Little boys:  
the potency of peer culture  
in shaping masculinities

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I certify that the thesis entitled

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

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents.............................................................................. i
Acknowledgments............................................................................. iii
Abstract........................................................................................... iv

Chapter One: Introduction................................................................. 1
  1.1 The study’s purpose and significance........................................... 3
  1.2 Theoretical and methodological focus........................................ 7
  1.3 Background: the wider social and cultural issue......................... 8
  1.4 The study’s contextualisation within current educational debates... 12
  1.5 Overview of the thesis............................................................. 15

Chapter Two: Literature Review....................................................... 19
  2.1 Social frameworks for theorising gender................................. 20
  2.2 Defining masculinity.............................................................. 26
  2.3 Understanding masculinities.................................................... 28
  2.4 Analyses of masculinities in secondary schools....................... 38
  2.5 Young people’s understandings of gender: early childhood and primary education........................................ 51
  2.6 Reflective notes...................................................................... 73

Chapter Three: The Research Process............................................ 76
  3.1 Textual authority and the crisis of representation....................... 77
  3.2 Feminist poststructural theory................................................ 78
  3.3 Group socialisation theory...................................................... 91
  3.4 Ethnographic case study......................................................... 95
  3.5 The site.................................................................................. 101
  3.6 The participants.................................................................... 101
  3.7 Collecting the data................................................................107
  3.8 Tools of representation.......................................................... 114
  3.9 Tools of analysis and interpretation........................................ 119
  3.10 A note on the study’s reliability and validity............................ 123
  3.11 Reflective notes.................................................................... 123

Chapter Four: The Research Story.................................................. 125
  4.1 Narrative 1: Your Truck Sucks............................................... 127
  4.2 Narrative 2: Who Dares Wins............................................... 133
  4.3 Narrative 3: It’s More Than a Game....................................... 139
  4.4 Narrative 4: That’s a Bullet Belt............................................ 154
  4.5 Narrative 5: The Cricket Season............................................ 161
  4.6 Narrative 6: I Hate His Guts.................................................. 169
  4.7 Reflective notes.................................................................... 180

Chapter Five: Analysis and Interpretation.................................... 184
  5.1 The dispersion of power within the boys’ peer group............... 186
5.2 The dispersion of power between groups: group solidarity against others................................................................. 209  
5.3 Contextualising the peer group’s discourses: the broader institutional structure of the school........................................ 221  
5.4 Contextualising the peer group’s discourses: competitive sporting culture and bodily expressions of masculinities........ 231  
5.5 Resistances and contestations to the dominant discourses of the peer group................................................................. 234  
5.6 Reflective notes........................................................................................................................................... 242  

Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications................................................................. 249  
6.1 The shaping and regulation of the group’s dominant discourses of masculinity........................................................... 250  
6.2 Resistance and disruption of the group’s dominant discourses: the peer group........................................................... 262  
6.3 A way forward: a warrant for working with peers..................................................... 265  
6.4 Reflective notes........................................................................................................................................... 277  

Appendix A...................................................................................................................................................... 280  
Appendix B...................................................................................................................................................... 283  
Appendix C...................................................................................................................................................... 285  
References...................................................................................................................................................... 287
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Abstract

This study explores the peer group understandings of five male friends between the ages of six and eight years and seeks to examine the ways in which the group’s social dynamics interact to define, regulate and maintain dominant and collective understandings of masculinities. Within a self-selected affinity context, and drawing on their lived and imagined experiences, the boys’ enact and interpret their social worlds.

Adopting the principles of ethnography within a framework of feminist poststructuralism and drawing on theories of ‘groupness’ and gender(ed) embodiment, the boys’ understandings of masculinities are captured and interpreted. The key analytic foci are directed towards examining the role of power in the social production of collective schoolboy knowledges, and understanding the processes through which boys subjectify and are subjectified, through social but also bodily discourses. The boys’ constructions of peer group masculinities are (re)presented through a narrative methodology which foregrounds my interpretation of the group’s personal and social relevances and seeks to be inductive in ways that ‘bring to life’ the boys’ stories.

The study illuminates the potency of peer culture in shaping and regulating the boys’ dominant understandings of masculinity. Within this culture strong essentialist and hierarchical values are imported to support a range of gender(ed) and sexual dualisms. Here patriarchal adult culture is regularly mimicked and distorted. Underpinned by constructions of ‘femininity’ as the negative ‘other’, dominant masculinities are embodied, cultivated and championed through physical dominance, physical risk, aggression and violence.

Through feminist poststructural analysis which enables a theorising of the boys’ subjectivities as fluid, tenuous and often characterised by contradiction and resistance, there exists a potential for interrupting and re-working particular masculinities. Within this framework, more affirmative but equally legitimate understandings and embodiments can be explored. The study presents a warrant for working with early childhood affinity groups to disrupt and contest the dominance and hierarchy of peer culture in an effort to counter-act broader gendered and heterosexist global, state and institutional structures. Framing these assertions is an understanding of the peer context as not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies, but enabling and generative of affirmative subjectivities.
Chapter 1
Introduction

In a school dormitory at Trinity Grammar, one of Australia’s most exclusive private schools, a 16-year-old boy is tied to a bunk with school ties by two of his ‘mates’ and stripped to his boxer shorts in the presence of fellow students. On another occasion, in the company of student on-lookers, these same two boys tie him up again. He screams as they ‘indecently’ assault him with, among other such implements, a wooden dildo, dubbed ‘The Anaconda’, that one of the boys had made in woodwork class (ABC 07.02.01a; *The Weekend Australian* 10-12.02.01).

Isolated incident committed by deviant individuals? The principal of Trinity Grammar seems to think so. He rejects that his school suffers under a “culture of bullying” and is reported to describe the attacks as the “isolated incidents” of “individuals” (ABC 07.02.01b). Indeed, only two individuals are formally charged with “aggravated indecent assault” with one other boy found guilty of the lesser charge, “intimidation” (*The Weekend Australian* 24-25.03.01). The victim and the victim’s father, however, tell a different story: one of a general and pervasive peer undercurrent of assault and ongoing abuse within which a small band of fellow students reportedly perpetrate more than 50 attacks over an alleged period of three years, often in the presence of student on-lookers (ABC 07.02.01b; *The Sunday Telegraph* 15.10.2000).

How could these brutal attacks have occurred in a school that does “not tolerate bullies” and has a “clear anti-bullying policy?” (*The Daily Telegraph* 17.10.2000; Cujes 2001) Why was a culture of “rumbling and bullying” unnoticed by school officials? Why didn’t any of the boys involved speak up? (ACB 07.02.01a; ABC 07.02.01b; *The Weekend Australian* 10-11.02.01) On behalf of the staff at Trinity, and in the school’s defence, the principal states that, “(they) were completely unaware anything like this was taking place” (*The Weekend Australian* 10-12.02.01). It remains however, that these “offences occurred in an environment where the victims were entitled to feel safe and protected,”
the magistrate presiding in judgment over the case asserts (*The Weekend Australian* 24-25.03.01).

Many stories of male violence and abuse such as this have fuelled intense interest and concern over the past decade in the construction of masculinities in Australia. A scan of the recent and ‘all too familiar’ media reports from the U.S.A. such as the 1999 shooting spree at Columbine High School where two young males shot dead thirteen students before taking their own lives, in conjunction with analysis of empirical data in an Australian context amplify such concern. Males overwhelmingly dominate the statistics for youth suicide, injury, death, violence, conflict, petty crime and school suspensions and expulsions (*The Australian Bureau of Statistics* 1999; 1998; 1997; 1996; Department of Education, Tasmania 1998). Such data has incited widespread debate concerning the issue of ‘male identity’. Underpinning this heightened focus is an emerging social anxiety about the impact resulting from boys defining and understanding masculinity along ‘essentialist’ lines, as synonymous with power, domination and ‘non-emotion’ (see Connell 1995; Davies 1993; Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997; Martino 1997). More specifically sociological analysis has been directed to exploring how such understandings are developed, maintained and perpetuated.

Within this analytic of ‘male identity’, interest in the primacy of peer culture in shaping and regulating ‘limited’ understandings of masculinity has gained momentum (see Fitzclarence, Hickey & Tinning 1999; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000) and situates cases such as the opening Trinity vignette as far from uncommon. While the magistrate in this case sees the “motivation” for these offences as “obscure” (*The Weekend Australian* 24-25.03.01), commenting on the events at Trinity, psychologist Evelyn Field, locates the boys’ behaviour within the context and contingency of peer culture. This informal context, she argues has “incredible power in shaping behaviour. If the peer group says bullying is in, it’s in and if the peer group says it’s out, it’s out” (*ABC* 07.02.01a).

This study examines issues of masculinity within the context and contingency of dominant peer culture and is framed within Connell’s (2000: 162) assertion that “peer groups, not individuals, are the bearers of gender definitions.” To this end, Connell
(2000) positions peer culture as central in the definition, regulation and maintenance of masculinities and sexualities. Within this frame of understanding, the study locates group belonging and the desire for self-legitimation within peer culture as pivotal in the construction of masculinities (Harris 1998). The study’s focus is on the pervasiveness and potency of this informal and often covert micro-culture in shaping boys’ behaviours and understandings within the school environment and the inadequacies of conventional and traditional philosophies and practices within the school context which individualise, pathologise and rationalise particular group behaviours.

In scanning the abundance of media reports and representations, popular literature (Browne & Fletcher 1995) and intervention programs in schools (Education Victoria 1999) concerning the disruptive behaviour of boys, one could be excused for locating masculinities and peer culture as an issue for secondary schooling and adolescence. The frequency and seriousness of playground violence, bullying and classroom aggression within the secondary sphere (see Carosi & Tindale 1995) has prompted and legitimised the urgent implementation of a variety of programs within these schools specifically targeting the ‘remedying’ of boys’ disruptive behaviours in the middle school years.

This study positions these intervention programs for boys in adolescence and secondary schooling as necessary but ‘too late’ in ‘remedying’ or changing boys’ problematic behaviours and thus gives primacy to recognising and understanding antecedent group behaviours. In this regard, the study illuminates the grave inadequacies of understanding the sphere of childhood along conventional developmental lines as ‘natural’, ‘innocent’ and ‘free’ and highlights the importance of intervention in the initial years of schooling. It is posited that the relative fluidity and malleability of peer culture and ‘gender identities’ in early childhood constitute the potential for exploring and reworking dominant understandings and restrictive notions of gender. Against this backdrop, the study locates the early childhood sphere as central.

1.1 The study’s purpose and significance

Boys’ disruption, harassment, hostility and aggression predominantly occur in, and are maintained by, boys’ peer cultures (Connell 1995; 1996; 2000; Harris 1998; Kenway
Peer networks comprise a means through which boys can explore, negotiate and practice a range of social and sexual ‘identities’. Within this infrastructure, many boys learn the codes of masculinity and develop the “social and discursive practices that serve to validate and amplify masculine reputations. Here, young males mark their rite of passage into manhood” (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 53).

Masculine power hierarchies within and between peer groups are regulated and maintained through collective oppressive practice (Walker 1988; Askew & Ross 1988; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Connell 1995; Martino 1997). These oppressive behaviours are underpinned by a need for belonging, affiliation, and place within the peer group’s hierarchy (Connell 1996) and are characterised by boys’ attempts to acquire power, mark prestige and validate or prove one’s own ways of being male (Askew & Ross 1988; Collins, Batten, Ainley & Getty 1996; Martino 1997). Boys’ masculinities are continuously ‘put to the test’ (Martino 1997), their competitive struggle for self-legitimation argued to be their predominant means of relating to each other (Askew & Ross 1988).

‘Winning’ a place within the masculine ‘pecking order’ means escaping personal oppression and gaining personal status. Thus, “boys invest a lot of energy in maintaining their position within the dominant group” (Martino 1999: 253). “There is a lot of concern with face, a lot of work put into keeping up a front” (Connell 1996: 219). This often means that boys subordinate other boys who are perceived to fall short of the masculinity considered as socially and culturally superior. This subordination is invariably achieved through heterosexist practices and by associating the boys who “don’t measure up” with the feminine side of the male/female polarity, and denigrating them as weak and inferior, or as homosexual (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 5-6). To escape this association with femininity and homosexuality, many boys develop convoluted heterosexist attitudes characterised by a strong need to distinguish or distance oneself from ‘weakness’ and femininity (Mac an Ghaill 1994) and “to demonstrate the collective understanding of ‘boyness’, defined in antithesis to ‘girlness’” (Clark 1993: 32). To this end, boys’ essentialist peer group understandings are often characterised by investments in ‘toughness and confrontation’ (Connell 1996). This does not only involve “acting tough in front of peers, but is seen as
a key element in boys’ active production of gendered behaviour and attitudes” (Clark 1993: 32). Additionally, Davies (1993: 92) notes:

…in some quite fundamental ways ‘being good’ is incompatible with images of heroism, hardness, strength and domination which we associate with masculinity.

The association exists between the adoption of dominant and essentialist behaviours and boys’ academic underachievement (Epstein 1999). This oppositional definition usually involves a rejection of pursuing academic work because of its perception as feminine or effeminate. Thus, adoption of a dominant ‘macho’ version of masculinity, with its image of reluctant involvement and disengagement, is often to the detriment of boys’ academic success (Epstein 1999; Mahony 1999; Martino 1997). Indeed, it is often those boys who are seen to work at school who are most likely to be targeted for homophobic abuse by other students (Epstein 1999). In discussing the issue of boys’ academic underachievement, Epstein reports:

‘Being a boy who was (or worked at being) scholastic was given as the identifying marker for being the subject of bullying and of homophobic abuse. (1999: 98)

Many of the structures and practices ingrained and normalised in the processes of schooling are said to inadvertently support the perpetuation and reinforcement of a restrictive ‘male identity’. For example, the significance of contingency and context in shaping boys’ peer group behaviour (and resonating with understandings such as those of Trinity Grammar’s principal) is often dispelled in schools through teacher authority practices which individualise and pathologise boys’ disruptive and/or anti-authority behaviours (Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000; Browne 1995a). Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000) argue that the philosophies and strategies that support such practice are inadequate in acknowledging and addressing the potency of the social context of enactment through leaving this context, and the contingency within it, unproblematised. Similarly, dominant teacher practices in an early childhood context are seen as ignoring or endorsing restrictive ways of being masculine (Davies 1988; Epstein 1999; Kamler, Maclean, Reid & Simpson 1994; Walkerdine 1990). The ‘progressivist’ and individualistic approaches which have permeated the philosophy of early childhood education in this regard, tend to
perpetuate and naturalise dualistic notions of gender, by rendering the masculine as unproblematically implicated in the reproduction of social inequity.

A recent report on educational performance, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000), calls for further research into the pervasiveness of peer culture. Indeed, the report’s primary ‘first-order disadvantage’ in relation to impeding the educational participation and performance of both males and females is:

Being locked into a traditional and narrow gender identity and peer group which constrains rather than enables educational choice and flexibility. (2000: 5)

Calling for further examination of the peer group’s impact in shaping gender, the report presents understanding this context as critical in identifying and exploring different pedagogic approaches to challenge and rework constraining peer discourses. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine how masculinities are understood and practised within the collective context of early childhood peer culture, with the aim of providing further understanding of the dynamics and contingency within this sphere. It is intended that these understandings will warrant greater acknowledgement of the potency of peer affiliations and investments in shaping behaviour in the early childhood context. The study also seeks to facilitate new discussions about the development of pedagogic approaches and strategies to contest and disrupt essentialised constructions of gender and to explore ways which encourage boys to value a range of different and diverse ways of being.

The study’s three research questions, in the context of schooling, are distilled from these aims.

. How are dominant masculinities understood and practised within an early childhood male peer group?
. How are dominant masculinities shaped, regulated and maintained within early childhood peer culture?
. How are dominant masculinities disrupted and contested within this peer context?
1.2 Theoretical and methodological focus

The study adopts the principles of ethnography drawing on Harris’ (1998) group socialisation theory within the theoretical lenses of feminist poststructuralism as core interpretive tools. The study finds warrant for exploring masculinities from a feminist perspective in the belief that “masculinities cannot be fully understood without attending to their relationship to femininities within the broader scope of patriarchy” (Kenway & Fitzclarence 2000: 120). As Hickey, Keddie and Fitzclarence (in review) point out, concerns about contemporary masculinity are not only issues for males. In this regard, it is argued that the enactment of masculinities:

…has consequences that reach far beyond any notion of ‘secret men’s business’. Indeed, such actions inexorably impact on mothers, wives, lovers, sisters, girlfriends and female friends and colleagues. (Hickey et al. in review)

The usefulness of a feminist poststructural methodology for exploring dominant masculinities is found to lie in its political theorising of gender inequities as socially constructed and reproduced through language, social practice and institutional structures and thus as fluid, dynamic and amenable to change. Within this frame of analysis, dominant and dominating masculinities can be seen as open to deconstruction and reconstruction through alternative language processes and social practices.

The key theoretical and methodological foci are thus directed towards examining language and meaning in the collective production of ‘schoolboy masculinities’ in relation to the processes of how young males subjectify and are subjectified, through power relations embedded in social interactions. In this regard, it is acknowledged that all social interactions are shaped and governed by dominant understandings enmeshed within gendered practices and subjectivities which “make more possible some ways of being, and not others” (Davies in Mac Naughton 1998: 160). Harris’ (1998) understandings of the primacy of self-categorisation and group identification in children ‘learning to be’, in terms of the significance of context, contingency and the establishment of hierarchy and differentiation, are drawn on within this theoretical frame. To this end, the social beliefs, practices, emotional and bodily investments underpinning dominant forms of peer group masculinities, which act to govern boys’ behaviour and to
condition and limit boys’ understandings of masculinity, are of key importance to this investigation. The epistemological disparities between poststructural theory and Harris’ group socialisation theory, grounded in the contrasting traditions of sociology and psychology, are acknowledged. Underpinned by Rutter and Smith’s (in Fitzclarence 2000) call to integrate rather than disregard the work of other disciplines, the study’s intention is to draw on the ideas of Harris to enrich my understanding and theorising of peer culture without contradicting the primacy and integrity of the sociological framework and perspective underpinning the work.

Based on the central belief that forms of dominant and dominating masculinities are overwhelmingly reinforced in groups (Browne 1995a; Connell 1995), the study orientates around an interrogation of peer group ‘meanings’ through exploring collective understandings of masculinities within the context of intensive ‘affinity group’ (Mackay 1993) sessions over a six-month period at a primary school in Tasmania, Australia. Consistent with Mackay’s work with affinity groups, this method of grouping individuals of similar interests promotes group cohesion, discussion and the identification of shared and contradicting stories, ideas and meanings. To this end, the method is applied to explore the socio-political dynamics of a boys’ peer group. Through a variety of age-appropriate stimulus prompts, twice weekly affinity group sessions foreground the dominant and collective dynamics and understandings of a group of five young male friends, aged between six and eight years*. To further explore perceptions and understandings of the boys, data are gathered through discussions with an affinity group of girls; a teacher affinity group; interviews with the boys’ class teacher and the school principal; and my own observations and reflections. Drawing on narrative methodologies and textual strategies within a feminist poststructural foregrounding of socio-political relations of power, the data are fashioned into six narratives of experience.

1.3 Background: the wider social and cultural issue

Over the last quarter of a century the feminist revolution and ideals of equal opportunity have inspired a radical redefinition of gender. Through the demand for equality with men

*Throughout the study, these boys are referred to as early childhood (Kindergarten to Grade Two) students, consistent with the Tasmanian Education Department system of classification.
throughout all facets of life, feminism has dramatically altered the expectations and experiences of women. However, while many Australian women have redefined, and continue to re-shape, their position in society, many Australian men have been left in a quandary, characterised by hesitancy and doubt about the nature and redefinition of their relational gender position (Mackay 1993). Feminism has pushed to the fore the need to reconstitute men’s lives in pursuit of social justice and gender equity. The traditional male role, which constituted women as secondary, has been severely destabilised through women’s increased economic independence and political status. Until quite recently, however, the upheaval in gender politics was generally thought of in relation to the implications for, and changes to, the social position of women, rather than in terms of any real implications for men. This has been inherently problematic as change in the social positioning of women necessarily implies displacing masculine power and dominance (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1987).

For men, two things seem to go together - the desire for power and the fear of powerlessness. No other alternative seems to exist. (McLean 1997: 62)

The process of adaptation has been, and continues to be, fraught with hostility and complication. Central to this hostility has been men’s struggle to defend their ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell 1995). This dividend represents the cultural investment men have in sustaining a society organised around patriarchy: the general domination of women by men. The early 1990s, for instance, were witness to a male backlash against feminist reform with the emergence of Men’s Rights and Sympathy groups which attempted to argue that boys and men were the new disadvantaged. These groups were formed to counteract equal opportunity initiatives, with extreme forms of backlash most visible in the politics of the ‘angry white male’ and the anti-feminist men’s movement, which amounted to severe animosity and hostility towards women generally (Lingard 1998). The new-found independence and social power of females, combined with the notion that feminist reform had ‘succeeded’, or even gone too far, was the basis underpinning much of this backlash. Amongst the animosity men felt lay feelings of emasculation, irrelevance and redundancy (Mackay 1993). Even those men who did not concur with the ideas tacit in the male backlash often faced conflict “between the desire to be
sensitive and understanding and the desire to avoid being written off as a wimp” (Mackay 1993: 41).

Moreover, ‘manufactured uncertainties’ (Lingard 1998) accompanying globalisation (such as the representations and dealings of sexual politics and the impact of feminism within cultural products such as the mass media) continue to exacerbate the backlash through misinformation. These depictions, particularly in the print media, exaggerate and sensationalise incomplete assumptions based on partial truths. Often these reports portray contemporary men as victimised in the wake of feminism, and as subordinated in all spheres of life (Lingard 1998). These headline exemplars illustrate this point:

- Men must help men, for crying out loud (The Australian, 1 May 1995)
- Law to make men share housework (The Courier-Mail, 3 April 1998)
- What’s the snag for 90s men: misogynist predator or feminist victim? (The Weekend Australian, 4-5 April 1998)
- The descent of men (The Weekend Australian 13-14 June 1998)

These representations, which are both productive and generative (Lingard 1998) of particular ways of perceiving such issues, ignore the complexities of sexual politics (such as the maintenance of patriarchal power and capitalist restructuring) (Mahony 1999) and discount the realities and specificities of persisting sexual inequality, thwarting gender justice.

The present gender order is at odds with the ideal of genuine social justice because it continues to remain structured around patriarchy. This patriarchal structure continues to embrace massive inequality in the areas of power relations, production relations and sexual relations with each of these areas (re)producing gender practices which maintain male authority (Connell 1995). While these areas, as a result of feminist reform, constitute gender practices which are more equitable than ever before, women continue to be subordinated economically, politically and socially. Feminism has, however, created serious implications for patriarchy, namely bringing into question its legitimacy and problematising the sexual politics of men (Connell 1995).
Males have an obvious cultural investment in a patriarchal gender order (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Boys and men can experience the power of patriarchy through acknowledging their membership in the category of male as opposed to female. By complying with the structures, practices and ‘ideologies’ that constitute female as ‘other’, male as dominant is confirmed (Fine 1994).

…a critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are. (Hall in Fine 1994: 72)

For boys or men to identify with femaleness or femininity thus is to be, or at least to be aligned with, the ‘other’ - disempowered and somehow inferior. To be less than, or other than, male is to call into question the very essence of male identity (Epstein, 1997). In learning the sexual hierarchy of society boys learn to associate being a girl with a loss of power and value - “the only thing as bad as being a girl is being a sissy which is like being a girl” (Kaufman 1987: 20). This identification process, in which boys are acculturated to embody all things male and reject all things female, creates a male/female dualism which serves to maintain a symbolic opposition culminating in many boys and men explicitly denying any sign of femininity in themselves for fear of being perceived as inferior or homosexual (Rout 1992).

Through associating maleness with power and strength, and femaleness with powerlessness and weakness, male dominance is affirmed. To these ends, generally, boys and men will consciously and subconsciously learn the ways to maintain a gender order which positions them with authority. It is paradoxical, however, that while men collectively control relations of power, men as individuals often experience powerlessness (Segal 1990). The loss of power and agency, through subordination in the work place or oppression through race, class or sexuality, mean that many males do not experience the collective notion of men’s relative social, political and economic power over women (Mc Lean 1997). Nevertheless, the gendered order of society ensures that relatively powerless or subordinate men will still tend to have access to power over the females in their immediate circle. Furthermore, many men seek other forms of power to assuage their feelings of inferiority and to authorise an ideology of supremacy through
other avenues, such as the use of aggression or violence* over weaker or more vulnerable individuals (Connell 1995).

A clear association exists between aggression and violence and men’s feelings of powerlessness (Cairns & Cairns 1991; Farrington 1991). Moreover, “there is now some evidence to suggest that as women strengthen their place in the world, certain sorts of misogyny intensify” (Kenway & Willis 1998: 165). Rape, harassment, sexual abuse, domestic brutality and even murder are examples of intimidation and violence which symbolise men’s attempts to dominate. Based on relations of power, male-dominated violence at its most terrifying involves large-scale battles of war which serve as a referent for rationalising violence as an acceptable method of solving conflict (Kaufman 1987). Indeed, some commentators point to the male-dominated occupations of army, prison and police officer as perpetuating and normalising the association between maleness and violence through the use of socially endorsed forms of violence and force (Kaufman 1987; Segal 1990). Other forms of male violence and abusive behaviour are legitimised and rationalised, even glorified, through media images of high profile male contact sports (Fitzclarence & Hickey 1998).

As a largely male domain, aggression and violence are said to comprise a major role in the perpetuation and maintenance of a system of domination. However, as Connell asserts, violence also signifies the problematic nature of the modern hierarchical gender order and questions its very structure as viable:

(Violence) is a measure of its (a system’s) imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate. The scale of contemporary violence points to crisis tendencies … in the modern gender order. (1995: 84)

1.4 The study’s contextualisation within current educational debates

This study is located within these current sociological concerns of restrictive masculinities as defined around dominance, aggression, power and the rejection of the

*In clarifying the term ‘violence’, the study draws on the work of Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997: 117) who define violence as “occurring along a continuum involving physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuses of power at individual, group and social structural levels”.
feminine. Within the sphere of education, the study’s contribution is timely, particularly in light of the continuing public pre-occupation with outcomes-based, gender-comparative foci. As Mahony (1999) asserts, this pre-occupation has reduced ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ to measuring specific aspects of education, namely, literacy and numeracy and advanced an obsession with academic results. These narrow definitions of success and achievement have been foregrounded as the most important measures of school effectiveness, while broader social concerns have been detached and perceived as somehow less significant than measurable academic outcomes (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1997). In this regard, critical educational issues such as the perpetuation of gender dualisms through the school’s masculinist infrastructure (Mahony 1999) and the level of violence and homophobic, sexist and racist harassment in schools have often been overlooked (Kenway & Willis 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1997).

To elaborate on the former, the deeply gendered and ingrained structures of schools have served to make gender hierarchies and divisions so normalised that they have been largely unquestioned and continue to be taken-for-granted. While these structures persist because of this normalisation, they cannot be justified as merely reflecting the wider societal gender politics because they are actively produced by schools (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Efforts to disrupt this structural normalisation have been met with an abundance of resistance, with much recent equal opportunity feminist reform in schools being received with distaste, reflecting an increasingly obvious gap between policy and practice (Kenway & Willis 1998). The now familiar catchcry ‘What about the boys?’, a product of conservative masculinist politics (Mills 1997), has induced a kind of pervasive panic regarding boys’ achievement in schools (Epstein 1999). This position is commonly echoed in defiance of feminist reform, resonating with the broader social backlash against feminism which positions men and boys as the new disadvantaged. Fundamentally, these reactionary politics, versions of which are explicitly anti-feminist, even misogynist (Lingard & Mills 1997), blame feminism for the loss of male control and the failures of boys and invariably argue for “a return to a ‘more natural’ regime, in which men and women knew their places, and men were able to use their inherent male power” (Epstein 1999: 6).
The panic surrounding the ‘What about the boys?’ backlash has focused on the simplistic and misguided assumption that ‘all boys’ are now being outperformed at school by ‘all girls’ (Hey, Leonard, Daniels & Smith 1999). Indeed, many teachers believe that feminist reform has succeeded in the interests of girls and that all boys are suffering educationally (Kenway & Willis 1998; Lingard 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1997) and now require a kind of reverse discrimination to rectify the balance at the expense of girls (Hey et al. 1999). As many commentators have noted, however, this panic regarding boys’ achievements has largely been a misinformed, alarmist reaction to crude comparisons between boys’ and girls’ specific educational achievement outcomes which has presented girls as generally outperforming boys, often ignoring issues of race, class and ethnicity and highlighting the superior achievements of a minority of middle-class girls (Epstein 1999; Lingard 1998; Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel 1995; Collins et al. 2000a). This comparative focus has further cemented gender divisions and advanced a ‘competing victims’ syndrome within education (Epstein 1999; Kenway & Willis 1998; Lingard 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1997), which assumes that if girls are succeeding, then boys must be failing. Additionally, as Barber (cited in Mahony 1999: 39) remarks many of the gains made for girls “are increasingly being eroded as the belief takes hold that girls have had it too good for too long.”

Against the backdrop of the ‘What About The Boys?’ backlash, and drawing on the work of Lingard and Douglas (1999), this study locates itself within a social justice framework. This framework is strongly informed by the broader socio-political reality of the current gender order which perpetuates substantial educational injustice and disadvantage in terms of the quality of girls’ relative post-school options (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000b) and is still overwhelmingly economically, politically and socially oppressive for women more generally (Kenway 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1994). In this regard, the study’s general approach is in broad sympathy with Lingard and Douglas’ call for boys to:

…broaden their modes of expression to encompass what has been traditionally seen as feminine, instead of progressively limiting their options as they attempt to
continue to define themselves in contrast to girls, women and their identification with the feminine. (1999: 152)

1.5 Overview of the thesis

The following locates the subsequent chapters as they contribute to the thesis. The end of each chapter draws together the key ideas and themes with a section entitled ‘Reflective Notes’ (Connell 2000).

Chapter Two delineates the central historical tenets for theorising gender and defining masculinities, from the static perspectives of identity within biologically deterministic tenets, to the fluid notion of gender subjectivity within poststructuralism and the significance of gender embodiment. Masculinity is defined as socially and historically constructed within a system of gender relations, and understood as dynamic, multiple, hierarchical and collectively organised and enacted. Informed by an understanding that masculinities and systems of patriarchy cannot be understood without a historical location within broader socio-political contexts, the discussion then turns to particularities of state and world contexts in the shaping of contemporary masculinities. Within this framework of understanding, the Chapter reviews the research and literature pertaining to gender, masculinities, sexualities and peer culture within school-age contexts. Central to this discussion is exploring how masculinities and femininities are understood, shaped and regulated within the context of the peer group micro-culture. In examining masculinities within broader school infrastructures, the significance of the school as masculinist structure and masculinising agency (Kenway & Willis 1998) is discussed. Particular reference is made to the perpetuation of gender and sexual dualisms through sporting culture and sexualities education within a secondary school context and teacher philosophies and practices within an early childhood/primary context.

Chapter Three describes the research process, including the study’s theoretical and methodological underpinnings and the procedural aspects of data collection, (re)presentation and analysis. The constructed nature of researcher positionality in informing the research process is recognised through a description of how the study’s feminist poststructural framework shapes the work. The centrality of socio-political
power in the construction of meaning and subjectivities through language, discourse and
the construction of gender binaries, as they pertain to the study’s understandings of
masculinities, are described in this regard. Aspects of gay poststructural theory
informing the work, in particular the significance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary
in structuring thought are then discussed, preceding a delineation of the ways in which
the research draws on aspects of group socialisation theory in understanding peer group
relations.

Against this backdrop, the study’s location within ethnographic and case study principles
is explored. Central to this discussion are the implications of my positioning within the
study and, in particular, the significance of the relationship between researcher and
researched. The study’s concerns for moral and ethical soundness in working with young
children are outlined here together with how the work hopes to reconcile the issue of
‘researcher locatedness’ (Davies 1999) through self-conscious transparency and self-
reflexivity. The procedural aspects of the research process are then described, including
information about the site and the participants. The data collection techniques are
explained including the specificities and procedures of the affinity group approach and
methods of interview and observation. Particular elaboration of the affinity group
method is central within this section in relation to its applicability to the work and its
modification and use within the study’s early childhood focus. Following this is an
explanation of how the data are structured and (re)presented. Within poststructural
understandings, and foregrounding socio-political relations of power, the textual
strategies used to fashion the study’s research into narratives of experience are explained.
The final section of Chapter Three illustrates how the study uses its theoretical
frameworks to understand and analyse the affinity group, interview and observation data
in response to the study’s three research questions.

Chapter Four (re)presents the data and recounts my interpretation of the research story
through six narratives. These narratives, based predominantly on affinity group data,
seek to express the boys’, girls’, teachers’ and principal’s understandings of
masculinities. In this regard, while the study’s poststructural framework foregrounds
relations of power, I attempt to capture the participants’ personal and social relevances in
ways that tell their own stories. To these ends, I seek to (re)present the complexity of the research story through juxtaposing and interweaving many interpretations and lines of thought in reflection of a multi-vocal and intertextual network. Through the boys’ artwork and their thoughts on favourite toys, playground adventures, football, guns, cricket, friends and enemies, I attempt to ‘bring to life’ their social worlds. Through relational interpretation of such issues, I illuminate the girls’, teachers’ and principal’s understandings of these social worlds.

Drawing on the study’s theoretical frameworks, and organised around the three research questions, Chapter Five describes my interpretation of the research story. The boys’ collective dominant discourses are defined and discussed in relation to how they are constructed, embodied and legitimated through the dispersion of socio-political power within and between peer groups. The language and bodily practices of self-legitimation are explored as they relate to the establishment of leadership, power and the production of dominance and hierarchy within the group. The impact of this dominance and hierarchy in terms of how it (re)constitutes the group’s dynamics, positionings and understandings is also explored. The socio-political dynamics in relation to group solidarity and the dispersion of power between peer groups is examined as this relates to the research story. Central to this examination is a discussion on how the group’s solidarity essentialises and amplifies dominant subjectivities in alliance against others not in the group. An analysis of the boys’ positionings of gender within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality follows. Key to this analysis is a discussion of the authority the boys wield over females through positioning them in the less powerful half of gender and sexual binaries. The boys’ peer group discourses are then contextualised within the broader structure of the school in relation to an analysis of teacher and principal intervention and philosophies, and an interpretation of the girls’ understandings of the boys. The Chapter then turns to interpreting the boys’ bodily expressions of masculinities inherent in the group’s dominant discourses, and contextualises them within the broader institutional structures of competitive sport. Chapter Five concludes by foregrounding the tenuous and contradictory nature of the group’s dominant discourses through an illumination of the numerous points of disunity within the boys’ peer group interactions.
Through interaction with the research literature, the final Chapter of the thesis draws together the study’s principal contentions. Against this backdrop, the study’s primary thesis, positioning the peer group as central in shaping, regulating and amplifying boys’ dominant and restrictive understandings of masculinities underpinned by mutually reinforcing gender and (hetero)sexual dualisms, is supported. In illuminating the inadequacies of teacher practices which individualise behaviour, a warrant for working with boys’ peer affinity groups is presented. Informed by the feminist poststructural research of Davies (1993) and work in the area of countering homophobia and heterosexism in schools, propositions for reworking disruptions and contestations in exploring affirmative alternatives to social and bodily dominance are explored. These propositions are underpinned by a promotion of the ‘traditionally feminine’ and are framed within an understanding of peer culture as not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies, but enabling and generative of affirmative identities. The final Chapter draws the thesis to a close by locating these propositions within broader institutional structures.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

This chapter outlines the predominant issues and themes within the literature grounding the study’s understandings of gender and masculinities. Examination and (re)presentation of the literature is framed around the basic premise that masculinities cannot be understood without relational reference to femininities within the system of gender (Connell 2000; Kenway 1997; Kenway & Willis 1998). The chapter thus begins with a location of the study’s perspective for understanding and defining masculinity within an overview of the major social frameworks for theorising gender and defining the notion of masculinity. The review then turns to a contextualisation of masculinities within the gender order of society and illuminates the significance of locating masculinities within the historical contingency of gendered and heteronormative institutional, state and global contexts (Connell 2000).

Following this explication, the chapter is organised into two main sections. The first of these comprises a review of the literature concerning secondary education, and includes an overview of how masculinities are enacted in this setting. Points of significance refer to the notion of multiple masculinities organised around collective subjectivities; hierarchical power relations and the regulation of masculinities and femininities; and school structure as installer of particular forms of masculinity. Additionally, this section examines the literature regarding schools’ perpetuation of heterosexism, in the areas of sporting culture and sexualities education, and how this is implicated in the shaping and regulation of masculinities.

The second, and final section involves an examination of gender and masculinities as these are made manifest within primary and early childhood education. This section reviews the literature pertaining to young people’s understandings of gender and involves an analysis of how children are taught gender implicitly through learning to be agentic in school and classroom settings; how schools perpetuate particular forms of masculinity
through their intrinsically masculinist structure; and how teacher practices, pedagogy and philosophies actively construct and perpetuate particular ways of being masculine. Further, this section analyses the early childhood/primary literature examining how and why boys define and understand themselves in opposition to girls and femininity, including their use of (hetero)sexual power; how these understandings are associated with the construction of masculine hierarchies which subordinate particular forms of masculinity; and finally, the potency of boys’ collective understandings in shaping their masculine subjectivities.

2.1 Social frameworks for theorising gender

Many social theories have evolved from the underpinnings of Marxist analyses of class division, conflict and power (Giddens 1984). Within this framework the basic causes of contemporary inequality and oppression in Western societies are explained as emanating from ‘modern’ systems of capitalism and their inherent class stratification. The Women’s Liberation Movement is perceived, within such theories, as primarily a class struggle in which women are oppressed through the technologies of capitalism which support social, political and economic subordination (Connell 1987). The class-interest theories of Marxism ran in tandem with, and informed, other social theories such as those drawing on psychoanalysis (Parsons & Bales 1956; de Beauvoir 1949). Parsonian schools of thought, namely functionalism and naturalism (Giddens 1984), approximated the understandings of social science with natural science in an evolutionary sense. Within this framework, contrasting gender roles and customs were explained as necessary for social stability and functioning (in Segal 1990). The feminist theorising of de Beauvoir, on the other hand, explained contrasting gender roles as centring around unequal power relations and the subordination of women (de Beauvoir 1949).

Theories such as these gave rise to analyses underpinned by social reproduction theory (Mitchell 1975; Tolson 1977). Social reproduction theory, under feminist analysis, examined the reproduction of capitalism and the subordinate role women played within this reproduction. Capitalism’s drive for profit, for instance, was theorised as associated
with the exploitation and subordination of women through a sex-divided workforce and the oppression of the housewife (Connell 1987).

Within a functionalist, class-first framework, the social reproduction of gender was also explained through Sex-role Theory (see Bem 1974) which was popularised in the 1950s and 1960s. The basic premise underpinning Sex-role Theory, which was associated with the naturalistic assumptions underlying Parsonian thought, related to individuals learning or acquiring particular sex-related social behaviours through positive and negative reinforcement. In this sense, individuals were said to be socialised into same sex roles with the cultural and psychological aspects manifest in traditional modes of femininity and masculinity said to be socially reproduced and perpetuated to fit the needs of a capitalist system. The theory conceptualised the male sex-role as complementary to the female sex-role with the assignment of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ dualistic traits based on instrumentality and expressivity respectively (Parsons in Segal 1990). In this regard, class-first and functionalist theories saw the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy as necessary for the maintenance of the existing social order, thus gender difference was theorised as a natural and functional part of capitalist society.

With the increasing prevalence of feminist analyses of gender (see Franzway & Lowe 1978), major flaws with sex-role theory and the functionalist perspective of gender difference became obvious during the 1970s. Firstly, the theory assumed the voluntarism of the individual in choosing to maintain existing customs, thereby constituting her as a passive recipient of externally imposed roles (Alloway 1995a; Connell 1987); and secondly, in its ‘complementary’ categorisation of the male and female sex-role, the theory was seen as dependent on a biologically determined dichotomy (Connell 1987). In this respect, functionalist sex-role theory failed to deal adequately with issues of power and social interest. It thus became increasingly evident that the argument explaining the nature of patriarchy as necessarily functional for the reproduction and survival of capitalism could no longer be conceptualised as simply a class struggle (Sarup 1988). In light of feminist theory and the economic redefinition of women’s gender roles, the union between the gender priority theories of feminism and the class priority theories of Marxism became divided on a number of critical issues: explaining the existence of
women’s oppression before capitalism; the existence of women’s oppression in countries that had ceased to be capitalist; and the new economic role women played for capitalist purposes (Delphy 1977). Similarly, many other struggles during this time, such as those relating to ecology and education, could not be conceptualised solely as class struggles. Thus, philosophers (including Lacan and Foucault) rejected the simplicity of Marx’s class first analyses, recognising the complexity of forces in social struggles for power and control. Further, these philosophers found the supposed analysable totality of social formation to be incompatible with their view of conflict (Sarup 1988).

The increasingly complex and inconsistent relationship between capitalism and patriarchy highlighted the need for a theory of gender which would be logically independent from a theory of class. This did not necessarily mean an avoidance of theorising the ways in which systems of gender and class were to interact. While the move away from a Marxist perspective of feminist theory resulted in many feminists excluding class from their writings (Skeggs 1997), these writings, in conjunction with related analyses, provided a more comprehensive understanding of gender structures.

2.1.1 Theories of biological determinism and social construction

Entwined within broader sociological theorising, schools of thought explaining the power relations and customs between men and women have basically developed from two competing paradigms: biological determinism and social construction. Theories of biological determinism are underpinned by assumptions which explain gender inequalities as largely attributable to differences in the genetic makeup of men and women. The ‘superior’ reasoning and intellectual powers of men over women, for example, have been explained by early Darwinian argument through biologism as that of natural difference between men and women. More recent work (see Moir & Jessel 1989) underpinned by this framework continues to explain gender differences between men and women as biologically determined. Through this lens, women are seen as naturally suited to positions subordinate to, or supportive of, men. Theories of biological determinism have analysed the brain - ‘brain sex’ theory and the endocrine system - ‘endocrine theory’ to explain gender difference and, in effect, to justify male domination over females. Thus, generally, inequitable social arrangements and sexist ideologies are
understood by these theorists as legitimised through biological differences between men and women.

Despite extensive research, little empirical evidence can be cited to substantiate biological determinism as a valid theoretical basis explaining gender difference, particularly given that this view discounts or completely ignores the overwhelming “evidence of cross-cultural and historical diversity in gender” (Connell 1995: 47). Under this theoretical analysis, gender categories are not conceptualised as historically and culturally fluid, or as socially and psychologically complex and dynamic in their relation to broader institutional and material powers. In this sense, biological determinism fails to provide an adequate understanding of subjective sex/gender ‘identities’ (Mac an Ghaill 1994).

It is now apparent that much of what has been understood previously as gender difference determined through biology can now be interpreted as “more plausibly located in the social” (Alloway 1995a: 17). Views of gender from a social constructionist’s perspective appear to be defined in antithesis to biological determinism. Social constructionists view the body as being socially, rather than biologically, determined and thus perceive social practice, and in particular, linguistic structure and semiotics, as central to theorising how individuals ‘become’ gendered (Connell 1995). Feminist poststructuralist thought has been at the fore of such theorising on gender. It is generally believed, within this frame, that the individual is a ‘blank canvas’ upon which social forces are inscribed. However, this does not suggest that the ‘blank canvas’ passively accepts, or doesn’t interact with, these social forces. On the contrary, the individual is seen as actively involved in the constitution and reproduction of social forces. Thus, femininity and masculinity are viewed as culturally endorsed and socially inscribed constructs which are located within a particular point in time. Ways of being male and female are, in this sense, constantly constructed and endorsed through everyday discourse (Alloway 1995a). In this regard, participation within, and subjectification through, discourse is seen as shaping and gendering individual behaviour with dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity defining and sanctioning the constitution of ‘normality’ and deviance (Gee in Grieshaber 1998).
Within this understanding of gender as constructed through discourse, poststructural theory has provided a framework from which to examine socially structured relations of power in the production of subjectivities (our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions) and the construction of gender(ed) ways of being (Hollway 1984).

Poststructuralist concepts have allowed the conceptualisation of males and females as binary opposites to be disrupted as taken-for-granted normalities by investigating the ways in which these binaries are held in place. Through an examination of power and the production of meaning and subjectivity through language and discourse, human realities can be seen as a construction - a cultural product (Sarup 1988). Thus, the ways in which our gendered realities are constructed within hierarchies of power can be explored and deconstructed to expose the ways in which particular groups are oppressed and marginalised (Kamler et al. 1994). Analysis within this paradigm centres upon examining how we are spoken and written into (gender(ed) existence by ourselves and others through constructed and constructing language practices. Through poststructural lenses, our subjectivities are not unified or coherent but are continually shifting, “precarious and contradictory” (Weedon in Kamler 1994: 15), in response to different social situations and contexts which involve inconsistent relations of power. The theory moves beyond thinking of gender in terms of unities and allows conceptualisations to explore pluralities and diversities (Scott in Lowe 1998).

The concepts of subject position and subjectivity within poststructuralist thought signify a critical shift from humanist conceptions of identity. While within a humanist perspective ‘identity’ is conceptualised as being essentially stable and semi-fixed, for poststructuralists, an individual’s subjectivity is conceptualised as being “constantly achieved through relations with others (both real and imagined) which are themselves made possible through discourse” (Davies 1993: 10). This theory provides ways of understanding how an individual can take up or reject a number of different subject

*Weedon (1987: 113) provides the study’s definition of the term power: “Power is a relation. It inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individuals.”
positions within a myriad of different discourses and contexts. It also allows an understanding of how, through discourse, an individual may be positioned or subjectified in restrictive or limiting ways by others. Gender construction and subjectivity are thus theorised to occur through individuals locating themselves, or being located by others, within social practice and discourse. This process constitutes a dynamic and multifaceted masculinising and feminising process poststructuralists term ‘subjectification’ in place of the static humanist term ‘identity formation’. In this sense the individual is seen as an active agent within the social world rather than an object to be shaped “according to the dominant position of the time” (Lowe 1998: 207).

While recent analyses of gender have embraced much of the theory underpinning the semiotic focus of poststructuralism, it is apparent that a completely semiotic or cultural account of gender discounts the notion of differential gender embodiment in relation to bodily experience, bodily expression and desire (see Prain & Hickey 1998). The individual, while clearly subjectified by social practice, also embodies experience and practice and, in this sense, the physical sense of being male or female is significant to any analysis of gender:

Through body-reflexive practices, bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs, or positions in discourse. Their materiality is not erased, it continues to matter. (Connell 2000: 27)

Bourdieu explains: “what is learned by the body is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is” (in Prain & Hickey 1998: 19). In recent times Bourdieu’s conceptualisations of habitus (a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways) (Thompson in Bourdieu 1991: 12) and embodied cultural capital (processes and investments of social positioning) have been extended to examine gender and the body-society relationship (Shilling 1991). In this regard, the connection of ‘the physical’ to the production of gender(ed) bodies is examined with the bodily experiences of gender and the materiality of bodies recognised as central to understanding the production of social inequalities in multiple ways. Prain and Hickey explain gender embodiment as:
...a complex body-reflexive process where mental and physical capacities are interdependent, and where bodily attributes may influence cognitive perspectives. (1998: 18)

This dialectical approach, argues that bodies both construct and are constructed by social relationships situated historically within a society’s culture, politics and economy:

Gender identities are not simply superimposed on biological bodies but themselves change and become incorporated into bodies ... ‘biology’ is not given once and for all but is affected by social and historical processes. This construction, in turn, continues to influence human bodies and social relationships. (Shilling 1991: 665)

For Connell (1995), it is critical to recognise the agentic role bodies play in the processes of the social. His theoretical position argues that through body-reflexive practice, gender is experienced - embodied. The materiality of bodies is thus significant in generating and shaping courses of social conduct as well as being shaped by social conduct. Thus, social and bodily action are inextricably entwined:

With bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern beyond the formulae of current social theory. The pattern might be termed body-reflexive practice. (Connell 1995: 61)

While the study’s understandings of gender(ed) subjectivities are strongly located in the ‘social’ within the discursive frame of feminist poststructuralism, these understandings also acknowledge the significance of bodily experiences of gender and how these bodily experiences are intricately enmeshed with social processes. Human bodies are thus taken to be significant in the reproduction or transformation of routinised social structures and systems. Ways of being masculine, then, are embodied: gendered dispositions to act become encoded as unconscious beliefs and taken-for-granted ways of being (Bourdieu 1984).

2.2 Defining masculinity

In defining masculinity, Connell (1995) places central, the significance of its existence as dependent only on an ongoing system of gender relations. Within this understanding,
focus on the relationships between masculinity, femininity and the gendered practices and structures which are enmeshed within broader social, economic, political and environmental systems and conflicts is of key importance (Connell 1995).

Rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object, we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives. ‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. (Connell 1995: 71)

A feminist poststructuralist lens offers a particularly powerful way of interpreting Connell’s (1995: 71) focus in defining masculinity in terms of making visible the “processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives.” This analytic enables examination of the ways in which masculinities are embodied, maintained and normalised through spoken and written discourse and social practice. The poststructuralist conceptual tools of recognising the availability of, and access to, different subject positions within relations of power constitutes a way of unravelling, disrupting and re-working the complex ‘gendering’ process which constructs our subjectivities within broader gender(ed) structures.

The tensions and instabilities in each person’s subjectivity become visible in a poststructuralist analysis through an examination of the discourses and practices through which our subjectivities are constituted. (Davies 1993: 11)

2.2.1 Masculinities: dynamic, contextual and fluid

The existence of masculinities as dependent on social practice and thereby produced within human interaction (Connell 1996) underpins the notion of ‘masculinity’ as fluid: continuously and actively constructed within social practice. Davies (1993) articulates the process of everyday social discursive practice as assiduously constituting and reconstituting the human subject. She describes the many contradictory and irresolute ways within which our gendered logics and desires are constituted as ‘layerings’. She uses the metaphor imbrication to give a visual conceptualisation of overlapping parts of a larger whole, such as tiles on a roof. Another metaphor Davies uses to describe the
layered and multifaceted ways in which contradictory and sometimes disruptive new social practices and discourses integrate with old practices and discourses is *palimpsest*:

…a term used to describe the way in which new writings on a parchment were written over or around old writings that were not fully erased. One writing interrupts the other, momentarily overriding, intermingling with the other; the old writing influences the interpretation of the imposed new writing and the new influences the interpretation of the old. But both still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted. (Davies 1993: 11)

Thus, new discourses, social practices and ways of thinking and being gendered do not directly substitute or erase the old in terms of a clean slate. Although these new and old discourses may assimilate or co-exist separately, they may also create tension through contradiction and disruption between old and new ways of thinking and being at any given moment.

It is now widely accepted that the gender categories of masculinity and femininity are inter-dependent parts of a system of gender relations (one does not exist without the other). The specificities of these categories are understood to be historically and socially fluid in terms of being culturally located within a particular point in time (Connell 1996; Davies 1993). The practices of masculinity and femininity are thus said to be continually defined and redefined compilations of truths and commonsense understandings which are “illusions that are the products of specific circumstances in space and time” (Butler in Yelland & Grieshaber 1998: 3). Against this backdrop, masculinised and feminised practices are actively constituted, contextual, multi-faceted and dynamic while they are also said to be embodied and, in this sense, personalised and enacted in a multitude of different ways.

### 2.3 Understanding masculinities

Critical in understanding masculinities is acknowledging: the notion of multiple masculinities conceptualised around race, sexuality and social class; the concept of masculine hierarchies; the significance of collective practice; and their location within broader institutional, state, global and historical contexts (Connell 1995: 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994).
2.3.1 Masculine hierarchies: hegemonic*, complicit, subordinate and marginalised

A framework constituting the hierarchy of different forms of being male, critical in understanding how multiple masculinities interplay, has been explained by Connell as consisting of four main types: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised (Connell 1995). Each type, it must be emphasised, is not a static category within the gender relations’ hierarchy but is fluid and dynamic, dependent on the interplay of a myriad of social, cultural and historical variables. In this sense, masculinities may be contradictory and inconsistent and, in any event, are certainly subject to contestation, renewal and variation. Nevertheless, at any one time, consistencies emerge within these four types.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a pattern of “gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 1995: 77). Hegemonic masculinity, however, as it is perpetually in defence of patriarchy, must continually adapt its practices to maintain dominance and authority in reaction to consistent challenges to its legitimacy by other gender groups. Further, dominant forms of masculinity may be competing for hegemony and there may be more than one hegemonic masculinity operating at any one time (with examples including the sporting hero and the business tycoon). Very few men, however, are seen to fit the hegemonic profile in all its ‘idealistic’ authority and cultural superiority. Nevertheless, it is suggested that many men recognise the cultural investment they have with regard to legitimating patriarchy and, therefore, practices of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the majority of men benefit from, to use Connell’s term, the ‘patriarchal dividend’, through practices of masculine complicity.

*It is acknowledged that commentators such as Kenway (in Kenway, Fitzclarence, Hickey & Lingard 2000) express growing concern about the inadequacies of the term ‘hegemonic’ in describing patterns of dominant/patriarchal ‘masculine’ practice. These concerns, in light of theories explaining gender as multiple and fluid, relate to the term’s tendency to reduce and totalise meaning, and the term’s inadequacies in explaining different ‘hegemonies’. While it is used here, in reference to Connell’s work, I use the term ‘dominant’ rather than ‘hegemonic’ in reference to the study’s data.
These complicit practices, while very rarely overt, support the premise of male authority and importance over female authority and importance and thus perpetuate a male/female dichotomy.

The hegemonic and complicit practices within the ‘masculine’ hierarchy denigrating groups and positioning them as inferior may also be seen as enforcing and maintaining a male/female dichotomy. In this regard, we see the ‘othering’ of ‘femininities’ or ‘female-like’ behaviour in males as evidenced in the subordination or marginalisation of homosexual or effeminate men. Hegemonic and complicit practices, which actively endorse the cultural stigma attached to homosexuals, such as ostracism, ridicule, name calling and violence, thus work to legitimate dominant versions of masculinity at the expense of others.

Further domination and oppression invariably result from the interplay of masculine hegemony, complicity and subordination with the marginalising structures of race and social class. Additionally, the state can be seen as valuing and institutionalising particular forms of masculinity which magnify the hierarchy - those men who are unemployed or of the lower working-class are clearly excluded from state defined versions of successful masculinities as commensurate with economic status and professional ‘success’. Those men who believe their power to be jeopardised through social positioning, Kenway and Willis (1998), suggest, may attempt to acquire power from other sources. Connell (1989: 298) illuminates:

A man who has social and cultural advantage through economic status and professionalism has no need for riding leathers and engine noise to assert masculinity. His masculinity is asserted and amplified on an immensely greater scale by society itself.

Thus, acquisition of power from other sources in the form of ‘riding leathers and engine noise’ – social rebellion often associated with the positioning of young ‘working-class’ men and boys (Segal, 1990; Walker 1988) might be seen as embedded features of a social hierarchy oppressed with divisions of race and class where a perpetual under-class is created and where social mobility is infeasible (Segal 1990). In this sub-cultural context, the hegemonic masculinity may well be characterised by rebellion against authority and
dangerous risk-taking pursuits. Aggression and violence, within this realm, might thus be characterised as forms of gaining power and as a reaction to feelings of social powerlessness, reflecting the continual paradox between the notion of maleness as synonymous with power, strength and domination and the ‘relative’ powerlessness of the lives of many men (Segal 1990).

2.3.2 Collective, exaggerated practice

Critical in the regulation of hierarchy, research on masculinity emphasises the significance of power, authority and a sense of masculine identity as strengthened through collective practice or peer culture (see Connell 1995). In this sense, boys and men develop collective masculinities and learn how to behave as boys and men from and within these collectives or peer groups. Indeed, recent research in this area suggests that the peer group is, from early childhood onwards, the single most significant environmental impact shaping personality and behaviour (Harris 1998).

The dynamics within peer cultures are said to exaggerate particular dominant and dominating behaviours (Connell 1995; 1996; 2000; Harris 1998; Kenway 1995; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 1999). On a personal level, the exaggeration of group behaviours is said to affirm individual worth and acceptance by others in the group, however this dominating behaviour can become extreme when one peer group dominates another (Deshmarchelier 1997). The notion of within group rivalry and ‘out-doing’ one another is applicable in this regard. Thus, situations involving the dominating and often exaggerated behaviours of aggression and violence can develop as a result of competition and provocation from the peer group (Cairns & Cairns 1991). Research pertaining to the potency of the peer culture in shaping and regulating behaviour within the context of education will be examined in sections 2.4 and 2.5 in more detail.

2.3.3 The gender order of society: locating masculinities within institutional, state, global and historical contexts

The importance of locating the structure of patriarchy within institutional, state and global gender orders has been emphasised by many social commentators (Connell 2000; Holter 1995; O’Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999; Parker, Parkinson & Behrens 1999;
Weedon 1999). Moreover, the system of patriarchy and its regulation and maintenance of masculinities and femininities within institutional contexts cannot be understood without a contextualisation within its gendered historical development (Connell 2000). This institutional and historical contextualisation helps to explain existing inequitable power relations within a gendered social order which continues in its overall oppression of women and constitution of subordinated masculinities. The significance of this contextualisation to the study’s understandings lies in the interrelatedness of the patriarchally defined system of gender (and the perpetuation of sexism) and the patriarchally defined system of sexuality (and the perpetuation of heterosexism). In particular, how both these systems are underpinned and governed by the subordination of the sphere of femininities (including effeminacies) and thus work to promote particular, limited understandings of masculinity at the expense and marginalisation of other subjectivities.

Institutions are highly gendered and gendering sites (Connell 2000; O’Connor et al. 1999). Through the circulation of definitions of masculinity and femininity institutions produce particular understandings of gender and regulate and normalise particular behaviours, promoting some ways of being and not others. Connell talks of particular kinds of masculinity as being embedded in institutions such as the army, corporations, schools and sporting clubs. These institutions are seen as shaping and regulating masculinities and femininities through constructing and calling into existence “specific conditions for social practice” (2000: 45).

Localised gendered understandings of masculinities and femininities are institutionalised, normalised and maintained on a larger scale, by the state (Connell 2000; O’Connor et al. 1999; Parker et al. 1999) and cannot be understood in isolation from its centralised power. State power regulates patterns of gender segregation and participation within the labour market and constructs policies enabling or constraining workers, such as equal employment initiatives and child care provision, or lack thereof (O’Connor et al. 1999). State power also constructs and normalises gendered and heterosexist understandings and social categories through social policy, resource provision and legal regulation. For example, welfare dependency has been defined through the categories of ‘worker’, ‘wife’
or ‘mother’ and social and sexual normalcy and deviancy have been defined through repressive laws, such as the understanding of marriage in Australian family law as involving a union between a man and a woman (Connell 2000; O’Connor et al. 1999; Parker et al. 1999).

In managing institutions and relations like marriage and motherhood the state is doing more than regulating them. It is playing a major part in the constitution of the social categories of the gender order. Through them the state plays a part in the constitution of the interests at play in sexual politics. (Connell in O’Connor et al. 1999: 11)

O’Connor et al. (1999) theorise state-society relations and provide an understanding of the connections between gender and politics. They explain the neo-liberalism of the contemporary Australian welfare state as inscribing gender inequality through its ideological affirmation of independence, freedom and the individual, and its enforcement of a sharp split between the public and private sphere. Feminist critique (see Pateman 1989) has illuminated the inherently gendered nature of liberal thought as perpetuating a ‘patriarchal’ welfare state through separating the public world of the state from the private world of the home and family. This separation is said to ignore the particularities of individual and group disadvantage and assumes the public and private sphere to be gender neutral.

Neo-liberal policy formulations usually treat women in the same terms of possessive individualism as they treat men, and construct issues about their participation in paid employment as matters of rational market choice. (O’Connor et al. 1999: 60)

The public/private dichotomy ignores the connectedness of these worlds, in particular the implications and consequences of the division of domestic labour and child care (unpaid work predominantly carried out by women) on men’s and women’s participation in the labour force and politics of the public sphere. Neo-liberalism thus justifies economic inequity within the home as private choice rather than public concern and ignores how inequalities within this sphere are implicated within the public sphere. In an Australian context, for instance, the economic inequalities between men and women are manifest in high levels of employment sex segregation and over-representation of women in part-
time work (O’Connor et al. 1999). In this regard, the liberal ideals of individualism, independence and freedom acknowledge only the masculinised self of the public sphere and are thus said to “obscure a fundamental source of power and inequality in relations between the sexes” (O’Connor et al. 1999: 45). Neo-liberalism’s affirmation of individual freedom and assumption of gender neutrality within a rational market paradigm, opposes support for women on the basis of gender (O’Connor et al. 1999). Thus neo-liberalism positions women at an economic disadvantage relative to men and reinscribes their dependency (within the traditional notion of the family), through an assumed gender neutrality and a lack of financial support for parents, namely women, in both public and private realms.

Similarly, these inequitable social relations and gender ideologies are endorsed and naturalised through the patriarchal and heterosexist structure underpinning Australian family law. Feminist critique has exposed the value and moral-laden biases of family law as powerful in shaping ideologies and understandings of gender and social relationships (see Parker et al. 1999). For example, the gendered ideologies transmitted through family law, in particular, the privileging of the traditional family, have been criticised as entrenching the public/private binary and perpetuating patriarchal power through lack of state regulation and intervention in family matters underpinned by an assumption that families function equitably (see Donovan 1985).

A look at how ‘marriage’ and ‘family’ are represented in Australian family law is revealing in relation to how the state defines ‘acceptable’ gender relationships as those worthy of legal protection and support. Parker et al. (1999: 22) assert that the formation in Australia of the *Family Law Act* (Commonwealth), the *Family Relationships Act* (South Australia) and *Family Court Act* (Western Australia), all of 1975, constitute the “clear legislative interest” governing bodies have in the “family as a distinct social unity.” However, this notion of ‘family’, in terms of the relationships and households eligible for the provision of legal support and protection, under Australian family law, is quite specific. While a precise notion of ‘family’, within the context of the *Family Law Act*, does not exist, for constitutional reasons, the notion of ‘marriage’ remains the “dominant concept of family law” (Parker et al. 1999: 22). In this regard, for example,
property settlement rights under the *Act* are only available to legally married (heterosexual) couples. Thus, property settlement rights for alternative relationships and families, such as homosexual or lesbian relationships, single parent (by choice) relationships and families formed under traditional Aboriginal law are not available under the *Family Law Act* (*The Canberra Times* 16.03.92). Recourse is only available in disparate state legislation or the common law. Even in terms of child residency matters for which the *Family Law Act* universally applies, it is argued that alternative relationships are not only ignored but are clearly discriminated against, as the following example, regarding same-sex relationships and dispute over children delineates:

A woman who does not conform to the heterosexual stereotype seems to be fighting an uphill battle in a custody (now residency) dispute, particularly if the father has re-partnered and is able to provide a ‘stable family life’. Virtually all the cases assume there is a risk to the children in being placed with homosexual parents … In effect, homosexuality is a factor to be overcome in a dispute whereas heterosexuality is taken for granted. (Parker et al. 1999: 339)

Within this structure coupledom, on the basis of heterosexuality, is institutionalised as ‘respectable’ and ‘stable’, whereas coupledom, on the basis of homosexuality, is institutionalised as deviant and risky (Millbank 1998; Parker et al. 1999). Compulsory heterosexuality as a key element of the form of masculinity hegemonic in Australian law is perhaps best exemplified in the Tasmanian context, where until 1998, homosexual sex between two consenting male adults was considered a criminal offence, punishable with a 21 year jail term.

A broader understanding of the ways in which localised relations within the structures of small and large-scale institutions are gendered, is availed when situated within a global context (Connell 2000; Enloe 1990). Again feminist work has revealed the masculinised areas of international trade, global markets and international politics as significant in shaping and normalising particular understandings of gender and perpetuating social inequities on a world scale (see Enloe 1990). Feminist analyses have illuminated the global patriarchal structures impacting on women’s situation and, in particular, women’s economic disadvantage relative to men on a world scale through inequities in wages and labour force participation and gross inequities in relation to private ownership (see Taylor}
1985). The implications, of a global patriarchal order on masculinities, have been illuminated by Connell. He talks of the global conditions which exist to produce a “hegemonic masculinity on a world scale, that is to say, a dominant form of masculinity which embodies, organises and legitimates men’s domination in the gender order as a whole” (2000: 46).

Connell’s (2000) work illuminates the importance of historical contingency in the manifestation of particular gender(ed) relations. In understanding the state and global conditions perpetuating a gender order which subordinates women and positions particular masculinities in the periphery, an historical account of gender(ed) relations is useful. Wallerstein (in Connell 2000) affirms that the production of today’s global society originates from the political and economic processes stemming from the expansion of European states, into the creation of colonial empires, from the fifteenth century. Connell asserts that the creation of colonial empires, through the gendered process of Imperialism holds the key to current society’s inequitable social order. He explains (2000: 50) the process of Imperialism in three ‘masculinised’ phases. The first phase, he describes as one of male force, “conquest and settlement” with the “massive disruption of indigenous gender orders.” The second and third phases, he defines, within colonial and neo-colonial societies, as establishing stratifications around gendered divisions of labour and hierarchies of masculinities defined around race and social class. The reconstitution of gender relations, and in particular masculine hierarchies, during these phases, he asserts, was directly implicated within the installation of large-scale masculinised institutions on the “North Atlantic model: armies, states, bureaucracies, corporations, capital markets, labour markets, schools, law courts, transport systems” (2000: 45).

Also characteristic of colonial and neo-colonial societies, and critical in shaping understandings of masculinities and femininities, he argues, was the gendered division of labour resulting from industrial capitalism’s economic restructuring of local production systems (Holter in Connell 2000). In this respect, gendered labour was organised into two distinct spheres: femininity was associated with the unpaid work of the private sphere within the home and family, and masculinity was associated with the paid work of the
public sphere (Holter in Connell 2000). This division of labour had vast economic consequences in terms of unequal pay and the grossly inequitable accrual of private wealth (Connell 2000).

According to Connell (2000), the formation and development of colonial and neo-colonial societies saw massive class and gender reform on a global scale and was clearly implicated in the shaping and understandings of masculinities. Gender reform of colonial and neo-colonial societies forced a reconstruction of masculinities with the “break down of purdah systems of patriarchy” (2000: 42) and the legal and political concessions, arising through challenges from the Women’s Movement. Within a global context, Connell (2000: 41-51) explains neo-liberalism as “reorienting masculinities towards national and international contexts” and remaking gender divisions of labour “on a massive scale in the ‘global factory’” (2000: 41-51). Within this context, he talks of the strategic power of dominant masculinities within male-controlled large-scale institutions and corporations organised and reasserted around the international politics of a highly unequal and turbulent global market controlled by the “great economic powers” of the United States, the European Union and Japan (Connell 2000: 41).

Backlash politics, manifest in attempts at maintaining global patriarchy and affirming masculine hierarchies within this international context, are also seen as critical in the shaping of masculinities. Gender, class and racial reform have met with fierce opposition from dominant masculinities in colonial and neo-colonial societies. The masculinities of extreme nationalism, for example, have had dire consequences, in the form of glorified violence, mass genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’ on a global scale (Tillner in Connell 2000). Disruption of male-domiance, with the movement of women into the formally masculinised public sphere has also met with fierce opposition in the various forms of men’s movements in an effort to re-legitimate men’s cultural dominance. A masculine fundamentalism underpins many of these oppositional movements, from the Mythopoetic movements of the West, who wish to recover and celebrate an essential masculinity, to the oppressive and misogynistic masculinities of particular Middle Eastern countries (Connell 2000).
2.4 Analyses of masculinities in secondary schools

Analyses of masculinities have largely been concerned with the study of adolescent boys within a secondary school setting. Early work such as Willis’ study of working class boys who were *Learning to Labour* (1977) and the *Louts and Legends* of Walker’s study (1988) as well as more recent research conducted by Mac an Ghaill (1994), Connell (1995) and Martino (1997), reveal strong similarities in their findings. The major themes from these and other studies will be discussed here within Connell’s (1996) framework for understanding masculinities, in particular the notion of multiple masculinities organised around collective subjectivities such as class, race and sexuality; and the hierarchical power relations enmeshed in the regulation of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, as well as the regulation of femininities.

2.4.1 Multiple masculinities organised around collective subjectivities

In working from Connell’s thesis (1996), masculinities are defined and collectively constructed in different ways within different cultures and social settings. Moreover, the sub-cultures of class, race and sexuality clearly impact on how masculinities are understood. Thus, different versions of masculinity organised around these sub-cultures co-exist within particular cultural settings. In the studies of Willis (1977), Walker (1988), Askew and Ross (1988), Mac an Ghaill (1994), Connell (1989; 1995; 1996; 2000) and Martino (1997; 1999), different versions of masculinity are understood collectively within the cultural settings of schools and differ markedly within each of these settings with regard to class, race and sexuality.

These studies’ identification and examination of several friendship groups’ different definitions of masculinity underlies the contention that ideas of ‘being male’ are not consistent. For example, Walker’s (1988) *Footballers*’ collective definition of masculinity embodies loyalty to one’s mates, rebellion against authority, risk-taking behaviour and sporting prowess. This construct stands in considerable contrast to Walker’s *Three Friends* who define their masculinity (being studious, dislike of football, interest in theatre) in almost complete opposition to the *Footballers*. Similarly, Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) working class *Macho Lads*, Connell’s (1989) *Cool Guys*, and Martino’s
(1999) *Party Animals* share analogous group understandings of masculinity: machismo and compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia and aversion to femininity, rebellion and aggression against authority structures, ‘toughness’ and ‘standing up for your mates’. Indeed, these boys’ anti-school culture is defined in antithesis to the more ‘feminine’ masculinities of the *Academic Achievers* (Mac an Ghaill 1994), the *Swots* (Connell 1989) and the *Squids* (Martino 1999).

These findings illuminate the significance and potency of informal student peer culture in shaping and regulating masculinities. As Connell (2000: 162) makes clear “peer groups, not individuals, are the bearers of gender definitions.” Through a distinctive gender order (Connell 2000: 161), young people within peer culture “define their own sexualities and identities.” Martino (1999: 245) describes the potency of these defining interactions within and between peer groups as a “regime of normalising practices through which boys are incited to adopt certain practices of masculinity and to display themselves as particular kinds of boys.” Mac an Ghaill (1994: 53) articulates the significance of male peer groups as “providing a material and symbolic safe space within which to develop social and discursive practices.” These studies, while organised around ‘typologies’, also illuminate the complex, contradictory and fluid nature of this tenuous ‘identity-making’ process. In this regard, the inhabitation of specific subject positions is seen as governed by, and open to, continual contestation. Male students are thus positioned as actively and dynamically engaged in negotiating their own masculinities within a range of “social and sexual identities” (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 53).

### 2.4.2 Hierarchical power relations and the regulation of masculinities

All these studies highlight the significance of collective power hierarchies in shaping and legitimating masculinities. In this regard, ‘ways of being’ are shaped within and between peer groups through the dispersion of socio-political power. The regulation and maintenance of collective masculinities are achieved through oppressive, and often exaggerated practice which serves as a method of ‘self’ and ‘other’ surveillance. Connell (2000: 162) describes these exaggerated group behaviours as a “performance of hegemonic masculinity” for the benefit of an audience. Mac an Ghaill (1994) similarly
explains these collective behaviours, often ritualistically obsessive in nature, as the amplification of masculine reputations, within a process of identity affirmation.

These studies characterise this process of ‘identity affirmation’ in terms of competition and the need to prove one’s masculinity (Askew & Ross 1988; Martino 1997). In this regard, boys’ masculinities are continuously ‘put to the test’ in the competitive struggle for status and prestige within the masculine ‘pecking order’ (Martino 1997). This pecking order is established through boys taking every opportunity to assert their ‘masculinity’ and pounce on other people’s weaknesses. Commonly, boys attempt to intimidate or humiliate others by using verbal put-downs, threats, body language and sometimes violence (Askew & Ross 1988; Martino 1997). Boys’ competitive preoccupation with ‘out doing’ each other is argued to be their predominant means of relating to each other. Competitive behaviour, in this regard, is seen as permeating most of their social interaction and school activity and clearly affects schoolwork performance and concentration (Askew & Ross 1988).

The hierarchical structure of these masculinities, as well as the tenuous and turbulent nature of power acquisition within this structure and the constant need for reassurance and legitimation, points to the fragility of masculine identity (Connell 1995; 1996; 2000, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Kenway 1995). Identity is interpreted as formed through an investment in a particular form of masculinity and “boys invest a lot of energy in maintaining their position within the dominant group” (Martino 1999: 255). Particular masculine practices within these dominant groups deploy certain techniques of power through directly and indirectly subordinating and excluding other masculinities in the continuous effort to hold on to a sense of power and collective identity within the hierarchy. Subordinated masculine peer groups, in turn, also seek to gain power at the expense of other groups (Martino, 1999).

A fear of powerlessness and the notion of equating hegemonic masculine worth with power and domination is said to be at the core of these struggles for masculine legitimation. In this regard, boys’ are seen as deriving a sense of self-esteem and self worth from acceptance within this masculine power frame and subsequently associate
powerlessness with femininity and unmanliness. Clearly implicated within this equation are the hierarchical divisions organised around class, race and sexuality, including the subordination of groups such as Asian and Black minorities (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Within each school setting, particular versions of masculinity are interpreted as working to mark prestige or difference from other gender sub-cultures, through positioning these groups as subordinate and somehow inferior. In this regard the ‘othering process’ is clearly operating to subordinate ‘inferior’ groups through specific homophobic, heterosexist and racist discourse (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1994).

In the studies of Connell (1995; 2000), Mac an Ghaill (1994), Walker (1988) and Martino (1997; 1999), masculine power is seen to be acquired in two main ways: firstly, through achieving academically and therefore marking prestige by ascribing to the school’s values, as with Connell’s Swots (however, as academia is often associated with femininity this form of masculinity is rarely the hegemonic form); or secondly, attempting to acquire alternative forms of power through denigrating the values of the school and rebelling against these values, as with Mac an Ghaill’s Macho Lads. These two types of opposing masculinities, particularly those types organised around macho definitions, are interpreted as collectively regulating the hierarchy. For instance, each masculine ‘type’ actively criticises the other in an effort to verify masculine superiority:

Like Willis’ Lads, the Macho Lads at Parnell School made a similar association of academic work with an inferior effeminacy, referring to those who conformed as ‘dickhead achievers’. Consequently, they overtly rejected much school work as inappropriate for them as men. They were also a pivotal group within the school in creating a general ethos in which the academic/non-academic couplet was associated with a feminine/masculine division for a wider group of ‘ordinary’ male students, who were not overtly anti-school. (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 59)

Here, the Macho Lads appear to hold considerable power over the attitudes and values of the wider student body in terms of what could be defined as ‘acceptable’ masculine behaviour. Their perceptions of femininity or effeminacy as inferior, and something to reject or degrade as unmanly, is thus seen as a fitting denigration of the Academic Achievers and also serves to perpetuate a gender duality and further reinforce the gulf between these opposing groups. Indeed, academic achievement seems only acceptable as
a ‘masculine’ practice within this macho group for those rare few who are seen to achieve with little effort (Mac an Ghaill 1994). In a similar vein to the Macho Lads, the Academic Achievers distance themselves through highlighting their intellectual superiority and associating their masculinity with greater aspirations for future professional careers:

An important aspect of the Academic Achievers’ self-representation was the acceptance of the ‘mental-manual’ division of labour, and their identification with ‘mental’ production. This explicitly manifested itself in terms of distancing themselves from the Macho Lads, the embodiment of manual labour and ‘low-life’ futures. (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 63)

Collective gendered, as well as classist and racist assumptions and practices thus underpin much of the regulation and legitimation of masculinities within these hierarchies. Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Martino’s (1997; 1999) studies, in particular, illuminate how the ‘moral order’ of compulsory heterosexuality or heterosexism permeates school life in terms of self-decipherment and the monitoring of others. In Mac an Ghaill’s words, “the sexual and gender imperatives of performing like a man” (1994: 137) within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality “circumscribe everyday cultural practices” (1994: 241) because these imperatives pervade all aspects of school life. In this regard, misogyny and homophobia, the aversive bi-products of a patriarchally defined compulsory heterosexuality, are seen, within these works, as pivotal in the shaping and policing of adolescent masculine identities with the ‘desirable’ masculinity thus defined along ‘hypermasculine’ lines. This heterosexist ‘hypermasculinity’ is interpreted as governed by a strong association between power and ‘masculinity’, and powerlessness and unmanliness, or ‘femininity’: any sign of ‘femininity’ or effeminacy in the boys and young men in these schools is thus perceived by the dominant or ‘macho’ group as aversive. Indeed, many boys, whether they are perceived as ‘feminine’ or not, are denigrated with homophobic abuse when they are perceived as ‘not measuring up’ to the dominant heterosexist codes of the ‘macho’ or ‘cool’ group. Within the oppressive power structure of compulsory heterosexuality, girls and women are constituted as subordinated objects, often the feature of misogynistic boasting within sexual narratives (Mac an Ghaill 1994). To these ends, the gendered and sexual power of the cultural
elements of heterosexism, misogyny and homophobia are found to interplay to constitute, police and legitimise adolescent male heterosexual identities (Mac an Ghaill 1994).

Sexual harassment of girls and women, in the form of denigration and objectification, and of boys and men, in the form of homophobic abuse, is interpreted as constituting the main way boys and young men actively regulate the masculine hierarchy and legitimate their own masculinity (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 1997, 1999; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1994). As Mac an Ghaill (1994: 90) articulates:

What emerged as of particular salience was the way in which heterosexual male students were involved in a double relationship of, traducing the ‘other’, including women and gays (external relations), at the same time as expelling femininity and homosexuality from within themselves (internal relations). These were the complex and contradictory processes within which heterosexual male student apprenticeships were developed within a secondary school context.

2.4.3 The regulation of femininities

Mac an Ghaill’s (1994: 131) study offers a valuable relational perspective concerning how dominant and collective masculinities of “objectification, fixation and conquest” position female subjectivities within the context of the school. He describes female sexualities as being institutionally regulated, policed and normalised within “public modes of masculine heterosexuality” (1994: 133). The female students in his study, for example, express specific concern over sexual harassment. In particular, in response to continually being positioned as ‘objects’ within the surveillance of the male gaze, they are greatly self-conscious about their appearance and their alleged reputations and feel constant pressure “to conform to accepted sexual divisions and heterosexual arrangements” (1994: 131). This ‘constant pressure’ is found to hold ambiguities and confusion for the female students. “Normal heterosexuality and more grown-up femininity,” Mac an Ghaill, asserts, are proven for the girls through getting a boyfriend (1994: 137). To these ends, the young women express a desire for male attention and approval but feel insecure at the hands of the boys’ crude and possibly derogatory judgement. Additionally, the young women feel that they are not taken seriously in relation to alerting others, and in particular male teachers, of their concern about sexual
harassment. Against this backdrop, the boys’ sexualised power relations are constituted within the realms of normal, expected behaviour.

2.4.4 School structure as installer of particular forms of masculinity

It is important to acknowledge the recent research within secondary education which has highlighted the active role school structures and practices play in the production and endorsement of particular forms of masculinity (Askew & Ross 1988; Connell 1995; Kenway 1995; Kenway & Willis 1998; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 1999). Schools are masculine structures (Askew & Ross 1988; Kenway & Willis 1998), and masculinising agencies (Kenway & Willis 1998; Mac an Ghaill 1994) and institutions which typically enforce a gender dichotomy which “systematically privileges boys and men” (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 4), through particular masculinising practices. In this regard, schools serve to “fix … regulate and reify” the “highly fragile socially constructed phenomenon of masculine heterosexuality … as an apparently stable, unitary category” (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 96).

Connell (1996; 2000) delineates these masculinising practices as associated with: the division of labour in schools in terms of male staff predominating in positions of ‘higher’ status and pay within the administrative and secondary sphere and female staff in the primary and early childhood sphere; curriculum divisions, in relation to gender segregation of certain subject areas; the patriarchal legitimation of knowledge; discipline systems, regarding how power and authority is modelled by adults in schools; and sport, in terms of the way particular male-dominated sports are treated as markedly more important than female-dominated sports. Within a secondary context, the masculinist nature of sexualities education has also been perceived as perpetuating and endorsing heterosexist masculinities (Harrison 1996). These practices within schools perpetuate and maintain the view of gender as difference and opposition. Through maintaining these gender and sexual dualisms, not only is femininity perpetually subordinated but particular forms of masculinity are viewed as less powerful than other masculinities, thereby amplifying the differences between subordinate and dominant groups within the masculine hierarchy.
2.4.4.1 Schools perpetuation of heterosexism

Heterosexism in schools themselves operates in a number of different ways. Like all other social institutions, schools are suffused with the heterosexual presumption. In every area of the formal curriculum heterosexuality is the norm. (Epstein & Johnson 1994)

While heterosexism is said to permeate all areas of the formal curriculum in schools, research in the areas of schooling, masculinities and sporting culture and schooling and sexualities in a secondary education context is seen as highly relevant to explore here in terms of offering the study compelling insight into masculinities, power and heterosexism.

In the studies discussed above, sport, and in particular football, features as central in the definition, enactment and legitimation of dominant masculinities. In this regard, participation in football is seen as pivotal to the ‘identities’ of Walker’s Footballers, Macan Ghaill’s Macho Lads, and Martino’s Cool Boys (also known as Party Animals). These studies make clear the high status schools accord male-dominated sports such as football and the attendant high status accorded to boys who achieve success at such sports. More specifically, these studies inform us of the pervasive masculinising practices within schools which implicitly and explicitly promote this particular brand of ‘hypermascualinity’ over alternative forms of masculinities, through the valorisation of football. As McLean (1996: 30) notes:

Boys who are … physically aggressive are highly rewarded by school structures, as long as they channel this aggression in the sanctioned directions of competitive sport.

Martino (1999: 244) delineates these masculinising practices within his study, in reference to his Cool Boys. He notes the school’s high recognition of football as a “public enactment of heterosexual masculinity” and outlines the privileges and status afforded to the school’s footballers, the Cool Boys. Through their success playing football, the Cool Boys enjoy popularity and a high profile and are able to secure a place at the top of the masculine ‘pecking order’. This ‘cool’ football masculinity is fashioned as desirable and used as the standard from which to adjudicate and relegate alternative masculinities. In particular, masculinities contrasting or contradicting the ‘macho’
footballer’s image, in terms of displaying particular traits seen as ‘feminine’ and ‘passive’, are disparaged and harassed as inferior. Martino’s work draws attention to the role of sport, and football in particular, in (re)constituting and (re)legitimating “the binary frames of reference that are implicated in specific regimes of practice in which adolescent boys learn to enact their masculinities” (1999: 243).

The significance of football, in the studies of Connell, Mac an Ghaill, Martino and Walker, in shaping a desired masculinity locates itself within the increasing interest in sports as ‘masculine making’ institutions (Fitzclarence, Hickey, & Matthews 1997; Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). Indeed, football has been described as the ‘last bastion’ of masculinity (Hickey & Fitzclarence 1998b). Feminist analyses of the late seventies, according to Messner and Sabo (1994) began this critique of sport. These analyses pointed to the fundamentally sexist aspects of institutionalised sport, such as: the exclusion of female athletes from sporting history; the overwhelming over-representation of males in sport; the saturation of men’s sport in the media; the ‘masculinised’ traits associated with highly valued sports, such as physical strength and domination; and the differential patterns of ‘sex-socialisation’ in sports. All these are seen through feminist lenses as naturalising men’s power and privilege over women. Moreover, this domain is seen as “helping to uphold an otherwise faltering ideology of male superiority” (in Messner & Sabo 1994: 5). Feminist analyses (see Miedzian 1992) have explored the association between the broader culture of boys’ and men’s violence and combative sports. Miedzian’s (1992: 197) question: “When winning is the only thing, can violence be far away?” illuminates her concern regarding the hyper-competitive and aggressive nature of many male-dominated sports. She elucidates further:

Life is filled with difficulty, danger, and suffering, the reader may wonder what is wrong with teaching boys and men to overcome their fears, to be courageous, to withstand pain. There is nothing wrong with it. But when a high school football player is shot up with Novocain in order to play, when he plays with injuries that if aggravated could lead to permanent damage, he is learning much more than to withstand pain. He is learning to sacrifice his body unnecessarily and to hide all feelings of fear and vulnerability. However warranted they may be he is also being taught to sacrifice the bodies of others. (Miedzian 1992: 197)
A burgeoning body of work brings these lines of thought into detailed explorations of the intersection of Western sporting culture and masculinities (Fitzclarence et al. 1997; Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). The male institution of sport is seen as central in the social production of masculinities (Whitson 1990). As Townsend (1994) articulates, male culture has passionately embraced male-dominated sports for over sixty years. Along similar lines, Fitzclarence et al. (1997) talk of the embracement of sport in adolescent culture in terms of the allegiances formed, the hero worship of sporting stars, the immortalisation of great feats and the dreams of success and glory. In this regard, Townsend rings true with his comment that sport is “very much a part of the male psychology, from the time of adolescence, or often earlier, even for those who reject it” (Townsend in Fitzclarence et al. 1997: 70). Strong associations are made between developing manhood and participation in sport (Fitzclarence et al. 1997) with the degree of success in sports considered a significant measure of status within adolescent and preadolescent male peer groups (Whitson 1990). This body of work, while noting the positive role sports may play in the lives of many males, also shares feminist concerns that the values transmitted through sporting institutions promote male supremacy and normalise structures of domination within and outside sport. In this regard, the celebration and acclaim accorded to a particular type of ‘hyper-competitive’ masculinity, within a sports hierarchy where combative team sports such as football enjoy top positioning, is seen as subordinating and marginalising females and alternative ways of being male (Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). As Messner (in Fitzclarence et al. 1997: 70) points out, “when boys start playing competitive sport they are not just learning a game, they are entering an organised institution.”

By publicly celebrating the dramatic achievements of the best males in public stadia while marginalizing females as spectators, sports validate the male claim to the best jobs and the highest status and rewards. Sports contribute to the underdevelopment of the female majority of the population and the undervaluing of those traditionally ‘feminine’ skills of nurturing and emotional maintenance, which are essential to human growth and survival. (Kidd 1990: 37)

Kidd (1990) outlines particular traits and ‘masculinising’ practices valorised and celebrated in competitive male-dominated sports, including: winning, competitiveness, aggression, physical strength, confrontation, fighting skills and male solidarity. As well
as devaluing other kinds of physical prowess, he describes the pursuit of these traits as reinforcing the gender divide and perpetuating a hegemonic masculinity that works to legitimate itself at the expense of femininities or effeminacies, and to thwart boys’ and men’s emotional development. In this regard, he notes the limited scope sporting contexts offer in the exploration of alternative masculinities, in the sense of there being a “broad range of masculinities that are subordinated in public and institutional discourse” (1990: 37). Along similar lines, Whitson (1990: 28) talks of the “small or awkward boys, scholarly or artistic boys” who are excluded from sports and must come to terms with their positioning as ‘inferior’ to the hegemony.

Today much (sporting) experience is distorted or muted by sexism, homophobia, and aggressive domination thinly disguised as ‘healthy competition’. (Messner & Sabo 1994: 1)

Messner and Sabo (1994) discuss the integral and interrelated roles heterosexism and homophobia play in ensuring that the inequities of competitive sport’s masculine hierarchy remain intact. They detail the common misogynistic and homophobic slurs used by boys to insult other boys’ lack of toughness. The ‘troubling’ aspect of the coach’s implication in curtailing or fostering and reproducing such abuse and aggression has also been noted (Fitzclarence et al. 1997; Messner & Sabo 1994). Fitzclarence et al. (1997) explain that a certain degree of ‘hardness’ and ‘aggression’ is required to win, and indeed play football, and in this regard, coaches must deal with the constant tensions created from fostering ‘focused aggression’ which does not develop into ‘institutionalised violence’. Messner and Sabo (1994: 104) also position the coach as central in fostering a degree of ‘hardness’ and implicate him in challenging or perpetuating the dominant cultural mores of heterosexism and homophobia.

Some coaches use homophobia as a motivational device. Playing on the gender and sexual insecurities of adolescent athletes, coaches use the threat of homosexual stigmatisation to muster allegiance to themselves of esprit d’corps among the ranks. Such ploys work because they reflect and feed the anti-gay sentiment that already exists in the locker-room subculture.

Also seen as significant in transmitting dominant cultural mores undergirded by heteronormativity and heterosexism is sexuality education. While research concerning
sexuality education and schooling is overwhelmingly focussed within a secondary context (see Gourlay 1996; Harrison, Hillier & Walsh 1996; Marshall 1996), this research is significant for an enriched understanding of the gendered world of early primary and early childhood because it illuminates the taken-for-granted and ‘all pervasive’ nature of a socially constructed heterosexuality and how this is implicated in understandings of gender. It also provides clues as to why sexuality(ies) remains such a ‘taboo’ subject for exploration within early childhood settings and consequently why much heterosexist practice remains unchallenged within educative settings. As the preceding sections make clear, the ‘playing out’ and ‘taking up’ of sexualities is rampant throughout the informal aspects of schooling, particularly within the peer group context, where this ‘play’ constitutes restricted and oppressive understandings of gender and sexuality. When schools fail to acknowledge and challenge heterosexism within their formal curriculum this constitutes an implicit endorsement and perpetuation. Mac an Ghaill (1994: 136) articulates his thoughts on the ‘desexualisation’ of schooling found within the official curriculum:

In their privatization of sexuality, they underplay its complex social and psychic power structure, within which schooling serves to legitimate the promotion and celebration of specific forms of male and female sexual identities, with the accompanying institutional positions as normal and natural.

The desexualisation of schooling then implicitly endorses the status quo of compulsory heterosexuality, through omitting talk and exploration of sexualities. The explicit endorsement of heterosexist assumptions, however, occurs through the curriculum content within sexuality education, as it is predominantly taught in secondary schools (Harrison et al. 1996; Marshall 1996). Sexuality education’s concern with ‘heterosexual activity’ rather than ‘sexuality’ has lent its focus to exploring safety and risk related issues such as disease and pregnancy prevention (Harrison et al. 1996; Marshall 1996). In this regard, Marshall (1996: 113-114) notes that educators “do very little sexuality education” because “very little attention (is given) to what goes on inside our heads.”

The equation of sexuality education with “male-dominated heterosex” (Harrison et al. 1996: 69) is manifest in a pre-occupation with the heterosexual sex act and a general
exclusion of discussing sexualities other than heterosexuality within this context (Harrison et al. 1996; Marshall 1996). In this regard, hierarchical gender relations are authorised through an emphasis on heterosexual penetration and, by inference, male pleasure. In this regard, silences are created around female pleasure and homosexual sex which are constituted as deviant from the norm (Fine in Harrison 1996).

Key issues of pleasure and desire, of sexual identities and sexuality as power, autonomy and dependence are usually present only as conspicuous absences. (Redman in Epstein & Johnson 1994: 217)

Fine’s research (in Harrison et al. 1996: 74) in American schools indicates that sexuality education curricula “by its very focus, serves to reproduce young women as the object of attention; as still somehow the ‘problem’ that needs to be fixed or the sex in most danger.” This she adds “normalises female sexual victimisation and privileges heterosexuality over other practices of sexuality.”

These discourses, like those concerned with safer sex, construct monogamy and penetrative heterosex as the norm … (and) continue to reflect broader heterosexist and masculinist cultural norms … under the guise of value neutrality. (Harrison et al. 1996: 80)

Moreover, Harrison et al. (1996: 73) point out, that while young women, within these heterosexual discourses, are silenced and subordinated, “the same is not true in relation to the discourses of femininity and romance.” Discourses of femininity and romance, they assert, generate crucial knowledge about sexuality. Of particular concern, they suggest, is the positioning of femininity within ‘romance’ discourses as invariably cast relative to male needs and desires.

Marshall’s work (1996) outlines the opportunities for exploring sexualities within the framework provided by the National Statements and Profiles for Australian schools, covering all years of compulsory schooling. In particular, Marshall points out, that the strand of Human Relations within the key learning area of Health and Physical Education (Curriculum Corporation 1994) attempts to provide a context within which students and teachers can explore “the ‘in our heads’ aspects of sexuality” (1996: 113). However, his recent audit of school programs in Queensland and Victoria reflects the broader situation
that teachers “teach very little about these outcomes” (1996: 114) because they generally feel ill prepared, under-trained and under-resourced to do so (Marshall 1996; Gourlay 1996). Gourlay (1996: 39) describes this area of the curriculum as “disparate” and “loosely defined” and illuminates some of the arguments that oppose sexuality education. These include accusations that sexuality education, “undermines family values,” “promotes homosexuality” and “invades the young mind with sexual information that destroys something irreparable in a child’s spirituality.” It is unsurprising then, that against this backdrop, and within the context and concept of sexuality “as the most private aspect of the inner self” (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 219), teachers generally find issues such as homosexuality ‘problematic’ to address. In this regard, the content of sexualities education is often monitored or censored through “discomfort and embarrassment” (Harrison et al. 1996: 76-77). What remains, in both content and pedagogy, tends to reinforce the masculinist notion of heterosexuality as assumed.

2.5 Young people’s understandings of gender: early childhood and primary education

Within an Australian context, recent research on gender (see Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993; Danby 1998; Davies 1988; 1993 Davies & Banks 1991; Epstein 1999; Kamler et al. 1994; Lowe 1998; Mac Naughton 1997; Yelland & Grieshaber 1998) has recognised the importance of examining the early childhood sphere in understanding how children ‘learn to be’ male and female. These studies have provided valuable insight into the many facets which contribute to the ways in which children develop a sense of social identity or subjectivity and position themselves within the gender order. It is clear that primary schools are “sites where children can ‘act out’ culturally endorsed ways of being male and female” (Alloway 1995a: 41). Given that gender is formed through social practice within social settings, the primary school is one such crucial social setting:

Differences are made and teachers and children may be seen in certain ways to comply in their making. Such differences are not the outcome of unalterable and inequitable working of ‘nature’. Boys and girls are, in a very real sense, ‘learning to be’ in the school setting. The collective identities which they produce and take on are a real part of their emerging social identities. These social identities, however, are in no way ‘pure’ and themselves comprise practices and attitudes
which are used to enact and enforce an unequal distribution of power in society. (Clark 1993: 30)

Issues of power generally, and issues of power and its association with masculinity more particularly, are major themes which emerge from the research into early childhood settings. Under the broad umbrella of the interrelationships of power and masculinities in school, studies such as those conducted by Alloway (1995a), Clark (1993), Davies (1993) and Kamler et al. (1994) reveal important factors: first, children are taught gender implicitly through constituting themselves as agentic and ‘correct’ students within the school and classroom hierarchy; second, structures within education, including the masculinist framework of schools, and the practice and philosophies of teachers, perpetuate or install particular forms of masculinity; and third, boys’ behaviour, in peer groups in particular, represents their efforts to maintain and enforce a male/female duality and define themselves in opposition to girls and as powerful members within their own gender group hierarchy. The literature concerning early childhood education has a predominant focus on ‘gender’, rather than on ‘masculinities’. This focus provides a comprehensive picture of how children learn the system of gender relations in terms of the interrelatedness of masculinity and femininity.

2.5.1 Children learning to be agentic within the school context

Hierarchical gender relations are produced and sustained through both everyday and educational discourses about gender (Alloway 1995a). In order to achieve agency or empowerment within a school setting children learn how they must behave and thus their place within the hierarchy of the school and classroom. It is important to define agency or empowerment as a process: a process through which an individual finds a sense of their own power (Lather 1991a). ‘Successful’ integration into school life depends on children learning ‘how to be’ functional members of a large group through a disciplining process of behaviour modification and adaptation (Kamler et al. 1994). Becoming a school child and a member of the wider community (Lowe 1998) means that children’s behaviour becomes institutionalised. Through a concern with rules and expectations and acquiring a knowledge of ‘how to get it right’, children learn how they must ‘correctly’ constitute themselves within the contextual practices and structures of the school and
classroom in order to avoid being positioned as powerless. Those who deviate from these ‘correct’ positions, through for example, attempting to acquire power through resistance or non-conforming, are ‘managed’ by the ‘powers that be’ through disciplinary and authoritative structures and practices. The aim being to mould students into collective rule abiding and subordination. Through this process children learn the collective nature of the student body and their position within it as conforming members expected to behave in particular ways in tandem with other members of the student group (Kamler et al. 1994).

Through exposure to, and interaction within the dominant discourses of the school, gender is taught implicitly in children learning to be ‘good’ and learning what is expected and valued by teachers and other students (Davies 1993). Davies (1989: 4) argues that

> Much of the adult world is not consciously taught to children ... but it is embedded in the language, in the discursive practices and the social and narrative structures through which the child is constituted as a person.

A significant part of being constituted as a person involves the child in ‘getting his/her gender right’ which is critical in being accepted by others as normal and competent within the culture of the school. In other words, if a child is to avoid being seen as an incompetent and abnormal member of school and classroom culture s/he must be seen as successfully constructing an ‘appropriate’ gender(ed) world, “achieving the practices, the ways of knowing and of being that make sense within the narrative/interactive structures” (Davies 1989: 20) of school and classroom life. Through successfully adopting the school’s gender(ed) competencies and ways of knowing children can achieve agency, acceptance and empowerment through gaining access to, and making sense of, their ‘legitimate’ place within this system’s hierarchical power structure (Clark 1993).

Early childhood research notes that “most children have adopted a gender identity by the age of 2” (Bussey in Jordan 1995: 72) and, on commencing school, tend to position “themselves in an either/or gender category with a strong commitment to being members of a gender group.” Gender conformity, moreover, is seen as “very apparent in the early childhood setting” with strong pressure to conform to typical gender stereotypes (Lowe
1998: 214). These positionings, however, are also characterised as tenuous and fluid in terms of how children perceive ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ gender behaviour. Lowe (1998: 210) talks of the process of gender construction as far from a consistent or harmonious process, but one characterised by the child’s struggle within competing and often contradictory discourses to develop and maintain a ‘personal gendermap’. Children, in this sense, are not seen as passive in the construction of their personal gendermap and, while they “constitute and structure gender positions in response to the discourses within which they participate” (Lowe 1998: 206), they also clearly play an active role in the maintenance and perpetuation of discursive practices which construct limited forms of masculinity and femininity (Clark 1993; Lowe 1998). In this sense, classroom, playground and school identities or subjectivities “are constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time (children) think or speak” (Weedon 1987: 32). Moreover, these subjectivities are formed through, and dependent on, the different contexts of the school, classroom and playground which have their own separate regimes and behavioural expectations. Through these routinised structures and disciplinary practices, students quickly gain an awareness of the limited range of acceptable ways of being within these contexts and how to position themselves within the norm. These contexts, structures and practices work to control and regulate the behaviour of students who reject ‘acceptable’ ways of being with the aim of moulding this ‘otherness’ to assimilate with the frame of the school, classroom and playground (Kamler et al. 1994).

It is critical to recognise that the school’s structures and practices also play a powerful role in producing and maintaining these constructed inequalities, however, this power also signifies the school’s potential in deconstructing and reconstructing gendered ways of being (Clark 1993). It is worth noting here that, although this study will not explore in any great depth parents’ gendered expectations of their children, the breadth of research in this area suggests not only that parents and the home context constitute “one of the most powerful sites of discourse that informs children about masculinity and femininity” (Lowe 1998: 208), but that parents both implicitly and explicitly position their children ‘correctly’ according to gender norms of behaviour and indeed, feel societal pressure to do so (see Lowe 1998). In this sense, the discourses within the education context either
reinforce the gender(ed) behaviour learned in the home or create dissonance between these two contexts (Lowe 1998).

2.5.2 Schools perpetuating particular forms of masculinity

Much of the focus regarding the ways in which schools perpetuate particular forms of masculinity, through academic streaming, masculinist valuing of knowledge, power relations and so on (see Connell 1996; Kenway 1995; Kenway & Willis 1998; Mac an Ghaill 1994), has been on secondary education. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that structures and practices within the early childhood/primary sphere are equally significant in perpetuating particular forms of masculinity and reinforcing limited ideas about being male and female. Ideas about masculinity and femininity in primary schools are based on inequitable assumptions of power and serve to perpetuate divisive ways of thinking about gender, thus maintaining dualistic gender relations (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993; Davies 1993). Further, many of the gendered practices and structures within schools are so institutionalised that difference is seen as normal, natural or invisible (Clark 1993; Kamler et al. 1994). Two major areas are found to perpetuate particular forms of masculinity within the early childhood/primary sphere: first, the intrinsically masculinist structure of education and schools; and second, teacher practice and pedagogy which either ignore or endorse particular ways of being masculine. Interestingly, these two aspects identified within early childhood/primary education are also those identified as critical within secondary education. It is, perhaps, the idealistic assumptions regarding the ‘innocence’ and ‘untouched’ nature of early childhood, informing much of this area’s philosophy, which have, in the past, led to this sphere being seen as unproblematically implicated in the production and perpetuation of social inequity (Alloway 1995a; Davies 1982: 1988).

2.5.2.1 The intrinsically masculinist structure of schools

While predominantly focussed on secondary education, Kenway and Willis (1998) provide a comprehensive account of the ways in which schools remain intrinsically masculinist in their valuing of success. In particular, they point out how schools are structured around notions of academic success which are conventional, limited,
masculinist and classist and, in this way, constitute a particular masculine position as superior over other masculine and feminine positions. The underlying assumption being that females, in order to achieve ‘success’, must improve on male terms; as seen, for example, in educational reform policies focussed around ‘increasing girls’ options’ through greater enrolment in the traditionally masculine domain of mathematics (Kenway & Willis 1998). Alloway (1995a) contends that, in the past, these ‘equal opportunity’ models of educational reform have interpreted females as being in the deficit of males, because their basis has been inherently masculine in terms of the ways in which particular success and knowledge are valued:

Schools, as social institutions, are established as ‘masculine’ structures in which boys and girls need to operate in ‘masculine’ terms in order to succeed. (Askew & Ross 1988: 43)

Kamler and her colleagues, in reference to early childhood education, delineate their thoughts regarding such structures: “kindergarten is a triumph for masculinist discourses of power” (1994: 22).

Fundamentally, educational policies of ‘equal access’ and participation, which are underpinned by liberal feminist perspectives and have dominated gender equity programmes in education, have done very little to challenge sexist gender ideologies and dualistic relations in schools, not least because they have perpetuated and further legitimised an unproblematic masculine position as superior to the feminine. Moreover, these assumptions are grounded by a theory of learning gender which assumes that children absorb gender messages uncritically and, in this sense, are passive in their own gender construction (Mac Naughton 1998). This situation has not only ignored or disadvantaged girls and femininities, but has clearly encumbered boys’ broadening of their human potential and stifled their sensitivity to perspectives which are exclusionary (Clark 1993).

Needless to say, girls and femininity have been seen as in need of reform - for improvement: in effect masculinising girls, so that they can achieve on masculine terms in a masculinist society. The reverse idea: that of feminising boys continues to be an
aversion to many of those connected with school life because of the social disadvantage traditionally associated with females and femininity. Indeed, as Epstein (1999: 11) proffers:

“Much exertion is put into achieving masculinity by boys themselves and much effort is made in schools by teachers and others (often without even realising they are doing it) to ensure that boys become the ‘right kind’ of boys.”

Jordan (1995) contends that the masculinist structure of the school may reproduce societal inequities through introducing young boys to the public/private division of men’s lived experience. In this regard, the early childhood classroom is said to present only two legitimate types of masculinity, one associated with public rationality, and one with a private physicality. These identities share striking resemblance to the competing adolescent masculinities of anti-school physicality and academia, described by Connell (1996), Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Martino (1999). The most revered of Jordan’s early childhood identities, she describes as a gender defining ‘warrior’ masculinity, which, as with the ‘macho’ version of masculinity of Connell and others, runs counter to the values and structures of the classroom and school. She defines the warrior discourses, which “gain such a grip on little boys” as enmeshed in boys’ fantasy depicting “the male as the warrior, the knight errant, the superhero” (1995: 76). Jordan and Cowan (1995), argue that this ‘warrior’ masculinity competes with and often subordinates the rational and responsible masculinity approved and promoted by the school. The private/public division, they assert, is said to be introduced and enforced through the school’s insistence of a rational and responsible masculinity in the classroom with the removal of the warrior masculinity to the playground – later to be endorsed and celebrated within the school’s sporting context.

“The message is conveyed to them that if they behave like citizens in the classroom, they can become warriors on the sports oval. (Jordan & Cowan 1995: 740)

2.5.2.2 Hierarchies and the stability of masculinist structures within schools

The way power is exercised and perceived within schools sends explicit and implicit messages to children about gender. Hierarchical power structures within schools
invariably locate men in the small number of positions of authority and women, who constitute the vast majority of the early childhood/primary teaching service, in subordinate positions (Baumgart 1995; Davies 1988; Lingard & Limerick 1995). Further, as Martinez (1998) points out, at the lower primary end of the teaching scale, the proportion of women teachers increases dramatically highlighting the domestic/business dualism which positions the early primary sphere at the less important or less serious end of the educational continuum.

This structural inequality conveys to children that female teachers are less powerful than their male counterparts and indeed, men in general. As Davies (1988: 26) asserts, while “women are in control, that which is hegemonic is maleness constructed at the expense of the girls and the teachers.” Additionally, while female teachers may have a powerful role within their own classroom, that position of power and agency is often undermined within the discourses of the broader context of school hierarchies. The ‘reality’ of how power is really dispersed is illuminated to children with the predominance of males in positions of authority, such as principal and senior teacher (Kamler et al. 1994). Such a message serves to enforce dualistic ways of thinking about gender and naturalises difference between males and females. Further, it provides a legitimisation for ‘power over’ behaviour in boys, manifest in their domination of space and resources and in boys’ harassment of girls and the denigration of weaker boys (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993; Epstein 1999).

Feminist research and work in educational reform have challenged the masculine patriarchal base structure of schools and influenced major policy writings (see The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97) which have come to encompass an approach which draws on feminist poststructural theory. In this sense, the inequitable structure of schools can be viewed as masculinised through a tangled web of subjective construction sustained by specific historical, cultural and social discourses and practices which are unstable and, in this sense, open to deconstruction and reconstitution. This framework of reform has the potential for radically changing gender relations because it is based on the belief that society produces gender inequity through the perpetuation and normalisation of dominant ideas about “the correct way to be male and female” (Mac

58
Naughton 1998: 166) and seeks to disrupt or de-centre these dominant ideas. As Mac Naughton (1998: 166) further notes, it is the inequitable nature of this socially constructed gender order which produces inequalities: “If there were no one correct way to be male or female then inequalities could not exist.” Within these ways of thinking the diffusion of power within the masculinised structures of schools may be exposed, disrupted and transformed through contesting both masculine and feminine ways of being (Alloway 1995a).

Despite the influence of poststructuralist theory in much of the more recent gender reform initiatives envisaged for schools, it is clear that the stability of masculinised structures remains largely undisturbed and the ways of being female, and in particular, male have remained essentially uncontested and limited. It seems that the deeply ingrained and normalised nature of these intrinsically masculinised structures constitute extreme obstacles in the path of efforts which seek to contest and disrupt such structures in the pursuit of social justice. Remaking the meanings of masculinised assumptions of success, knowledge and power is eminently complex in the context of gender reform, but remains possible if the dominant discourses which sustain these assumptions and the cultural excuses which are used to justify them can be identified and dismantled in an environment which is supportive, rather than restrictive of such change (Kenway & Willis 1998). However, it appears that current understandings remain restrictive in schools. That gender reform is often diluted or even ignored and is “on the wane everywhere” (Kenway & Willis 1998: 210) is illustrative of the tenuousness of contemporary gender reform in schools.

2.5.3 Teacher practices and pedagogy which ignore or endorse ways of being masculine

A number of areas within the early childhood/primary literature on gender, teacher practice and pedagogy emerge as particularly potent in shaping boys’ ways of being masculine, particularly: teachers’ gendered expectations in shaping children’s understandings and behaviours; how teachers’ modelling of authority and power perpetuates boys’ understanding of masculinity; teacher strategies which perpetuate dualistic understandings of gender; teachers locating the masculine position as
unproblematically implicated in inequitable power relations between boys and girls; and the implications of early childhood, child-centred pedagogy.

2.5.3.1 Teacher expectations and practices

In their study of children in the first month of school, Kamler and her colleagues reveal that boys and girls through either resistance to, or compliance with, teacher expectations take up the practices of regulation within the school and classroom differentially. In this regard, for example, it is observed that teachers notice and comment on disruptive and aggressive behaviour in boys more than they notice or comment on compliant behaviour. On the other hand, teachers notice and comment on compliant behaviour in girls more than they notice or comment on disruptive behaviour. These sorts of teacher expectations are argued to contribute to one of the major ways through which difference in the behaviour of boys and girls is perpetuated and inequitable power relations normalised:

…while ‘naughty girls’ in schools are disciplined in certain ways to want to reproduce ‘good’, ‘thoughtful’, ‘not hurting’ behaviour, this is precisely what is still, contradictorily, cherished in ‘naughty boys’. (Reid, Kamler & Maclean 1994: 48)

Additionally, Epstein (1999), Davies (1988) and Adams and Walkerdine (1986) recognise similar gendered expectations teachers’ display when describing the achievements and behaviour of boys and girls. While girls’ achievements tend to be devalued and attributed to hard work and diligence, boys’ achievements and successes are often attributed to genuine or innate intelligence. Even disruptive behaviour in boys is often equated with boys being too bright or being bored. In this regard, the responsibility of boys’ educational failure has tended to be attributed to extrinsic factors (for example, feminists, female teachers, single mothers etc.) rather than intrinsic factors (for example, lack of ability, poor effort etc.) with the reverse situation true for girls (Epstein 1999; Hey et al. 1999). Further, as Davies (1988) suggests, girls have tended to comply with the teacher’s expectations for obedience, neatness and willingness to please, often to their own detriment, thwarting their learning development, self confidence and potential through an unwillingness to take risks or be assertive. Indeed, girls continue to be positioned as ‘caretakers’ (Lowe 1998) and models of morality and are praised constantly
for displaying compliant and passive behaviours which invariably result in rendering
them invisible (Bruce in Davies 1988), whereas boys are almost expected to be
‘challenging’ and to misbehave:

The high-spirited child is traditionally regarded with affectionate tolerance. Boys
will be boys. A boy who never gets up to mischief, it is suggested, is not a proper
boy. (Adams & Walkerdine 1986: 26)

Thus, teachers’ gendered expectations within the school and classroom context, have
been characterised as indirectly resulting in children being greatly concerned with
‘getting their gender right’ and regulating the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ gender
behaviour (Davies 1988; Reid et al. 1994).

Educational research has highlighted clear associations between how teachers model
authority and power and the maintenance of students’ disruptive behaviour. Boys have
been found to adopt the authoritarian styles of ‘power over’ conflict resolution that many
teachers apply in their attempts to control disruptive behaviour (Askew & Ross 1988;
Browne 1995a). Davies suggest that this model of authoritarianism which reflects some
of the more negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as domination and control,
can be associated with how boys take up ways of being male in their wish for control,
agency and power. Girls, within this context of adult authoritarianism, she asserts, tend
to be disempowered rather than agentic (Davies 1993).

Teachers who attempt to deal with boys’ disruptive and anti-authority behaviour often
resort to similar ‘power over’ authoritarian strategies as a way of controlling these boys’
aversive behaviour in their efforts to prove their general competence as teachers. In this
regard, many teachers consistently offer boys more of their overall time and attention
than girls (Alloway 1995a; Davies 1988; Hey et al. 1999). It would seem that this energy
and attention is largely directed at particular boys and their behaviour, with the purpose
of predicting and thus avoiding conflict and to escape being seen as a failure as a teacher.
Within teacher culture, competence is often perceived by other teachers and staff as being
commensurate with their success in regulating and controlling student behaviour (Clark
1993): “Principals still want quiet classrooms” (Reid et al. 1994: 23). For reasons likely
to be associated with the gendered dispersion of power in schools, and indeed other institutions, female teachers, according to Clark (1993), feel far more pressured by this measure of competence than their male counterparts. In this sense, these teachers may be more likely to use authoritarian strategies in attending to the behaviour of particular boys. This is not only because they perceive boys to be potentially disruptive but also because many female teachers recognise that boys have the potential to make life extremely difficult for them (Clark 1993; Davies 1988). Ironically, the dominating and controlling behaviour of particular boys may be perpetuated and sustained by the very same behaviour modelled by teachers in their attempts to control such behaviour, perversely “giving boys considerable power over what happens in the classroom” (Clark 1993: 23).

It is critical to recognise the association between ignoring or maintaining dualistic relations of gender and the perpetuation of particular forms of masculinity. Teacher practice which consciously or unconsciously ascribes to, and reinforces, this dualism, assigns power inferentially to particular dominating boys and perpetuates the subordination of girls and other boys. Teacher practices of this nature include: perceiving boys as naturally more aggressive and physically active than girls and making subsequent allowances such as permitting boys to dominate playground space and computer resources without question (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993); using gender as a strategy for classroom organisation such as in the assignment of monitors’ duties, seating arrangements, competitions and lining up; and the gendered assumptions and expectations underlying descriptions of student behaviour and achievement. All these practices convey to children in explicit and implicit ways that gender is a primary means of ‘naturalised’ division and opposition.

As elaborated earlier, ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘gender inclusive’ models of educational reform have been based on liberal feminist agendas which focus on changing girls. This position has been seen as inherently masculinist in terms of interpreting that which is female as deficit to that which is male (see Alloway 1995a; Askew & Ross 1988). Many and varied teacher strategies have developed from this masculinist model, perpetuating the view that girls must change their behaviour and attitudes to be more like boys (see Alloway 1999; Mac Naughton 1997). These strategies within early childhood/primary
education have included, and continue to include, feminising male dominated areas such as block play with ‘feminine’ toys to attract girls; separating activities into ‘girl areas’ and ‘boy areas’ and policing equal participation through ‘girl time’ and ‘boy time’ and attempting to increase girls’ assertiveness (Mac Naughton 1997). According to Mac Naughton (1997) and Alloway (1999), these strategies, while effective in the short term in increasing girls’ participation in male-dominated activities, are ineffective in producing any change in children’s own gender relations. This is because the implementation of these strategies requires adult-child hierarchies of power (in terms of constant adult surveillance and monitoring) rather than child-child power negotiations. More importantly, these strategies are seen as inadequate because they position girls as ‘lacking’ and place responsibility for change with them. To these ends, these strategies reproduce the masculine position as unproblematic through “failing to address the asymmetrical power relations between girls and boys, (leaving) the power base intact and uncontested” (Alloway 1999: 159).

2.5.3.2 Early childhood - child-centred pedagogy

In the dominant early childhood pedagogy that is child-centred and champions careful observation of the individual, there is an implicit belief that attention to each child makes issues of social justice redundant. (Alloway 1995a: 5)

Alloway (1995a), Clark (1993) and Weedon (1987) point to the naturalist and individualist assumptions underpinning early childhood ‘child-centred’ pedagogy as perpetuating and normalising gender dualisms. They present strong arguments for critiquing this philosophy (and strategies such as ‘free play’) as discarding the prominence of existing gender subjectivities and the micro and macro social frames within which they develop and thus as subjugating or ignoring social justice issues through leaving gendered relations of power unquestioned and naturalised. In this sense this philosophy can be criticised for validating children’s personal constructions of “what they know and understand of the world, and for failing to expose how constructivism is potentially implicated in social reproduction” (Alloway 1995a: 64). As Clark (1993: 15) remarks:
It became clear that the idea of ‘free choice’ led teachers to accept highly
gendered activities and to miss seeing just how ‘unfree’ many children’s choices
were.

The assumptions underpinning the view of childhood as innocent and free have informed
pedagogies which advocate minimal interference in the facilitation of the ‘natural’
development of children. These pedagogies which have run in tandem with the
educational reform strategies underpinned by liberal feminism (see Weiler 1988), have
reinforced masculinist perspectives of ‘natural’ sex differences, presenting them as
apparently objective, rather than laden with subjective social meaning (Yelland &
Grieshaber 1998).

Further, the view of the child as ‘natural’ and ‘free’ has ignored the significant
enculturation process children experience prior to attending school. Studies such as
(1994) and Lowe (1998) consistently highlight the ‘gendered’ nature of young children’s
constructions of masculinity and femininity in early childhood. In these studies it can be
seen that children already possess developed conceptual frameworks of gendered
subjectivities and awareness of the power inequities that exist between males and females
by the time they reach school. Invariably, this power differential is seen by children as an
“inescapable aspect of human existence” (Paechter in Lowe 1998: 211) and, in this sense,
its validity is rarely questioned.

Several studies (see Adams & Walkerdine 1986; Lowe 1998) have illuminated the
tendency for children to lean towards stereotypical play when left to their own devices.
Fantasies and play activities of many young girls are found to centre upon domesticity
(Adams & Walkerdine 1986; Lowe 1998). The home corner, for instance, is perceived as
an area of familiarity for girls within which they can locate themselves as powerful,
confident and in control. Boys’ fantasies and play activities, on the other hand, are found
to be much more exploratory, but invariably also more aggressive and disruptive, actively
excluding girls’ involvement. The characteristics of these gendered play activities are
also reflected in the abundance of research concerning boys’ domination of playground
space (see Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993). In this regard, as Lowe’s research (1998)
indicates, power is central to the gender dynamics between young children, whatever the context, be it the ‘home corner’ or the activities seemingly preferred by boys. Danby (1998) and Mac Naughton’s (1997) research further illuminates the very serious real-life work of play in the shaping of young children’s gendered and gendering social worlds in early childhood. In particular, their studies exemplify the ‘unfree’ nature of unsupervised play in relation to the existence and maintenance of inequitable power hierarchies within male dominated block play.

Kamler et al’s study (1994) notes the gendered nature of children’s interactions in the first month of school, identifying the tendency of girls to adopt the strategy of invisibility in the pursuit of ‘goodness’. Quoting Morgan and Dunn, they posit the following:

We must conclude that our society generates a great many cues and training patterns right from the beginning of life, which help to point children toward particular and highly significant patterns of behaviour. (in Kamler et al. 1994: 199)

Davies’ (1989) work with young children similarly indicates the gendered nature of pre-school children’s understandings of male/female relationships. For instance, her study found that four and five year old children had great difficulty understanding stories with a female heroine often rejecting the female and distorting the story to position the male character as the central heroic figure.

Yelland and Grieshaber (1998) and Mac Naughton (1998) suggest that the assumptions and beliefs perpetuating naturalist and individualist ways of thinking about gender development within the sphere of primary education have their foundation within understandings of child development through discourses of psychology. It is these discourses which have disguised how fundamental the social construction of gender is in children’s learning and development (Mac Naughton 1998). The focus, within educational psychology, has been on observing individual child developmental progress within particular domains such as cognition, emotional and moral development. However, as Gilbert (in Lowe 1998: 207) asserts:
If language practices - reading, writing, talking, listening - are seen to be predominantly cognitive, predominantly individualistic, predominantly natural, then it is difficult to accept that it is also through language practices that we learn how to take up positions in our culture as women and men.

Within this frame, these gendered discourses of maleness and femaleness are learned by children as if they are incorrigible - fixed and natural elements of their personal selves (Davies & Banks in Lowe 1998). The taken-for-granted and ingrained nature of the gendered discursive practices through which we take up our positions of male or female naturalises and disguises their power and bias and, thus, leaves their social construction largely unexamined.

Accepting these patterns of behaviour as somehow justified because they are believed to be ‘naturally’ emerging perpetuates the masculine/feminine dualism and locates children in gender positions that are narrow and restricting. Moreover, normalising them through school discourses and pedagogies which are legitimated through the rubric of individualistic, child-centred philosophy, renders their constructed and inequitable nature somehow invisible and incontestable or the way things ‘ought to be’ and perpetuates the belief that children are passive participants in their own gender learning and construction who will simply absorb the messages around them.

2.5.4 Boys understanding themselves in opposition to girls and femininity

In the primary-school context, the worst thing a boy can be called is a ‘girl’, even worse than being called ‘gay boy’, ‘poof’ or ‘sissy’. (Epstein 1999: 103)

As Lowe (1998) suggests gender positions are interpreted by most children as mutually exclusive in the general sense that girls should not display masculine characteristics and boys should not display feminine characteristics. Boys recognise their position in the more ‘powerful’ half of the gender divide and appear to invest much energy into maintaining a power relationship which excludes and subordinates girls and denigrates ‘girlness’: boys don’t do girls’ things! don’t be a girl! (Clark 1993). Indeed, marking this difference from girls appears to be the major avenue through which boys define and understand masculinity - in opposition to girlness and femininity. Boys’ power and worth are maintained through highlighting their perceived superior position within the
dualistic notion of gender, thereby amplifying gender as difference and opposition. Jordan and Cowan’s (1995) study illuminates the investment and self-definition little boys’ seem to glean from amplifying ‘masculine’ characteristics within a conception of the self framed around fighting, combat, guns, fast cars and the like. In this regard, the physical expression of masculinity as oppositional to femininity in areas such as war play and sport (the ‘masculine epitome’ of physical expression) appears to be particularly significant for young boys.

The gender division is thus enforced through boys’ distancing themselves from ‘girlness’ (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993; Davies 1993; Epstein 1999; Thorne 1993).

Boys put girls down because of their girlness. They can do this because this discourse is available to them from the media and adult society. Girls don’t have access to the same range of put downs because there is nothing ‘wrong’ with being a boy. (Clark 1993: 38)

This subordination also applies to particular boys who may not be perceived as ‘measuring up’ to, or complying with, the dominant forms of masculine practice or who may even reject, or seem to reject, these forms of masculine practice. Within the overwhelmingly exclusionary same-sex gender groups of the school playground and classroom, hierarchical social orders, particularly for boys, are created which work to promote a particular version of hegemonic masculinity (Danby 1998). Danby’s research (1998), explores the construction and regulation of hegemonic masculinity in early childhood. Her findings, which focus on the male-dominated area of block play, detect ritualised threats of power or rites of passage operating as a strategy for induction or exclusion of ‘newcomers’ or younger boys into an established group of more experienced boys. This process Danby explains as involving the hegemonic group in protecting their space through rallying for support, actively excluding younger boys, and dominating or threatening younger, less experienced boys with violence and displays of bravado.

Often boys who are excluded are seen by their peers as feminine or ‘sissies’ because they may be physically smaller or play with girls and like ‘girl things’ (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993; Epstein 1999; Thorne 1993). Being viewed as somehow ‘like girls’ and by inference somehow inferior, is seen to be the very reason why they are subordinated and
ostracised: ‘girlness’, in any form, is something to be distanced. As Thorne (1993) denotes, the common terms ‘tomboy’ and ‘sissy’ for those who cross the gender divide embody quite different meanings: for a girl, being a tomboy is often seen as something to be proud of, such as being good at sports and other physical activities; whereas, for a boy, being a sissy has clear negative connotations and social ramifications. Consequently, the implications for such gender deviation are often cruel and repudiating. Furthermore, teachers often reflect the wider societal aversion to feminising boys and may be personally affronted by the idea of constructing alternative masculinities and express genuine concern about young boys who do not demonstrate appropriate maleness (Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993). This aversion to feminising boys:

…reflects strongly held cultural anxiety that relaxation of the strictures of masculinity necessarily means the assumption of homosexuality... (Such aversions represent a) potentially powerful strategy to coerce observance and compliance with socially endorsed forms of masculinity as distinct from femininity. (Alloway 1995a: 35)

Perpetuation of this dualism results in the confirmation of children’s essentialist views of masculinity and femininity. The ‘confirmed dualism’, however, is baseless and only exists as a series of collective superficial assumptions. According to Clark (1993: 54): “boys and girls barely know each other and … see each other as almost different species ... The consequences of this for both boys and girls are negative.” Moreover, as Adams and Walkerdine (1986: 35) have found, this perception of oppositional difference boys and girls have of each other, not only limits most behaviour and interaction to within two distinct single sex groups, but perpetuates inimical behaviour between these two groups “marked by strangeness, ... excitement and (even) violence.”

2.5.5 Sexual power

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

For boys, investment and participation in dualistic discourses positions them with power over female students and indeed over some female teachers. Boys learn, by positioning themselves in the ‘more powerful’ half of the gender divide, that they have access to
sexual power (Clark 1993; Davies 1993). This ‘sexual power’ is not necessarily explicitly sexual, but is based on (hetero)sexual power relations which subordinate girls and women in some way, simply because they are female (Clark 1993). As Davies (1993: 198) asserts: “in the face of powerlessness, boys return repeatedly to the destructive practices which sexualise and oppress girls” with the purpose of constituting them as objects to be dominated and controlled. In this sense, boys can draw on the available discourses which emanate from the dualisms underpinned by the domination/subordination binary to retain their ‘masculine’ power through positioning girls and women as sexually vulnerable and open to attack. (Hetero)sexual power relations also avail boys access to discourses that position ‘effeminacies’ as ‘other’. Within the heterosexual/homosexual duality, ‘feminine’ or ‘effeminate’ boys can effectively be subordinated and marginalised.

Connolly’s study (1995) exemplifies the explicit sexualised behaviour and knowledge of a group of five to six year old boys, the Bad Boys. Running in stark opposition to discourses of early childhood innocence in the face of the taboo subject, sex(ualities), he describes the heterosexual games of ‘kiss-chase’ episodes involving, among other things, groups of boys holding down and sexually abusing girls: “groping them or simulating sex on top, or against them” (1995: 181). He describes this game, together with derogatory verbal abuse, insults and sexualised talk of females in the context of girlfriend acquisition and rejection, as definitive in their emphasis on violence, power and domination. He also sees these activities as experiments and distortions of “adult, but specifically men’s ways of knowing” (1995: 191) and significant in these boys’ identity construction, in particular their self-legitimacy and group status. Perhaps paradoxically, the young girls in Connolly’s study demonstrate an investment in participating in certain discourses within the boys’ inequitable framework of heterosexuality. This Connolly posits as evident in their encouragement of the ‘kiss-chase’ games and their open interest in the Bad Boys. Epstein and Johnson (1994), in a similar contrast to the notion of childhood as innocence, note the existence of ‘sex-play’, sex talk and games in children as young as six. Further to this, they draw attention to the awareness young children display of ‘appropriate’ sexual knowledges in relation to specific contexts. In this regard, children recognise the
need to be seen to ‘curb’ their sexual knowledges within the context of the school because they understand that these knowledges are deemed inappropriate or undesirable to explore at school.

Some female teachers can be confronted with situations of sex-based harassment and conflict within which they feel undermined, insulted and humiliated by particular boys, even young boys (Clark 1993; Davies 1982: 1988: 1989). As Kenway and Willis (1998: 124) report:

Sex-based harassment can be experienced at any level of formal power. Teachers being positioned as more powerful than students within the school hierarchy does not protect a female teacher from being positioned negatively because of her femaleness.

In exemplifying the sexual power very young boys can avail themselves of to position female teachers as powerless, Reid (1999) and Epstein and Johnson (1994) draw attention to Walkerdine’s nursery school vignette. In this story, two three-year-old infant boys use a discourse of male power to reduce their female teacher, Miss Baxter, to a sex object through the use of explicit sexualised language, constituting her as powerless within their own discourse.

In presenting these examples, it can be seen that playing with and constructing sexualities are significant aspects of gender(ed) construction for young children, and in the case of young boys, this gender(ed) construction embodies the use of (hetero)sexuality as a potent source of ‘power over’ females in the form of domination and even violence. It can be seen, thus, that the cherished notion of children as sexual innocents, which continues to underpin early childhood/primary philosophy and curriculum in terms of, among other things, the “vehement exclusion of sexuality from the formal curriculum,” is very misleading (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 217). More importantly, subscribing to this cherished notion, in terms of ignoring or failing to challenge heterosexist practice, can be seen as constituting and legitimating patriarchal heterosexuality as normal, and everything else as deviant, and in this sense, a particularly narrow misogynistic and homophobic masculinity is endorsed usually under the rubric of ‘boys will be boys’.
2.5.6 Collective understandings of masculinity in early childhood

(Gender) positioning ... is dependent upon the experiences the child has had and the response of other participants to the position the child has taken. (Lowe 1998: 207)

Through constantly acting and reacting to the multiplicity of everyday discourses within the social world which guide and shape their behaviour, girls and boys learn how to “construct a gender position that is responsive to the dynamism of discourse” (Lowe 1998: 207) and regulate the categories of male and female from a very early age, sanctioning those who transgress gender boundary lines (Kamler et al 1994; Thorne 1993). Thorne uses the term ‘borderwork’ to help conceptualise how gender boundaries are maintained and strengthened in the primary school. According to Grieshaber (1998) deviations or transgressions from the authoritative versions or truths of gender constitute breaches of behaviour and must be rectified because such breaches have the potential to violate, disrupt and bring into question the status and legitimacy of ‘acceptable’ behaviour. Often the reinforcement and regulation of ‘acceptable’ behaviour or borderwork (Thorne 1993) is most visible and potent in groups where understandings about gender are collective. Furthermore, children’s collective understandings of gender behaviour become context dependent and context ‘appropriate’ because, as Thorne has indicated, children adopt “gender identities consistent with the immediate context” (in Grieshaber 1998: 18) within which they locate themselves and are located by others through interaction.

Thorne’s (1993) analysis of children’s gendered and divisive peer group interactions identifies the conduciveness of the school playground context in perpetuating such behaviour. She asserts that gender differentiation and ‘policing’ are heightened within peer groups by the rigid formal and informal structures of the school. In this regard, she argues, that the school’s age-segregation of students and the concentration of many children in one space intensifies a conformist dynamic which results in children allying in small groups. This group alliance dynamic works to reinforce and legitimate the group’s sameness and provides a context to enact and often exaggerate this sameness at the expense and sanctioning of alternative ways of being, in an effort to mark difference and prestige. To these ends, notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are gendered
and restricted within rigid boundaries set by the peer group. Rather than being passive in this process, however, Thorne characterises children, as active and agentic in their own positionings, constituting and negotiating power and identity within and between peer groups.

Kamler et al. (1994) point to the significance of peer interactions in shaping the behaviour and attitudes of children in their first month of school with the following observations. First, the peer group offers children a sense of identity and prestige; second, sub-groups organised around the categories of gender and based on male-female dualistic relations are formed which incorporate well-defined hierarchies of status and influence; third, children’s collective classroom and playground interactions within the peer context are often highly gendered with a focus on rules and boundaries; fourth, peer sub-groups engage in ‘borderwork’ behaviours which actively exclude or include others; and fifth, both boys and girls invest much energy in monitoring and maintaining gender boundaries in their attempts to secure peer membership, establish and maintain solidarity within a group and avoid being excluded. In this regard, it is clear that the peer group plays a significant role in shaping children’s lives and is a major context through which the boundaries of ‘gender appropriate’ behaviours are learned.

For boys, identification with their peer group means acquiring a sense of power through gaining acceptance and a place within the hierarchy or ‘pecking order’. This peer group acceptance, as Lowe’s study (1998) indicates, also means that boys can use this resource as a means of asserting collective power and dominance, when unable to dominate alone. Often, however, the hierarchical dispersion of power within and between peer groups results in ‘power over’ antagonistic and dominating behaviour which does not occur when boys are interacting with others on their own (Clark 1993). Boys who subordinate others in peer group situations are often concerned with proving their masculinity through a display of bravado, thereby exaggerating masculine practice because there is an audience and a need to be seen as ‘tough’ and to ‘save face’ (Clark 1993). This not only involves “acting tough in front of peers, but is a key element in boys’ active production of gendered behaviour and attitudes within the school” (Clark 1993: 32). Within the classroom, this competitive element means that boys are unlikely to ask other boys in
their peer group for assistance or learning support and hence, compete for the teacher’s time and attention which is a scarce resource. As teachers have numerous demands on their time and cannot attend to all of them, “boys may be tempted to go ‘off task’ and/or to respond with inattentive and disruptive behaviour” (Hey et al. 1999: 141).

Paradoxically, boy’s disruptive, anti-authority behaviour is usually individualised by teachers and authority practices in schools, rather than dealt with within this collective dimension of masculinity (Browne 1995a). In this regard, the significant impact contextual and group factors have on behaviour is largely ignored (Browne 1995a; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b). Harris’ work (1998) on the potency of peers in shaping children’s behaviour offers the study useful theoretical tools for understanding and articulating the dynamics of the peer group. These will be explored in Chapter Three, The Research Process.

2.6 Reflective notes

The study’s conceptual framework for defining and understanding masculinities, draws heavily on feminist poststructural beliefs concerning language and discourse in relation to the embeddedness of power and socio-political interest in the (re)production of gender(ed) subjectivities. ‘Masculinities’, within this frame, cannot be defined or understood without reference to ‘femininities’. The study understands the social categories of ‘masculinity’ as fluid and tenuous, culturally and historically located; continuously and actively constructed within social practice; contextual and multi-faceted; layered and often contradictory; and dynamic and malleable to deconstruction. Within these understandings, the significance of bodily experiences of gender in shaping masculinities is acknowledged as enmeshed within social processes.

Multiple masculinities are stratified hierarchically around race, class and sexuality. This hierarchical structure, loosely formulated around hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinities, is legitimised and regulated through explicit and implicit social and cultural acceptance and rejection of particular behaviours. The regulation of this hierarchical structure is found to be most visible within the collective nature of the peer group where masculine conventions are often amplified and exaggerated. Thus,
particular minority masculinities are targeted for subordination or marginalisation by more dominant groups. These dominating practices are underpinned by attempts to cement a place within the masculine ‘pecking order’, to secure collective and individual feelings of authority and power and to avoid being positioned as powerless.

A location of masculinities within gendered and heterosexist institutions avails a broader understanding of the inequities of the gender system through revealing that particular, taken-for-granted ‘ways of being’ are perpetuated, normalised and regulated by state and global contexts. Analysis of Australia’s welfare-state, for example, exposes the ways in which the tenets of individualism underpinning neo-liberalism, disadvantages women through enforcing a public/private dualism. Similarly, an examination of Australian family law, in relation to the definition of ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ gender relationships, reveals discrimination against same-sex couples. Within a global context, the masculinised areas of international trade, world markets and international politics illuminate social inequity on a massive scale stemming from the shaping and normalising of particular understandings of gender. Within an historical location, the gender and sexual inequities of global and state contexts can be seen as emanating from the masculinist regime of Imperialism and the establishment of colonial and neo-colonial societies (Connell 2000).

The hierarchical structure of collective masculinities, organised around class, race and sexualities, features as pivotal in the construction of male identities with the secondary education context. Here the peer group defines and perpetuates particular ways of being masculine at the expense of alternative masculinities. Group behaviours, in this regard, often escalate masculine conventions in exaggerated and amplified displays of difference. Oppressive group behaviours are manifest in the domination and marginalisation of others, through sexual harassment and homophobia, in the effort to mark prestige and hold on to a sense of power and collective identity. Much of this power is drawn from the masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual oppositional dualities, and is enacted through the policing and repudiation of anything feminine or effeminate. Located within the institution of the school, these practices are installed through the normalisation of
heterosexuality and the perpetuation of heterosexism, in areas such as sporting culture and sexuality education.

Within the early childhood setting, where children ‘learn to be’, this masculine/feminine dualism permeates many aspects of the school’s structures and teacher practices and is seen to be the main way boys define themselves: in opposition to, and rejection of, girls and femininity. Within this binary, gender is taught implicitly to children when they constitute themselves as agentic and ‘correct’ members of the classroom and school hierarchy. Also within this binary, primary schools perpetuate particular forms of masculinity through sending explicit and implicit messages to children about gender. Examples of this include, the intrinsically masculinist structure of the primary school and the installation of ‘equal access’ policies based on changing girls, assuming the masculine position to be unproblematic, and the hierarchies in schools which predominantly position males with greater power and authority than their female colleagues. Further, within the masculinist structure of schools, teacher’s gendered expectations concerning children’s behaviour, their modelling of authority, and their child-centred philosophies, perpetuate oppositional and restrictive understandings of gender.

Young boys recognise their position in the more ‘powerful’ half of the male/female binary and invest much energy in maintaining this inequitable relationship, manifest in their exclusion and subordination of girls and ‘girlness’. Boys who display ‘girlness’ and who thus are not perceived as ‘measuring up’ to, or complying with, the dominant forms of masculine practice are also targets of subordination and exclusion, usually in the form of homophobic abuse. This oppositional binary also allows boys to draw on (hetero)sexual power to sexualise and oppress females and femininities. Such oppressive behaviour is most visible and potent in groups where gender differentiation and policing are at their most severe. In this respect, the group’s sameness is legitimated and behaviours are often exaggerated in an effort to mark difference and prestige. The collective dimension of the peer context is seen as one of the most significant dynamics in shaping the behaviour and perceptions of young children, particularly in relation to providing identity, prestige and solidarity.
Chapter 3
The Research Process

The philosophy and tenets of feminist poststructuralism strongly inform the work guiding the methodological focus to interrogating the centrality of power in the production of meaning through language as discourse. Thus, this chapter begins with a note on how the study reconciles the tensions between textual authority and the crisis of representation and details aspects of poststructural theory significant in shaping the study’s feminist perspective. The key arguments critiquing poststructural theory are then acknowledged with reference to how the study endeavours to reconcile these criticisms. Aspects of group socialisation theory (Harris 1998) as additional tools of understanding and interpretation are then described.

Within the framework of feminist poststructural theory the applications of the principles of ethnography within a case study approach are delineated, with particular attention to the methodological compatibilities interpreted as undergirding these approaches and the delimitations particular to the research. As a core aspect of ethnographic study, the relationship between researcher and researched is then explored, with discussion of the inequities and possible implications of this relationship and the processes and strategies the study employs in consideration of these issues.

The latter half of the chapter outlines the procedural aspects of the research and includes a description of the study’s context and participants with an explanation of the data collection, (re)presentation and analysis processes as these relate to the study’s methodology and research questions. Specificities of the data collection process include an outline of the affinity group and interview context, techniques and procedure with reference to the study’s use, foci and processes of observation and reflective journaling. The tools of representation are then described, including the use of transcripts, and narrative within the study’s methodological framework. Finally, the theoretical understandings of poststructuralism and group socialisation are explained in relation to how these are used as interpretive tools in examining the study’s three research questions.
3.1 Textual authority and the crisis of representation

Writing does not describe a world independent of itself. Rather, critical or expository writing is self-referential, governed by rules for its own construction. (Brown 1994: 233)

The issue of textual authority is a critical element within the study’s methodological framework. It is acknowledged that the research is value-laden, culture-bound and perspectival and, in this sense, is necessarily a partial (re)presentation, “no more outside the power/knowledge nexus than any other human creation” (Lather 1992: 91). To this end, it is recognised that a full textual inscription of the participants’ understandings and experiences is impossible. In this regard, the assumptions and theories shaping the study are detailed and the limitations inherent in my textual representation acknowledged (Jones 1992; Prain 1997). There is no claim to an unlocated objectivity: the significance of my locatedness as researcher in informing the research process and product is acknowledged and taken as “central to the study’s logic of discovery and logic of justification” (Pendlebury 1998: 177).

The study’s empirical adequacy is underpinned through explication of a situated analysis of both the knower and the known (Pendlebury 1998). Thus, the specific meanings and values of the feminist subjectivities and discourses, central in informing and shaping the work, are made transparent (Jones 1992; Foucault in Davies 1999) through the study’s self-conscious and self-reflexive stance. The thesis acknowledges, through self-reflexive ‘voice’, the “invested positionality (shaping the study’s) rhetoric and practice” (Lather 1991a: xvii) and accepts its partial and irreducibly constructed nature (Prain 1997). Foregrounding this self-reflexive voice however, within the larger theoretical frame of the feminist discourses shaping the work, is not intended to offer a supplementary form of textual authority (Prain 1997). Rather, it intends to make explicit the processes constructing the text and disrupt the search for absolutes and the authorial voice of certainty. Thus, it is acknowledged that there are no areas of complete certainty: “there is always a proliferation of interpretations, and no interpretation can claim to be the final one” (Foucault in Sarup 1988: 50). Against this backdrop, the study’s methodological framework supports an exploration of multiple narrative positions which resist the
reinscription of conventional ways of knowing and understanding in an attempt to open and extend dialogue and questioning (Prain 1997; Lather 1992).

### 3.2 Feminist poststructural theory

The study’s methodological framework is informed by the tenets of feminist poststructural theory. Immersion within this perspective has directed the research focus to the relations between the language, power, subjectivity and social organisation (Weedon 1987) of a boys’ peer group. The study draws on feminist readings and interpretations of the poststructural concepts of subjectification through language and discourse. The study’s central focus is thus concerned with foregrounding how social power, embedded in the language and discourse of a boys’ peer group, is exercised in the (re)constitution of the group’s gender(ed) subjectivities. This lens makes visible the ways through which the dominant practices and understandings of a boys’ peer group shape and regulate its subjectivities: the boys’ conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and desires, their sense of themselves and the ways through which they understand themselves in relation to the world (Weedon 1987).

As a feminist researcher, the theoretical principles underpinning poststructuralism are personally significant because of their potential to be politically generative. Specifically, these principles offer a way of exposing taken-for-granted ways of seeing and enable oppressive and restrictive subjectivities to be re-thought and re-worked to explore alternatives to dominant and dominating ways of being. Particularly important in this regard is the poststructural principle referring to the discursive constitution and (re)production of an individual’s subjectivities through language and social practice, and the belief that subjectivities and meaning are never fixed and unitary but fluid and precarious - discursively (re)constituted each time we think or speak (Weedon 1987).

The poststructural rejection of humanist discourses (positing ‘identity’ as possessing a fixed and coherent essence) in place of a dynamic view of the subject, offers a way of conceiving ‘gendered’ subjectivities as amenable to change through the reconstruction and use of alternative language and discursive processes.

The political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change. In making our
subjectivity the product of the society and culture within which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists that forms of subjectivity are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. (Weedon 1987: 33)

To these ends, the theory offers transformative possibilities because it questions and challenges the taken-for-granted subjectivities and consciousness underlying socially inscribed gendered power relations seeking to disrupt and expose their inequitable nature. In this regard, feminist poststructuralism allows for a radical re-thinking of genderedness, opening unbounded reconstructive possibilities for how social relations of gender might be transformed (Weedon 1987).

Feminist poststructuralism provides a number of theoretical lenses that facilitate the interpretation of masculinities as discursive categories (re)produced through historically and culturally specific language practices. The specific language practices and collective or dominant discourses of the boys’ peer group, which can be seen as limiting and restricting their understandings of themselves and others, can be understood as discursively produced through the social interactions of the group, rather than inherent or fixed and unchangeable. The theory offers an explanation of how these boys’ dominant understandings and practices are (re)produced through a focus on the way power is dispersed within the group. Through analysing the dynamics of the boys’ peer group interactions, particularly the relationship between power and the production of meaning within the group, strategies and areas for change can be identified in relation to exploring opportunities for resistance to, and disruption of, dominating and restrictive masculinities (Weedon 1987). Poststructuralism’s illumination of plurality and difference within a positioning of the subject as dynamic and fluid is seen as particularly helpful in my analysis of the boys’ peer group relations. Through conceptualising the peer group’s discourses as multiple, conflicting, tenuous and often contradictory in their (re)constitution of the boys’ subjectivities within the peer group, points of disunity can be identified and explored, providing generative possibilities and clues for how dominating and restrictive discourses of masculinities might be deconstructed.
3.2.1 Language, meaning and subjectivity

It is language which enables us to think, speak and give meaning to the world around us. Meaning and consciousness do not exist outside language. (Weedon 1987: 32)

The work of French poststructuralist Jacques Lacan has been particularly meaningful and useful for feminists’ understandings and explanations of gender relations and the (re)production of gendered subjectivities. Lacan theorised that language constitutes us as human subjects and, far from reflecting an existing social reality, determines our knowledge of the world, of others and of ourselves (Lacan 1968). Language, in this regard, can be seen as ‘outside’ the individual because it is inextricably meshed within, and necessarily dependent on its broader social agreement of use. It is this broader social agreement of language use which determines our knowledge of the world (Brown 1994). As de Saussure has remarked, while “the individual cannot fix a single value…each time I say (a) word I renew its substance” (in Brown 1994: 237-238).

Through this lens, the boys’ gendered understandings are thought to be determined and reproduced through the context specific language and social interactions of the peer group. The boys’ experiences are thus interpreted as given meaning and understood according to the particular discourses of the peer group which constitute their “consciousness, and the positions with which (they) identify, structuring (their) sense of (them)selves, (their) subjectivity” (Weedon 1987: 33). This process is characterised as dynamic and fluid, and in this sense, always subject to differing and imposed interpretations. However, while the boys’ (re)production of meaning is characterised as multi-faceted, often contradictory and variable between different discourses and contexts (Weedon 1987), their language practices are nevertheless taken as essentially functional, and in this regard, necessarily reductionist. To this end, the language within the boys’ peer group is seen as (re)constituted and (re)legitimised by what it excludes, reducing and framing meaning to a particular subjective and necessarily partial focus (Lather 1991a).

3.2.2 Language as discourse

In articulating experience through reductionist language practices, we make sense of our world and our social reality is made mutually comprehensible to others (Brown 1994).
However, this categorising and regularising of social reality and behaviour necessarily creates and illuminates difference and distinction which defines conceptions of ‘normalcy’ and deviance and legitimises inequitable social order and control. These exclusionary processes, which regulate social behaviour, are the logical properties of a discourse (Brown 1994) and are inescapably political because they are enmeshed within inevitable sets of power relations (Apple in Lather 1991a). Foucault defines discourse as “more than a way of thinking and producing meaning. Discourses constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (in Weedon 1987: 108).

Foucault’s work examines the significance of power in constituting social reality, knowledge and truth. His contention that “all social relations are power relations ... power produces reality ... rituals of truth ... and the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge” (in Sarup 1988: 82-93) offers a particularly compelling principle for the study’s methodological understanding of the significance of power in the (re)production of knowledge. Within this frame the ‘taken-for-granted’ nature of dominant knowledges, which continually and insidiously reconstitute subjectivities and reproduce an inequitable social order, can be interpreted as socially and politically crafted and structured - (re)produced and (re)legitimated through various persuasive strategies that disguise their value and power-laden nature from social members (Brown 1994). Relations of domination and authority are thus seen as created rather than natural and given.

The significance of discourse in feminist poststructural theory refers to the way dominant and restrictive understandings of gender or gendered knowledges are constituted through language in the form of subjective social practices and power relations (Weedon 1987). These gendered discourses are seen as simultaneously socially constrained and shaped, and socially shaping and constraining (Kamler et al. 1994). In the articulation of how these dominant understandings and knowledges are (re)produced, Mac Naughton (1998: 160) suggests that, within any point in time “contradictory discourses about what is normal, right and best circulate and compete with each other” and become dominant (rather than more ‘truthful’ or ‘right’) and give meaning to the world depending on their political strength and social power. Hence, the construction of meaning and knowledges
is seen as permeated by social and political power (Lather 1991a). This process of ‘discourse legitimation’ discounts or represses particular understandings and knowledges, and protects and preserves others “by means of social sanctions that marginalise or silence dissident voices” (Brown 1994: 235).

How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and with which we structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourse, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent. (Weedon 1987: 26)

The complex and often contradictory nature of this dynamic (re)legitimation process, however, “can offer the discursive space from which the individual can resist dominant subject positions” (Weedon 1987: 111). As Foucault theorises, while the legitimation of a discourse produces and reinforces its power, it also “undermines and exposes it, rendering it fragile and making it possible to thwart” (in Weedon 1987: 111).

This theoretical perspective enables a conceptualisation of the peer group as an organiser of social power and constitutor of knowledge, truth and reality. The dynamics and interactions of the peer group and the ways in which power is organised and distributed within it are seen as (re)constituting the boys’ dominant understandings of masculinities specific to this context. The organisation of social power within the group is also seen as critical in limiting the authority and power of marginalised discourses (Brown 1994). In this regard, some ways of being are seen as “more possible than … others” (Davies in Mac Naughton 1998: 160). These dominant discourses are thus taken as shaped by the exercise of power and shaping of peer group interactions, working to govern the boys’ behaviour, and condition and limit their understandings of masculinity (Mac Naughton 1998). Indeed, compliance with these dominant discourses might be seen as critical in maintaining status within the group and avoiding exclusion. Notwithstanding, while language as discourse is seen as forceful in shaping and regulating the boys’ peer group subjectivities, it is also conceptualised as an important site of political struggle and thus, constantly open to challenge and redefinition. Challenge, or resistance to language as discourse is thus seen as crucial “in the production of alternative forms of knowledge, or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power” (Weedon 1987: 111).
3.2.3 Discourse and institutional power

Critical within feminist poststructural theory is an examination of institutions, such as the law, medicine, education and the family, in relation to how power is dispersed in the establishment and reconstitution of patriarchal discourses and the significance of these discourses in shaping and regulating individual subjectivities. Thus, the broader framework of institutions is seen as significant in the production and maintenance of the power relations that (re)constitute individual subjectivities (Weedon 1987). The work of Foucault has been instrumental in this regard, in particular his examination of historical specificity in relation to the exercise of power and the government of individuals in the areas of discipline and punishment, psychiatry and sexuality (in Weedon 1987). In this regard, institutional definitions of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ behaviour, while contestable, are seen as forceful in constructing meaning, shaping subjectivities and maintaining inequitable power relations.

Within this framework of understanding, the study incorporates Seidman’s (1993: 136) suggestion of conceptualising the social positioning of the boys’ peer group masculinities “as marking a social juncture in the institutional, administrative, juridical organisation of society, and as an axis of social stratification”. The boys’ peer group language practices are thus seen as implicated in positioning them within a range of social controls that are determined in “relation to institutional resources, social opportunities … and social privileges” (Seidman 1993: 136). Against this backdrop, contextualising the group’s practices within the institutional dynamics of adult culture within such structures as the school and the domain of organised sport, is seen as critical in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the shaping and regulation of the boys’ dominant subjectivities.

3.2.4 Metaphysical thought: gender and sexuality

Human perspective and interpretation, however multiple and broad, often relies on a certainty of meaning and interpretation. Jacques Derrida’s work theorises this contention: that meaning often depends on ‘metaphysical’ thought which is based on oppositional principles:
Derrida labels as ‘metaphysical’ any thought-system which depends on an unassailable foundation, a first principle or unimpeachable ground upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings may be constructed ... First principles of this kind are commonly defined by what they exclude, by a sort of ‘binary opposition’. (Sarup 1988: 40)

Metaphysical thought, Fuss (1991: 1) elaborates, operates on the “structural symmetry of ... seemingly fundamental distinctions and the inevitability of a symbolic order based on a logic of limits, margins, borders and boundaries”. The identification of any term, she asserts, is necessarily dependent in reference to its relational exterior or opposite that defines its boundaries.

The inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis. Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production. It has everything to do with the structures of alienation, splitting, and identification which together produce a self and an other, a subject and an object, an unconscious and a conscious, an interiority and an exteriority. (Fuss 1991: 1-2)

These theoretical explanations of metaphysical thought are particularly useful in understanding the exclusionary and oppositional nature of gender relations in the primary school. The study draws on these explanations in relation to the belief that this binary thought system is embedded in boys’ ways of being male. To this end, the use of, and investment in, the oppositional binary boy/girl (boy-like/girl-like) is believed to be a major way boys construct meanings and ideologies of masculinity: that is, in critical opposition to essentialist interpretations of femininity and being female. In this regard, the ‘first principle’ of masculinity, cannot be understood without reference to its relational principle, femininity. Thus masculinity is defined by what it excludes: femininity. Based on this dualistic binary, boys are seen to construct inflexible gender boundaries which clearly differentiate between ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ masculine behaviour. As Derrida asserts, within these oppositional binaries, the principle term constitutes superiority and privileged status, with the secondary term serving as inferior - the ‘superior’ term’s identity depending on the exclusion of the other (in Sarup 1988).
The boys’ oppositional conceptualisations of the masculine/feminine polarity are also taken as necessarily enmeshed within their understandings of the hetero/homosexual binary. The study’s theoretical framework thus draws on aspects of gay poststructural theory and gay liberation theory as additional tools of understanding and analysis. In particular, I am drawn to these theories as useful in explaining the high instances of homophobia in schools (Martino 1999; Pallota-Chiarolli 1997), particularly the oppression of boys perceived as female-like or effeminate and, by inference, ‘unmasculine’.

Aspects of gay liberation theory (although ending as a social movement in the mid 1970s) have been ‘revived’ by Seidman. His discussion of the theory’s “expansive social and political potential” (1993: 128) offers the study a compelling framework for understanding the hetero/homosexual binary and the social construction of an oppressed homosexual minority. The study draws on Seidman’s (1993) explanation, after Altman and Young, of the hetero/homosexual dichotomy as a repressive, sexist and artificial regime imposed on society which privileges heterosexuality and men. Seidman talks of gay liberation theory as a ‘gender revolution’ through an illumination of Altman’s argument positing the interdependent and mutually reinforcing nature of the sex and gender binary systems.

Altman sees the gender system and the clear and restrictive demarcation and exclusivity of masculinity and femininity as implicated in a sexual regime which stigmatises and condemns homosexuality. This bipolar gender system, underpinned by the categorisations of heterosexual and homosexual, Young and Altman concur, perpetuates and maintains heterosexuality through oppositional, heteronormative and heterosexist practice (in Seidman 1993). He notes that heterosexuality socially defines the ‘normal’ and ‘true’ man and woman and adds that heteronormativity teaches children to “view as natural and inevitable that they in turn will become ‘mummies’ and ‘daddies’” (in Seidman 1993: 113).

Gay poststructural theory positions the hetero/homosexual binary as “structuring the very core modes of thought and culture of Western societies” (Seidman 1993: 131). Feminist theorist Weedon (1999), talks of this binary and the privileging and normalising of
heterosexuality as discursively produced. She argues the importance of questioning the power relations behind the privileging of heterosexuality “as natural, to the point at which it becomes an invisible, unmarked category, rendering other ways of being (lesbian, gay, bisexual or even celibate) seemingly deviant or not quite natural” (1999: 45). Indeed, the power of heterosexuality is posited to lie in its ‘taken-for-grantedness’ (Epstein & Johnson 1994). Sedgwick (in Seidman 1993) and Fuss (1991) view the construction of hetero/homosexual codes as inscribing, in particular, the masculine/feminine oppositional polarity. Fuss explains the regulation and establishment of heterosexuality with recourse to Derridean metaphysical understandings of definition through oppositional exclusion:

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

Michelle Fine (1994) explores this securing and protection of “self-identity” from the “encroachment” of a “contaminated other” within the process of ‘Othering’. The study’s focus on othering practices recognises that the binaries of masculinity/femininity and hetero/homosexuality are shaped by power and established through the logics of “certainty, non-contradiction, totality and linearity” (Lather 1991a: xvi). It is these binary logics and assertions which underpin the study’s perspective on how boys learn masculinity, as oppositional and, to use Fuss’ words, superior to the “predatory encroachment” (1991: 2) of femininity and homosexuality, particularly within the context of the peer group where subject positions and ways of being are already seen as limited (Kamler et al. 1994).

3.2.5 Critiques of poststructural theory: the study’s acknowledgment and positioning

Taken up as generative and enriching to the study’s methodological framework, the work of Seidman (1993), Fuss (1989; 1991) and Connell (1995; 2000) offer useful critiques of poststructural theory. An attempt is made to reconcile their critiques with the study’s theoretical position. The first critique illuminates the theoretical limitations inherent in
poststructuralism’s problematisation of identity. The second critique inspects the theory’s perceived limits regarding an overemphasis on the self in relation to textual representation, seen as abstracted from bodily expressions of masculinities. It is important to note here that within poststructuralism, while underpinned by a consensual philosophy, there exists different and varied ways of seeing and applying this theoretical perspective. Thus, elements of the following critiques will not apply to all poststructural work.

3.2.5.1 The poststructural problematising of identity

Poststructural socio-political assertions illuminate plurality and difference within a theorising of the subject as fluid, precarious and dynamic. These assertions oppose and aim to destabilise and subvert identity as a ground of political theorising and activism because identity politics are seen as reducing the subject to an irreducible and unitary essence to the ends of assimilating narrow interest-group ideals and perspectives (Seidman 1993). The positing of an identity, thus, is viewed as an act which works to exclude and repress difference through normalising and disciplinary socio-political forces. This signification is seen as marking the beginnings of conflict, domination and hierarchy. Poststructuralists reject a logic of identity as boundary-defining and necessarily producing of a hierarchical order. As explained within Derridean theorising, identity is understood as metaphysical and purchased through the exclusion, repression or repudiation of the Other (Fuss in Seidman 1993). The identification of subordinated subjects within metaphysical understandings is thus seen as reinforcing and confirming the centrality of dominant and repressive codes. To these ends many poststructuralists refuse to ‘name’ the subject and propose an anti-identity politic as a means of deconstructing and subverting the notion of a unitary subject to the ends of exploring alternative social and political possibilities (Seidman 1993).

Seidman’s work (1993: 134) views the poststructural positing of an anti-identity politic as a “welcome critique of the essentialist celebration of a unitary subject and tribal politic.” However, while he presents poststructuralism’s problematisation of identity and refusal to name the subject as powerful in its critical force, he also presents this anti-identity logic as incoherent and constitutive of a weak politic “of gesture or disruptive performance”

87
(1993: 135) that forfeits positive social change. Indeed, he submits that this anti-identity logic results in the theory’s lack of an affirmative socio-political vision (Seidman 1993). “Underlying a politics of subversion”, he asserts, “is a vague notion that this will encourage new, affirmative forms of personal and social life” (1993: 132). He explains that poststructuralism’s refusal to “anchor experience in identifications” (1993: 130) ends up forsaking the acknowledgment of differences through “submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated” (1993: 130). Moreover, the poststructural focus on subverting identity, he asserts, fails to acknowledge and “theoretically engage the practices of individuals organised around affirmative identities” (1993: 134). Against this backdrop, the study, after Seidman, recognises the limitations of essentialism, but notes the efficacy of identity politics as “personally, socially, and politically enabling” constructions that need not be reduced only to “modes of domination and hierarchy” (1993: 134).

Fuss’ (1989:1) account of the essentialist/constructionist tension similarly disputes the tenability of a poststructural subversion of identity when she argues that, “essentialism is essential to social constructionism”. She asserts that “essentialism subtends the very idea of constructionism” (1989: 5) and indeed argues that the strength of the constructionist position is built on the presupposition of, and strategic deferral to, essence. Thus, she views deconstruction as deploying “essentialism against itself, leaning heavily on essence in its determination to displace essence” (1989: 13). Fuss notes that “we can never truly get beyond essentialism” (1989: 13), but illuminates the importance of conceptualising essence as an historically contingent sign, constantly subject to change and redefinition. She explains that essentialism, conceptualised in this sense, can be ‘deployed’ or ‘activated’ in ways of strategic or interventionary value. To this end, she suggests that the “subject’s complex positioning in a particular social field” constitutes the political investments of the sign ‘essence’ and that “the appraisal of this investment depends not on any fixed or interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it” (1989: 13).
The study’s marriage of group socialisation theory and poststructural theory acknowledges an uneasy tension underpinned by the seemingly incompatible voices of essentialism, on the one hand, and the determination to resist such essentialism, on the other. In reconciling this tension, the study draws on Elam’s (1994) notion of ‘groundless solidarity’. In explaining the so called impossible union of feminist politics and postmodern perspectives, “because feminism itself depend(s) on a relatively unified notion of the social subject ‘woman’, a notion that postmodernism would attack” (Di Stefano 1990: 77), Elam (1994: 109) talks of a ‘groundless solidarity’:

Groundless solidarity is the possibility of a community which is not grounded in the truth of a pre-social identity. Solidarity forms the basis, although not the foundation, for political action and ethical responsibility. That is to say, groundless solidarity is a stability but not an absolute one; it can be the object of conflict and need not mean consensus…

In naming the subject (‘the boys’ or ‘the peer group’) and in defining affinity and groupness the study’s methodological framework acknowledges an engagement with essentialism. Indeed, after Fuss (1989), this essentialist reading is seen as critical in enabling and strengthening the poststructural position. However, the study’s essentialism is deployed within Elam’s frame of a groundless solidarity that is neither absolute, nor founded on pre-social identity. In returning to Fuss (1989) and how her theorising of essence might be framed within this notion of ‘groundless solidarity’, the study draws parallels between the notion of ‘groundless’ as consistent with Fuss’ view of essence as slippery, elusive and highly contingent, on the one hand, but possessing an identifiable stability (Elam 1994) - something, according to Fuss (1989), we can never truly escape. The key thread in the study’s drawing together of these two perspectives within its theoretical and methodological framework is understanding ‘essence’ as founded in the social (Elam 1994). The traditional notion of essentialism as rooted in theories of biologically determinist accounts of pre-given difference thus does not apply to my analysis, interpretation and discussion within this study. Against this backdrop, rather than my conceptualising ‘the boys’ and ‘the group’ as possessing shared identities, they are conceptualised, within a social constructionist framework, as sharing forms of social shaping, normalisation, regulation and maintenance (Weedon 1999).
3.2.5.2 The centrality of the ‘self’ and textual representation in poststructural theory

A concern with power, language and the production of socio-political meaning underpins poststructural analysis and theorising, urging a shift away from identity politics to a focus on cultural codes and the politics of signification. The feminist poststructural rejection of biologically determinist accounts of gender, manifest in what may be seen as a narrowing of perspective through an over-emphasis on the politics of textual representation, has been criticised as ignoring the significance of the bodily experience of gender (see Connell 1995; Prain & Hickey 1998). To these ends, the poststructural notion of subjectivities as entirely inscribed through social processes has been argued as inadequate. While Connell (2000: 12) explains that “men’s bodies do not determine the patterns of masculinity”, he contends that men’s bodies “are not blank slates” - they are “addressed, defined, disciplined (in areas such as sport and the military) and given outlets and pleasures, by the gender order of society.” Connell’s (2000) extensive work in the area of gender embodiment argues for recognition of the power of the body’s materiality and bodily experience in how gender is expressed. He asserts that gender “is not a social practice reduced to the body” but “a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do” (2000: 27).

Through acknowledging and endeavouring to accommodate these critiques, the soundness and validity of the study’s methodological framework is seen as strengthened. To this end the study does not reject the notions of essence or identity and accepts that they are inescapable, indeed necessary and potentially useful conceptualisations. However, while attempts to ‘name the subject’ will be made in seeking to recognise and explore affirmative and agentic identity constructions that do not reduce social practice to modes of domination and hierarchy, Fuss’ view of essence/identity as “slippery”, “elusive” (1989: 19) and historically contingent, underpins the study’s conception and use of this term. Against this backdrop, as both Seidman and Fuss stress, the study’s analysis focuses on examining the social production and significance that constitutes particular identities and subjectivities, rather than engaging in the subversion of identity or essence. This analysis also underpins the study’s construction of an affirmative and
transformational social vision, acknowledging Seidman’s call pertaining to the need to “spell out a vision for a better society” (1993: 137).

While the study remains heavily committed to a poststructural concern with analysing the self in relation to the politics of textual representation, the significance of the interconnectedness of bodies with social processes is accepted. To this end, the study’s methodological framework acknowledges the boys’ bodily expressions of masculinities as critical in the development of their ways of being.

3.3 Group socialisation theory

Having, or not having, a group to identify with could make all the difference to a kid who isn’t sure what sort of person he is. (Harris 1998: 277)

Judith Rich Harris’ (1998) insights into peer culture have been particularly meaningful in broadening my understanding of the dynamics and potency of peer group relations in shaping behaviour. Through the interpretive lenses of feminist poststructuralism, I draw on a number of key ideas within Harris’ theory of group socialisation as additional tools for analysing and understanding the boys’ peer group subjectivities. As established in Chapter One, the epistemological disparities grounding feminist poststructural theory and group socialisation theory are acknowledged. Harris’ ideas are thus integrated as additions to the study’s methodology to enrich rather than contradict or undermine my poststructural understanding and theorising of peer culture. The limits to Harris’ group socialisation theory are accepted, indeed, as with many such theories of socialisation, her work also tends to over-simplify and unify through “obscuring our recognition of the complex and contradictory ways in which we are constantly constituting ourselves in the social world” (Davies in Lowe 1998: 206). Against this backdrop, Harris’ conceptualisation of the peer group’s primacy in shaping behaviour and her understanding of the dynamics within and between peer groups are used as ‘qualified’ but

*Harris uses the term ‘socialisation’ in her theory. It is acknowledged, as with the term ‘identity’, that poststructural thought rejects this term on the basis of its perceived (re)constitution of the human subject as historically, developmentally and interactively static and unitary; passive in the receipt of social forces, rather than active in their (re)construction. In this thesis, while I use the term ‘socialisation’ in reference to Harris’ theory, I qualify this use, and indeed the use of other terms in her theory, such as ‘norms’, ‘effect’, ‘categorisation’ and ‘personality’, similarly within a conception of the subject as active, dynamic and fluid in the (re)construction of social forces and subjectivities.
useful elements of the study’s theoretical framework. In this respect, I use her ideas in ways consistent with, and not contradictory to, the tenets of feminist poststructural theory.

3.3.1 The peer group’s primacy in shaping behaviour

Harris’ theory of group socialisation is underpinned by an understanding that children’s behaviours, perceptions, language and culture are primarily shaped through their identification with a peer group. Group socialisation theory posits self-categorisation and ‘groupness’ as a child’s central means of identity construction. This process of self-categorisation is conceptualised as children “seeking out” and identifying with “a group of others like themselves” (1998: 285) with membership to a particular category or groupness informing, shaping and governing behaviour. The theory positions children as actively engaged in this process of peer group identification - they don’t want to be different, “oddness is not considered a virtue in the peer group” (1998: 341). Within this framework, children are considered competent members of their own society, active in the collective creation of their own culture and ‘ways of being’, adopting and modifying elements of existing adult cultures to suit their own purposes. Group socialisation theory thus positions children as willingly conforming to their peer group’s norms - well aware of the expectations and ramifications of behaviour specific and appropriate to their social category.

Of key importance to the study, Harris’ theory illuminates the significance of social context in shaping behaviour and understandings. Group socialisation theory foregrounds the sensitivity and variability of behaviour depending on self-categorisations and social context. She affirms that peer group behaviour is situational and usually appropriate to the norms of the particular group. She asserts that “when groupness is salient (individuals) see themselves as members of whichever group is in the spotlight at the moment. When groupness is not salient, (individuals) see themselves as unique…” (1998: 177).

Harris’ conceptualisations of ‘groupness’, self-categorisation and the significance of social context as primary in shaping the identity of children, inform my understandings of the potency of the boys’ peer culture in shaping their masculine subjectivities. Within
this theoretical frame, the boys are seen to be actively and collectively constructing subjectivities which are highly sensitive to the peer group context, highly contingent on the behavioural dynamics of the group and modified from existing adult subjectivities.

3.3.2 Within group dynamics

Group socialisation theory illuminates the importance of comparison in children learning about themselves. Through comparing themselves and being compared with others in their social category, the theory submits, children develop an understanding about what kind of people they are. Harris contends that positions varying in status within a peer group are assigned or acquired through within-group comparison, differentiation and competition and are critical in shaping an individual’s self-concept. Within the social context of peer culture, comparison to those holding high status, the leaders, informs behaviour and understandings because, as Harris asserts, children “want most of all to be like the kids who have high status in their peer group” (1998: 245). Within-group relations, she proposes, centre on the group’s leadership and ‘attention structure’: to whom does the group pay attention?

Characteristics of leadership and their importance in shaping peer behaviour are significant aspects of Harris’ theory. She asserts that the leaders of children’s peer groups - those positioned “at the top of the attention ladder” (1998: 245) - are usually the oldest or most mature members and are positioned thus through possessing such characteristics as “force of personality, imaginativeness, intelligence, athletic ability, sense of humor, and a pleasing appearance...” (1998: 267). These leaders, the theory argues, are afforded many privileges and can impact on the group’s norms: attitudes, ideals and behaviours; and the group’s membership: who is in and who is out. Moreover, the leaders of high status peer groups can also impact on how others (non-members) behave.

Group socialisation theory’s conceptualisations of ‘attention structure’ and leadership are drawn on within my understandings of the boys’ peer group as an organiser of social power. In this regard, while peer group subjectivities are seen as collectively constructed, the notion of within-group comparison and the significance of the group’s attention
structure in relation to the dominance of leadership positionings and power dispersion and their impact on shaping the boys' subjectivities are seen as critical.

3.3.3 Between-group dynamics

Within the framework of group socialisation theory, differentiation within a peer group is said to weaken when other peer groups are present. Self-categorisations are thus seen to shift from *me* to *us*. In this regard, when another group is present, comparison, differentiation and competition between groups becomes apparent. Harris describes the differentiation between groups as ‘group contrast effects’. While the commonalities of the group, her theory posits, are exaggerated by the influences of group members, the group also works to contrast with, and mark difference from, other groups. This sort of self-identification with, and salience of, groupness “makes people like their own group best” (1998: 242). In this sense, the group often works to recognise, value and exaggerate the commonalities of *their* group and de-value or distance themselves from the commonalities of *other* groups. Harris proposes that these group contrast effects tend to create difference or make existing differences between groups widen, commonly resulting in an ‘us versus them’ mentality manifest in intergroup hostility, particularly noticeable between boys and girls of middle childhood.

Group contrast effects act like a wedge. They force themselves into any little crack between two groups - any difference between them - and make it wider. Such effects have their origin in the deep-rooted tendency to be loyal to one’s own group. I am one of *us*, not one of *them*. I don’t want to be like (yuck) *them*. (original italics, 1998: 242-243)

The study draws on the concepts ‘group contrast effects’ and ‘intergroup hostility’ as additional reference points in understanding the boys’ metaphysical thought, which is seen as informing their understandings of themselves and their ‘male-like’ behaviour in binary opposition to females and female-like behaviour. Harris’ understandings of intergroup hostility as exaggerating the commonalities of the group in contrast with other groups resonate with poststructural understandings that view exclusionary practices as established through logics of “certainty, non-contradiction, totality and linearity” (Lather 1991a: xvi). I found these theoretical conceptions within group socialisation theory to be
particularly useful in understanding and explaining the tendency for boys’ behaviours in peer contexts to escalate in alliance against others in the form of intimidatory practices.

### 3.4 Ethnographic case study

The study draws on ethnographic principles and methods within its feminist poststructural framework. The principles of ethnography within a case study approach are interpreted as converging with the tenets of poststructural theory in fundamental ways. Case study ethnography allows for a close and thorough inspection of the complex interactions of a social group. Through interpretive contextual analysis and ‘thick’ descriptive representation, this type of research focuses on meaning and understanding from the perspective of the participant(s) (Hickey 1997). This approach allows an exploration of how the boys construct their commonsense knowledges in the context of their peer group (Roman & Apple 1990). Through acknowledging the dynamics of the boys’ peer group relations as a myriad of active, constitutive and often contradictory social and cultural processes (Burns 1994), a detailed, complex and personalistic analysis can be afforded, with this working to proliferate rather than narrow or totalise meaning and interpretation (Stake 1996).

Confining the research focus to a single case study avails a level of depth and specificity to attend closely to the subtlety and complexity of the case - the peer group (Aledman, Jenkins & Kemmis 1996). In this regard, the approach allows for a thorough analysis of the social interactions of the boys within the peer group context. This thoroughness, while enabling detailed attention to the establishment and regulation of the dominant understandings and practices of the boys’ peer group, also enables the identification and interrogation of aspects and idiosyncrasies that are inconsistent with, and disruptive of, the dominant understandings of the group. In this sense, the attention to, and illumination of, discrepancies and conflictual interpretations that the specificity of the case study approach allows, offers alternative ways of interpretation and understanding consistent with the methodological underpinnings of the study.

The profound contextuality and embeddedness of case study research within its real world situation is generally seen as forsaking the capacity for generalisation because it is considered poorly representational of whole populations (Aledman et al. 1996).
However, as Stake’s work (1996) convincingly argues, the intimate understandings of the specificities of a case study approach allows for generalisations of the particular case and this can promote ‘generalisations from case to case’ (Stake 1996: 3). In this regard, the specificity and depth of the case study approach, through offering the reader a vicarious experience of recognition, can appeal to the reader’s “tacit knowledge of human situations” (Aledman et al. 1996: 4) and can “establish the basis for naturalistic generalisation” (Stake 1996: 3). The reader is thus able to respond to, and harmonise with, the case study descriptions by engaging with its similarities, likenesses and relevances and by relating these to personal experiences and understandings.

One prominent aspect of case study research is its careful specificity delimiting its boundaries - “what is and is not the case” (Stake, 1996: 3). This specificity, however, does not suggest that the social discourses and ‘realities’ of the case stand in isolation. To the contrary, the specificities of the case are seen as inextricably moulded by, and enmeshed within, the social discourses and ‘realities’ of the wider society (Burns 1994; Roman & Apple 1990) which pre-exist the case, and to a great extent, determine the possibilities and scope available to the individual within a given case (Sharp in Roman & Apple 1990).

Against this backdrop, the study recognises the larger social discourses and contexts which shape the values, expectations and understandings of the participants within their peer group context and attempts to situate these understandings within the broader underlying social ‘reality’ (Roman & Apple 1990). Indeed, the study recognises and acknowledges the impact of wider social structures, many of which are based on inequitable power relations (Roman & Apple 1990), which can be seen as significant in shaping and regulating the boys’ understandings and practices within the micro context of their peer group. These include impacts such as the school, family and sport within adult culture. While the study’s central focus is delimited to a thorough and detailed exploration of the interrelations of five young males within one peer group, attempts to relate the impact of broader social structures and institutions to the development of the boys’ subjectivities are made. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the structural mechanisms and material conditions (Roman & Apple 1990) within the peer group, as
situated within broader social and institutional contexts which shape and regulate the boys’ practices and understandings.

3.4.1 My positioning: the researcher and the researched

At the core of any ethnographic endeavour is the relationship between researcher and researched (Burgess, 1989). Understanding the development of this relationship, as well as its dynamics, is an important methodological aspect of the theory and practice of the study. It is acknowledged that my physical presence among the boys, (as, indeed with all other participants), impacts on their behaviour, understandings and practices. This ‘impact’ is particularly relevant to the study’s analytical focus of young children in terms of investigating the ethical and moral ‘soundness’ of the researcher/researched relationship. Concerns with the ethical and moral implications of researching children have been widely discussed (Amos Hatch 1995; Hood, Kelley & Mayall 1996; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig 1996; Matthews, Limb & Taylor 1998). These concerns have related to the appropriateness and desirability of involving children directly in research in terms of their competence and vulnerability as research subjects (Mahon et al. 1996). The view of children as incompetent and in need of protection and control has been seen as underpinning much research involving children, with this view based on adult assumptions (Hood et al. 1996; Matthews et al. 1998). In this regard, the research focus governed by adult interests has resulted in children being perceived as “either at the mercy of or posing risk to adult social worlds” (Hood et al. 1996: 118). To these ends, children’s own interests, experiences and knowledges have often been excluded from the research enterprise (Hood et al. 1996) because they have been perceived as poor informants: not able to fully understand “many of the issues which confront their daily lives” (Matthews et al. 1998: 314).

While the validity and accuracy of children’s responses have been questioned in conjunction with debate over the issue of protecting children from researcher exploitation in the form of intrusive or potentially distressing questioning, there is now strong consensus that “children’s views can and ought to be taken seriously” (Mahon et al. 1996: 146). There is also strong consensus on the significance for researchers to consider particular ethical and moral issues when working with children, with these concerns
related to the issue of researcher intention and the notion of research with or for children rather than on children (Amos Hatch 1995; Hood et al. 1996; Mahon et al. 1996; Matthews et al. 1998). In this respect, ethical questions concerning researcher intention and justification such as, “Why am I doing this study? … What is my relationship to the participants?” and “Who may be at risk in the contexts I am studying?” are seen as critical (Amos Hatch 1995: 221). Hood et al. (1996: 119) assert the justification for the research - for “collecting the data (should be) to help make children heard.” Such self-reflexivity to the ends of “making children heard” positions children as actors in their own right with valid opinions and views about their everyday worlds (Matthews et al. 1998). Through self-reflexive participation and engagement alongside children within the research process, researchers can understand children and childhood from the perspectives of children (Hood et al. 1996).

Through the development of a self-conscious and self-reflexive stance, in recognition of my ‘researcher locatedness’ (Davies 1999) and my invested positionality in the research, the study identifies and makes visible the constructedness of the researcher/researched relationship. This involves understanding and unraveling the ways in which the boys’ subjectivities might be shaped by the research itself, through, for example, my research intention and intervention, my personal characteristics and my construction of the research environment. For example, my research intention, governed by my poststructural concerns with analysing power and social interaction will impact on my research intervention or lack thereof. In particular, the interactive dynamics of the boys’ affinity group sessions, guided by my questioning, will be shaped in relation to my foregrounding of particular (possibly emotive and contentious) issues and interactions concerned with language, the dispersion of socio-political power and the production of meaning. Questions assessing the ethical soundness of my research, such as those framed by Amos Hatch, will be significant in enabling an awareness of how my positionality, manifest in my research intention, might be implicated in shaping the participants’ behaviour. Again, the study’s reflexivity and openness hopes to dispel intimation of “appropriating (the) participants’ experiences, understandings, and even their miseries to serve (the) ends” of the research (Amos Hatch 1995: 221-222).
This self-conscious and continually self-reflexive stance attempts to decentre my position as a ‘detached researcher’ and underpins the study’s methodological belief that researcher neutrality is neither desirable nor attainable (Roman & Apple 1990). This positioning acknowledges that the dynamics of my relationships with the participants is necessarily intertwined within, and shaping of, the data process and product (Punch in Burgess 1989). It is acknowledged that my personal characteristics, as a 30 year-old female are implicated in shaping the data. Attempts to reconcile these implications are manifest in the detailing of the development of my relationship with the research participants, the observation of the participants’ behaviours and relationships in other contexts and with other people, and my openly transparent situation and self-reflexive voice within, in particular, the data (re)presentation (research story) and related discussions. The study’s perspective on, and reconciliation of, the research environment’s constructedness and its possible implications in shaping the participants’ subjectivities are detailed subsequently in 3.7.1.1 (An Affinity group in a natural setting?). To these ends, the research structures shaping the participants’ interactions are made transparent in an endeavour to disrupt reinscription of the detached researcher’s dominant and authorial understandings.

3.4.1.1 Developing relationships of ‘trust’

Immersion within the research culture is a guiding feature of the ethnographic case study (Roman & Apple 1990) with the accuracy and clarity of the research significantly enhanced through considerable time spent in the field (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Such immersion over an extended period fosters close proximity between researcher and researched, with issues of acceptance and trust of particular consideration.

During the intensive six-month data collection phase of the research, I spent most days at the school and had the opportunity to develop close relationships with the children of grade 1/2W., particularly with those children in the focus peer groups through far more frequent contact. In the classroom I interacted with the children through initiating, or responding to, informal or incidental talk when they were playing games or engaging in school-work. I also included myself actively in the children’s games during recess and lunchtime periods and often sat with the children to eat lunch.
I tried to develop a level of trust and rapport with the children through continually showing an interest in them and by adopting a non-judgemental and non-authoritarian position in my interactions with them. This proved, at times, to be somewhat problematic. Indeed, my position as researcher of young children within a school setting presented various ethical implications concerning responsibility, trust and confidentiality. As Burgess (1989) illuminates, studying participants within institutions can present many ethical dilemmas for researchers because they are often privy to information that contravenes institutional rule. In attempting to project a non-authority position with the children in the study I made moral decisions when witness to rule-breaking or privy to information contravening school or classroom rule (eg: instances of bullying and truancy) to, in effect, comply with this contravention through keeping it confidential.

Notwithstanding, I resolved to intervene in an authority position only if I felt a particular act would likely endanger, or put at risk, any member of the staff or student bodies at the school. For example, when children broke school or classroom rules in my presence, I simply ignored the transgression and did not attempt to intervene, pass judgement or inform a teacher. When children requested my intervention in playground disputes, I referred them to a duty teacher rather than manage or sanction the behaviour myself. Fortunately the overwhelming majority of rule breaking incidences and (play ground) disputes I witnessed occurred within the relatively close vicinity of a teacher or were ‘minor’, such as breaking the ‘no tackling rule’ on the football field or the ‘no swearing rule’. To this end, I was able to have them dealt with effectively without giving the appearance of being directly involved. I was conscious, however, of the ever present conflict between gaining the children’s confidence and trust through resisting positions of authority and being a responsible adult in the company of young children within the overarching disciplinary framework of the school.

It was hoped that my attempts at building a relationship of confidence and trust through resisting the adoption of authority would position me in the children’s eyes as possessing less power and authority over them compared with the other adults in the school. This was important as I interpreted the children’s behaviour as governed and sanitised by teacher/adult authority. I anticipated that my resistance of ‘power over’ them would leave them little reason to ‘sanitise’ their behaviour when they were in my company. In
this sense, I hoped that the children would perceive me as somewhat ‘inconsequential’ to how they practiced and interpreted their relationships with others.

3.5 The site

Banrock Primary School* is situated in a middle class socioeconomic area in a large provincial city in Tasmania, with an enrolment ceiling of 296 students from a diverse range of familial structures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Around 30% of the student population are in receipt of government benefit in the form of Student Assistance. The student population is largely mono-cultural, with only a minority of students from cultures other than Anglo-Saxon descent.

The main campus is positioned within a bush setting and accommodates mostly composite levels comprising Preparatory to Grade Six, while the Kindergarten is located in a nearby suburb. The different locales housing the Kindergarten and Preparatory to Six children have resulted in the positioning of the Preparatory classroom in a separate unit within the main campus to help children in their campus transition.

The school was selected for a number of reasons. First, my association with a teacher colleague at the school provided me with relatively open access to a particular early childhood classroom; second, the school seemed fairly typical of many primary schools in Tasmania; and third, I had never been employed as a teacher at the school. I believed this last point to be important, given that I wanted to resist being positioned in a ‘teacher’ role (by students and staff) while at the school as a researcher.

The school year at Banrock, as with all Tasmanian schools, comprised three terms. In 1999, first term began in early February. The second term commenced in mid-June, and the final term in late September. The school year finished in middle December 1999.

3.6 The participants

The 27 students in Grade 1/2W. comprised 16 girls and 11 boys ranging in ages from six to eight years at the beginning of Term Two 1999. A letter detailing the study’s

*Pseudonyms have been used in naming the school and in naming the subjects who participated in the study.
justifications and research processes: observation and possible focus group discussions with a selection of students, was sent home to parents/guardians seeking their permission for their child to be involved in the study (see Appendix A). Following receipt of this letter and half a dozen or so follow up phone calls, 24 of the 27 parents/guardians (the parents of two girls and one boy declined permission) agreed for their child to participate.

After an initial four week observation and familiarisation period at the beginning of Term Two 1999, the compilation of the affinity groups involved a whole-class activity. A ‘Birthday List’ activity (Appendix B) was completed by each child in the class to reveal preferred peer relationships. The children were asked to select four or five children in the class who they would most like to invite to their birthday party. From these birthday invitation lists, four affinity groups emerged. The two groups representing greater affinity (ie: the groups with greater numbers of nominations) established the focus groups for discussions (one group of boys and one group of girls). This Birthday List activity allowed for the affinity groups to be selected organically and reflect the children’s ‘natural’ or preferred peer/friendship group choices through the children nominating their own preferences (see Appendix C).

Subsequent to the initial four-week observation and familiarisation period and during the remaining eight weeks of Term Two, the group of boys and I met twice a week in the afternoons for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. During the 12 weeks of Term Three we also met for 30 to 40 minutes twice a week in the afternoons. During the same two-term period, the girls and I met once a week for the same duration of 30 to 40 minutes in the afternoon. The affinity group of teachers and I met on one occasion near the end of Term Three 1999 in the boys’ classroom for approximately one hour. All of these sessions were tape-recorded.

The procedure immediately prior to the boys’ and girls’ sessions commenced usually involved the children returning to the classroom from lunch time play and spending approximately 35 minutes engaged in relaxation, partner massage and reading activities. The teacher would then allow me to take the group away for our sessions. The majority of these sessions were held in a small unused conference room separate from the classrooms. This room contained a small, central coffee table and had several chairs
lining three of the walls. Three large windows, overlooking the school’s quadrangle, spanned one of the walls, providing the room with ample natural light. A kitchen sink, overhead cupboard and refrigerator occupied the far end of the room.

3.6.1 The boys’ peer group

The students who participated in the core group discussions were Adam, Matthew, Justin, Jack and Ravi. The following portraits were developed from my initial interactions with, and observations of, these children and incidental discussions I had with the boys’ classroom teacher.

3.6.1.1 Adam

Adam had just turned eight and was in Grade Two at the beginning of the data collection period and was the eldest member of the group. Adam’s parents are separated, with Adam residing with his father, a builder. His younger sister, who also attends Banrock, resides with his mother, a full-time ‘home-maker’. Adam is very competitive and loves high energy games and physical exertion. His hero is Sylvester Stallone and his sport is boxing - he attends an organised club for training and matches. His favourite non-sporting pursuit is drawing cartoons. He is rebellious and self-assured, with a quick-wit and sarcastic sense of humour. Adam’s teacher describes him as “high-spirited” and “active” with a “chauvinistic streak”. While Adam possesses highly developed verbal skills, he struggles academically, particularly in his literacy skills.

3.6.1.2 Matthew

Matthew turned eight during the first few months of the data collection period and was in Grade Two. Matthew’s parents are separated and he lives with his mother, a part-time taxi-driver, and his younger, pre-school age brother and an older sister who attends Banrock. His mother’s new partner, who is in full-time work, and his two children also reside with Matthew’s family. Matthew loves playing high energy sports, such as football and basketball, with his best friend Adam. He also enjoys playing James Bond games with his toy guns and is very proud of his vast collection of match-box cars. His teacher describes Matthew as quite unsure of himself: “a follower” who tends to “tag
along” inclined to cry at “the drop of a hat”. Although she sees him as being quite capable academically, she believes that laziness has limited his progress at school.

3.6.1.3 Justin

Justin was seven years old and in Grade One in 1999. Justin lives at home with his mother, a part-time supermarket cashier; father, a full-time council worker; and an older brother, who also attends the school. Justin is physically the largest of the group and extremely competent at sport, particularly football and cricket. He is ‘football mad’ and attends a junior football group Auskick\(^*\) on the weekends with his father and older brother. His hero is AFL player Chris Grant. His teacher says that while Justin’s academic achievement is disappointing, particularly his literacy and verbal skills (he has a slight speech impediment), he is a diligent worker, who is concerned with gaining the approval of adults in the school context.

3.6.1.4 Jack

Jack was six years old during most of 1999 and was in Grade One. The youngest member of the group, Jack lives at home with his older brother, who also attends Banrock; his mother, a full-time ‘home-maker’; and father, who is in full-time work. Like the other boys, Jack is interested in sport, and is particularly skilled at football and basketball, with his heroes being sporting stars Michael Jordan and Matthew Richardson. He also loves and collects anything related to Pokemon. Jack’s teacher describes him as being a gentle and quiet boy who developed confidence at school as the year progressed. He is also described as competent academically, with particular skills in the area of literacy.

3.6.1.5 Ravi

Ravi was in Grade Two in 1999 and turned eight at the end of the year. He lives at home with his mother, who is studying at University, and an older brother, who also attends Banrock. He has never met his father who was born in India. Unlike the others, Ravi’s fine and gross motor skills are poor and he does not choose to play sport in the

\(^*\)Auskick is a community organised junior development program designed to teach Australian Football League skills
playground. He prefers playing computer games or engaging in creative activities in the playground such as devising a treasure hunt or maze. His teacher describes him as “excellent at drama … very imaginative, artistic and clever … a creative thinker - full of ideas”.

3.6.2 The girls’ peer group

The consultation of a girls’ peer group was seen as critical in presenting a relational and comprehensive understanding of the boys’ masculinities within the study’s feminist methodology. The study’s gender focus positions the analysis of masculinities as deficient without a relational analysis of ‘femininities’ (Kenway 1998). Referring to his study of masculinities and sexualities, Mac an Ghaill notes “female students occupy a critical social position from which to speak of masculinities and their cultural and political impact on their lives and future socio-sexual destinies” (1994: 112).

The students who participated in the girls’ corroborative group discussions were Sally (six years), Jane (seven years), Alexandra (six years) and Kate (seven years). All of these girls have younger siblings with Sally being the only one from a single parent family structure. All of the girls perform well academically with Sally and Jane excelling in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Sally, in particular, demonstrates a thoughtful maturity well beyond her six years. The girls often played together, adore the Spice Girls and loved singing, dancing, imaginative role-play, playing ‘chasey’ and drawing.

3.6.3 The teacher

Corroborative discussions in the form of two interviews were conducted with the children’s class teacher. Mrs. Walker (Mrs. W.) was in her early forties at the time of data collection. A relative latecomer to the teaching profession, Mrs. W. had only been teaching early childhood classes for two years (at Banrock), with her earlier working experience as a ‘special school’ teacher aide. Her classroom was highly organised and structured with the behaviour of her students well managed through the consistent outline of clear rules and behavioural reinforcements. Mrs. W. informed me that she established this structured environment at the beginning of each year with the collective discussion and construction of a ‘class constitution’ with the children. She framed this discussion
with the children, encouraging their contributions to the set of classroom rules, along the lines of “what can we do in our classroom to make it a safe and happy place for everyone?” The children’s contributions were then re-worded to form rules such as “In our classroom we always move around quietly and sensibly” and “In our classroom we raise our hand when we wish to speak to the teacher”. Through Mrs. W.’s consistent ‘rule-reminding’, the children became well aware of the expectations for behaviour, thus it was very rare for the children’s behaviour to contravene these expectations in the classroom. For example, if a child interrupted Mrs. W. while she was speaking, or ‘called out’, she would ignore the child’s request and ask her to recite the rule about raising her hand when wishing to speak to the teacher. Thus, the ‘time-out’ chair, for children who contravened classroom rules was very rarely occupied.

I observed Mrs. W.’s general demeanour to be one of dedication and commitment to facilitating the learning opportunities of her students. She frequently discussed with, and sought advice from, her colleagues regarding her general concerns and ideas relating to the ‘progress’ of the children in her class, devising and documenting possible individual and group strategies and specific learning activities and routines to challenge and further the children’s academic and social development. I noted her comprehensive knowledge and documentation of each of the children’s scholastic progress and her efforts to match this knowledge and documentation to her planning and design of specific learning experiences, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy remediation. I was aware of her efforts to include variety in her learning program to motivate the children. For example, the children were always kept busy with the opportunity to explore numerous practical based activities dispersed as ‘learning centres’ throughout the classroom, such as jewellery making, musical notation, word games and story building through puppetry. Mrs. W. seemed to have organised the classroom in a particularly welcoming manner, with the children’s colourful work carefully mounted and displayed on most of the exposed walls; tables constructed in co-operative learning groups; and class materials and resources readily accessible and carefully organised for the children’s activities.
3.6.4 The teachers’ peer group

A group discussion was conducted which involved an affinity group of three teachers, including the children’s class teacher, Mrs. W., the school’s drama teacher, Ms. C. and a senior teacher responsible for whole school music, whole school sport and behaviour management, Mr. A. Ms. C. was in the final year of her teaching degree and worked at Banrock part-time. Mr. A. had worked at the school for five years. Both teachers were approximately thirty years old and taught the children at least once per week in addition to frequent informal contact.

3.6.5 The principal

The principal, Graeme Thomas (Mr. T.) was interviewed on one occasion. In his late fifties, he had been employed as a principal in Tasmanian schools for approximately 17 years, seven of those years as principal of Banrock Primary. Mr. T.’s contact with the children of 1/2W. was infrequent. His dealings with students were largely concerned with school administration and discipline.

3.7 Collecting the data

3.7.1 Affinity groups

Based on the fundamental belief that forms of anti-authority masculinity are overwhelmingly reinforced in groups (Browne 1995a; Connell 1995), the core focus of the study involved investigating the collective understandings within a boys’ affinity group. It is the study’s strong contention that the affinity group context reflects the boys’ peer group subjectivities and “renders visible” the “doing(s) of masculinity” (Coleman 1990: 191). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the affinity group of boys, corroborative data were collected through discussions with: an affinity group of girls and an affinity group of teachers. The focus of these sessions was to explore these girls’ and teachers’ collective interpretations, responses and understandings of their interactions with the boys in the affinity group.

The choice of conducting open-ended discussions with affinity groups was seen as an appropriate method for the study’s endeavours to explore the subtleties and complexities
of peer group relevances, understandings and behaviours (see Mackay 1993). Moreover, while this method has been criticised for saying very little about the private spheres of individuals, it has been said to be useful in foregrounding the ‘partial truths’ of a group’s dominant discourses (Harrison 2000). This method of grouping people of similar interest and engaging them in discussion aims to promote a sense of group cohesion, which encourages the participants to speak with confidence and openness about their ideas, interpretations and feelings (Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000a). The intimate and informal context encourages the identification of shared and contradicting stories, ideas and understandings through clarifications, negotiations and confirmations. The affinity group method is also significant in positioning the researcher in a role more informal and peripheral to that of interviewer, which foregrounds the relationships of the group through the facilitation of relatively ‘untethered’ communication (Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000a).

Two affinity groups were self-selected from the 24 children who participated in the study. The affinity group method was modified, after Mackay (1993), for use with young children in a school setting. His use of the method with adults stipulates three main features: the group must comprise of people who are well known to each other; the discussions must be conducted in a setting ‘natural’ to the participants; and the discussions must be unstructured and spontaneous, free from researcher structure or interruption.

The first feature did not present any difficulty for the study as all of the 24 children in 1/2W. were well known to each other. The second feature: conducting discussions in settings ‘natural’ to the children, such as the home environment, was thought as an unworkable and untenable undertaking for the study. However, as children spend a considerable amount of time at school it may well be seen as a natural place for them to be, particularly since many of their interactions with peers occurs in this context. At the very least, areas of the school environment, such as those less governed by rules, would seem more ‘natural’ in setting, than those areas more governed by rules. In the interest of achieving a ‘natural’ context, understood as one where the participants would feel free to talk openly and honestly, the affinity group sessions were conducted in areas somewhat removed from teacher authority. Such contexts included areas within the school
playground and a small conference room separated from other classrooms. Additionally, the children were assured that the information within the affinity group sessions would remain private and confidential. This freedom from parental or teacher authority seemed particularly important to the children and appeared to create an open environment within which the children could talk freely.

In selecting the affinity group method, I also considered research and commentary on ways to address the social mismatch between adult researcher and child participant (Thorne, 1993; Hood et al. 1996; Mahon et al. 1996; Matthews et al. 1998). These studies suggest the power imbalance in the adult/child research relationship, created by differences in body size and status in society, can, at least partially, be reconciled through particular research methods concerned with addressing the level of confidence children may feel when interviewed by an adult researcher. Children, in these studies, were found to be more at ease when in the supportive company of their peers, rather than when working with a researcher on an individual basis.

The third and last feature, requiring the spontaneity of discussion free from researcher interference and structure, was also seen as untenable for working with young children. It was felt that some structure and prompting were required: firstly, to ensure the provision of a safe environment; and secondly, to ensure the children remained interested and willing to talk. To this end, in protecting the children’s safety, some loose guidelines for behaviour were devised, such as requiring the children to remain seated during the sessions and abstain from physically rough contact. In relation to maintaining the interest level of the children, while most of the discussions were spontaneous and did not involve a formal agenda, they did involve a certain degree of (loose) structure, questioning and prompting to facilitate and encourage discussion. In this regard, topics of incidental interest were selected as initial discussion points, with follow-up issues generating from aspects of these discussions. For example, aspects of the daily occurrences at home or school that the group elected to discuss and explore, or that I prompted the group to discuss, generated interest and facilitated communication. For the boys’ group such areas of interest included discussing play time activities, favourite games and friendships.
My questioning strategies, while unstructured, were loosely modelled after Epston and White’s (1992) ‘landscapes of action’ and ‘landscapes of consciousness’. Working from Griemas and Courtes, White and Epston propose two types of questioning: the first type being to elicit responses concerned with meaning and significance made by contextualising the sequence of events within a landscape of action; and the second type relating to examining the ‘inner world’, the landscape of consciousness, referring to exploring feelings, thoughts and perceptions in relation to the contextualising and sequencing of events within the landscape of action. This framework seemed to be particularly helpful in encouraging the peer groups to elaborate on, clarify and explore particular events and issues.

Further prompting activities and strategies within the affinity group sessions, such as drawings, and the use of props including photographs (taken by myself and the children), media images and toys, were also used to encourage and facilitate discussion. The work of Mahon et al. (1996) and Matthews et al. (1998) advocate the use of prompts such as these when working with young children. In particular, Matthews views these sorts of ‘appropriately chosen’ interactive research aids as critical in developing rapport between researcher and child to develop an interesting and empowering environment where children feel free to express themselves.

These prompts were effective as open-ended stimuli for exploring organically the dynamics of the boys’ peer group relations and their understandings of themselves and others. For the girls’ group, areas for discussion were prompted in response to aspects I presented to them from the boys’ discussions. For example, during my time at the school, the boys were involved in many disputes, particularly when playing sport. The group of girls were asked about their thoughts on these disputes. Additionally, the girls were encouraged to discuss aspects relating to their interactions with the boys, and in particular with any of the boys in the study. Similarly, the affinity group of teachers was asked to discuss their interactions with, and/or observations of, the affinity group of boys.

3.7.1.1 An affinity group in a natural setting?

It is acknowledged that the affinity group setting was an artificial construction and in this sense, could be construed as only partially reflecting the boys’ and girls’ peer group
subjectivities. The setting was certainly artificial in the sense of the arrangement and constructedness of regular meetings in a specific room. It was also artificial in the sense of there being a researcher present amongst a group of young children. Further to this, while the self selecting process constituted the groups organically, the constancy and regularity of the group meetings subsequent to this self-selection may be seen as self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating the children’s sense of groupness.

It may also be argued, however, that all settings and groupings are, to an extent, artificial constructions, seldom entirely of our own choosing. In this regard, the extent to which any behaviour is ever free from the social limitations and restrictions of its contextual constructedness and ‘artificialities’ is arguable. Young children, in particular, consistently operate within the ‘artificialities’ of their constructed contexts. Indeed, the majority of children’s behaviour operates within, and often depends upon, an adult governing framework, whatever context they may be in. Additionally, young children, and indeed older children and adults, are continuously grouped together in constructed and artificial ways. The school’s class groupings and the structured and routinised time frames of recess and lunch which discipline children’s bodies, regulating the when, where and what of their lives are such examples (Kamler 1994).

It is quite possible that the regularity and frequency of the peer group sessions encouraged some form of self-perpetuation with regard to shaping behaviour within an artificial groupness. While this is acknowledged, it is said that any form of groupness may be ‘self-perpetuating’ with regard to shaping behaviour (Harris 1998). Notwithstanding, the study’s corroborative data investigated, through observation, the implications of the boys’ groupness in contexts other than the affinity group setting, (contexts such as outside play time where the boys’ groupings could be construed as less ‘artificial’ or imposed). The warrant for proceeding with the affinity group, as core focus for the study, however, remains firmly embedded within the evidence of the potency of the peer group context (whether genuine or manufactured, whether consisting of long term friends or short term acquaintances) in shaping and regulating the behaviour of its members (see Harris 1998).
3.7.2 Interviews with staff

To further enhance my understanding of the boys’ subjectivities, interviews were conducted with the boys’ classroom teacher. These were semi-structured discussions of an informal ‘conversation-like’ nature involving an exploration of the teacher’s perceptions and interpretations of the boys in the affinity group. I conducted three interviews with Mrs. W. in Term Two of 1999, during and after school hours, in the children’s classroom. The first of these interviews, lasting approximately 1.5 hours, was framed around an invitation for the teacher to discuss her interpretations and understandings of each of the affinity group boys in turn. The discussion included her descriptions, thoughts and insights into, the boys’ family histories, their personalities, relationships and behaviour and their academic performance. The remaining two interviews took the form of incidental discussion concerning particular incidents and lasted approximately 15 minutes each. Towards the end of the data collection period I conducted an interview with the principal of Banrock Primary. This interview was framed in a similar way to the first interview with Mrs. W. with the purpose of exploring Mr. T.’s perception of the boys in the affinity group. In particular, noting the principal’s involvement with the children as largely limited to administration and discipline, I was interested in exploring the philosophies and understandings underpinning his behaviour management strategies. All of the affinity group sessions and interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed.

3.7.3 Observation

Observations of the social behaviours and interactions of the group of boys within the context of the classroom and playground corroborated and strengthened the accuracy and validity of the affinity group data. Of particular interest was the less restricted context of the playground where the boys’ behaviours were far more self-governed and, in this regard, more ‘natural’ than the more restricted teacher-governed context of the classroom. My participant observations began at the start of Term Two 1999 and involved an initial four week familiarisation period. During this initial period I spent every school day immersed in the children’s classroom and playground activities. A typical day started with my arrival 15 to 20 minutes prior to the commencement of day’s scheduled teacher directed sessions at 9:00 am. During the ‘before school’ time I interacted with the
children on an individual and group basis and included myself in such activities as computer or board games, block play or simple incidental discussions. During class time I sat with the children at their desks or at the back of the classroom and accompanied them to their specialist lessons of Drama, Phys. Ed. and Library. Within the classroom context I tried to position myself in a non-authority role when interacting with the children. To this end, when the children asked for my assistance I referred them to the classroom teacher or other students. During recess and lunch I accompanied the children outside and joined in their activities. In particular, to develop a rapport with the boys, most of my outdoor interactions involved playing their games of football and basketball.

I carried an A5 sized notebook with me at all times for the recording of observational field notes. The field notes recorded descriptive detail and dialogue relating to the children’s interactions as well as structural information such as the date, period within the day, such as recess or lunchtime and the physical location, such as the classroom, oval or quadrangle. Mostly, I took notes at specific times during each day, while sitting at the back of the classroom, such as at the end of the ‘interest’ periods of recess and lunch, while the children were engaged in quiet activities such as reading or relaxation. However, there were many other occasions, particularly during outdoor recess periods where I felt compelled to note particular observations ‘as they happened’. This daily observation and recording continued after the initial familiarisation period until the end of second term of 1999. During the subsequent third term my observations were less frequent with recordings occurring approximately two to three days per week.

The core focus of the observations involved watching the boys’ playground behaviours, and the extent and manner in which they did or did not interact with other members of their affinity group. In this regard, I examined how the boys interacted as a group, observing how the group’s dynamics constructed certain subjectivities and relationships and how I saw these dynamics as interacting to (re)produce a particular group structure. The observations also involved examining how the affinity group collectively interacted with, and defined itself from, other individuals and groups.
3.7.4 Reflective journal

I maintained a reflective journal for the duration of the data collection period. Each day, immediately after my time at the school, I wrote detailed anecdotal and impressionistic reflections of my personal thoughts and feelings. The purpose of the journal was not to reproduce any of the material from my observations or transcripts (Hiller 1998), but rather, to record aspects of the day other than that directly observable or recordable on tape. Most of these reflections detailed my thoughts and feelings concerning aspects of my research positioning in various contexts within the school and my relationships with the children and teachers. To this end, many of my reflections detailed my concerns relating to how each affinity group session and observation period had proceeded, such as the subtleties of how I thought the children had responded to me and to each other. The journal also included commentary on how I thought particular strategies in various contexts to build rapport were taken-up by the children. Further, it acted as a medium in which to record my thoughts regarding incidental discussions I had with teachers or children. To this end, the journal, while necessarily partial and perspectival, corroborated and embellished the data from other sources and provided me with a richer understanding of the more affective aspects of the research processes and practices.

3.8 Tools of representation

3.8.1 Transcripts

The affinity group and interview transcripts provided a permanent record of the sessions and allowed me the opportunity to revisit the data at any time at a later stage. In keeping with the study’s self-reflexive approach all interview and affinity group transcripts involving the teachers and the principal were given to the participants to verify their representational accuracy. The transcription process proved difficult as many of the affinity group interactions were overlayed with multiple voices at any one time. With a tape recording of each session, however, it was possible to listen to, and replay, the tapes repeatedly to thoroughly familiarise myself with the detail of interactions such as the frequency of interruptions and overlayed talk (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1988).

The transcripts were seen as an effective reference tool rather than an original data source and, in this regard, were analysed in conjunction with the original tape recordings, as
“much information is lost when working only with a transcript” (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997: 70). Further to this, as the tape recordings obviously did not detail aspects of the sessions such as the physical movements of the participants or particular subtleties such as facial expressions, these were recorded during the session as general notes. The tapes were transcribed soon after the sessions with these non-audible details included.

3.8.2 Narratives of experience

The postmodern turn in the social sciences, with its attendant strong linguistic focus in the constructedness of social and cultural realities, has promoted interest in narrative as a method of research in the human sciences. This interest in the literary potentialities of narrative has been derived from the postmodern view of knowledge and truth as “poetically and politically constituted, made by human communicative action that develops historically and is institutionalised politically” (Brown 1994: 229). Indeed, the use of narrative in educational research can be seen as reflecting the ‘crisis of representation’ in the social sciences (Mishler 1995). Within a critique of the positivist stance formerly dominating educational inquiry and the social sciences (Mishler 1995), narrative, as an alternative method of social research, makes transparent the historical contingency and rhetorical constructedness of scientific texts (Brown 1994).

A narrative focus in educational inquiry is situated within an implicit framework of human social and cultural life as experienced and understood through story. Storytelling is thus seen as capturing and characterising the personal and social relevances of human experience in meaningful ways (Connelly & Clandinin 1990) because narrative structure reflects how we organise our experiences: our thinking and perception (Mishler 1995). To this end, the study’s use of narrative reflects my endeavour to (re)present the participants’ thoughts and understandings through ‘story’, with these narratives providing the basis for further analysis and interpretation (Mishler 1995). In particular, these narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin 1990) attempt to vivify the boys’ peer group relevances, experiences and understandings through description of the development and dynamics of their relationships within the affinity group sessions. Consistent with poststructural thinking, these narratives were constructed to (re)present and illuminate the complexities and dynamics of the participants’ (re)constructions of
their experiences and relationships and in this sense, incite a proliferation of thoughts and emotions for the reader. In this regard, meaning was created through:

…the process of transforming experience into text in a dialogical relation with other texts and contexts (Todorov in Brown). Thus, a text becomes an intertextual network, a kind of juncture, where other texts, norms and values meet and work upon each other. As a result, there is not one privileged meaning but many meanings and many voices. (Brown 1994: 233)

The multi-vocal complexity within the narratives was also seen as significant in foregrounding and making transparent the ways in which I featured in, and shaped, the participants’ text and discourses in the storying process. My dispositions or ways of knowing the world, as feminist, researcher, adult and mother, were necessarily enmeshed within the research situation and central in the telling of the research story. Moreover, as Peshkin (in Connelly & Clandinin 1990) points out, unforeseen and unexpected aspects of the research field engage our dispositions differentially. To this end, the narrative selection and construction process was situated within a self conscious and transparent stance in relation to my positionality in fashioning the data (re)presentation (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

It is clear that we do not find stories; we make stories. We retell our respondents’ accounts through our analytic redescriptions. We too are storytellers and through our concepts and methods … we construct the story and its meaning. In this sense the story is always co-authored. (Mishler 1995: 117)

Of most significance in shaping the narratives was the selection and reassembling of (re)presentative episodes of ‘raw’ data to tell the research story. The choices of these selections were guided by my concerns with language, power and meaning through the study’s feminist poststructural framework. To this end, I was drawn to interactions I perceived as characteristic of how power was dispersed within the boys’ affinity group to (re)produce particular subjectivities over the period of data collection. In this regard, the narrative purpose was directed by the research focus to explore the understandings and practices of early primary peer group masculinities, in particular how these understandings and practices became collective and how they were shaped and regulated. In this sense, I was interested in foregrounding significant events and/or interactions
within the ‘raw’ data which I believed to be illustrative of the boys’ relationship dynamics and their collective understandings and practices.

The use of narrative as a method of data (re)presentation is located within the study’s qualitative poststructuralist methodology, particularly its case study approach. The use of narrative within a case study approach is intended to appeal to, and connect with, the reader’s own experience. Against this backdrop, the particularities of the stories seek to induce within the reader a sense of recognition in terms of their association with similar particularities within the reader’s memory. To this end, the narratives invite the reader to “look where I did and see what I saw” (Peshkin in Connelly & Clandinin 1990: 280) and, in doing so, entertain my positionings in alignment with the sensibilities and thinking of the reader’s own positionings. Indeed, these elements of recognition and alignment are said to be critical in the ‘authenticity’ or plausibility of empirical narrative construction (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

3.8.2.1 Textual strategies

Subsequent to the transcribing processes, I re-listened to and re-read the boys’, girls’ and teachers’ affinity group data in conjunction with the data from the teacher’s interview and my observations and reflective journal. These re-listening and re-reading processes enabled me to focus on the holistic quality of the data from their various sources and thus build the narratives with a sense of ‘the whole’ in mind (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). Within this framework, particularities of the data, predominantly from the boys’ affinity group transcripts, were selected in explanation of the whole. These particularities, in the form of raw data sequences, were selected as illustrative and corroborative of the participants’ understandings and experiences regarding the ways in which the boys’ thoughts and actions were developed over the (six month) data collection period.

The data were (re)presented in the form of several narratives illuminating specific aspects of development within the data collection period. The textual strategies within the study’s use of narrative were built on an inductive rather than demonstrative approach. In this regard, rather than the raw data being included in exemplary ways to reflect explanations of my thoughts/impressions and/or interpretations, I attempted to use the data in ways that told their own story (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). More specifically, I
tried to recreate the tone and ‘spirit’ of the affinity group sessions through reproducing as closely as I could sequences of the participants’ ‘exact’ voice and interaction patterns. This meant including the participants’ speech or pronunciation idiosyncrasies and some repetition and self-correction rather than editing these to conform to grammatical conventions. I felt that including these elements was necessary in attempting to ‘authentically’ reflect the participants’ interactions and subjectivities.

Jones (1992: 31) suggestions for authentic feminist writing guided my construction of the narratives. The following points held particular significance in my writing and use of textual strategies:

- Decentre yourself as narrator, explicitly position yourself - one speaker, or one possible voice in a multiply voiced discussion.
- Do not avoid contradictions - feature them in your text. You do not need to come to one particular and unblemished end point, via one seamless argument.
- Juxtapose interpretations and lines of thought - several narratives, stories and interpretations.
- Use a range of media such as photos and drawings.

The narratives are an attempt to capture and ‘bring to life’ the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of all the participants. In this sense, I have tried to create a multiply-voiced discussion which presents me as only ‘one possible voice’. The textual strategies I employed to vivify the highly dynamic and often complex nature of the affinity group sessions were: the inclusion of non-verbal aspects, mannerisms and gestures as they occurred, including my interpretation of the participants’ emotions; the use of text boxes throughout the narratives to juxtapose and interweave similar and differing lines of thought, relevances and interpretations from other texts and contexts; the use of different coloured text to (re)present the different voices; and, the use of a range of media, including photos and drawings. Lather and Smithies’ (1997) research storying the worlds of HIV+ women in the USA model such textual strategies in the (re)presentation of data. Here the authors juxtapose relevances from other texts and contexts in the form of inserted textboxes and illustrations within their (re)presentation of two ongoing conversations occurring simultaneously (divided by a split page) to ‘bring to life’ the multi-vocal and highly dynamic nature of their data.
3.8.3 Nomenclature

The data were derived from a number of different sources: the boys’, girls’ and teachers’ affinity group sessions; the class teacher’s and principal’s interview; and my observations and reflective journal. The nomenclature assigned to represent these different sources was organised according to type and number (or name) of data source and the date data were collected. For example, (b.a.g. 02, 03.08.99) represents the boys’ second affinity group session held on the 3rd of August 1999. Similarly, the girls’ and teachers’ sessions were organised (g.a.g.) and (t.a.g.) respectively. The nomenclature organising the classroom teacher’s and principal’s interviews comprises type of data source: (int.), name initials (K.W.) or (G.T.) and date (01.10.99). My observations (obs. A.K. 09.07.99) and reflective journal entries (r.j. A.K. 27.07.99) were organised similarly.

3.9 Tools of analysis and interpretation

Detailed hitherto, the theoretical tenets of feminist poststructural theory were critical in shaping my interpretive focus within the procedures for collecting the data and constructing the data (re)presentation. The tenets of this theory were also powerful as tools for interpreting the data (re)presentation or ‘research story’.

3.9.1 Analysis and interpretation of data: the boys’ affinity group

Research questions 1 and 2

. How are dominant masculinities understood and practiced within an early childhood male peer group?
. How are dominant masculinities shaped, regulated and maintained within early childhood peer culture?

To analyse and interpret the research story (predominantly constructed from the boys’ affinity group data), in relation to the study’s first two research questions, my focus was drawn to the organisation of social power within the group and how this dispersion of power positioned the boys relative to one another. A poststructural focus on group dynamics and social interactions manifest in the boys’ language practices was applicable in this regard. Informed by Harris’ group socialisation theory, my focus was drawn to the ‘attention structure’ of the group i.e. “Who does the group look to when they’re not sure
what to do?” (1998: 245). In this regard, the analysis of leadership positionings in shaping the ‘attention structure’ of the group was important in light of Harris’ understandings relating to the power of a leader to define the norms (or dominant discourses) of a group and the status or positioning of its members. Against this backdrop, my poststructural analysis sought to foreground particular language practices seen as constructing and regulating leadership and the group’s attention structure: particularly, how power was dispersed through language practices which promoted/endorsed particular ways of being, while silencing and marginalising others.

Areas of analysis involved interpreting the dispersion of power within the peer group and between peer groups. Guiding my interpretation of how power was dispersed within the peer group was an examination of relations of dominance (i.e. how the leader was positioned relative to other group members). The following questions were asked of the data in this regard:

- What strategies and language practices does the leader use to establish, legitimate and maintain his leadership/dominance?
- How does he maintain his place/position at the top of the group’s attention structure?
- How do his language strategies position the other boys?
- How does his leadership impact on, and shape the group’s dominant understandings of masculinities?
- How are the group’s dominant understandings enacted?
- What language practices do the boys use to endorse and (re)legitimate the hierarchical positionings or attention structure within the group? (In what ways do the other boys position themselves within the group in relation to the leader?)
- Are there (and what are the mechanisms of) particular ‘leadership alliances’ (or alliances of dominance) within the group?

My analysis and interpretation of the dispersion of power between groups was framed within group socialisation theory’s concept of ‘us versus them’. In particular, the notions of intergroup hostility and group contrast effects informed my poststructural examination of the language practices dispersing power between groups. Here I drew on the theoretical framework of metaphysical thought in relation to evidencing the use of the
male/female and hetero/homosexual dualities, as a form of differentiation and ‘othering’
between groups. The following questions were asked of the data in this regard:

- How does the group differentiate themselves from non-group members?
- What language practices are used to the ends of group (re)legitimation?
- How do these between group language practices impact on, and shape the
  positionings and subjectivities within the group?
- How do these between group language practices impact on, and shape the group’s
  dominant understandings of masculinities?

Research question 3

- How are dominant masculinities disrupted and contested within this peer context?

Interpreting the research story in relation to the third research question involved analysis
of the language practices identified in consideration of the first two research questions.
In this regard, the language practices establishing and (re)legitimating leadership, the
group’s attention structure and the group’s dominant understandings of masculinities
were examined for areas of disunity and resistance within the group. The following
questions were asked of the data in this regard:

- In what ways is the group’s attention structure, in particular its leadership,
  disrupted/contested?
- In what ways are the group’s dominant understandings of masculinities resisted?
- How are these disruptions/contestations/resistances implicated in the group’s
dynamics and the legitimacy of the group’s dominant understandings of
masculinities?

3.9.2 Analysis and interpretation of data: the teachers, the girls and the
principal

Selection of these data involved sifting the corpus for relevances pertaining to specific
issues expressed in the boys’ dialogue. In this regard, the data were used to corroborate
or dispute the boys’ understandings and behaviours.
In relation to analysing the girls’ data, I was informed by literature on gender and sexualities, particularly, that which dealt with how girls position themselves and are positioned within discourses of patriarchally defined heterosexuality. In relation to the teachers’ and principal’s data, my interpretations were guided by the literature on boys in schools, in particular the implications of school authority structures and attitudes in shaping boys’ behaviour. The following questions were asked of the data in this regard:

- What understandings/philosophies seem to underpin the teachers’ girls’ and principal’s articulations about the boys’ individual and group behaviour?
- What intervention strategies (preventative or otherwise) do the teachers and principal employ in managing the boys’ behaviour?
- How might these understandings and interventions perpetuate particular behaviours?
- How do the girls perceive of their positionings within the boys’ dominant discourses?

3.9.3 Analysis and interpretation: observations and reflections

The corpus of data compiling my observations and reflections were analysed with the purpose of identifying selections that might be seen as enhancing specific aspects of the research story. To this end, descriptive observations and reflections explaining aspects, relating to, but not immediately apparent in, the transcript data such as contextual factors were selected to add meaning and coherence to the narratives and their sequencing. My observations and reflections pertaining to the boys’ body language and gesture, or bodily expressions of masculinities within and between groups were applicable in this regard.

3.9.4 Analysis and interpretation: institutional dynamics

All data were analysed and interpreted in terms of potential relationships to institutional dynamics and contexts. Thus, the micro-social structure of the self and the peer group were connected to the broader macro-social structures of the school and institutions such as sport within adult culture. Guiding my interpretation was an analysis of how particular masculine subjectivities, underpinned by heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions, were promoted and perpetuated in these institutions.
3.10 A note on the study’s reliability and validity

The study’s concerns for reliability and validity are implicitly expressed throughout this chapter. Explicitly, reliability refers to enhancing the study’s replicability (Burns 1994). The thorough elucidation of the theoretical perspectives and assumptions underpinning and informing the research, together with an outline of the research questions and detailed account of the research process aims to strengthen the study’s reliability in relation to its potential replicability. Clear statement of the research justification and aims (as defined in Chapter One) also intends enhancing the study’s reliability (Burns 1994). The establishment of rapport and ‘trust’ between myself and the participants, the study’s use of corroborative research methods and multiple methods of data collection and representation in conjunction with the relatively extensive and intensive data collection period aim to improve the study’s internal validity (Burns 1994).

3.11 Reflective notes

This chapter has examined the study’s research process. Within the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism the data collection, representation and analysis procedures were detailed. The issue of the study’s textual authority was explored, with the value-laden and perspectival nature of the research acknowledged. Reconciliation of this issue was underpinned by a detailed explanation of the study’s understandings and applications of feminist poststructural theory. In particular, the poststructural concerns with language, power and the production of meaning were explored in relation to how these concerns inform the study’s conceptualisation of the boys’ peer group subjectivities as enacted on a micro-social level. The significance of these subjectivities, as shaped within broader institutional structures, was also described. The interrelatedness of the metaphysical binaries of sexuality and gender within the study’s application of gay liberation and gay poststructural theory was seen as useful and generative in informing the study’s understanding of the boys’ expression of their masculinities. Of further significance in developing a broader understanding of the boys’ peer group expressions of masculinities was an outline of the study’s intended application of aspects of group socialisation theory within its methodological framework, particularly, the significance of leadership and group hierarchy, or attention structure, in shaping group behaviour and the
concepts of ‘intergroup hostility’ and group contrast effects in the dispersion of power between peer groups.

Understood as enhancing the methodological soundness of the research, particular critiques of poststructural theory, namely the poststructural problematisation of identity and the significance of gender embodiment in shaping subjectivities, were acknowledged and reconciled within the study’s theoretical framework. Further consolidating the theoretical perspectives shaping the study, the use, delimitations and implications of the case study approach within an ethnographic frame were explained. This approach was seen as providing for an intimate and thorough inspection of the subtleties and complexities of one case. The implications of my positioning in shaping the research process and product, as well as the study’s acknowledgment of the significance of understanding the inequities within the adult/child, researcher/researched relationship, were discussed. In reconciling these issues, the study’s approach was to transparently and dialogically consider these relationships in self-conscious and self-reflexive ways.

A detailed outline of the research process explained the procedures the study adopted for data collection, (re)presentation and analysis including a description of the specificities of the site and the participants. The use of affinity groups as a method of data collection was justified as compatible with the study’s endeavours and was explained in terms of methodological and procedural implications. Similarly, a description of the interview and observation techniques and foci, and the purposes and characteristics of the reflective journal were detailed. In relation to the study’s data (re)presentation, the transcription procedures were explained in conjunction with an examination of the methodological congruency and textual strategies used to construct the narratives of experience. The data analysis and interpretation procedures were clarified in reference to the study’s three research questions. Drawing on the theories of group socialisation and gay poststructuralism, within the study’s feminist poststructural framework, a strategy for analysis was posited through the delineation of a series of questions to be asked of the data and focal points to guide analysis of observation and interview data.
Chapter 4
The Research Story

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the research story through a series of narratives. These ‘narratives of experience’ are my attempt to capture and characterise the personal and social relevances of the participants’ experiences (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). Thus, the research story is a (re)presentation of my account of the six month data collection period. While the data are shaped to foreground events which reflect the study’s poststructural concerns with the interactional dynamics of power, language and meaning, the research story seeks to be inductive rather than demonstrative. In this sense, I have attempted to (re)present the data in ways that tell their own stories (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

The work of Jones (1992) has been at the fore of my thinking while writing this chapter. Her suggestions for authentic feminist writing have prompted me to consider the following issues. Firstly, to consistently decentre my voice of authority through explicitly positioning myself within the narratives in terms of remaining mindful of how I have shaped the (re)presentation. To this end, my voice is featured throughout the narratives as one of many and I have detailed how each issue came to be explored and (re)presented within the research story. Secondly, in an attempt to (re)present the many voices within the data, and in this sense reject the privileging of one voice or meaning, I have constructed the narratives as intertextual networks (Brown 1994). In this regard, the research story does not follow a neat and uncomplicated pathway and does “not avoid contradictions” (Jones 1992: 31). Similar and differing interpretations and lines of thought are juxtaposed within the narratives (re)presenting the complexities of the participants’ stories through a multi-voiced discussion. I have attempted to do this throughout the research story by weaving in relevances from other texts and contexts (Todorov in Brown 1994) in terms of entwining related aspects from all data sources, simply as additional text within the discussion or in the form of inserted textboxes. These textboxes are intended to be read within and alongside the narrative at the place of
insertion. To aid the reader in discerning the identities of the interspersed voices, I have included blue text to (re)present the girls’ interpretations and lines of thought, while the teachers’ interpretations (Mrs. W. or Mrs. Walker, Mr. A., and Ms. C.) are (re)presented within the narratives using red text. The green text throughout the chapter (re)presents the principal’s (Mr. T.) voice. The narratives themselves are differentiated from interim ‘bridging’ text with the use of a different font. All data sources are defined by the appropriate nomenclature, eg: boys’ affinity group (b.a.g.), girls’ affinity group (g.a.g.).

The research story is based primarily on the data gathered from the boys’ affinity group sessions and my observations, with data from other sources incorporated corroboratively. The narratives are sequenced and chronological (re)presentations of the six-month data collection period, with each one progressing to the next in reflection of the data gathering process. The final narrative, however, is a more extended chronological account of the data collection process and retraces earlier data.

The narratives story the worlds of five male friends: Adam, Matthew, Justin, Jack and Ravi. They span aspects from approximately thirty of the boys’, girls’ and teachers’ affinity group sessions. Narrative 1: Your Truck Sucks begins an account of the second boys’ affinity group session centred around a discussion of favourite toys. This narrative sets the scene for the research story through introducing the relationship dynamics of the boys’ peer group. Narrative 2: Who Dares Wins (re)presents aspects of affinity group session 15 and goes on to explore the dynamics of the boys’ relationships through a discussion of the group’s thoughts and understandings regarding one of the boys’ favourite pursuits: ‘doing dares’. Narrative 3: It's More Than a Game describes aspects of affinity group sessions 16 and 19 and relates to the boys’ interest in Australian Rules Football (AFL). The fourth narrative: That’s a Bullet Belt recounts session 18, with reference to the dynamics of a ‘free play’ construction session. The Cricket Season is the next narrative and details characteristics of data collected over a month from sessions 22, 24, 27 and 32, pertaining to issues arising from the boys’ participation in cricket. The final narrative explores critical moments spanning a more extended time frame. I Hate His Guts, the sixth narrative recounts thoughts and reflections from sessions 8, 30, 31, 33,
35, 38, 39 and 42, regarding several related violent incidents that occurred towards the end of the data collection period.

4.1 Narrative 1: Your Truck Sucks

Classroom sharing time was an eagerly anticipated and enjoyable event for the boys and girls of 1/2W. Every Friday the children would assemble cross-legged in their ‘sharing circle’ clutching their toy or special ‘item of the week’ behind their backs, patiently waiting for their turn to share. Power Ranger figurines, teddy bears, dolls, matchbox cars and football paraphernalia were popular sharing items. Sometimes however, the children simply liked to talk about the forthcoming weekend’s events, a trip to the beach or to the local football match (obs. A.K. 30.07.99). I decided that the relaxed and familiar nature of sharing time would provide a non-threatening context to initiate and encourage discussion during the early phases of the affinity group sessions.

The boys’ affinity group session Favourite Toys on the 3rd of August was the second time we had met as a group. The boys had eagerly anticipated this second session and were looking forward to sharing their favourite toys.

“I’m gonna bring my Megazoid Power Ranger in!” Adam had decided. (21.07.99)
“Can I bring my Spiderman suit?” Ravi had asked. (24.07.99)
“I’m bringing my cars!” Matthew had told me. (24.07.99)

When our afternoon sharing time finally arrived (b.a.g. 02, 03.08.99) the boys excitedly grabbed their toys and bounded down the corridor to the school’s tiny conference room, assembling themselves around the small table in the middle of the room. Adam began the session, and had the other boys transfixed with a few stories about boxing.

“I have won two silver medals, five gold medals. I’ve won two championship belts an’ I’ve had fifty seven nose bleeds an’ I am de champion of de world,” he began in a commanding voice. “An’ if you win de grand final,” he continued, while the other boys listened attentively, “you will get 25 dollars an’ for each week’s pay you get 5 dollars.”

“Well, Adam’s definitely a leader. He’s very athletic therefore well thought of by the kids. Kids always admire people who are good sports people. He's involved in competition boxing, which is a bit scary for a little boy who is eight years old. As far as in the classroom I certainly don't celebrate his success. I certainly allow him to tell his news, but I don't make a big deal of it because I don't think it's an appropriate sport for a little boy but you can't step over that line, it's not up to me to decide what he does.” (int. K.W. 01.10.99)

“Adam seeks attention doesn't he,” Mr. A. stated.
“Definitely,” Ms. C. agreed.
“As soon as you give him any attention,” Mr. A. added, “in the yard, just most of the time I see him and have time to spend with him, then you know he feeds off that and he easily spends the next ten minutes with you following you around and telling you more stories and, you know, sort of in the limelight.” (t.a.g. 19.11.99)

“Um an’ if you get knocked out,” he added, “your back’s gonna cane like hell 'cos um de whole floor’s made out of cement an’ um, I’ve got knocked out an’ I’m out of boxing this
Thursday an’ second Saturday because I got a knee injury,” he remarked, casually rubbing his knee. “You have to have special boxing gloves,” he continued to his attentive audience, “an’ dere’s rapid punches um a abicarda punch um one, two, knockout and a rhino,” he explained.

“That would hurt!” Justin exclaimed, in excited response to Adam's description of being knocked out on a cement floor.

“Can you do a rhino punch for us?” Matthew asked Adam.

“I think that’s a really good career, like doing boxing.” Ravi confirmed in admiration.

“Oy,” Adam continued a few moments later, “is everyone listenin’ to my fabulous speech?” he asked, as he stood up, not waiting for a reply. “We have ta catch turkeys no, I mean roosters,” he described, earnestly continuing his boxing narrative, “an’ he (coach) makes us have logs about that big,” he explained spreading his arms out wide, “an’ we ‘ave to hold ‘em over our shoulders!” On a few occasions during the time fleetingly paid to the other boys’ toys; Ravi’s “torch light gun”, Matthew’s “Batmobile”, and Jack’s descriptions of his “Waspinator” Beast War play, Adam jumped up and asked if he could demonstrate some of his “moves”. “Can I jus’ show you what a rabbit punch is?” he asked me. Full of confidence and delighting in his position as authority on the subject he proceeded to demonstrate his (pretend) “rabbit punch” on Ravi, a willing volunteer.

“De easiest way t'knock out their tooth,” he explained, while holding Ravi’s head in a headlock, “is ta go like dat an’ then you smash de jaw line”. Later in the session when Adam revisited his boxing career: “Can I please talk about my boxing career again?” he proceeded to describe all his gear, special boxing gloves and shoes and the equipment he trained on at home, his “low ceiling punching ball”, “boxing bag” and home gym. “Yeah, I got de perfect gym from America ta work out on - The Perfect Gym y’know what’s advertised,” he boasted.

The other boys could hardly contain their envy and excitement.

“Oh, that's not fair,” retorted Jack.

“Yeah that's not fair. Can I come to your place?” asked Matthew eagerly, “Yeah, 'cos I'd like to do some boxing. Yeah, I think I'd like to do some boxing,” he added.

“Um I go to karate,” Ravi offered after listening to the other boys.

“Um, is it fun at karate?” asked Matthew with interest.

“YEAH!” Ravi exclaimed. “It’s real fun! And you even get to do a little bit of boxing,” he added looking directly at Adam.

“Do y'do rabbit punches?” Adam asked Ravi.

“Nup,” Ravi replied standing up from his chair, “but there’s a tiger whack,” he added, demonstrating with a slicing movement of the arm and a deft leg kick, “and it’s like it’s, you go phew and you like um get um go up like that and then you go phew.”

“Oh right, like a donkey kick or something?” I queried.

“Yeah,” Ravi established with a nod.

“We’re good at karate us aren’t we?” Adam confirmed smiling and nodding at Ravi.
Justin was a little skeptical, about Adam’s boxing stories however, “You’re not the real champion,” he stated with suspicion.
“Yes I am,” Adam replied arrogantly and with certainty, “go to Lilydale,” he remarked sharply spitting each syllable at Justin.
“Rocky is,” Justin interrupted, “except Rocky is the real champion.”
“Cept Rocky isn’t even real,” Adam replied rolling his eyes upward, “It’s Silester Stallone who plays Rocky,” he said in exasperation. “Der!”
“Oh touchy,” Justin remarked, appearing embarrassed as the other boys laughed in amusement.

Justin continued his skeptical line of questioning, “You’re only, you’re a little fella,” he remarked to the smaller boy.
“Oh shut up an’ do us all a favour,” Adam snapped with irritation.
“Yeah and...” Justin continued.
“Oh yeah,” Adam boasted to the group, “I forgot ta say, I’m a featherweight boxer.”

The session continued along these lines. “Y’have ta listen to what I have ta say Buster!” Adam told Justin when he wasn’t paying attention, and when Justin tried to boast about his Power Ranger figurine collection, Adam silenced him with the retort, “Not your turn ta speak Buster!” Justin tried to gain the attention of the group on several further occasions, and became quite frustrated when Adam suggested that I send him back to class for being a “pain in de butt”. The others also seemed to ignore Justin’s attempts to gain their attention. Finally, Justin’s frustration turned to play fighting and shoving and I asked him to return to class.

I was taken aback by his response to my request. He dived under one of the chairs, clearly distressed and began to cry. I tried to cajole him out from under the chair. “Hey Justin,” I said, “you want to come out and talk about it?”
“No!” was the muffled response from under the chair, “no”.
Justin stayed crouched under the chair for the remainder of the session, and didn’t end up sharing his favourite toy truck with the group, despite continual coaxing from the others.
“Y’wanna share your truck Justin?” Ravi asked.
“No!” was Justin’s response.
“God, he’s a bit mad!” Adam frowned.

At the end of the session, I sent all of the boys back to class and managed to persuade a teary-eyed Justin to come out from under the chair. I tried to console him as I accompanied him back to class where I attempted to explain my interpretation of Justin’s distress to his teacher, Mrs. W. I was quite puzzled at how upset he was.

Mrs. W. explained to me the next day, after she had discussed the issue with Justin and his mother, that one of the main reasons for Justin’s distress, was a comment Adam had
made to him before the group’s session which referred to Justin’s prized toy tow-truck: “Your truck sucks, Justin,” Adam had said as the boys had clambered down the hall. After much anguish Justin had tearfully told his mother about the comment. Adam denied that he had said anything about Justin’s truck. However, Mrs. W. confided to me later: "That’s just like Adam to say something like that." (r.j. A.K. 04.08.99)

In light of Justin’s distress, following the Favourite Toys session I gave him the opportunity to withdraw from working with the group. However, he flatly refused and actively involved himself in all of the subsequent group sessions. Fortunately, for a number of possible reasons, the situation did not repeat itself again in future sessions.

“I think Justin has toughened up since that truck incident and probably a little bit more street-wise I think you would say. That was a really big deal for him, but that’s how influential Adam is, this is how they seek his approval so much. Yeah, but he’s a teary boy. I mean if I raise my voice at Justin, which I don’t have to do very often, but if I do he’ll be devastated. He’s a real Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde in a way isn’t he? Outside he likes to be tough and bossy and everything, but if somebody challenged him he would cry, he couldn’t cope with it." (int. K.W. 01.10.99)

Following the outcome of the Favourite Toys session, I became acutely aware of the dynamics constituting Adam’s leadership and dominance within the group. I began to closely inspect Adam’s relationship with the other boys in the affinity group. I noted that Adam often played with Matthew and sometimes with Justin. Jack and Ravi, however, while sometimes joining the other boys, tended to play with other children. I noted that Adam’s belittling of Justin persisted, with Adam constantly dismissing Justin and interrupting him with disparaging remarks. For instance, during a later session (b.a.g. 03, 06.08.99) after Justin had proudly shared with the group a basketball trophy he had recently been awarded, Adam had casually told Justin that his trophy “sucked” and that he had a “million of ’em” for boxing, adding, “I go boxing. In my opinion basketball really does suck.”

I also noted Matthew, and to a lesser extent Jack, beginning to align themselves with Adam in this disparagement of Justin, imitating his belittling of Justin’s stories. During a later affinity group session (b.a.g. 05, 10.08.99), I asked the boys to draw pictures of themselves and then I asked each boy, in turn, to show their self-portraits and to describe themselves to the group.
“I’m out on my skateboard and I can do flips!” Justin stated, referring to his self-portrait.

“Get real Justin,” Adam sneered rolling his eyes.

“Sure Justin,” Matthew added with a smirk.

“And,” Justin continued, ignoring the other boys’ comments, “you can describe me as tough, basketball, football, skateboarding, drawing and fishing.”

“Get real Justin!” Adam retorted meanly.

“Yeah, get real Justin!” Matthew repeated grinning at Adam.

“Who do you go fishing with?” I asked Justin.

“Shut up,” Justin said to Adam and Matthew and, turning to me, added, “I go fishing with my dad my dad’s friend riding the boat and we’ve…”

“Oh sure!” Adam and Matthew chorused over the top of Justin’s voice.

“Yeah,” Jack laughed. “Oh sure!”

“…caught,” Justin continued, “what was it? Sixty six fish!” he concluded with a grin.

“Sure, sure Justin,” Adam and Matthew contended in unison.

“And I caught, I caught…” Justin insisted.

“Sixty five thousand!” Matthew interrupted sarcastically.

“And I caught fifty eight,” Justin retorted.

Towards the end of this session I noticed Matthew and Adam huddled together over Matthew’s drawing. I could see Matthew looking on delighted as Adam added some finishing touches to his self-portrait. He added the Samurai sword, machine gun, grenades and pistol to make it more like his. He also changed the skateboard into a turbo-charged device. (obs. A.K. 06.08.99)
I became increasingly aware of Matthew’s willingness to imitate Adam in belittling Justin and began to examine the alliance between them. The two boys spent much of their break time together playing highly physical games. However I noted that it was often an unhappy union for Matthew and he was frequently in tears. Indeed, the play activities of this group of boys and in particular those involving Adam and Matthew seemed to be continually fraught with conflict and tears. (r.j. A.K. 20.07.99) It seemed that Adam’s superior athletic ability and combative style left Matthew feeling frustrated and inadequate. Adam would often monopolise the ball or engage in rough tackle when playing football or basketball, or outrun Matthew playing tag.

One day during recess (obs. A.K. 06.08.99), I was strolling around the quadrangle when I came upon a sobbing Matthew crouched on a bench by himself on the periphery of a basketball game. I asked him what the matter was and through the sobs he explained that he wasn’t as good as Adam and that Adam was “too rough … hogged the ball” and “never passed it” to him. Matthew was still sobbing ten minutes later, crouched on the same bench. On another occasion (obs. A.K. 13.08.99), Matthew was crying tears of frustration after being “it” in a game of ‘chasey’, unable to outrun and tag Adam. Matthew was in tears yet again a few days later (18.08.99) when Adam had dared him to jump off a large tree stump positioned on the oval. Matthew had fallen heavily on his side after an impatient Adam had pushed him off the 1.5 metre stump. Apparently Matthew had taken too long to jump.
“Adam told Matthew to jump off the stump and when Matthew was up there an’ um Adam came and whacked him down,” Sally told me. “Sometimes boys are like um like do that kind of stuff sometimes,” she added seriously, “like pushing in.”

“Hmmm,” Jane agreed.

“Why do you think they might do that?” I asked.

“Oh probably ’cos they like to be you know a bit rough,” Jane suggested.

“Do you think?” I asked.

“Yeah, ’cos Adam goes to boxing,” Jane remarked. “Yeah, he likes to be rough and cool.” (g.a.g. 18.08.99)

4.2 Narrative 2: Who Dares Wins

The following narrative explores the relationship of Adam and Matthew and centres upon one of their favourite play-time pursuits: ‘doing dares’.

My early observations noted that Adam and Matthew took certain delight in physically risky activities, with both of them particularly keen for these displays to take place in public. One afternoon in mid-August, the class had a ‘free play’ session outside, “Ms. Keddie, can I show you somethin’?” Adam enquired. Before I could answer he had sped away from me toward the swings. I watched as he fearlessly climbed to the top of the three-metre swing structure yelling, “Look at me, Ms. Keddie!” when he triumphantly reached the top, arms waving madly above his head. Mrs. W., his classroom teacher was attending to other students at the time. However, on hearing Adam’s voice, she swung around and demanded that he get down. Adam deliberately shimmied down one of the poles of the climbing structure in an elaborate manner, his tiny physique swinging vigorously from side to side, the final momentum throwing his body recklessly away from the frame. Amazingly, he landed on his feet and gave his audience, which was most of the class by now, a breathless grin. “Why did you do that?” I asked him the next time he raced passed me. Without losing pace he yelled his reply, “I’m a dare devil! I like taking risks, it’s fun!” (obs, A.K. 13.08.99)

A few days later, it was Matthew who ran past me at recess, “Can I show you some tricks Ms. Keddie?” he asked eagerly. I followed him to the playground with Sally and Ben, two other children from 1/2W. “He’s going to stand on the swing frame,” announced Sally as she watched Matthew’s movements. Sure enough, Matthew had deftly climbed the ladder of the three-metre structure and was nearly straddled over the top bar when he was admonished by a duty teacher, “Matthew, get down from there immediately!” Turning to grin at me and the two children with me, he waited for the teacher to turn her back before jumping clean off. As he landed, Adam came racing past. “Matthew!” he screamed, as he bolted after his friend and chased him half way down the hill. Matthew turned to look at Adam, grinning as he picked up speed. As Adam smacked his body into the back of Matthew’s, both boys skidded down the rest of the hill, sliding onto the side of their bodies and rolling to the bottom. As Ben watched he declared with more than a hint of admiration, “they’ve been doin’ dares all week!” (obs, A.K. 18.08.99)

“It starts to come out,” Mr. T. remarked, “you see them. Who’s the born leader, who picks the games and who says who can play with who. Who says ‘you’re on my team’ and ‘I
don’t want to play with you’. They’re the leaders and they never get hurt. They orchestrate, they watch, they accept, they reject kids.”
“What makes these kids ‘born leaders’,” I asked. “What makes the other kids listen to them do you think?”
“Most kids attract others to them because they’re seen as being good at something,” Mr. T. replied. “With the boys it’s going to be someone that’s good at something physical.”
(int. G.T. 09.12.99)

The somewhat daring nature of Matthew and Adam’s play-ground escapades prompted me to introduce the notion of ‘dares’ as a topic of discussion during one of the boys’ affinity group sessions. (b.a.g. 15, 31.08.99) I opened the discussion.

“Tell me what a dare is,” I asked the group.

“I know what it is, I know…” Jack began.

“Well it’s like someone tells you to do somethin’ what’s really dangerous an’ y’don’ wanna do it or dey call you a ‘chicken’ or a ‘girl’ so y’go ‘okay jerk I’m gonna do it!’” Adam interrupted enthusiastically, drowning out Jack. “You might ‘ave to jump off a cliff,” he continued wide-eyed, “or walk up a building what’s de 46th floor or somethin’. Or you might ‘ave to play James Bond de movie and y’ave to fight the bad guys,” he added punching the air with his fists. “Or, y’could eat six Tim Tams in um three minutes an’ y’have to eat three egg yolks in two seconds, no two minutes,” he suggested as the other boys listened attentively.

“Like on ‘Who Dares Wins’!” Jack blurted to the group in excitement. “Like, like, like I’ve seen one where…”

“Remember the one where y’had to feed a stingray?” Adam enthused, interrupting Jack again.

“Shut up!” Jack said to Adam, in frustration, and continued hesitatingly, “Um like I think I’ve seen one um where y’know that guy on ‘Who Dares Wins’? When he said y’ave to go down and reach for something in like um twenty seconds or something?”

“Did y’see me up on dose bars?” Adam continued, ignoring Jack, “cos I’ve got proof but I’ll still get a wet butt an’ a wedgie though,” he explained to his amused audience.

As the discussion continued, the boys were busily engaged in drawing ‘dares’. Adam had positioned himself away from the other boys, hiding his drawing from their view.

“Adam told me to do a dare one time, like his dares,” Matthew began, “I had to go up dere an’ where it was real scarewy, dat’s how I learnt my dares an’ I nearly wet my pants!” he explained with a grin.

“Hey,” Adam interjected from his position away from the group, “Matthew you never finished your dare. You was too much of a chicken to do dat super duper fing what I did, y’can’t idiot! Y’ave ta climb up da bars an’ da or da ladder really, and den y’ave to get up, crawl on the thingamigigo, the bar, an’ den you turn aroun’ an’ den y’have to swing up side down,” he continued. “I told ’im to get down da bars, but ’e was too much of a chicken t’do dat, he got up, he got up de ladder and den he chickened out,” Adam explained as he returned his attention back to his drawing.

“Um, I climb up to the top of the bars and go across the top bars and sometimes I get a real bad wedgie,” Matthew continued, unperturbed. “An’ I go across with my hands,” he added, “an’ I showed my sister one time and she told mum and I got in deep trouble for doin’ those dares. I’m not allowed to ’cos mum doesn’t like me doing them she thinks
they'll break me, she thinks I'll break me head and then I won't be going then I won't be
doing my dares anymore 'cos I'd be dead, no wonder," he concluded with a shrug.
“What do you think about Matthew’s ‘dares’?” I asked the group.
“Um, dey dumb,” Justin remarked flatly.
“They’re pretty good,” Ravi commented with uncertainty, “except the only thing is they
might be a little bit too daring.”
“Um, I reckon they’re, they’d be pretty bad,” Jack said warily, ‘cos you might hurt yourself
badly.”
A little later, after listening to the other boys, Justin changed his mind, “I think they’re
pretty cool.”
“But you said they were dumb before,” I remarked looking at Justin.
Before Justin could explain Matthew interrupted, the other boys laughing at his retort
“Yeah, and I’ll punch you in the head!”
Justin, also laughing, clarified his concerns, “But they scarewy um, ‘cos you might break
your neck, yeah if you fall.”

“Have you noticed that Matthew sometimes does ‘dares’?” I asked the group of girls.
“Yeah,” Sally remarked, “I heard that he did a dare with Adam.”
“Yes, I have,” Alexandra asserted.
“I have too,” Jane added. “I’ve seen them jumping off the silver bars and that. That’s the
thing they’re always doing.”
“Why do you think they do that?” I asked.
“I don’t know,” Jane puzzled. “Actually that’s the strange thing, I think, that’s the strange
thing, I don’t know.”
“I know because they don’t have any brains,” Alexandra suggested. “They don’t have
any brains in their heads.”
“Or they want to make them scared and they want to dare them to do it and they want to
make people scared,” Sally suggested. “To call them scaredy cat,” she added. “I don’t
know, I’m just guessing.”
“Me either,” Jane agreed, “It’s just strange how they do it.”
“It is strange you know,” Sally reconciled. “Yeah, pretty strange, I can’t even explain how
strange it is.” (g.a.g. 30.08.99)

Later, during the ‘Dares’ session, while the boys were occupied with
their drawings, Justin chose to
draw Adam, noting, “I’m drawing
one of Adam on those silver bars ‘e jumps off da top of ‘em.” Both
Justin and Matthew were
particularly interested in what
Adam was doing positioned away
from the group. The pair of them
continually moved over to where
Adam was sitting to try and catch a
glimpse of his drawing. “Can I’ve
look, can I’va look?” they asked
repeatedly. Each time the boys
came near his drawing Adam
protested loudly “It’s my drawing
back off!” he said angrily.

“Why do you do ‘dares’?” I asked Adam, during a
later affinity group session.
“So ‘e can get lots of girlfriends!” Justin interrupted.
“Yeah!” Matthew agreed.
“No,” Adam remarked, “because I jus’ like t’do it
because well I jus’ like to jump off things t’be silly
sometimes like um…”
“And get into trouble,” Matthew added.
“What about you Matthew?” I asked, “Why do you
do them?”
“Um, to get lotsa girlfriends,” he told me with a grin.
“Do you get lots of girlfriends do you?” I queried.
“You don’t even have a girlfriend,” Jack argued.
“Yeah I do,” Matthew insisted, “I have three.”
“Oh, dream on Matthew,” Adam sneered.
“Yeah dream on! Dream to Dream World!” Justin
added.
“I got Charmaine, Jamie and Portia,” Matthew
listed, counting on his fingers. (b.a.g. 18, 22.09.99)
“Everyone’s havin’ a look at mine an’ I don’ want them to!” he complained. Adam attempted to hide his work from the boys, “They’ll get ideas off my famous drawings,” he protested. However, Matthew managed to see enough of Adam’s work to replicate the lava, mountain and cross bone danger sign into his own drawing. On a few occasions Adam strolled over to the group to inspect the others’ drawings, protectively hugging his own drawing to his chest. At one stage he made a disparaging comment about Justin’s drawing of him “What’s that s’posed to be?" he had remarked sarcastically. Another time he looked at Matthew’s drawing and retorted, “See, Matthew’s already started on mine!”

Despite Adam’s further protests, Matthew and Justin persisted in their interest in his work, with Adam becoming more and more aggressive. “Get lost! I’m gonna kill you!” he yelled at Matthew, adding, “I’m gonna be a good cartoonist an’ everyone will pinch my ideas an’ kill dem.”

Ravi tried to explain the situation to me, “I think it, Adam was um…” His voice paused for a moment. “He want’s to be, it’s gonna be one of his best drawings and he don’t wan’ anyone to um do any stuff, um anything like his.”

Finally, Matthew’s last attempt to catch a glimpse of Adam’s work was met with, “Oh, Matthew! That’s does it!” Leaping to his feet, Adam chased Matthew around the room catching him roughly around the torso. At this stage I was keen to defuse the situation, “Let’s share our drawings now boys,” I stated firmly.

We all gathered around in our circle on the floor. “Wow, Adam’s looks great!” Ravi began, as he caught a glimpse of Adam’s work, “So does everyone else’s,” he remarked earnestly.

Justin looked at his drawing and commented flatly “Mine’s the dumbest”.

“Show me yours Adam,” Matthew asked, still pre-occupied with Adam’s effort.

“No doubt about it, yours is de dumbest alright,” Adam retorted casually as he inspected Matthew’s work, holding his drawing to his chest so no one could see. Still clutching his drawing to his chest, he returned to his position away from the group to complete the finishing touches to his work.

A little later the boys were still comparing their drawings. “That looks good, is mine good or bad?” Matthew asked the group with a frown.

“Mine looks stupid,” Justin said in dismay.

“It does look good!” Matthew remarked looking at his drawing.

“Mine looks dumb,” Justin repeated.

“Yours look great,” Ravi assured Justin.

“Hmm, nice drawin’s everyone,” Adam commented sarcastically when he returned to the group a little later, still clutching his drawing to his chest.

“Mine’s gonna come last,” Justin muttered with disappointment.

“I bet yours would come second,” Ravi consoled, looking at Justin.

“Mine’d come second!” Matthew interjected.

“Mine’d come first,” Jack remarked confidently.

“Yeah?” Matthew responded suspiciously, “You show me. What about Adam’s?”

Each of the boys were invited to talk about their drawing.
When Ravi had finished explaining the drawing of his dare, “Yeah, on the top of the rotunda eating rotten eggs with a reeking pong, lightning shooting down, a ground mine under it,” Matthew began his explanation, “I’m gonna jump into lava,” he stated. “Oh, you are not,” Jack replied, “you’d be dead!”

“Oh, you copy cat!” Adam interrupted, glaring at Matthew. Matthew continued, “an’, I jumped off a big, and it’s got a big, it’s got, it’s got um a big green tree, with a big mountain,” he concluded looking at his drawing. Ravi grinned, “Can I take a look at it? Oh, that looks cool,” he said, inspecting Matthew’s drawing. Adam rolled his eyes and said evenly “an’ dat was exactly my idea.”

“Well, maybe, that’s because it was such a good idea Adam,” I suggested. “Yeah!” Matthew agreed and continued talking about his drawing, “and it’s a sign, I’m gonna fall in um you can’t quite see, it’s a cross bone.” “Copy cat!” Adam interrupted with indignation.

Matthew, finished with his story, seemed eager to hear about Adam’s effort, “Now you Adam!” he said to his friend. “Is it my go?” Jack queried, but Adam had begun his description, still holding the drawing to his chest. “D’you like mine everyone?” he said showing the group his work proudly.
The other boys listened intently to his story, “Oh, well, first of all you got a gun an’ a rifle an’ a rocket pack an’ you have to get past de killer birds den y’have ta get past de machine guns an’ den you have to kill de wolf an’ not fall down into de lava or get killed,” he explained, hardly pausing for breath. “An’ den y’have to fight de demon wiv a Samurai sword,” he continued, “an’ then y’got a missile to get past an’ y’have to be careful if de, because we don’ want no lightning throwin’ at ya butt so you’re chicken an’ dat’s a mine and you’re on the mountains,” he concluded with a grin.

“Awesome, oh man is that cool! Give me five!” Ravi exclaimed as he and Adam jumped up, their hands meeting mid air in a high five. “It’s my turn now,” Jack stated impatiently. “Um, my favourite dare…”

“Two Spears!” marvelled Justin.

“Two Spears! Give me a look,” added Matthew, as he scrambled with Justin and Ravi in a huddle around Adam’s drawing.

“Mine is um my favourite dare is um drinking a can of Coke in ten seconds,” Jack stated hesitatingly, glancing at the huddled group positioned away from him, “that’s what I did, drinking a can of Coke, um I mean Lift in ten seconds,” he added flatly, looking at me.

After Adam went back to class the others were still talking about his drawing. “You reckon he’s a good drawer?” Matthew asked Ravi.

“His one’s the best,” Ravi replied in admiration. “Yeah, he does really, really awesome drawings - do y’know why I think um that one would be one of the best?” he asked me. “Why is that?” I enquired.

“Well, I really like all the details he’s put into that demon, like how how he’s got that mini um bomb there, yeah, see?” he asked us pointing at Adam’s picture.

“No, it’s a part of his sword,” Matthew explained examining the drawing more closely. “Oh, yeah Samurai,” agreed Ravi.

“Do you think that’s a better drawing I did than Justin?” Jack asked, but no one seemed to be listening.

“The other kids are in awe of Adam,” Ms. C. offered. “Yeah,” Mrs. W. agreed, “I mean here we are we’re talking about three children (Adam, Matthew and Justin) and who’s dominating the conversation?”

“Adum,” Ms. C. confirmed.

“Our ringleader,” Mrs. W. added. (t.a.g. 19.11.99)

During one of the girls’ later affinity group sessions I asked them about their thoughts on the boys’ ‘dares’.

“Yeah with the dares it’s pretty stupid,” Sally remarked thoughtfully. “They show off just because they can do it and like if the girls can’t do it or anyone else, then they tease them just because they can’t do it. They just show off to think they’re smart and they think oh yeah, I’m very smart ’cos I can do this, I can do that, I can do this and that and that and
that and that and that! And they can’t even do it really some of them things and they just show off.”
“Yeah, uh well, they they tryin’ to be good, they tryin’ ta be better than other people,” Jane added.
“Yeah and like they usually say that, ‘boys are better than girls’,” Sally added in a singsong voice amid laughter from the other girls.
“They’re tryin’, well hmm Matthew’s tryin’ ta be good by jumpin’ off that stump thing with the sand in it an’ he’s an’ he’s hurt ‘imself instead,” Jane stated.
“Yes, yeah,” agreed Sally. “Matthew and Adam show off.”
“Yeah they do,” Kate commented.
“Like when they show you something,” Sally continued, “like they show you things that you can’t do and like they show off so I don’t like people that do that.”

“Sometimes they do and say silly things, just to get in a club, a boy club or somethink to go with a group or somethink, they do silly things just to go with a group,” Kate explained.
“Right, what sort of silly things?” I asked.
“Like people dare them to do things,” Kate explained, “then they do it so they can just get in the club, yeah. Yes some people do badder things than that, like they tell them to jump off a tree or something like that.”
“So they can be in a group?” I asked.
“Yeah,” Kate agreed, “and like if they, they’re playin’ with their friends an’ their friends would go laughin’ off and then they’d get embarrassed,” she added.
“Oh well,” Sally remarked, “it is because really when, like there’s a group of friends like, some boys are like that, like some boys try to act um cool just so they can stay in the group.” (g.a.g. 15.11.99)

Around the same time I also asked Mrs. W. about her thoughts on Matthew and Adam’s ‘dares’, “They’ve been banned,” she stated simply. (int. K.W. 19.11.99)

4.3  **Narrative 3: It’s More Than a Game**

While daring pursuits seemed to be the activity favoured by Matthew and Adam, football, another highly physical pursuit, was the activity favoured by most of the affinity group members. During the winter months, the footy season, these boys played football most school days and watched it on television most weekends, barracking passionately for one special team. The following narrative details the boys’ thoughts regarding this popular sport.

An important part of the rapport building process between the children and myself involved taking part in the boys’ and girls’ playground activities. Immersion within this outdoor context was of particular interest to me, as it was far less governed by teacher
restrictions than the classroom. This offered me an opportunity to observe the children in
a setting more conducive to autonomous behaviour and self-government. In building a
relationship of confidence and trust with the boys, most of my outdoor interactions with
them involved playing football. Four out of the five boys in the affinity group were ‘footy
mad’. During classroom sharing time, Justin and Jack would often talk about their
weekend activities at Auskick, their favourite AFL team winning, or going to the football
with their Dads. Justin and Matthew were keen Bulldogs supporters, with Matthew the
proud owner of a large matchbox truck in his team’s colours. Justin and Adam would
regularly bring their footballs to school to play with during class recess. After a few
weeks of inviting myself into the boys’ footy games, I was often greeted at the beginning
of each day with “You playin’ footy wiv us today Ms. Keddie?” by an expectant football-
clutching boy.

These football games usually involved Adam, Matthew, Justin and some of the other
children from 1/2W. Football on the large grass oval at Banrock Primary was certainly a
male-dominated activity, with only a few girls involved at any one time and even then
only in a peripheral sense and only within the younger sphere of early childhood. The
younger children were only permitted to play on a portion of the grassed area and, in this
sense, were separated from the ‘rough and tumble’ of the older children. This proved to
be the first contentious issue of each footy session, with the boys arbitrarily deciding
where their oval began and ended and where their imaginary goals were to be. Most of
the time they couldn’t agree on anything much and ended up scrambling for the ball and
kicking it anywhere and anyway they could, often declaring after each kick: “that’s a
goal!” Another contentious issue involved the score tally and deciding when a goal had
or hadn’t been kicked. This became exceedingly complex when no one was too sure
which team they were supposed to be on. Furthermore, the boys were fiercely
competitive and had a real problem sharing the ball. Once in possession, the ball, more
often than not, remained tightly clutched to a boy’s chest as he ran wildly to his
imaginary goal. Invariably another stronger and more determined boy would prise it
away from him before he could attempt to score. This usually involved some force, with
both boys ending up tangled within a habitual wrestle roll, clutching and squashing each
other until eventually the stronger one managed to snatch the precious ball away from its
winded possessor.

“But, like football is a bit rough,” Alexandra remarked with a frown.
“Yeah,” Jane agreed, “it’s a bit rough ’cos you have to tackle but we don’t do it at school.
There’s no tackling at this school but they still don’t follow the rules sometimes.”
“Because when I see Justin and Adam playing football,” Alexandra explained, “Adam
jumped on Justin and Justin fell down on his tummy.”
“He did a belly flop,” Jane asserted. “Oh, there’s always somebody jumping on someone,
somebody hurting someone, somebody snatching the football off,” she added. (g.a.g.
30.08.99)

Indeed, many of the games seemed to be a complete shambles, with the boys ignoring
the school’s ‘no tackling’ rule, hurting themselves through falling over each other to get
the ball, monopolising the ball once they had possession of it, and arguing over rules,
whose go it was and who was on whose team. Nevertheless, the breathless smiling
faces of the children, red with exertion and excitement, told me that despite the conflict,
the boys clearly enjoyed the physical nature of the activity. Even when they were
physically hurt, they would almost proudly show off their ‘injuries’, or compete for
sympathy, feigning injuries, lapping up any attention they could muster. Adam and Justin in particular, enjoyed their leading roles and superior skills in this context. However, their play was highly competitive and they continually fought with each other.

“I won’t play with them when I see them fight,” Alexandra remarked.
“No like they’re gonna hurt you or something,” Jane added.
“Oh like Justin and Adam,” Kate recalled.
“Yeah, when they were fighting with each other in football,” Sally commented.
“So you won’t play with them then?” I asked.
“No,” Sally replied.
“No,” Kate added, “‘cos they could do something silly.”
“So we just tell a teacher and then we go off playing together,” Jane explained.
“Yeah, or sometimes we try to break them apart,” Sally recalled. “We just like push them away from each other.”
“Oh so they won’t fight?” I questioned.
“Yeah,” Sally nodded.
“Yeah, like helping them sort it out,” Jane clarified.
“Yeah and like Adam nearly punched me in the head,” Alexandra said with a grimace.
“He pushed me over,” Kate added.
“We were just pulling their hands back and they were going ‘come back here, get back here’,” Jane explained.
“Yeah, we were trying to break them up but they were just fighting,” Sally confirmed. “I don’t know why.” (g.a.g. 23.08.99)

Two of the boys’ affinity group sessions during September 1999 were focussed on football. The first of these two sessions (b.a.g. 16, 01.09.99) involved a conversation concerning the reasons the boys liked football. The second (b.a.g. 19, 28.09.99) was an extension of the first and included discussion about particular media images of footballers from *The Age* (28.09.99) and *The Examiner* (27.09.99) newspapers. Both sessions involved the boys drawing pictures to do with their favourite sports, with most of these drawings being football-related. I began the discussion during the first session by simply asking the boys why they liked football. Adam was forthcoming in his reply.

“I know why, ‘cos I can bash de shit out of people.”

Jack seemed bothered, “Oh, you said the ‘s’ word again.”

“Okay,” Adam continued, oblivious to Jack’s comment, “well I like football ‘cos y’can get really good chicks ‘cos dey think your butt’s cute and, well, another thing in football, it’s really good an’ it’s a man’s sport and it’s somethin’ ta play and get muddy and come into de classroom and ya sweatin’ like hell and yeah, boys like dat sorta stuff.”

Justin was secure in his football ability and skill level and had mentioned to me earlier that week, after proudly showing me how he could “kick 50 metres,” that his Auskick training had improved his skills. “We’re the best, skilful players, me and Jack in this class,” Justin remarked with confidence to the group after listening to Adam.

“At what?” Adam questioned.

“Football,” was Justin's answer.

“No ya not,” Adam snapped back, “ya’re hopeless, I am.”

Jack, who had been listening with interest was firm in his retort, “I’m better than you Adam. You don’ even know, you don’ even know how to kick a football when it’s in sports.”

“Oh bull!” Adam replied.
I continued my questioning with the other boys, “What’s the best thing about football?” Matthew hesitated slightly, “Because you can hurt people,” he replied.

“And ya get sexy women,” Adam added with a grin as he grabbed a ruler from the table and placed it between his legs, gyrating his hips forward and back.

“Yeah,” Matthew agreed laughing, “you get sexy women.”

“You’re rude,” Jack retorted.

Adam continued, “…and dey watch ya and den you show off.”

“Don’t ya mean you get lotsa girlfriends?” Justin queried.

“Yeah,” Adam retorted. “Live and Kicking’s on tonight boys,” he continued, referring to a popular Australian Rules Football television show.

“That sucks,” Jack replied turning to Justin and asking, “Justin, who d’you think my brother goes for in the football?”

“Essendon,” was Justin’s answer.

“Yes,” Jack continued, “his favourite players are Matthew Lloyd and James Hird.”


“James Hird’s a little wimp,” Adam agreed.

“He’s just totally wimp,” Matthew added.

During this interchange I asked Jack directly, “What do you like about football?”

To which he replied, “y’can hurt people like and make blood go on them.”

“I don’t actually like football,” Ravi remarked, and referring to his drawing added, “look at, look at my guy, he’s actually playin’ soccer, except that’s the um, the um…”

“Soccer’s a girl’s game! Don’ talk about soccer,” Adam interrupted.

“Soccer’s silly!” Jack agreed.

“No, it’s not!” Ravi maintained.

“Yes it is!” Adam replied.

“Why is it a girl’s game?” I asked.

“Well, because when someone kicks ’em in de leg they go, ‘Ah ha my leg’,” answered Adam standing up from his chair and dramatically holding his leg while yelling in pretend pain. “And, he continued, “de crowd boos the umpire ‘BOO’.”

“Ravi, you like soccer don’t you?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Hey Lucy, what’s ya name again?” Adam interrupted with a laugh. “Oh yeah, dat’s right, Rowena!” he enthused as Justin and Jack joined his laughter.

“So,” I interjected, looking at Ravi, “if your friends were going to call you a girl or a sissy for playing soccer would that worry you?”

“Nuh,” Ravi replied.

“Doesn’t matter?” I queried.

“You’re a sissy, you’re a girl ha, ha, ha. You play soccer!” sang Adam in insistence.

Ravi ignored Adam and continued his commentary while colouring in the green of his soccer ground, “Once I saw um one of the Fremantles um he was um runnin’ ’round with the ball and he put, and he put his hand out like that and he went like this to one of the...”
Bulldogs and um grabbed ’em by the head an’ slammed ’im down an’ um and they’re always, yes, um, they’re always hurting people.”

“What do you think about that?” I asked Ravi.

“Oh, it’s very bad,” he said looking up at me from his drawing.

While Ravi was talking, the other boys were engaged in conversation about the AFL competition, a timely conversation since finals were forthcoming.

“Stop talking about the Bulldogs. They’re not sensational,” Jack told Justin when he mentioned Bulldogs.

“Richmond’s not in da finals, Richmond’s not in da finals,” Justin sang to taunt Jack, knowing he barracked for Richmond.

“Bulldogs are probably gonna be in the finals,” Matthew said to Justin excitedly.

“They are!” Justin responded enthusiastically.

Adam agreed with Justin, “They’ll beat West Coast, easy.”

Matthew also agreed, “yeah, they’re gonna cane ’em!”

“I’m going for West, um Western Bulldogs,” Adam decided.

“You go for Bulldogs, Bulldogs is da best,” Justin continued in reply to Adam, but was interrupted by Jack, “No they’re not!”

“They’re in the finals,” retorted Matthew in surprise.

“Bulldogs suck,” Adam remarked.

Justin disagreed, “Bulldogs rule!”

“They suck actually, they’re very silly,” was Jack’s response as he stood up, “they walk around like this,” he yelled as he sashayed around the room, ‘la, la, la, la, la’.

“We’ll tell these lot who ta really go for!” laughed Adam.

During the commotion that ensued, which involved Justin, Adam, Jack and Matthew yelling over the top of one another, I could just make out Ravi’s comment, “Remember guys, we’re on tape recorder.”

The subsequent session concerning football was on the 28th of September 1999. This session involved all of the boys in the affinity group except for Matthew and also involved another adult researcher, my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Christopher Hickey. As the AFL Grand Final had been played on the preceding weekend, my supervisor and I decided to show the boys some media images from the newspaper relating to this event. The session was held in the afternoon and, after a morning of observation and kick to kick
with the boys, Chris seemed to fit in well with the affinity group environment, the boys happily accepting and enjoying his presence.

Adam began the session in an attempt to monopolise Chris’ attention, “An’ I’m a really good drawer an’ I want ta be a cartoonist an’ a navy seal an’ a boxer an’ a footballer oh yeah an’ I want ta be James Bond,” he blurted out.

“Hey, I want too,” Ravi added.

Justin didn’t want to be left out, “I’m a good footballer, y’forgot to mention that,” he said looking at Adam and then at Chris.

“You’re a good footballer?” Chris asked Justin.

“Get real,” Adam responded sharply.

“I’m a good footballer,” Jack interrupted.

Justin was persistent, “I am, I’m the best footballer in the class.”

“I’m a good footballer,” Jack repeated to Justin impatiently.

“Oh, come on,” Adam continued looking directly at Justin, “ya couldn’ beat me at runnin’.”

Jack conceded, glancing first at Adam and then Justin, “Y’could never bet on it Justin.”

“Yeah,” Adam enthused, “I’ll bet y’a dollar.”

Jack thought for a moment, “Justin, probly you and me are the same ’cos we went to Auskick,” he pondered.

Justin didn’t answer Jack, “Y’can get their autograph, y’know, like I got Chris Grant’s,” he commented looking at Chris.

“I got Spider Everett’s,” Adam yelled proudly.

“I got Matthew Richardson’s autograph,” Jack added.

“Cool,” Chris was impressed.

“An’ he’s a poofbah!” Adam directed to Jack.

“I got Brendan Gale’s too,” Jack continued, ignoring Adam.

“Do you play football?” Chris asked, looking at Ravi, who had been listening quietly to the other boys.

“Nuh,” Ravi replied quietly, “I don’ play it but I’d like to.”

“Not as good as boxing!” Adam declared to Chris, “boxing is da fun bit.”

“Yeah,” Justin agreed.

“Why boxing?” Chris asked Adam.

“Well okay, it’s not very good when y’get da shit bashed out of you ’cos it’s not...”

“You said the, you said the ‘s’ word again,” Jack interrupted in annoyance.

“Yeah,” Adam persisted, “because if y’fall over de boxing ring’s all concrete and I can assure you from experience, ow it’s not very nice.”

A short time later, Adam continued his dialogue with Chris, “You follow d’rugby?” he asked.

“I’ve followed the rugby,” Chris replied, “do you follow the rugby?”

“Nuh, I think dat sucks,” Adam retorted with a grin.

“I too,” Justin was quick to add.

“Me too,” Jack also added.

“I follow football,” Justin stated firmly. “I love football ’cos y’can tackle and y’get blood rules.”

“The blood rule?” Chris queried.

“Yeah”, Adam interjected, “when you’ve got de blood rule, all de girls go ‘Oh geez that would’ve hurt’, so den y’get all de attention and y’look more sexier.”
“And y’have a cute butt and lots of girlfriends if you’re playing AFL,” Justin explained to Chris.
“That’s stupid, I don’t even know...” began Jack, but was unable to finish his sentence before Adam interrupted.
“So you’ve gotta have a cute butt to be a champ.”
“And a good footballer,” Justin added.
“And then you get some girlfriends,” Chris confirmed, “so does everyone like girls?” he asked.
“No,” Adam began, “I hate my sister’s guts!”
“Yeah,” Justin agreed with a laugh, “same with my brother’s guts.”
“I hate my brother definitely,” Jack added.
“But what about girls?” I asked.
“Na,” Adam smirked.
“I like my brother,” Ravi replied firmly, “I don’t like girls.”
“Same wiv me,” Justin added.
“I don’t like girls,” was also Jack’s firm reply.
“But I thought you said AFL players get lots of girls, but you don’t like girls. How can you want to get lots of girls but you don’t like them?” asked Chris.

“Britney Spears isn’t too bad. She’s okay,” Adam reconciled.
“Yeah,” laughed Justin.
“So, which girls are okay and which girls aren’t okay?” queried Chris.
“Um...” Justin began.
“Chubba chubs, cross out,” Adam asserted firmly while drawing an imaginary cross in the air.
“Stupid gutses,” Justin added with a grimace.
“Chubba chubs?” I enquired. “What are they?”
Adam looked at me and responded by standing up from his chair bending his arms up, blowing his cheeks out and stomping on the spot, “Oogga chucka oogg chucka,” he sang while the other boys laughed in amusement.
“Really fat people,” Justin explained to me with a grin.

“One time,” Matthew commented, “I hit Christie (sister) ‘round, kicked her in the head with my footy boots.”
“Did you mean to?” I asked.
“Yep,” Matthew answered, “it was deliberately and I had to.”
“Cos she’s fat,” Justin stated.
“Yeah,” Matthew agreed.
“But why did you do that?” I enquired.
“Because she, because she’s got big fat legs like that,” he replied, demonstrating a large circle hand width around an imaginary leg. (b.a.g. 11, 24.08.99)

“At the beginning of the year I don’t think Adam was terribly respected by the girls because he is very anti-female,” Mrs. W. pondered. “His dad is so anti-woman in general,” she added, “I’ve never seen dad by the way, dad has never been into this classroom. Twice he has contacted the school or been contacted by Mr. A. but he has not communicated with any female staff this year.” (int. K.W. 01.10.99)

“Oh,” I responded. “So you don’t like those?”
“So what are you saying,” Chris asked, “fat girls?”
“What?” Adam answered, “Nah, yeah.”
“Don’t like them?” continued Chris.
“Nah,” Adam and Justin chorused.
“So which girls do you like?” asked Chris.
“Ms. Keddie, I was lucky,” Adam remarked to me as we walked back to class one afternoon.

“Why?” I asked.

“Cos I got to watch dat movie last night,” he replied.

“What movie?” I asked.

“Striptease,” Adam responded, “yeah, it was on last night, it was awesome!” he stated as he walked off with Matthew.

(obs. A.K., 28.08.99)

“Hmm,” began Adam.

“Thin,” was Justin’s interjection.

“Sexy legs,” Adam suggested.

“Yeah,” Justin agreed with a loud laugh.

“Yeah,” Adam added, “and the ‘A’ man always gets the chicks!”

“Yuk,” Ravi said with a grimace, “don’ like any girls.”

“But sometimes you play with girls,” I said looking at Ravi.

“Sometimes,” Ravi agreed after thinking for a moment.

“Well sometimes boys play with us,” Jane stated.

“But we need to play what the boys play,” Alexandra remarked.

“It’s like when they’re playing basketball,” Jane explained, and we want to play something else they go ‘Let’s play basketball’.

“So do they play what you want to play?” I asked.

“No,” the girls chorused.

“Well ‘cos they don’t like our games.” Kate asserted. “‘cos girls like our games better, not boys.”

“Boys like fighting games and action games,” Jane decided. “Yeah, they like to fight.”

“They like chasing us,” Alexandra confirmed.

“Yeah and like chasing’s fun and they like to chase us ‘cos boys might really like us,” Jane remarked.

“Yeah, but boys don’t really want to play with us,” Sally explained. “You know, they don’t come and ask us or anything. Not many boys like, I mean we’re not very popular.”

“No,” Jane agreed, “it’s ‘cos they like us.” (g.a.g. 23.08.99)

The boys then responded to Chris’ question, “Do any of you boys play with girls much?” Ravi, Justin and Jack all agreed that they never played with girls, however Adam admitted that he “played with Jane and her girls ahh, probly about last term or somethin’.”

After this comment, Ravi also admitted to playing with Jane.

“So Jane’s alright?” Chris queried.

“Yeah,” Ravi agreed.

“Nah,” Adam corrected, “she’s just my friend.”

“Yeah,” Ravi agreed again, “she’s just my friend.”

“But she hasn’ got cute legs,” Justin reported.
“Nuh uh,” Adam acceded, “Jessica’s my girlfriend.”
“Yeah?” Justin and Ravi remarked.
“Oh yeah, an’ Zara Allan, she kissed me in kindergarten, oh an’ I’ve had a heap of girls who’ve kissed me,” Adam boasted.
“Yeah, and Matthew too,” Ravi asserted turning to Adam, “Matthew would say ‘e’s like got ten thousand’ girlfriends!” “He can tell more whoppers every day!” Justin remarked in agreement.
“Yes,” added Adam, “and ‘e says ‘I’ve got thirty two girlfriends’, an’ then ‘e goes nah, ‘I got this many’, an’ he shortens it one week and d’next week ten times it and then d’next week he’ll shorten it. Den he’ll go lower, higher, lower, higher.”
“Yeah,” Justin concurred.

“Well,” Adam remarked looking at me. “I played wiv the girls today and we went on de bars an’ they (girls) put their legs up on my shoulders an’ I hafta swing back an’ we play ‘chasies’, it’s real cool dude, I mean that is so radical dude,” he added comically.
“I was playin’ with you too,” Ravi interjected.
“Yeah an’ ‘e was playin’ wiv me,” Adam added.
“Yeah,” Ravi remarked. “But the problem is we were playin’ that game, we were playin’ that game but then and they were like goin’ on Adam and they didn’ give a stuff ‘bout anyone except for Adam,” he complained.
“The girls were playing with…” I began.
“Yeah,” stated Ravi.
“…were giving him attention, didn’t they give you any attention?” I asked.
“No,” Ravi replied. “Not any one, except for Kate.”
“Yeah, I tell ya…” Adam began.
“‘Cos ‘e’s sexy, they think that,” Justin explained.
“I played wiv Adam las’ time wiv the boring girls, their games are ‘spaz’,” Jack complained.
“So you got bored?” I questioned.
“Yes,” Jack replied.
“Was Adam bored?” I asked.
“No, he just likes girls,” Justin remarked. “When they’re goin’ round the corner like they duck down and go ‘Ooooooh Adam’,” he explained as he jumped around an imaginary corner.
“So he likes girls, do you think?” I asked.
“Yep,” Ravi replied.
“But you guys don’t?” I enquired.
“Nuh,” the boys chorused. (b.a.g. 22, 05.10.99)

“Did you know that Adam and Matthew have a girlfriend?” Sally asked me. Adam’s got two, three actually, I think,” she added.
“Yeah,” Alexandra agreed nodding her head.
“Who?” Jane asked wide-eyed, “I hope it’s not me,” she added.
“I hope it’s not me!” Sally repeated excitedly.
“He really does like me though,” Jane remarked.
“No he doesn’t,” Sally told Jane.
“Yes he does,” Jane insisted.
“He’s got a different girlfriend,” Sally informed Jane.
“Jessica,” Alexandra noted.
“Yeah,” Sally agreed.
“What do you think of that?” I asked.
“I’m pretty jealous ‘cos I haven’t got one yet,” Sally revealed.
“A boyfriend?” I asked.
“Hmm,” Sally replied.
“How come Adam’s got a girlfriend and ‘e doesn’ like girls?” Jane asked. (g.a.g. 04.10.99)
Directing the conversation back to football, Chris then presented to the boys, the following image from *The Examiner* newspaper (27.09.99), of a victorious football team and asked the boys to comment on what they thought the footballers were doing.

“Northern Bombers!” Justin yelled in excitement, when he saw the image. Jack’s face lit up, “Where’s my cousin, where’s my cousin?” he stammered, searching the faces in the photo.

“You’re cousin sucks,” retorted Adam with disinterest.

“No he doesn’t,” Jack argued, “he’s my best friend.”

“Rugby sucks,” Justin interrupted, looking at Adam. “It’s a girls’ game. Rugby’s for girls.”

“Rugby’s for girls?” asked Chris.

“No it isn’t!” Adam yelled.

“Rugby sucks! Rugby’s for girls!” Justin insisted.

“No,” Adam continued, “no, rugby isn’t! Y’can get really sexy stitches an’ y’can run real fast an’ y’can knock people over an’ y’can bash ’em up and y’can...”

“No, it’s not,” interrupted Justin.

“That’s good is it?” I asked Adam.

“Yeah,” Adam replied, “if y’knock ’em over who cares just knock ’em over an’ do it again.”

“So what do you think they’re doing in the photo?” Chris asked Jack who had been inspecting the newspaper image.

Jack began to talk but was interrupted by Justin, “Havin’ fun, saying ‘I want another girlfriend! Woohoo!’”

“I know,” Jack yelled, “they’re probly saying, oh yes, ‘Glenorchy sucks! Glenorchy sucks!’ That’s what they should be saying.”

“No,” Adam contended as he stood up from his chair and stretched his arms out wide above his head, “dey should be goin’, ‘this is our moment of glory’, ” he stated dramatically.

“Oh, oh sure Adam,” Jack retorted with a frown.

“So tell me,” Chris continued, referring to the newspaper image, “who can tell me what’s going to happen next?”
“They’re goin’ partying,” Adam yelled, punching the air with his fist, “an’ dey celebrate in their rooms an’ dey throw beer an’ den dey let all de fans in an’ dey celebrate, an’ dey get drunk!”
“No, no,” Ravi remarked, “first they let all their girlfriends in.”
“Oh yeah,” Adam reconciled.
“Ravi, what do you think they would do after this?” I asked pointing to the image of the victorious football team.
“Ah,” Ravi replied, “they would go into the club rooms, celebrate, let all their um girlfriends in, get beer, get drunk and um go...”
“Be a skunk!” Adam interjected enthusiastically.
“And go like this,” Ravi continued as he stood up and staggered around the room flopping his body from side to side, ‘haha, haha, haha’,” he slurred, amid laughter from Justin and Adam.
“Ravi, you’re ‘spaz’ y’know,” commented Jack with a frown.
“Yeah, well, dat’s what they do when dey’re drunk,” Adam laughed, glancing at Jack.
“Is it? Is that right?” I asked.
“Yeah!” Ravi and Adam yelled in unison.
“So do they have fun or do they, do you reckon they have fun?” Chris asked the boys.
“Yeah,” Ravi answered firmly.
“Oh, yeah,” Adam agreed, “but their girlfriends dump ‘em,” he added.
“And they smash things,” Ravi stated after thinking for a moment.
“Their girlfriends dump them?” Chris queried.
“And den dat’s a bigger chance for us!” Adam exclaimed.
“They what? They smash things?” I asked, directing my focus on Ravi.
“They smash, yeah, they smash their trophies, ‘cos they’re really really drunk,” he exclaimed, looking at me.
“That wouldn’t be too good,” I stated.
“Who wants to have a football game here,” Jack interrupted with excitement. “Me!” he yelled answering himself.
“Not me,” Ravi stated flatly.

The next image from The Age newspaper (28.09.99) Chris presented to the boys was of a man’s face. This man had been a sporting casualty and had a swollen eye and stitches to the left side of his face. Chris opened the discussion by asking the boys: “Do you reckon when this person was hit, do you reckon he would’ve cried?”

“Nuh,” Justin was certain.
“Nah,” Jack and Ravi chorused in agreement.
“Nuh,” Adam concurred as well.
“So he wouldn’t have cried?” Chris queried.
Adam continued, “an’ den, an’ den everyone would go yahoo ‘cos dey would think ‘Gee, he’s tough’ an’ we go ‘Oh gee he’s weak.”
“So,” Chris asked, referring to the picture, “if this happened to
“Me,” Adam stated with surety.
“Me,” Ravi was also certain.
“Me,” Jack repeated.
“I wouldn’t,” Justin said boldly.
“You reckon you’d cry?” Chris asked the boys.
“Yeah,” was the insistent chorus from Adam, Ravi and Jack.
“If that happened to me I wouldn’t cry,” Justin stated with conviction.
“Why not?” Chris responded. “Why don’t you think you would?”
“Oh sure Justin, he’s de big toughy,” Adam interrupted with disbelieving sarcasm.
“And one thing else,” Jack said looking at Justin accusingly, “Justin told me that he put his trampoline on the um on his thing, it had um concrete on the ground an’ he falled off an’ hit his face on there.”
“Yeah,” Adam said mockingly, “an’ gee that would hurt Justin, ’cos he’s like I’m de toughest man I’m made of steel,” he chanted at Justin in a sing-song voice.
“You are!” Justin spat.

“Yeah,” Chris asked, “you tell me what’s tough? You tell me what’s tough?”
“Yeah,” Adam answered knowingly, “like if y’have a little accident and if y’cry well dat’s not very good,” he explained.
“Yeah,” Adam assented, “dat’s weak. If y’jump off a cliff and y’break yourself or kill yourself well, den you’re allowed ta cry.”
“Okay,” Chris remarked, “there’s a point, if it’s really bad you cry.”
“You must be a sook if y’only hurt yourself a little bit,” Justin concluded with certainty.

“Yeah,” replied Justin.
“Yeah,” Justin added nodding in agreement.

“Yeah,” Adam agreed, “cos Zac an’ that was teasin’ him one morning an’ he went ‘boo hoo, boo hoo’,” he continued while Justin laughed.

“Would you get teased if you fell over a little bit and you cried?” Chris asked.
“No,” Justin began.

“No,” Adam interjected, “I’d punch ‘im in de damn eye an’ I’d say ‘in your face!’”
“So,” Chris confirmed, “you’d get cross, you’d get angry and punch if someone tried to tease you. Wouldn’t that be pretty risky?” Chris asked of Adam who nodded enthusiastically in reply.

Chris continued, “I was going to ask, who likes taking risks?”
“Me,” Adam remarked with certainty.
“Not me,” Justin said shaking his head.
“Not me,” Ravi agreed, looking at Justin.

“Y’can ask Ms. Keddie,” Adam told Chris, “give me a dare an’ I’ll do it an’ I’ll complete it for one dollar,” he stated with pride.

“You wouldn’t mind what it is?” queried Chris.

“Nuh!” Justin answered for Adam surely, glancing at Adam and then at Chris. “He’d do anything,” Justin added in admiration.

“Yeah, you can dare me, I would do, I would jump off a cliff wiv a parachute,” Adam boasted.

“Why?” Chris asked. “Why do you like taking so many risks?”
Adam was quick to respond, “Because dat’s just my character.”
“What about you, do you like taking risks?” Chris asked of Justin.

“Nuh,” Justin stated quietly.

“Not really?” Chris queried, turning to Ravi, “Ravi?”


“Yeah,” Justin exclaimed, “I like takin’ speckies! I like back speckies,” he elaborated with enthusiasm.

“I like doin’ bets ‘cos I always win!” interrupted Adam.

“If anyone dares you, they’re scared to do it themselves.” Ravi concluded thoughtfully.

“So what if Adam was to dare you to do something Justin? Would you do it?” Chris asked.

“Oh no,” Adam interjected earnestly, “I’m not, I don’ wanna dare him! He has ta dare me ‘cos I always be in de fun bit ‘cos I always hate ta be de catcher. I jus’ like ta be de risky one.”

“Adam, I got a dare!” Jack yelled enthusiastically, “um eat two hundred, eat two, two hundred pieces of pizza!”

“No not dat,” responded Adam rolling his eyes, “I mean like killin’ yourself like swingin’ up on de bars or somethin’, y’can get me ta go out.”

“Oh, so something that gets you up high or above something,” Chris stated.

“Yeah,” Adam concurred.

“So something physical,” Chris added, “that makes you do something that’s...”

“You got it!” interrupted Adam excitedly.

“If they said, if they say you jump off a cliff an’ they say like Ravi like said, ‘Why don’t you do it first?’ an’ they’d say I’m a wuss,” Justin explained.

“Cos y’are Justin,” Adam laughed spitefully in response.

“Are you a wuss Justin?” asked Chris.

“Nuh,” repeated Justin.

“Hey, you’re Josephine!” Adam yelled, “ha ha ha,” he laughed.

“Why wouldn’t you think you’re a wuss?” Chris directed to Justin.

“Cos I bash me dad up,” Justin replied firmly.

“Cos you can bash your dad up?” Chris repeated.

“Yeah,” Justin remarked.

The boys had been busily engaged in drawings their ‘dares’ during the session. When they were given the opportunity to share their drawings with the group if they wished, Adam and Ravi decided to share.

Ravi inspected his drawing and explained, “Yeah, the thing is, you’re supposed to yeah, there’s the water an’ there’s a guy who’s um almost with an anchor on him so then he can’t walk an’ there’s no air tank,” he added.

“Where did you see this?” I asked.

“Hmm,” he replied, “I just made it up.”

“That is pretty risky stuff,” Chris remarked.

“See,” Ravi said looking at Adam, “I wouldn’t even do that, would you Adam?”

“Ms. Keddie, Ms. Keddie,” Jane said persistently, “my brother’s stronger than me and I made him cry once. Didn’t I Alexandra?”

“What did you do?” Sally wondered. “What did you do to make him cry?”

“Boxed him in the head,” Alexandra stated proudly. (g.a.g. 25.10.99)
“What?” Adam enquired and examined Ravi’s drawing, “an anchor wrapped around your feet an’ y’got nowhere t’go and you’re in de Atlantic Ocean,” he continued. “Dat’s very risky.”

“This is risky, um...” Ravi agreed.

“I’d rather climb a mountain lioness dan do that,” Adam interrupted.

“Can you draw me one of them after school?” Ravi asked referring to Adam’s drawing.

“What them?” Adam enquired, looking at his drawing.

“Yeah,” Ravi replied.

“Oh, dat’s just a rough drawin’,” Adam remarked.

“Can you do a really cool drawing for me?” Ravi insisted.

“Yep,” Adam answered.

“He can do awesome drawings than that, can’t ya,” commented Justin with a touch of admiration.

“Yeah,” Adam responded casually, “this is just crap.”

“Okay Adam, you want to share?” I asked.

“Well,” he began, inspecting his drawing, “mine’s really stupid first of all,” he qualified as the other boys gathered around him. “Well first of all dere’s me, I got a, I got a sword, a gun, a bullet belt an’ a rocket launcher an’ y’have to get past this man wiv a machine gun. Oh no a laser gun an’ a shark river machine, laser gun an’ y’have t’get frough de fire, de robot there and de robot mountain lion. An’ y’have ta shoot back ta get frough dere an’ y’have t’kill dat guy an’ make sure, oy, are you listening?” he reprimanded Justin who was looking the other way, distracted. Justin turned his attention back to Adam, who continued. “An’ y’have ta kill dat guy so he doesn’ laser, zip you wiv his eye an’ den
y’have to shoot ‘im go bang! Then y’have to jump an’ jump on dere boing an’ go puw, puw an’ den y’have ta fly back dere an’ you’ve finished.”
“Good drawing,” commented Chris.
“You better believe it!” exclaimed Adam in response to Chris.
“Mine’s the dumbest!” Justin lamented, looking at his drawing.
“Who wants my drawing?” Adam asked, holding it up proudly for the group to see.
“Me, me, me, me,” Ravi answered eagerly.
“To keep forever,” Adam added.
“Me, me,” Ravi repeated.

The next day Adam followed through with his promise and dutifully drew Ravi an intricate drawing similar to his work displayed above. Ravi was suitably impressed and grateful, carefully inserting the drawing into one of his class-work books so that it wouldn’t crumple in his school bag on his way home. That day also signified the last school day for Term Two 1999, so I didn’t see the children again for two weeks. Over the break I read through my observation and reflection notes in preparation for my return to the school. My interest was drawn to an early observation (obs. A.K. 22.06.99) I had written about of a ‘free play’ construction activity. The particular observation had been made during a ‘wet weather day’. We had spent much of the scheduled break times inside the classroom playing with an array of different games and construction sets. During the lunch break, the children were ‘free’ to play with this equipment with whoever they chose. Small groups gathered around various parts of the classroom busily engaged in playing and making. I wandered around the chatting, laughing groups and finally positioned myself at the periphery of a group of four boys: Adam, Matthew, Jack and Ben. They were working with the ‘Mechanic, Plastic Blocks’ set. The theme of their talk and construction centred around the movie ‘Star Wars: Episode I’. The boys were busily constructing laser guns and machine guns, squinting as they aimed and shot each other while perfecting the length and volume of their shooting sounds.

“Mine’s biggest,” Matthew noted after he had shot Jack.
“No, mine’s biggest,” Adam retorted lining his gun up against Matthew’s.

Mrs. W. had noticed by this time that the boys were constructing guns and reminded them that guns were banned from the classroom and as such gun construction was also prohibited. The boys silently acknowledged this and obediently reconstructed their guns
into laser swords. A competition between the boys ensued. It centred on whose laser sword construction was the best.

“Mine shoots through walls!” exclaimed Adam as he dramatically waved his sword above his head.
“Mine’s still the biggest!” Matthew told Adam with certainty.
“What about mine?” Jack queried looking at his gun. “It has special super powers!”
“Yes, but you didn’t know mine turns into a gun!” Adam informed the others as he flipped his sword over and aimed it at the boys.

This observation prompted the focus of the next affinity group session on my return to Banrock to recommence my research. The subsequent narrative, That’s a Bullet Belt, tells the story of this session.

4.4 Narrative 4: That’s a Bullet Belt*

Towards the end of September, I involved the boys in a ‘free’ play construction session (b.a.g. 18, 22.09.99) in their classroom while the other members of 1/2 W. were attending library. I began the session by collecting the class sets of plastic and wooden construction blocks and placing them in the middle of the large mat area. As the boys excitedly scrambled around the blocks, shoving each other out of the way and grabbing pieces that took their fancy, I began.

“We’re going to try…"
“And make a machine gun?” Adam interrupted excitedly, “okay, no copying of mine,” he added as he grabbed a piece of plastic piping.
“We’re going to try and do a group thing, if you can,” I suggested to the boys who were already busy sorting through the construction pieces.
“A what?” Adam queried screwing up his face at me.
“A group thing,” I continued, “so make it, like together,” I said to the group.
“Ohhhh,” Adam wailed in disappointment, “Oh, no!”
“Why don’t you want to make a group thing?” I asked.
“Why?” Adam asserted. “Because we just don’t like that, we’re boys,” he stated rolling his eyes.
“Yeah, boys,” Justin agreed as he picked up a long length of rubber.
“Alright,” I resolved, “well you can all make something and then talk about what you’ve made, whatever you like.”
“WOO HOO!” the boys yelled in unison.
“Oh, that's hard,” Matthew mumbled.
“YAH HOO!” the boys yelled again.
“I'm gonna wet me pants,” Justin said excitedly, as he grabbed a circular plastic wheel.
“Justin, get lost,” Adam told Justin who had squeezed in front of him, “Matthew that was mine!” he added wrestling Matthew for a cylindrical plastic piece.

*I requested and obtained permission from the parents of the boys to include the photos within this narrative for presentation in this dissertation.
“Hey,” I interjected as the boys fell on top of each other, plastic bits flying into the air, “hey, gotta be sensible.”

“He got one of my thingies,” Adam stammered as he straddled Matthew and tried to prise the construction piece from Matthew’s clutch.

“I think there’s enough to go around,” I reasoned.

“Give it back!” Adam shouted as he continued to prise it from Matthew’s grasp.

“I think there’s enough to go around,” I repeated.

“I want my thingy back,” Adam insisted.

“Get back!” Matthew shouted as he jerked Adam off him and surrendered his plastic piece.

“I’m making a crown,” Justin announced turning to me seemingly oblivious to the surrounding racket. He had in his hand a long length of rubber and had started connecting bright yellow plastic attachments to it.

“Hey,” Matthew suggested to Justin, “you should put that around your waist.”

“Yeah, a BULLET BELT!” exclaimed Adam loudly.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m doin’,” remarked Justin glancing at Matthew and Adam.

“Yeah,” Matthew continued, as he scrambled through the plastic pieces, “it’s a bullet belt, don’t go on ya head.”

“What are you making there, Adam?” I asked a few moments later over the continuing noise of clamouring boys and plastic.

“A robot,” Adam said in a steady voice as he concentrated on lining up two plastic pieces.

“A robot?” I queried.

“I’m making a…” Justin yelled excitedly amid the din.

“I’m making a big bazooka!” Matthew interrupted holding up his construction.

“There’s my robot,” Adam stated proudly as he held it up for the group to see.

“What does your robot do?” I enquired through the noise.

“He’s a machine,” Adam yelled as he placed the arms in a shooting position, “pow, pow, BOOM!” he added as he shot the air.

“He’s a machine?” I asked.

“He’s a machine robot who goes to war,” Adam replied through the steady hub of clanging plastic.

“Oh right,” I remarked, “he goes to war.

“Yep,” Adam responded adjusting the robot’s gun arms.

“I’m going to war!” Matthew yelled as he stood up, “Pwaarrrr, BOOM,” he added as he shot the air with his plastic ‘bazooka’ and toppled over.

“I need one more,” remarked Justin as he rummaged through the plastic pieces in search of a bright yellow attachment. “What’s this called again?” he asked Adam through the rattling and shooting.

“A bullet belt,” Adam confirmed above the noise.

A little later, Adam had made two bar bell weights from the plastic construction pieces.

“Oh, oh yeah, look at that girls, oh, sex all day!” he panted as he ‘pumped iron’ while gyrating his hips in a sexually suggestive manner.

The other boys were highly amused by this performance, rolling about the floor in fits of laughter.
“Adam seems to be yeah streets ahead with some aspects of his development,” Mr. A. noted. “He’s more street wise than the others,” he added.

“Oh exactly, that’s what it is,” Mrs. W. agreed, “he’s allowed to do more isn’t he.”

“Hmm and because of that he’s more aware of things and he’s more daring and they appreciate his, you know ability to come up with these one liners and actions and you know cool things. Like where he’s been with his dad and what he’s got up to and so immediately he’s a little bit of a cult figure isn’t he,” Mr. A. remarked.

“Hmm,” Mrs. W. assented, “and his oral skills are wonderful, he’s just so manipulative and interesting, I mean I enjoy listening to his crazy stories ‘cos he’s just, he sells it so well,” she said laughing with the others.

“Yeah, I think Adam’s good to have a talk to,” Mr. A. confirmed. “I probably talk to him more than any of the others.”

“Yeah,” Mrs. W. interjected, “he’s great company,” Mrs. W. agreed.

“It’s like he’s being in a pub,” Mr. A. noted a few moments later, “I think he is already…”

“Yeah,” Mrs. W. interjected, “it is, well that’s where he spends a fair bit of his time though. I mean dad’s a builder and he’s out there. Sometimes Adam doesn’t get to school until 10 o’clock, sometimes he doesn’t get to school at all ’cos he’s off with dad on site, so school’s not a priority. Yeah he’s with the men and unfortunately all this takes priority over learning and he’s going to, it’ll catch up with him. He’s a good 12 months behind now, he’s really working at a lower level than he should be.”

“I don’t think that’s a priority for Adam, is it,” Mr. A. asserted, “and that’s not going to change.”

“No, it’s not, but he’ll get through, he’ll survive,” sighed Mrs. W. (t.a.g. 19.11.99)

“Hey, rack off man!” Adam told Matthew as he approached and tried to take one of his bar bell weights.

“Hey, you rack off man,” Matthew responded jokingly.

“Hey,” Adam continued in an American accent, “get y’hands off my girlfriend or I’m gonna smash y’head in!” he added as he began to wrestle with Matthew.

“Who’s your girlfriend?” Matthew yelled amid the noise, “who’s your girlfriend, pal?”

“Who’s your girlfriend, Adam?” Jack asked.

“What?” Adam asked.

“Who’s your GIRLFRIEND?” the boys chorused in unison.

“Nah, I’m just saying it for the act,” Adam responded laughing, playfully punching Matthew in the arm.

“You’re being silly,” Jack remarked.

“You took my girlfriend and you’re dead!” Matthew stated to Adam as he grabbed him from behind around the waist. “You will regret it mate,” he continued.

“Hey,” Justin said handing me his bullet belt, “can you please do this up?”

“If like somebody like has a girlfriend,” Jane remarked, “and they’re a boy and they see another boy with his girlfriend um they would act up and push ’em down and go walking off with her, then he’ll come around and punch him out of the way and like that.”

“Yeah,” Sally agreed, “and sometimes the boys they show off for girls, like they…”

“They go like ‘ohhh I’m sexy, hey babe’;” Jane interrupted with a laugh. “Yeah, Adam thinks he’s really sexy,” she added as the girls laughed in agreement.

“Like they be a movie star,” Alexandra added raising her eyebrows.

“Just so the girl likes him,” Sally established, “the boys show off just so the girls like them. I don’t really like that when they show off.”

“Do you think the boys in your class do it sometimes?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jane confirmed.

“I think so yeah,” Sally agreed.

“Definitely Adam and Matthew and Justin,” Jane added.
“Definitely,” Sally decided.
“Yeah, they like showin’ off to girls,” Kate remarked. (g.a.g. 04.10.99)

A little later Adam had made another construction. Pointing it at me he said in an American accent, “well, now it’s a machine gun.” “Yeah?” I responded, still surrounded by the continuous commotion of boys and rattling plastic, “what are you going to do with it?” “Shoot all the staff,” he yelled, “like you! BANG!” “Shoot me?” I asked as he laughed. “Thanks for that.” “A pleasure!” he shouted through the racket as he ‘shot’ me.

“Matthew, do you want to tell me about yours?” I asked.
“A stupid little gun,” he remarked showing me his construction. “Yeah? Why did you make a gun?” I enquired.
“Don’t know,” he paused, “so I can shoot you!” he shouted, pointing his gun at me. “You want to shoot me?” I asked.
“Yeah,” Adam interjected, “because you’re a girl! We don’t like girls here.” “Yeah, I don’t,” added Jack with a sneer. “So, why don’t you like girls?” I queried.
“Because they’re stinky winkies!” Adam exclaimed amid the boys’ laughter and noise. “If you’ve got so many girlfriends,” Ravi remarked, “why don’t you like um girls much?”

“They’re showing off to girls when they don’t like girls,” Alexandra puzzled. “Adam’s got girlfriends and ‘e doesn’t even like ‘em. Did ya know that?” Jane asked the others. (g.a.g. 04.10.99)

“Well, I like Julia Roberts, wow, she’s good,” Adam confirmed while he and the other boys laughed loudly as they pretended to shoot each other. “Julia Roberts is dead then!” Jack declared through the commotion.

A short time later, amid the persistent noise, I asked, “Ravi what have you got there?” “It’s supposed to be a gun,” he answered looking gravely at his construction. “Is it?” I responded nodding. “Yeah,” he stated. “Why did you do a gun?” I enquired. “To shoot you!” Matthew yelled, shooting the air with a plastic cylinder, “cos you’re a girl!”
“Ah, ‘cos I like James Bond,” Ravi told me as he aimed his gun and shot, “and he goes puew, puew, bang, bang!”
“Jack tell me about yours?” I then asked Jack.
“Bang! Buster! Buster! Pow!” Matthew and Adam shouted while I was talking.
“Mine’s a gun and it’s gonna shoot your head off,” Jack asserted pointing his gun at me.
“It’s going to shoot my head off?” I asked.
“Yeah, we’re gonna shoot your head off,” Adam agreed also aiming his gun at me.
“There’s me pack bullets! Grrrrummm, yeah,” Matthew yelled as he rummaged through the plastic pieces.

While Matthew was yelling Adam began to sing as he continued to shoot the air, “We don’ need no one ta tell us what t’do, yes we’re on our own.” Adding, “oh Matthew, you’re a show off!” to Matthew who had taken Adam’s barbell weights and was pretending to pump iron with them.

I concluded the session by taking some more photos of the boys and their constructions. As I held my camera at the ready, Adam jostled the others for front position. The boys were keen to display their plastic guns and shooting prowess, carefully posing their aim at the camera. Giggles and laughter rang through the air as the boys pushed, shoved and pretended to shoot each other and me. In the midst of this pandemonium, I saw fun and laughter begin to turn as the playfulness became roughness. Guns were broken, plastic pieces fell off constructions and Adam shoved Matthew with far too much force.

“Adam and Matthew!” I stated, gaining the boys’ attention in an attempt to defuse the situation.
“Guys, come on,” Ravi reconciled.
“Adam just broke this…” began Matthew picking up the pieces of his broken bazooka.
“I did not,” Adam retorted, “you did.”
“Matthew,” I said, “did you hurt yourself before?” I asked, “Are you okay?”
“Yeah, I just hurt my back,” he responded bravely as he limped over to me.
“Yeah, you fell over and hurt yourself,” I added.
“Ms. Keddie,” Adam interjected as he walked over to me and lifted his shirt, “are my bruises still there?”

“Ow,” I remarked, looking at his bruise.

“Are they?” Adam repeated.

“Yeah, it’s there,” I confirmed.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Adam exclaimed happily.

“Someone just shut the box and hit me in the finger and it still hurts,” Jack interjected showing me his finger.

“Why are you happy about bruises?” I asked Adam.

“Oh,” he replied, “cos people can look at ‘em, an’ go ‘oh, gee that would hurt’ an’ then y’get all the attention.”

“My wart’s falled off, my wart’s falled off!” Jack shouted as the other children of 1/2W. made their way back into the classroom.

“We did this thing,” I explained to the girls as I showed them the photos, “the boys constructed something from blocks and um there’s Justin, he’s got his bullet belt on and he’s got a dumbbell, you know those weights? And Adam made a gun,” I added.

“That’s bad,” Sally responded with distaste. “Boys are so violent,” she added as the other girls nodded their agreement.

“Oh! Very funny!” Jane exclaimed looking at the photos.

“And there’s Matthew,” I noted, “he made some dumbbell weights as well.”

“And do you know that,” Sally confirmed, “that’s what I mean, look he’s showing off!”

“Oh, Adam!” Jane exclaimed. “He’s showing off like he’s really strong.”

“Yeah,” Alexandra agreed as she inspected the image. “He’s going ‘oh man look at my muscles!’” Jane added.

“Yeah, he’s showing off,” Alexandra nodded.

“Look, they’re all showing off and I don’t want to see that,” Sally stated dismissively as she turned away.

“Yeah,” Alexandra maintained, “Adam is.”

“They’re being very silly,” Sally remarked.

“They’re showing off,” Jane stated with certainty, “oh, he’s showing off definitely!”
“Why do you think they made guns?” I asked the girls as they looked at the group photo of the boys. “Because they’re violent boys,” Sally retorted, “that’s why!” Probably “‘cos they think they look sexy, they just think they’re so sexy. They say ‘hey babe I’m sexy, I’m a stupid sexy boy!’” “But why would they make guns?” I queried. “They don’t make guns to be sexy do they?” “No, they just do it to show off and just so girls like them,” Sally responded. “I don’t know really,” Alexandra puzzled. “If a girl doesn’t like another boy,” Sally suggested, “like he would make a gun and try to pretend to shoot her.” “Yeah,” Alexandra agreed. “Very violent,” Sally said shaking her head. “Is that supposed to make girls like them?” I asked. “Yeah, yeah,” the girls chorused in unison. “Do you think they’ve got it wrong?” I queried. “Yeah,” the girls responded. “They’ve got it definitely wrong!” Sally exclaimed. (g.a.g. 04.10.99)

“Out in the yard is a different set of circumstances,” Mr. T. noted, “because you don’t know out there what’s going to manipulate or dominate things because they’ll be brought together for various things. Boys of that age just might decide that it’s time to start kicking a footy. They don’t know the rules properly, they don’t know what rubs people up the wrong way so if somebody’s got the footy they’re just as likely to get him, swing him by the jumper and try and land him on his head. And he’ll get up angry. A lot of their games are physical. They’re heading into that really boisterous stage of say your grade twos, grade threes, grade fours, they’re all going at a thousand miles an hour. They go through the school grounds like a herd of elephants you know, they just thunder through the games and they’re yelling and screaming and playing boisterous games. Of course they’re physical as well and they revolve around, ah you know, your play fighting and your kung fu or pretending to shoot each other. Whatever it happens to be and of course that leads to conflict too ‘cos somebody can get hurt. Somebody got hit a little bit harder than he thinks he’s been hitting the other. “So playful interaction can get…” I asked. “Gets out of hand,” Mr. T. interjected. “We’re all having good fun, we’re all pushing each other. I push you hard and you fall on your head instead of on your bum and so the reaction is you get up and you want to fight or you want to push him back harder or you cry and go to the duty teacher. The thing is we’re stuck with the boys at that age. For
about two years they go through this period where everything is really physical and the strong dominate and the born leaders start to come through.” (int. G.T. 09.12.99)

4.5 Narrative 5: The Cricket Season

It was now early October with the warmer weather prompting a shift in the boys’ choice of sporting play. Cricket nets, bats and stumps replaced footballs, grassed ovals and muddy knees. ‘Hero worship’ was displaced from Chris Grant and Matthew Richardson to Ricky Ponting and Shane Warne. Similarly, disputes about kicking goals, tackling and whose team “sucked” the most, were replaced with disputes over who was ‘out’ and whose turn it was to bat and wear the cricket pads. (r.j. A.K. 05.10.99) The following narrative spans a month and incorporates data from several observation periods and affinity group sessions relating to the boys’ interest and participation in cricket.

If I had thought the rough and tumble of football would present as the most conducive of the boys’ activities to spark contention and conflict within the group, I would have been wrong. Enter the cricket season. My first contact with the cricket season was on a sunny day in early October. I arrived at the school mid-way through recess and made my way through the various play areas around the school, amid the special noise and energy unique to overcrowded primary school yards. Smiling faces and running children greeted me as I walked through the basketball quadrangle, skipping ropes spinning and balls bouncing. As I went, I noticed three boys sitting in isolation, slumped with their backs to each other on either ends of the ‘time-out’ benches around the periphery of the quadrangle. Their dejected faces told their story of trouble. Disordered clutter and fun characterised the activity in the large ‘jungle-gym’ area, bodies climbing, racing and swinging any which way. Action in the sandpit involved a matchbox car race and a sand castle competition. As I scanned the large grassed area of the oval, I spotted Justin, Adam, Matthew and Jack in the cricket nets at the far end of the schoolyard and strolled over to them to observe their play.

Matthew was batting, his face earnest in concentration, while Adam bowled to him in an erratic manner. After a few misses Matthew hit the ball into the nets. “That’s a four!” he yelled as he dropped the bat and jumped up and down on the spot. “Hey Ms. Keddie,” he shouted to me as I came closer, “didya see that shot!” Next it was Justin’s turn. Adam’s bowling was highly inaccurate, however his style was humorous and elaborate and amused the others immensely. I watched as he ran up the pitch and purposefully swung his bowling arm around several times. He stopped three metres from Justin, throwing the ball over Justin’s head. He repeated this procedure about three times. Each time he became more dramatic and humorous and each time, Justin became more and more frustrated. “Adam y’don’t do underarm!” Justin yelled, “Bowl it properly!” he demanded. Finally, Justin managed to hit the ball and with a determined grin raced up and down the pitch, heaving a satisfied sigh when he had finished his runs. When it was Adam’s turn, he held the bat in a baseball hold as Justin skilfully bowled to him. Adam
swung the bat each time but was unable to hit the ball. As the bell for the end of recess rang Justin hit the stumps, "You’re out Adam!" he yelled triumphantly. (obs. A.K. 05.10.99)

That same afternoon the boys and I met (b.a.g. 22, 05.10.99) and discussed cricket. “So we’re playing cricket now, I’ve noticed?” I began. “Yep,” Justin answered happily. “No!” Adam retorted, “cricket sucks! Justin thinks ’e knows everything.” “Hey, I saw you playing at recess,” I told Adam. “Yeah, Jack and me was playin’ at lunchtime,” Justin added. "But Justin, ’e was bossin’ us around so much we didn’t wanna play,” Adam explained with a smirk.

“You tell me what happened Justin,” I asked. “We was playin’ cricket at recess and…” he began. “An’ Adam said you’re allowed t’have three batters on y’team, so then we started arguing.” “And then what happened?” I asked. “Yeah,” Matthew added, “an’ yesterday um Justin an’ Adam were pushing each other.” “And Justin threw the ball at Adam,” Jack continued, “and he threw it back.” “What?” interjected Adam, “well I threw it back in his, he was going ‘bla, bla, bla, bla’, so when he opened his mouth I threw the ball in his gob!”

“Yeah,” Justin agreed, “and I went ‘ccccs’,” he added holding his neck. “So what’s the real problem, do you reckon?” I asked the group. “He,” Matthew remarked, looking at Justin, “is a real bossy boots.” “Justin is bossy?” I enquired. “He’s the know all!” exclaimed Adam. “Adam’s the bossiest,” confirmed Justin. “Oh yeah, yeah sure,” Adam retorted sarcastically, “oh yeah okay Justin yeah, I am so bossy I think I’d better move schools!” “I like cricket,” Jack remarked. “I played with Timothy and…” Adam interrupted. “I play with, lots of people come to our house and play cricket,” Jack continued. “Jack, did you play cricket?” I asked. “Yeah,” he replied. “And what did you think?” I queried. “We play every day,” Justin asserted. “Yeah, and what did you think?” I asked Jack again, “Did you think Justin was bossy?” “Yeah sort of,” answered Jack as Matthew and Adam talked over the top of him. “But you didn’t mind playing?” I enquired over Matthew and Adam’s dialogue. “No,” Jack answered. “Like playing the football season, we play football in the football season,” confirmed Justin. “Now you play cricket,” I added. “Yep,” Justin stated. “I don’ play cricket,” Adam insisted, “I play ‘chases’ ’cos cricket sucks!” “Adam shut up,” Jack responded with a frown, “you know…” “Ms. Keddie saw me pelt the ball at recess today,” Matthew interrupted proudly. “Outside Justin’s a leader,” Mrs. W. told me, “because he’s sporty and he loves his sport and knows a lot about it and the whole family are right into their sport so yeah so his physical co-ordination is really good. He’s pretty bossy out there, yeah, he’s bossy, he likes things his own way, have you noticed that?” (int. K.W. 01.10.99)
“Did you see that one?” Justin insisted, swinging an imaginary bat, “that shot nearly went out of bounds, I had to go and get it!”

Cricket was an issue again a few weeks later. (18.10.99) I had been away for a week and returned to the school anticipating re-commencing my regular twice-weekly sessions. As I prepared to take the boys’ group away for our meeting, Mrs. W. approached me and said that she would rather that I didn’t work with the boys that day. She apologised and explained to me that while I had been absent, the cricket situation had become quite volatile with the boys (Adam, Justin, Jack and Matthew) continuously fighting over rules and fairness and actively, as a group, excluding other boys from joining in their games. Indeed, on that particular day she told me, the group had excluded a boy from another class when he had asked them if he could play. An argument had ensued, with this boy being sent to the isolation of the ‘time-out’ bench after resolving the dispute by grabbing the cricket stumps and hitting Matthew in the face with them. Mrs. W. saw it as important to address the issue and decided to talk to the boys as a group in place of my usual time with them. She also mentioned that, as the boys enjoyed my meetings with them, that the cancellation of the session might act as a punishment and help deter future conflict. I asked if I could be present and observe the discussion. (obs, A.K. 18.10.99)

While the other children were engaged in paired reading she called the affinity group boys to the mat. As they sat in front of her, cross-legged and attentive, she told them that they weren’t meeting with me today because she was disappointed with their behaviour, particularly while playing cricket. She said that there were far too many fights during cricket and that the boys were getting “too big for their boots” in excluding others from joining in their games. She then asked each of the boys in turn what they thought the problem with cricket was.

“Not sharing,” was Matthew’s flat response.
“Not playin’ fairly an’ not letting Xavier play,” was Jack’s.
“People getting angry,” Justin offered.
“Justin bein’ too bossy,” Adam asserted.

Mrs. W. told the boys that they were banned from playing cricket for the rest of the week and then asked them to go away to the back work-table and make up a set of clear and fair rules for playing cricket that they could all sign. She suggested that these rules be taken with the boys each time they played cricket to remind them of how to play and to help them to settle arguments.

The boys reluctantly sulked off to the back of the classroom and slid into the plastic chairs positioned around the work-table. Mrs. W. had provided them with a large sheet of white paper and a pencil. The boys were then left largely to themselves to devise their rules for playing cricket. After a few moments of subdued silence, Matthew looked expectantly at Adam and offered him the pencil so that he could lead. Adam, however, refused the offer saying “I’m not even gonna play any more, I hate cricket!” The lead then defaulted to Matthew. However, Matthew appeared to be more interested in studying the dirt up his fingernails. Jack and Justin were distracted also - their gaze intent on following the other children in the classroom. Adam managed to look particularly nonchalant and disinterested while leaning back and balancing precariously on his chair as he stared vacantly out the window. After a few moments of this Mrs. W.
walked by and glanced meaningfully at the blank paper. Matthew looked up sheepishly and then looked at Adam and Jack. Adam offered the first rule.

“When you’re out, y’gotta take it,” he stated glaring at Justin as Matthew began to write. “And no wicket keeper,” Justin added, “‘cos y’can get hit in the face.”

Matthew ignored Justin and when he had finished writing the first rule, looked back at Adam, who crossed his arms and turned the other way. Matthew then looked at Jack, “Y’gotta share,” Jack offered, looking at Justin while Matthew wrote.

“Rule 1, take it when you are out,” Matthew read hesitatingly when he had finished writing, “and rule 2, share,” he added.

“Everybody gets a bat,” Adam stated glaring at Justin again. “Play fairly,” Matthew deciphered as he began writing again, “f-a-r-l-y,” he mouthed as he wrote.

“Bat,” Adam continued evenly, “write, ‘he will give you a bat and ‘is name’s Justin’.”

“Take turns,” Matthew translated as he wrote.

“I’ve got another rule, I want another rule,” Justin interjected glancing at each of the boys. “Lots more people play cricket with us, Matthew? Matthew?” he asked as Matthew ignored him and kept writing.

As Matthew was writing the last cricket rule, Mrs. W. approached the table and sat down with the group. She briefly talked about the implications of each rule such as who decides when a rule is broken. She refined the rules by asking the boys what they had meant. After this she and the boys decided that the consequence for breaking a rule would be removal from the game.

“No one’ll listen,” Adam mumbled as each of the boys signed the cricket agreement.

“Oh yes they will Adam,” Mrs. W. remarked. “They’re the rules and if they don’t listen, they don’t play. If someone comes up to you and asks if they can play, you say, ‘yes, you can play but you must play by these rules’.”

As Mrs. W. collected the sheet of paper to photocopy for each of the boys I heard Adam mutter to Matthew, “I’m not playin’ anyway, cricket’s dumb.” (obs. A.K. 18.10.99)

“One instance the boys in question weren’t able to establish rules for a cricket game,” Mrs. W. explained to the other teachers, “and it had been a problem for a few days so cricket was banned for a week and then we got together and established some rules. So they were sent to the back of the room, I said ‘here’s a bit of paper’ and they had to devise some rules for cricket. They had to sign the contract and they’re the rules that they decided upon and we haven’t had any problems with cricket since. Adam wasn’t happy about it ‘cos he wants things to go his way.”

“Oh Adam would be changing the rules wouldn’t he,” Mr. A. laughed, “to, ‘no but you get another chance’, and ‘no you’re not out if you miss the ball, because…’ and he’d be able to justify everything!”

“Yeah, like ‘you’ve missed the wickets, so it has to be three!’” Mrs. W. added. (t.a.g. 19.11.00)

The next day I chose to further explore cricket during our affinity group session. (b.a.g. 24, 19.10.99)

“Don’t you like cricket?” I asked the group.

“Nup,” Adam said with certainty.

“Well you used to like it,” Jack puzzled.

“I never liked it,” Adam insisted.

“It sucks now,” Matthew agreed.
“Well how come you played it?” Jack queried.
“Because I didn’ ’ave anyone else ta play with,” Adam explained, “’cos you’re all bein’ stupid.”
“Well I think cricket sucks now,” Jack interrupted.
“Do you?” I asked.
“’cos it’s boring,” Jack explained.
“Yeah, ’cos Justin was a bossy boots,” Adam sneered.
“What do you do at lunchtime now then?” I asked.
“Play basketball,” Matthew answered.
“I usually play basketball,” agreed Jack.
“I play with Jimmy and Brian,” Adam stated.

“So do you still play cricket Justin?” I asked him a few moments later.
“Yep,” he replied.
“I don’t, it sucks,” Jack confirmed leaning back on his chair and folding his arms over his chest.
“What about you Matthew?” I asked.
“It really sucks,” Matthew replied screwing up his face.
“So you don’t play it any more?” I asked Matthew.
“Yes you do!” countered Justin indignantly.
“Not any, not any more,” he explained. “In the bigger classroom, the class play an’ they cheat!”
“They act like they know everything!” Adam added.
“In the 5/6, our book buddy class, they think they’re the legends of th’game,” Justin agreed.
“And so what do they do to you?” I asked.
“When we get dem out, they say, ‘I weren’t ready, I didn’t understand’,“ he explained with a frown.
“So they’re cheating?” I queried.
“Yeah,” Justin replied innocently.
“Justin, you’d be lucky to get a bumble bee out,” Adam sighed, rolling his eyes upwards.

The next time I met with the boys I asked them if they’d like to play a cricket game outside. (obs. A.K. 26.10.99) “Yeah! Woo Hoo!” were the unanimous replies as the boys jumped up and down on the spot with excitement, high fiving and bumping each other. I attempted to subdue their excitement enough for them to collect the cricket equipment from the classroom sports cupboard without overly disturbing the rest of the class and followed the bounding group down to the cricket nets. It was a freezing cold and windy day but that didn’t seem to dampen the boys’ reckless energy or excitement. As I watched the boys race to the nets, I quickened my pace to keep up with them, feeling just a little anxious about how the session would proceed in this outdoor context. Justin reached the nets first armed with the stumps and positioned them with serious precision at the far end of the nets, adjusting and inspecting them twice before he was satisfied. Adam had the bat and as he reached the cricket nets with a lively skid across the pitch followed by an overhead swing with the bat, he yelled, “I’m goin’ first!”

While the other boys didn’t seem to have a problem with allowing Adam to “go first” Matthew, Justin and Jack were all determined to be second. “I’m goin’ second!” Justin yelled, joining Adam to line up behind him, “I am!” shouted Matthew pushing in front of Justin. “No, you’re not, I am!” countered Jack jostling for second spot. I allowed the jostling and indignant “I ams!” to continue for a few moments. However, I could see that
a resolution would not be reached quickly. “Hey,” I yelled, attempting to silence them, “Hey!” I repeated as they looked towards me, momentarily giving me their attention. Ravi had been quietly watching the scene, “Why don’t we take turns from oldest to youngest?” he offered. “Okay, good idea Ravi,” I stated firmly, anxious to proceed with the game. “Adam, Matthew, Ravi, Justin and Jack,” I stated as I lined them up according to their ages.

“So what sort of rules are we going to have here?” I asked the boys. (b.a.g. 27, 26.10.99)
“Sharing!” Adam yelled, glaring at Justin.
“No wicket keeper,” Jack remarked.
“…and sharing!” Adam insisted.
“When you get out take it!” Justin offered looking at me.
“Oh, like you wouldn’t do that!” Adam sneered.
“Take it when you get out!” Justin repeated while Adam went over to the stumps to begin the game.
“But you won’t,” he yelled at Justin as he prepared himself for his first hit, deliberately whacking Justin’s carefully positioned stumps over with the bat in the process. “Kiss my arse!” he added as he swung the cricket bat behind his right shoulder, baseball style. “That’s a warning,” I told Adam quietly after I had approached him.
“Yeah,” he laughed in response as he picked up the stumps and re-positioned them.

I watched as the game began with Adam and Matthew batting alternatively and Justin bowling. Justin bowled the ball with as much overarm force as he could muster. Matthew complained when Justin bowled him out. “Justin wasn’t being fair, ’cos he’s letting the ball go really fast.” Adam attempted to hit the ball by leaving his crease and racing after it. On a few occasions he managed to hit the ball golf-style as it rolled on the ground towards him, to the sound of Matthew’s voice, “Plug it! Plug it!” The first time he scored, the ball flew down the hill as Jack ran after it, yelling, “I’m batting, I’m batting next!” “That’s a six!” Adam yelled, jumping up and down on the spot. “Sucked in Justin!”

Later, Adam had another turn at batting and positioned himself in a baseball stance with the cricket bat swung over his left shoulder. Jack was bowling. “Are we playing baseball or cricket?” he asked sarcastically.
“Are we playing baseball or cricket here?” Justin repeated, “Looks like we’re playing baseball.”
“Yeah, baseball,” Jack derided.
“That’s two hits gone,” Justin reminded Adam after he had bowled twice to Adam who had missed both times.
“Nah…” Adam began.
“Two hits gone,” maintained Justin as he bowled the next one to Adam.
“No,” Adam remarked, swiping the air with his bat but missing the ball again.
“Three hits gone,” Justin asserted with confidence.
“No…” Adam continued.
“Yes, you’ve hit it!” Justin yelled.
“But I didn’t hit the ball,” Adam retorted.
“Yeah, but that’s counted as a hit,” Justin responded.
“Oh yeah sure,” Adam sneered, “it doesn’ count unless I hit it,” he continued as Justin’s ball hit the stumps.
“Ha!” Justin laughed in jubilation. “You’re out!” “That’s good Justin, real good,” Matthew stated sarcastically.
“Justin you made me out and I’m angry,” Adam jibed.
“Justin thinks he knows everything,” Matthew declared to Justin. “You’re not perfect at everything Justin,” he added.
“I know I am,” Justin responded indignantly.
“I think you’re very dumb at everything,” Matthew scoffed.

“My bat!” Justin told Adam after he had bowled six balls to him. “My bat!” he repeated as he attempted to retrieve the bat from Adam. Adam responded by throwing the bat on to the ground in frustration away from Justin.
“Adam, that’s two warnings,” I told him as I picked up the bat and gave it to Justin.
“Adam’s gonna be in big trouble if he gets one more warning,” Justin remarked solemnly.
“Well, he’ll just have to go back to class,” I replied.
“I’m gonna be wicket keeper,” Adam decided as he positioned himself behind the stumps. “Strike one!” he yelled as Justin missed his first ball.
“No wicket keeper,” Jack yelled indignantly from the other end of the pitch, “there’s not allowed to be a wicket keeper!”
“An’ there’s no strikes in cricket, that’s baseball you’re talkin’ about,” Justin added.
“An’ there’s no wicket keeper,” Jack repeated.
“That’s strike two,” Adam insisted as Justin missed another ball.
“Strike two?” Jack queried. “There’s no strikes in cricket.”
“Who thinks there’s no strikes in cricket?” Justin asked.
“Me!” Jack shouted.
“There isn’t,” Justin maintained as Adam mimicked him, pulling faces behind him.
“Strikes are in baseball and there’s not allowed to be a wicket keeper!” he added swinging around to glare at Adam.

The session finished with Justin batting, concentration skewed his face into a grimace, “I’ll try to slog it!” he stated in determination, cricket posture poised ready to bat. As Jack bowled, Adam and Matthew laughed together conspiratorially, “Let’s see Justin make a fool of himself,” Adam jeered.
“Go as hard as you can!” Jack shouted as he bowled.
“Shot!” Justin yelled gleefully as he hit the ball into the air.
“Loser,” Adam muttered.
Matthew looked at me knowingly, “He’s doin’ that ‘cos Jack and Justin are the best,” he explained.

A couple of weeks later, the topic of cricket came up incidentally and for the last time during an affinity group session (b.a.g. 32, 10.11.99) while we were discussing the boys’ favourite games.
“We used to play cricket but we don’t play it no more,” Justin remarked.
“Yeah,” Adam stated defiantly, “because y’have to be de bossy boots! ’E was de bossy boots an’ no one wanted…” Adam insisted.
“No,” Justin interrupted.
“No,” Adam continued to argue, “because no one wanted t’play wiv you because you were bossing…”
“When we was out…” Justin interjected.
“…them around,” Adam continued, “an’ that’s why dey didn’t wan’ to play any more!”
“When we was out…” Justin repeated.
“…and y’found out dat um two people playin’ wasn’ very good so dat’s why we don’ play it any more,” Adam declared.
Justin can play football, he can hit a ball,” Mrs. W. remarked. “And he’ll always be able to do that,” Mr. A. added. “So that’s a good thing,” confirmed Mrs. W. “The older he gets the more advantage these skills will be,” Mr. A. noted, “because y’know in grade 5/6 those boys in the cricket team and the footy team y’know they’re the guys. They’re the ones to hang around with.” “That’s right, yeah,” Mrs. W. and Ms. C. agreed. “And he’s always playing basketball out there too,” Mr. A. added, “yeah so he’ll be y’know quite well placed because of that, whereas Matthew he’s not…” “Well he doesn’t, yeah he’s not involved in that sort of thing out of school hours,” Mrs. W. remarked. “And Adam on the other hand,” Mr. A. continued, “based on the ball skills side of things. Unless he does develop these skills he might become frustrated at not being one of the leaders.” “And potentially because of his learning problems,” Mrs. W. noted, “yeh I think, his behaviour will deteriorate as he goes through.” “Hmm,” Mr. A. pondered, “and particularly as the emphasis changes from stories and just general play. I mean Justin shows a little bit that counts for things but as they get older and y’know sporting ability really counts amongst boys it really does. Adam’s suddenly a couple of shades behind the others and he wants to be king pin well he’s gonna be left with a couple of choices. He either tries to learn from others or he says ‘this sucks, I’m not doing this’ and ah he decides to get aggressive, so what I need to do is punch you in the face. So they’ll be the choices he’ll be left with.” “That’s right, exactly,” Mrs. W. agreed. “Boxing,” Mr. A. added, “I wouldn’t have said would be a great choice for him ’cos um yes that’s leading him to act that way, yeah someone beats him to the ball he’s just gonna floor ’em.” (t.a.g. 19.11.99)

My observations during this time and until the end of my fieldwork noted consistent disharmony within the group. However, while conflict seemed to characterise many of the boys’ interactions, Adam, Matthew and Justin, in particular, were still drawn to each other in terms of their playground activities. “Justin continues his attempts to impress the others with his stories,” I wrote in my reflective journal one afternoon after an affinity group session, “but it seems that this leaves him wide open for the other boys to ‘cut him down to size’. The other boys, particularly Adam but also Matthew and Jack, seem to enjoy allying together in the belittlement of Justin.” (r.j. A.K. 09.11.99) The following text box contains data from a later affinity group session and vivifies this dynamic of belittlement.
“So what have you been doing lately Justin?” I asked at the beginning of one of our affinity group sessions.
“I went to Hobart on the weekend,” Justin offered.
“Yeah an’ that really sucks,” Adam retorted.
“Hobart really sucks,” Matthew agreed.
“He hasn’t been to Hobart,” Jack added disbelievingly.
“Haven’t ya?” Adam laughed.
“I have and…” Justin continued.
“I’ve been about 10 million,” Matthew interrupted.
“…um, we went up the bush,” Justin added.
“Wow that’s so good,” Adam said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.
“…and when we went up the bush an’ there was a calf,” Justin continued.
“Oh boy, I’ve got thousands of those,” Adam sighed.
“…and,” Justin added while Adam and Matthew talked over the top of him, “the calf kept on following us and so when we got up this hill the ute kept on sliding and it didn’t go the way we wanted it ‘cos it was muddy and we just about run into the horse.”
“Yeah, bull crap,” Adam retorted.
“Bull crap,” Matthew agreed.
“Oohhh sure,” Matthew sneered in disbelief.
“Sure oh sure yeah we believe you!” Adam added sarcastically.
“Do you think, do you think a horse could kill Justin?” Jack asked the others.
“Yes!” chorused Adam, Matthew and Jack in unison.
“The stallions could, the stallions could,” yelled Adam.
“They could, they could and probably…” agreed Jack.
“They could kick him in the face,” Matthew interjected.
“Smash ya,” Jack added.
“Yeah,” Adam concurred.
“They could buck them in the face,” Matthew declared.
“Like this they go ‘haaaa’,” Adam yelled as he stomped around the room. (b.a.g. 31, 09.11.99)

The following extended narrative differs slightly from the first five in that it reflects a more extended time period. In this regard, the narrative draws on and retraces data from earlier affinity group sessions. I Hate His Guts, tells the story of a series of related violent incidences.

4.6 Narrative 6: I Hate His Guts

Within the disorder of conflict and argument, the boys would sometimes harmonise their thinking and energies around particular issues. One particular area of harmony and congruence was a passion for hating Brian. “Beatin’ de shit outta Brian” was actually Adam’s obsession rather than the other boys’. However, Matthew and Justin really “hated his guts” too. Brian was a “fishface dork” who had been Adam’s “enemy” for two years. He showed off and screamed like a girl according to Adam. Whenever Adam had the chance he would practise his boxing skills on Brian, with Matthew and Justin in tow, boasting about his ‘conquests’. “I want to kill him,” Adam had told me through gritted teeth. “Me too,” Matthew had agreed. (b.a.g. 08, 13.08.99) While I was never witness to any violence related to this ongoing conflict, there were several particular incidents of
violence that were brought to my attention through discussion with the boys. The following narrative details three such incidents involving conflict between Adam, Brian, Matthew, Justin and a girl from another grade 1/2 class, Phoebe.

“Ah well first of all,” Adam told the group, commanding their attention, “guess who I bashed de crap out of?” (b.a.g. 30, 02.11.99)

“I know, fishface dork,” Matthew remarked looking at Adam.

“Bingo!” Adam shouted folding his arms across his chest with a smug look on his face.

“So what happened there?” I enquired.

“Ah, don’ know,” he started pausing for a moment, “well I bashed ‘is head in,” he continued matter-of-factly, arms still folded.

“He bashed ‘is head in,” Matthew agreed looking at me as he swung back on his chair.

“Ask Matthew, ‘e was there,” Adam interrupted turning to Matthew.

“He punched ‘im ‘round the face an’ all that,” Matthew chirped still swinging on his chair. Punched ‘im in the jaw,” Matthew continued.

“What happened after that?” I asked the boys.

“I had to go to Mr. T.’s office,” Adam remarked casually.

“And then what?” I queried. “What did he say?”

“Ah, don’ know,” Adam replied vaguely as he played with his shark tooth necklace.

“These uvver girls were involved an’ dey said dat I punched ‘em on de nose,” he established looking at me.

“You punched the girls on the nose?” I asked.

“That was Phoebe an’ Eliza,” Matthew offered nodding at Adam.

“No, ony Phoebe,” Adam decided.

“What, she said you punched her?” I enquired.

“Yes,” Adam told me.

“And did you?” I asked.

“Did ya?” Matthew repeated.

“Yes,” Adam confirmed, unperturbed.

“Because she was a cat claw,” Adam explained. “She had claws like out here,” he added, motioning the length of her ‘cat claws’ with one hand clawed at me.

“And she was fighting with you?” I asked.

“Was she attacking?” Matthew questioned.

“Um no,” he replied, “she was attackin’ Craig so I jus’ went bang.”

“So you were protecting Craig, were you?” I asked.
“Um Brian’s always got my girl,” Adam revealed. “And ’e thinks dat I’ve always got ’is girl, but he’s always got my girl the crap head.”

“Okay,” he continued after a short pause, “what really pisses me off always with Brian is he’s always got my girl, ah Zara. Yeah an’ another fing too, last year ’e got Jessica Kenny.”

“Was she your girlfriend?” I queried.

“Yeah, I almost had ’er,” Adam explained, “I got really pissed off, ’cos Brian shows off to the girls all the time. All the girls like ’im ’cos he shows off wiv his tricks n’that, he goes, ‘Watch me BABY!’”

“So that’s why you don’t like him much?” I asked.

“Well another thing too ’e gets, he’s always annoying, ’e always acts like a chicken an’ um ’e always screams like a girl and ’e thinks ’e’s so good,” continued Adam.

“Yeah, he screams like a girl,” Jack agreed.

“Mrs. Waaallkeer!” Justin screeched in a high-pitched voice, imitating Brian.

“Yeah, he screams like a girl, like he shows off n’that...” continued Adam a few moments later.

“I seen him scream like a girl in the toilet,” Justin interjected.

“Yeah and for ‘chasies’ he goes ‘arhhhh arhhhh arhhhh’,” Adam added with a high-pitched shriek. “And he goes ‘arhhhh, don’t get me, I’m running!’ Arsehole!”

“And you don’t like that?” I queried.

“No,” Adam established with a frown.

“He’s an arsehole,” Justin agreed.

“He’s a bitch,” Matthew added.

“Yeah and a bitch,” Justin reiterated.

“A son of a bitch an’ I say, what I would say, I say ‘hey Brian, I know you are but what am I y’no good arsehole’,” Adam retorted.

“...and I go ‘you’re a dickhead’,” Justin asserted. “I hate his guts!” he added surely.

“He showed everyone dis big scar because um ’e had to had his intenticles cut out,” Adam noted.

“Appendix maybe?” I offered.

“Yeah,” Adam confirmed.

“Yuck!” Justin retorted in disgust.

“...um what made ’im go dizzy so he got ’em cut out,” Adam continued.

“Did he show you his scar?” I enquired.

“Nuh, he showed all the girls in the class,” Adam remarked.

“Yuck!” Justin repeated.

“...to impress dem wiv this...” Adam continued.

“Big scar!” Justin yelled.

“Impress them? Do you think he impressed them?” I asked.

“Well if y’ask me all de boys said ‘what’s he got dat I haven’ got?’” Adam replied. “An’ I said ’one scar, two dickhead, free dickhead, four dickhead, five dickhead, six dickhead...”

“A million, a million dickheads!” Jack interjected.

“...seven dickhead, eight dickhead...” Adam continued.

“And one bitch,” Matthew interrupted.

“Yeah an’ one bitch, yeah an’ six thousan’ dickheads!” exclaimed Justin.

“He’s two million dickheads actually,” Jack decided.
“Yeah!” Justin agreed enthusiastically.
“So you don’t like it how he tries to impress the girls?” I asked.
“No,” Adam stated firmly. “I hate his guts! ‘E better watch out ‘cos I go ta boxin’, I know how to hold a punch.”
“Yeah,” Matthew yelled in agreement.

“So you don’t like Brian much either?” I asked turning to Matthew.
“Nuh,” he grimaced, “it starts with ‘D’. It starts with ‘D’, ‘H’.”
“DH?” queried Jack.
“Two words,” Matthew added.
“You called him that in the school grounds,” Justin interjected.
“That’s what I, that’s what I…” Matthew hesitated. “I don’t say it but that’s what I think,” he reconciled.
“I call ‘im fish faces when I see ‘im,” Justin stated with certainty.
“Brian’s a big show off,” Matthew remarked.
“Yeah, he shows off with the girls, he goes, ‘Yeah baby, yeah, watch me do this trick an’ this trick’. He just about does, undoes, all his buttons,” Justin explained standing and swinging his hips in imitation.
“Does he?” I asked.
“Yeah,” Matthew confirmed with a nod.
“…and goes,” Justin continued, “jumps off stuff and all these girls watch him and think he’s sweet and all that.”
“Do they?” I questioned. “Do they think you’re sweet Justin?”
“Nuh,” Justin answered, flatly, “I never do it.”
“Oh, so the girls think he’s sweet ‘cos he does all that stuff?” I asked.
“Yeah and when he comes off the bars he goes, ‘Kiss me when I get down’,” Justin explained with a smirk.
“Yeah,” Matthew agreed.
“Yeah,” repeated Justin.
“That’s silly,” Jack remarked, “that’s silly isn’t it, ‘Kiss me bla bla bla’,” he added in a sing-song voice.
“Yeah!” Justin and Matthew chorused in unison.

“Yeah, he’s a show off ‘cos he jumps on really um high like high um places and girls um like think he gets sexy,” Ravi replied.
“Adam told me that he jumps off on a chair like this,” Jack interrupted excitedly bouncing off his chair and jumping up and down on the spot. “He jumps like this and then he goes, a a and then he says and then Adam said he goes ‘KISS ME BABY!’” he added laughing.
“And then he’s up the top of the bars and goes, ‘I’m the best boy and you’re the best girls I’ve ever had, will you marry me?’” Justin continued, as Matthew and Jack laughed loudly.
“Well I can do better tricks than him,” Matthew confirmed with certainty. “He can only go up the ladder and go back down.”
“And you can do better tricks can you?” I enquired.
“Yeah, ‘cos I can go across the bars,” Matthew explained.
“Yeah,” Justin smirked, “and when he gets up the top he goes, ‘I’m the best boy and you’re my best girlfriend’, and he climbs back down on the ladder.”
“So what do you think of that?” I asked.
“He’s a dork!” Justin exclaimed loudly.
“...and sometimes he kisses them on the cheek,” Matthew added.
“Yeah and he just about pulls his knickers down,” Justin interjected scornfully.
“He doesn’t wear boxers like me,” Matthew stated.
“He’s a really big jerk,” Matthew replied with contempt.
“Yeah,” Justin agreed. “He’s an idiot.”
“How ’bout he’s a girl or something,” Jack offered.
“Sometimes I just go up and punch ’im, sometimes I punch ’im in the guts,” Matthew asserted.
“Hey, when Brian’s not with his gang, I just go punch him in the nuts and punch him in the eye ball.” Justin added punching the air. “And, and when I see them in line I go, ‘You’re suckers!’” he exclaimed, sticking up his ‘rude’ finger.

The second and third violent incidents occurred around the same time a few weeks later. One of these violent incidents involved a conflict between Matthew and Phoebe. In Matthew’s absence, Adam, Jack, Justin and Ravi discussed the incident. (b.a.g. 38, 06.12.99)

“It’s what happened, I know what,” Jack began with a frown, “when Matthew got into trouble, oh like there was this girl and she scratched Matthew,” he remarked thoughtfully.
“Yeah,” Justin agreed, nodding in earnest.
“On the face,” Jack added.
“Phoebe,” Justin interrupted with certainty.
“...and Matthew was crying,” continued Jack, “because she pulled his hair and well I saw it ’cos Mr. A., and Mr. T. um were growling at him,” he explained.
“At Matthew?” I questioned.
“The girl was the one that actually started it,” Jack frowned.
“So what did Matthew do?” I asked.
“Yeah Phoebe,” Justin agreed with Jack.
“...’cos she scratched him,” Jack continued with a slow nod.
“He had this big red mark on him,” Jack told the others, his eyes squinting as he lightly touched his face.
“He went up to Craig,” Justin interjected as he stood up to demonstrate the scratching incident. “And said we’re just playin’ a game of ‘chasies’ and Phoebe said, ‘Don’t touch Craig or I’ll bash ya’,” and then she went like this, she went, ‘chuew, chuew, chuew’,” he explained, waving his arms and clawing the air.
“And what did Matthew do after that?” I enquired.
“Bashed her up,” Justin responded flatly.
“I saw a bit of it, I saw a bit of it,” interjected Jack, “when they were goin’ yeah, I’m gonna bash you up.”

“I just saw, only saw the bit where like Matthew was out there, it was like, out in the passage, and then Phoebe went ‘chuew, chuew’ like that,” Ravi reported while demonstrating an elaborate scratching motion. “Yeah, it was her fault,” he added.

“She beat ’im,” Adam resolved, “y’should, y’should see all dese nail marks in ‘is face, ’e had t’um go an’, ’e had to ’ave stiches on ‘is face. Um yeah an’ ’e’s got um a really sore leg.”

“So he can’t walk,” Ravi added.

“So why was he fighting?” I asked.

“I dunno,” Adam responded absently, “but I didn’ help ’im ‘cos I didn’ wanna get in any more trouble.”

“I’ve been, I’ve bashed someone up,” Justin remarked to no one in particular. “I just bash their bum,” he added.

“Oh bull Justin, you come over to me and let me bash ’em up,” Adam responded.

Matthew was also involved in another violent incident that day. According to Mrs. W. a boy in her class, Ben, asked Adam, Matthew and Justin to punch Brian’s head in because of something that Brian had done to him a few days prior. “So when I went out on duty,” Mrs. W. informed me, “I saw Justin, Matthew and a few others in other classes, and Adam, laying into Brian. So I just sent them straight to the office ‘cos anything physical like that they don’t even get a warning, just straight into the office. And so Mr. T. rounded all of the people up who were involved and there ended up being about half a dozen. Yeah, so they went to Mr. T. and he got to the bottom of it after a lot of roaring and just saying ‘What happened? Did you punch? Did you touch?’ Y’know this sort of thing and they’d start to say, ’I but, but, but’ and he’d say, ’No, did you touch?’”

“With the group that were in there?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Mrs. W. replied, “Justin’s brother was involved in it as well, his eye came up like a balloon so someone really hammered him and it wasn’t until some time later that Mr. T. came in and actually asked for Ben. So y’know this was little tiny blue eyed, tiny little tot Ben, butter wouldn’t melt in its mouth,” she concluded, shaking her head. (int. K.W. 01.12.99)

“So Adam, the other day I heard you had a little trouble with Brian,” I commented (b.a.g. 39, 06.12.99) in Matthew’s absence.

“Yep,” Justin interjected looking at Adam.

“Yep,” Adam confirmed.

“Fishface, we bashed him, we hate him,” Justin sneered, screwing up his face and clenching his fists.

“Yeah we hate his guts, we bashed the crap out of him,” Adam remarked casually.

“Yeah he got me down on the ground…” Justin began.

“Yeah,” Adam interrupted, “and hey Justin, tell Ms. Keddie how I beat Brian.”

“Um he, Brian got me down on the ground,” Justin began as he stood up, “and hurt me head so Adam got up on this, pretend Adam was Brian,” Justin continued as he went over to Adam and pretended to sit on him. “He got him like this and went and got him in the head and went ‘puew’,” he described as he demonstrated a punch to the torso.

“I jus’ bashed da shit out of ’im,” Adam confirmed.
“I beg your pardon,” Jack stated with disapproval.
“Yeah, dumb Benny boy told us to do it,” Justin explained.
“Hmm,” Adam agreed.
“And so you did it for him?” I queried.
“Yep,” Adam replied surely.
“Nuh,” Justin stated.
“I did,” Adam maintained.
“Who did you do it for?” I asked Justin.
“Gettin’ attention,” Justin giggled.
“You got some attention didn’t you,” I noted.
“Yeah,” Justin replied still grinning.
“I shoved ‘is, I shoved sand in ‘is mouth,” Adam interrupted. “Yeah an’ I punched de crap outta him, ‘cos ‘e had Justin, an’ I said you’re not my frien’ so come an’ get me an’ I’ll show ya who’s gonna be hurt.”
“He does that to me,” Ravi remarked.
“You were protecting Justin were you?” I asked.
“Yep,” Adam confirmed.
“He always does that to me too,” Ravi repeated. “Adam’s a pretty good friend ‘cos when a grade six is up to me he gets in the way and bashes ‘em in the head.”

“So the three of you went together to…” I began.
“Yep,” Adam interjected.
“…you’re told by um someone to go and bash someone up and then off you go…” I continued.
“Yep,” Adam interrupted, “been there, done that,” he added dismissively.
“And then what happened?” I asked.
“Mrs. W. came up ‘cos Kate went an’ dobbed,” Adam replied.
“Kate went and dobbed,” I repeated, “and Mrs. W. came up, what did she say?”
“Yep,” Adam answered, “she said ‘GET TO MR. T.’S OFFICE RIGHT NOW!”

“And off you went?” I enquired.
“Nuh,” Adam slurred, “I didn’, I told de bitch ta get stuffed!”
“No you didn’t,” I stated.
“Nah, I went to, I went to de office,” he continued.

“She’s the worst (relief teacher) in the universe,” Ravi remarked frowning at me.
“You’re angry,” interrupted Justin, “she’s angry and she won’t even let us talk to go in class.”
“Yup,” Adam agreed. “She’s a meany, she’s a meany ol’ bum, sometimes.”
“I might as well stick it up ‘er,” Adam retorted.
“You shoulda told her ta get stuffed. Now Ravi you remember…” he continued.
“Get stuffed!” Justin repeated.
“…e’cep’ e’cep’ for teachers,” Adam added. “If anyone tries to hurt you…”
“Yes, yes, yes,” Ravi nodded, “I know I ask you to bash them up.”
“Yes,” Adam confirmed.
“So what’s that Adam?” I questioned. “You do that for your friends do you?”
“Yup,” Adam replied.
“So you’ve done it for Justin?” I queried.
“Mm hmm,” Adam assented.
“Yep, for revenge,” interjected Justin.
“For Matthew?” I asked.
“Um yeah but not right now ‘cos at now Mrs. W. said I’d get any, into any more trouble for the rest of da year she’ll ‘ave my dad down ‘ere,” he responded soberly. “Oh I’m terrified,” he added sarcastically. (b.a.g. 42, 09.12.99)
“And then what? You went too didn’t you Justin?” I asked.
“Got growled at, that was awesome!” Justin remarked smugly.
“You got growled at? Did Mr. T. find out what happened?” I queried.
“Yep, kicked our arses,” Adam confirmed.
“And then you had to get punished?” I asked.
“Yep and ’ad detention, loved it, NOT!” Adam responded. “But I don’t care as long as ’e gets in trouble.”
“As long as Brian does too?” I questioned.
“Yep,” Adam stated with a nod.
“Did Brian get in trouble?” I enquired.
“Yep,” Adam stated again.
“What else did y’reckon,” Justin retorted, looking at me.
“Well I didn’t know, I don’t know what it’s about you see,” I explained.
“Bashin’ people,” Justin confirmed.

“Well,” Kate began, “um boys are sometimes nice and sometimes they are funny and sometimes um they are very very funny ’cos they’re being silly. But,” she added with a frown, “sometimes when they’re together, they get a little over silly and sometimes just sometimes they just be silly and sometimes try to hurt you,” she explained.
“Yes,” Alexandra agreed. “The bad thing about boys is that they always fight.”
“Yes,” Jane and Sally concurred.
“Especially my brother,” Jane added.
“I think I know why boys sometimes fight,” Sally remarked after a moment. “Because um these silly people make action toys, these silly people invent action toys and put them on ads so the boys think ‘oh yeah, that’s cool, I want to be cool so I’ll go and get it’. Then they just try and be cool just because of their action toys and they copy what it does.”
“And fight,” Alexandra added.
“Like did you see that ad when there was these boys when there was these big boxing things?” she asked me solemnly.
“Wrestling?” I asked.
“Yeah and you see a lot of them on the weekend and then they think that they want to be real cool so they go and buy the toy,” Sally asserted.
“I agree,” Jane stated seriously.
“Like there’s a movie on,” Alexandra added, “and they watch the movie and there’s fighting on the movie.”
“Yes, yes,” Jane and Sally concurred.
“And they say ‘I want to be cool like them’,” Kate declared.
“Yeah,” Sally continued, “and they watch like T.V. and like there’s kid shows that are real violent.”
“Yeah,” the other girls nodded.
“…and they copy it and say, ‘Yeah I wanna be cool’,” Sally maintained.
“And, and kick,” Alexandra added.
“If there’s an ad of Action Toys in the shop they like when they do something they do it straight after like a karate kick,” Jane remarked as she demonstrated her karate kick. (g.a.g. 26.11.99)
“I just want to talk about the incident last week with Adam and Matthew and Justin and I think Ben. I’m just wanting to know how you dealt with that, how it was resolved?” I asked Banrock principal Mr. T.

“Okay well we looked at each one and we ended up with more kids than you might have seen of to start with,” Mr. T. began. “We had a kid who instigated it all and who had taken it back a week or so, but he wasn't game to do his own settling up - he got other kids to do it. So we've got the instigator and those that went to do what they were told to do.”

“The group?” I asked.

“Yep, well the three of them, Adam, Matthew and Justin,” Mr. T. explained. “Then we had the ones who butted in on behalf of the victim and then we had the victim himself who fought back and then we had another one who was in the background just agitating and so on. We had a huge variation on things so we started off with the one who was doing the agitating as being the smallest amount so he actually did one recess time in ‘time out’, up to the one who instigated it all but was behind the scenes. He did three lunch hours in time out and lots of firm talking to from Mr. A. and I. The rest were just ranked in between.”

“What did you talk to them about,” I asked.

“We talked to the victim along the lines of, ‘What could you have done in the early stages to get help for yourself?’ rather than saying, ‘Come on, come on, you wanna have a go?’” replied Mr. T. “Yeah so I mean it was so convoluted,” he continued, “it really was and it ranged from the messengers who saw what was happening and realised it was wrong and went to duty staff, right through to the one who orchestrated it all but didn’t take part. So, it was complicated and so was the list of punishments. It was just, ‘right this was your role’, and we always make them go through it and my stock phrase to them is, ‘Well are you guilty? Did you do it?’ And if they say, ‘yes’, well that gets rid of all that other garbage that you don’t need to carry. Once they've actually verbalised, ‘yes I did that set of things’, well you don't have to keep going through it and so you can start talking about ‘okay you said you’ve done that, now what’s a suitable consequence?’ Or you can say, ‘these are the consequences’, as well as giving them advice on what they should have done and what they shouldn’t have done so yeah it was a bit complicated but it was over and done with in about twenty minutes.”

“It’s perfect timing that it’s happened this time of year,” Mr. T. told me later, “when we’re working out classes and we can have a look at it and see if they should split up. Also, if a group starts to raise its head then we move to Trudy who’s a resource teacher, the guidance girl. We may run anger management groups and stuff like that. So over a period of time we’ve run assertiveness groups, we’ve run anger management groups and social skills groups. That’s where you look about how might you handle this situation that arises again or how do you behave so you don’t create this kind of situation. But I don’t think that they (Adam, Matthew and Justin) are in the general run of things huge problems." (int. G.T. 09.12.99)

“...they go alright,” Mr. A. began, “I just sort of keep them on track. They just get carried away, they’re set a task and they’ll sort of take it to the next level which is a little bit more physical. It might involve a bit of running around and might end up with a bit of a wrestle or a, you know, or start laughing at the top of their voices and completely off. So you know that...”
“They’re not actually ‘out of control’ kids though,” Mrs. W. interjected.
“No, no,” Mr. A. agreed.
“I mean, they’re not what I would consider ‘behaviour problems’,” Mrs. W. added, “could get that way. Yeah, but you know you just nip it in the bud before it starts.”
“I mean all I need to do is basically yell across the room ‘Boys!’ and they look and that’s about it,” Mr. A. asserted.
“Yeah,” Ms. C. concurred, “I haven’t needed to manage much behavioural issues at all. The only time that I’ve ever needed to speak with them has been while I’m talking about something or introducing something,” she added. “They’ll just giggle and carry on and it’s just a simple case of choose to sit sensibly or choose to sit in another place if you can’t sit together and listen and that’s generally enough.”
“I’m a bit the same,” agreed Mr. A.
“No, look they’re of the age where you don’t need to be too heavy with them,” Mrs. W. explained. “They respond readily and I mean they want to please me. I’m their teacher, they’re only little kids and they want to please me. All I have to say to them, is look down to the ground and say ‘I’m disappointed’ and they’re devastated and they lift their game straight away. I mean, I’ve got this ‘time out’ chair at the back of the classroom and the only person I’ve had on there all year is Billie ’cos she drives me insane with her talking.”
“Yeah, they’re still little boys,” Mr. A. agreed, “and with Adam you assume that he’s being forced to grow up probably quicker than he really probably wanted to. He’s still a little boy and still has emotional needs. He’s around with the men and he still wants cuddles from his mum.”

“You gonna split them up or keep them together next year?” Mr. A. asked Mrs. W. a short time later.
“I’m splitting them. I’d really like Adam to go into a 3/4,” replied Mrs. W.
“Yeah, in an older class,” Mr. A. agreed.
“Because,” continued Mrs. W., “I think he needs to come down a cog or two.”
“Yeah, he needs to be stepped on,” Mr. A. assented. “He does need to socially and that’s his greatest problem really.”
“Academically he’s going to really battle though,” Mrs. W. added, “if he comes down a cog or two socially he might be a bit more focussed academically.”
“Oh definitely yeah,” Mr. A. concurred. “He needs to have some strong people around him and he needs to have some people who just say, ‘Now look y’know that’s not right’.”

“I think Adam will be one child who later on if teachers choose to confront him in the yard and make it a confrontation or a ‘stand off’ they’ll come off second best,” Mr. A. added later. “Because,” he continued, “Adam will be the one who will quickly give them a mouthful of abuse and walk off. Someone will wear that aggression shortly, I reckon.”
“That’s right, yes,” Mrs. W. agreed, “that’s not the tack to take with Adam.”
“Whereas it would take a lot longer for Justin or Matthew to ever…” Mr. A. began.
“Hmm, that’s what I sense with Adam,” Ms. C. interjected, “and that’s why whenever I’ve needed to talk with him I always find a way of making it a very private.”
“Yeah and don’t make it confrontational,” Mrs. W. added.
“A quiet word in the positive of ‘I know you’re capable of…’ and that’s all I need to say,” Ms. C. continued. “Just like you were saying with the wanting to please type thing and like you were saying like um yeah just he knows, like he knows what’s going on.” (t.a.g. 19.11.99)
4.7 Reflective notes

This chapter has (re)presented the study’s data as a research story. Within a poststructural framework, the six chronological narratives, reflecting the entire six month data collection period, were shaped through an illumination of the peer group’s interactional dynamics concerning language, power and the production of meaning. These narratives, while primarily based on the boys’ affinity group sessions, sought to vivify the intertextuality and richness of the research through juxtaposition of the many voices within the study’s data. In this sense, relevances in the form of similar and differing interpretations and lines of thought were drawn from other texts and contexts, interwoven into the research story in an attempt to reflect its multi-vocality.

The research story began with an account of an early affinity group session organised around the boys’ sharing of their favourite toys. Adam’s prominence within the group, featured in Your Truck Sucks, manifest in his dramatic and attention gaining stories and demonstrations. The boys listened intently to Adam’s boxing triumphs and tribulations, his swag of silver and gold medals, his championship belts and his fifty-seven nose bleeds. They watched attentively as he demonstrated his boxing moves, dramatically “smashing de jaw line” with his rhino and rabbit punches. Your Truck Sucks also featured Justin’s distress and eventual withdrawal from participation in the session, partly resulting from Adam’s disparagement of him. Justin was informed that his toy truck “sucked”.

A concern for Adam’s impact on the other boys informed the basis of the subsequent narrative, Who Dares Wins. Preceding this narrative were observations of Adam, Matthew and Jack’s collective disparagement of Justin; Adam’s violent additions to Matthew’s self-portrait drawing; Matthew’s frustration at Adam’s playground ball monopoly, and his despair at not being “as good as Adam” at basketball. The narrative Who Dares Wins featured a group discussion on the topic ‘dares’, a favourite pursuit involving both Adam and Matthew. This narrative detailed the dare-devil antics of these two boys. How, for example, Matthew “nearly wet his pants” when Adam dared him to do something “really scarewy”. How Matthew was a “chicken” and an “idiot” because
he was unable to perform Adam’s “super duper” dare, and how the threat of being called a “girl” or a “chicken” was sufficient motivation behind the performance of these daring stunts. Adam’s intricate drawing of his “dare” was of particular interest to the boys in this narrative, gaining the attention and admiration of most of the group. Matthew and Justin demonstrated their interest and admiration through their continual attempts to copy Adam’s work, with Matthew eventually managing to replicate the more prominent aspects of Adam’s drawing, despite his ardent protests and increasing aggression.

Another of the boys’ favoured activities, football, was the focus of the next narrative, *It's More Than a Game*. In this narrative, the boys’ understandings of football’s appeal were presented with its violence, toughness and lack of emotion regarded highly. You can “bash shit out of people” and “hurt people and make blood go on them” the boys told us. Indeed, Ravi’s dislike of football’s violence and his participation in soccer were belittled as “sissy” and ‘girl-like’. Adam, Matthew and Justin also characterised their image of the archetypal football hero as celebrating his sporting victories with “lotsa girlfriends”, beer, drunkenness and “smashing things”. A dislike for girls in general emerged within this narrative, with Adam and Justin stressing particular distaste for “stupid gutes” or “chubba chubs” and their preference to “thin” girls with “sexy legs” like Britney Spears. The topic of risk-taking was explored a second time in *It's More Than a Game* through the boys’ drawings, with Adam’s detailed artwork again gaining the admiration of the group. This time Ravi managed to reproduce the more prominent aspects of Adam’s drawing.

The direction of the fourth narrative was shaped by my wish to explore the boys’ collective ‘free-play’ behaviour. In *That’s a Bullet Belt*, the boys were supplied with plastic construction materials and asked to assemble an item of their choice. Amid the clanging hub of activity, the boys wrestled for that special construction piece to create their bazookas, gun-firing robots, barbell weights, bullets and machine guns. Justin began to make a “crown” but, after suggestions from Adam and Matthew, changed his crown into a bullet belt. Adam’s ‘iron pumping’ sexualised display had the boys rolling about the floor in fits of laughter and developed into a dramatic play fight between Adam and Matthew over the possession of a fictitious girlfriend. Following Adam’s lead, Matthew and Jack took turns ‘shooting’ me. “We’re gonna shoot your head off! ... ’cos
you’re a girl!” they told me. The photos of the boys’ gun-toting and ‘muscle-man’ poses, included throughout That’s a Bullet Belt, captured the boys’ excitement and their keenness to share their construction efforts for the camera. Indeed, this excitement developed into pandemonium as the boys pushed and shoved each other for prime position in front of the camera.

The boys’ interest in cricket was explored in the fifth narrative. In particular, The Cricket Season detailed the conflict and contention experienced by the group through participation in this sport. Physical altercations, arguments over rules and fairness, disparaging remarks and the exclusion of others, characterised the group’s involvement in this game. From Adam and Matthew’s perspective, it was Justin’s “bossiness” that was presented as most problematic. Indeed, Adam firmly believed that “cricket sucked” because Justin was so “bossy”. The disordered and competitive cricket game mid-way through the narrative illuminated the nature of this conflict within the group. Stumps were knocked over, bats were thrown, cricket knowledge was questioned and disparaged. Despite teacher intervention in the group’s construction of a set of rules, Matthew and Jack eventually agreed with Adam that cricket “sucked”, with all of the boys deciding to withdraw from playing the game.

The final narrative featured the group’s passion for hating Adam’s enemy, Brian. I Hate His Guts detailed the boys’ accounts of, and justifications for, several violent incidents involving Adam, Matthew and Justin. Seething hostility, clenched fists and screwed up faces characterised talk of Brian. Adam’s hatred, in particular was clearly and repeatedly asserted throughout the narrative. Among other things, Adam expressed a desire to “kill” Brian and “bash de crap out of” him. Matthew and Justin also expressed similar malice towards Adam’s enemy. Matthew, for example told of “punching (Brian) in the guts”, Justin of punching him “in the nuts” and “eyeball”. The boys thought Brian was a “dork”, “jerk”, “arsehole”, “dickhead”, “bitch”, “chicken” and “girl”. They despised his ‘girl-like’ behaviour and, paradoxically, how he always “showed off to the girls”. The culmination of this hatred was evidenced in the three boys’ participation in group violence against Brian. This attack, led by Adam, was detailed mid-way through the narrative and was a serious enough offence for the boys to be sent straight to the
principal’s office. A concern with “suitable consequences” for individual degrees of guilt characterised the principal’s response to this matter, while off-handed mockery of the school’s authority structures characterised Adam’s response to this intervention.

The research story, (re)presented in this chapter, including the six narratives and all juxtaposed text constitutes the data gathered in the study.
Chapter 5
Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents my interpretation of the research story. Within the theoretical and analytic frame of feminist poststructural theory, drawing on elements of group socialisation theory and gay poststructural theory, my understandings of the data are delineated. The chapter is organised around the study’s three research questions. The first two research questions, regarding the dominant practices and understandings of masculinities within the boys’ peer group and how these practices and understandings are shaped and regulated, are the foci of sections 5.1 and 5.2.

Section 5.1 involves analysis of the dispersion of power within the boys’ peer group: in particular, the significance of leadership positionings in constructing, shaping and regulating the group’s dominant discourses commodifying physical dominance and violence, physical risk and heterosexist perceptions of females and femininity. In this regard, Adam’s position within the group is examined in relation to how he establishes and maintains his leadership through practices of self-legitimation. Adam’s attention-seeking behaviours and assertions of dominance in the form of bragging and displays of bravado and the strategies he applies to silence or belittle the other boys are thus analysed. Section 5.1 also examines how the peer group actively (re)legitimates Adam as leader, by allowing him to dominate and monopolise the group and through emulating his behaviour.

Section 5.2 investigates the dispersion of power between groups, manifest in the group’s essentialising of Adam’s subjectivities in solidarity or alliance against non-group members. This section has two areas of focus. The first area examines how group solidarity and legitimation occurs through the boys’ belittlement, mockery and physical violence against Brian. The second area inspects the group’s alliance against girls and women in relation to the boys’ efforts to differentiate themselves from females and ‘female-like’ behaviour. My interpretation of the boys’ denigration and objectification of
females as understood within an oppositional framework of compulsory heterosexuality is described here.

Section 5.3 interprets the peer group’s discourses as located within the broader institutional context of the school. The teachers’, principal’s and girls’ understandings of the boys’ behaviours within the school’s authority and disciplinary structures are explored. The focus of section 5.4 is an explication of the boys’ dominant understandings as these are situated within competitive sporting culture as bodily expressions of masculinity. The last section of the chapter (5.5) attends to the study’s third research question and, in this regard, delineates resistances and contestations to the peer group’s dominant understandings. This section identifies areas of disunity and resistance to the group’s dominant discourses and analyses the group’s implicit and explicit contestation of, and disruption to, Adam’s leadership and dominance and the boys’ resistance to the adoption of, and participation in, the group’s dominant discourses.

In drawing on the seemingly contradictory frames of feminist poststructural theory and group socialisation theory in analysing the data, the study’s methodological position is informed by the work of Seidman (1993), Fuss (1989) and Elam (1994). As explained in Chapter Three with regard to the poststructural problematising of identity, the study views a purely anti-identity logic and the refusal to “anchor experience in identifications” (Seidman 1993: 130) as potentially incoherent and constitutive of a weak politic of, to repeat Seidman’s words, “disruptive performance” (1993: 135) that forfeits positive social change. To return to Fuss’ (1989: 1) line of argument: if “essentialism is essential to social constructionism” - indeed “subtends the very idea of constructionism” (1989: 5), then it must be strategically deployed to displace essence. The study’s analysis, interpretation and discussion of the research story in the subsequent chapters thus reflect Fuss’ (1989: 13) view that “we can never truly get beyond essentialism”. In this regard my analysis and discussion, conceiving of essentialism and poststructuralism as dependent rather than incompatible analytics, strategically engages an ‘essentialist’ position that presupposes but strengthens the poststructural position in ways of interventional value. Specifically, this analytic engages the efficacy of identity politics by providing a base for poststructural deconstruction – a crucial point from which to
break up the seemingly fixed line of power unifying ‘identity(ies)’. This frame of understanding allows ‘essence’ to be deployed in a way that exposes its fragility.

The study’s essentialist position, however, in no way “depends on any fixed or interior values intrinsic to the sign but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produce it” (Fuss 1989: 13). Thus, while my frame of analysis, in attempting to capture the acute potency of groupness in shaping masculinities through identifying collective and hegemonic behaviours and practices, necessarily crystallises ‘the boys’ and ‘the peer group’, this crystallisation suggests a momentary essence, or ‘groundless solidarity’ (Elam 1990) that is historically contingent, partial and incomplete - constantly subject to change and redefinition. It is acknowledged that the study’s use of essence, however qualified will sit uncomfortably with purist versions of the poststructural anti-identity logic. The conflicting debate between the strengths of identity politics, on the one hand, and the efficacy of the poststructuralist insistence of deconstructing the idea of identity, on the other, has been underway since the 1970s (Weedon 1999). Within the context of the usefulness and applicability of feminist poststructural analysis, particularly in relation to exploiting the theory’s full political potential, it is the study’s clear conviction that this issue requires further debate and discussion.

5.1 The dispersion of power within the boys’ peer group

The organisation and dispersion of social power within the boys’ peer group is interpreted to be the key dominant practice, shaping and regulating the boys’ masculine subjectivities*. Recognising and fitting in with the implications of this dispersion of power is also interpreted as critical in enabling the boys’ agency within this peer context (Davies & Banks 1991). In this regard, the boys’ peer group subjectivities are seen as contextual and highly contingent upon the group’s dynamics. My interpretation of the data is guided by these conceptualisations and leads to analysing the interactions of the boys’ peer group in relation to the dynamics of social power. I am also guided by Harris’

*Use of the term ‘subjectivity(ies)’ throughout this Chapter refers, after Weedon (1987), to the boys’ conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and desires, their sense of themselves and the ways through which they understand themselves in relation to the world.
thoughts on the hierarchical nature of groups in relation to ‘attention structure’, in particular her understandings of the significance of leadership in shaping group behaviour. To these ends, the way social power is continuously organised in relation to the control and deference assigned to the group’s leader is interpreted as critical in (re)constituting the group’s practices and subjectivities, and in determining which competing masculine discourses become dominant and which are marginalised (Brown 1994).

The following discussion interprets the data (re)presentation through examining the discursive constitution, reproduction and implications of leadership positionings within the boys’ peer group. In this regard, my analysis seeks to foreground the language practices seen as constructing and regulating leadership and the dispersion of social power within the group.

5.1.1 Leadership within the group

Consistent with Harris’ argument, equating greater age and maturity with higher status and popularity in children’s peer groups, Adam, as the oldest and most mature group member, is positioned as leader. Adam’s positioning as leader affords him immense privileges. It is Adam who implicitly and explicitly constructs and regulates the dominant subjectivities and discourses of the group through his definitions and conceptions of ‘desirous’ and ‘non-desirous’ behaviour. Adam actively positions himself with the social power assigned to being a leader amongst his peers, with the organisation and dispersion of this power establishing the group’s attention structure (Harris 1998) and actively positioning the other boys as secondary to his leadership. In this regard, Adam’s leadership behaviours are seen as highly contingent upon, and comparative to, the other boys’ subordination.

Adam’s self-legitimation as leader is (re)constituted through specific language practices which work to shape and regulate the group’s social ‘reality’. Centred on gaining attention from the group, the continual use of these language practices work to (re)legitimate Adam’s leadership and subjectivities through the domineering strategies associated with monopolising the discussion and positioning himself as expert. Adam
also (re)legitimates his leadership by way of validating his subjectivities at the expense of the other boys through language practices which work to silence or belittle. Adam’s multiple practices of self-legitimation thus work in a self-perpetuating fashion to shape and regulate the dynamics of the group and (re)construct a hierarchical social order (Brown 1994). His roguish and daring stories, bragging and dramatic displays of bravado position him at the top of the group’s attention structure, thus perpetuating his power and (re)legitimating his subjectivities within the group. This positioning allows his silencing and belittlement of the other boys to carry validity and to shape and regulate the subjectivities of the group.

5.1.1.1 Language practices of self-legitimation

The narrative *Your Truck Sucks* introduces us to Adam’s position of power within the group. Through the language practices of bragging, dramatic descriptions and displays of bravado, Adam takes every opportunity during this early session to assert his dominance. Adam successfully positions himself as leader and expert, commanding the attention of the group and legitimating his subjectivities as valid. He engages his audience and monopolises the discussion with the shock value of his daring stories of inappropriate and somewhat devious and roguish pursuits complete with dramatic presentation. Before the session commences, Adam asserts his position as expert with his evaluation of Justin’s favourite toy “Your truck sucks…” he says as the boys clamour down the hall in preparation for the session. He opens the session and sets the scene with his “champion of de world” dialogue, demanding his place in the limelight by detailing his knowledge of boxing and bragging to his attentive audience about his achievements: “two silver medals, five gold medals … two championship belts”; his injuries: “fifty seven nose bleeds”; his special moves: “rapid punches … knockout” and “rhino” punches; and his boxing equipment: “low ceiling punching ball … boxing bag” and “home gym”. Adam’s animated description in this narrative appears to further legitimate these roguish stories as engaging and interesting. His position at the top of the group’s attention structure seems to be reaffirmed, for example, through dramatic demonstrations of his boxing moves, such as his “rabbit punch” on willing volunteer, Ravi.
Adam’s regular (re)positioning of himself as leader and expert within the group through the attention-seeking language practices of bragging and displays of bravado are a consistent theme throughout the research story. Indeed, much of the time, Adam’s stories, together with his bold and “streetwise” use of language, seem to be designed to shock the other boys and in this sense he is able to entice, engage and monopolise their attention. Adam’s teachers confirm his leadership qualities. In the first narrative, for example, Mrs. W. notes of Adam, “he’s definitely a leader ... he’s active, loud and bossy.” Adam’s teachers also seem enticed by the dominating and engaging nature of his stories. They note Adam’s fondness for the “limelight”: “Adam seeks attention doesn’t he ... you know he feeds off that,” Mr. A. comments in the first narrative in reference to Adam’s behaviour. This receives firm agreement from Mrs. W. and Ms. C. In particular, the teachers appear taken by Adam’s use of language. “He cons people because he has really good verbal skills,” Mrs. W. notes in the first narrative. “Adam’s amazing verbal skills, I mean he just amazes you some of the things he says at times. He gets you in straight away,” she adds later in *Who Dares Wins*. Mrs. W. finds Adam “great company,” his “crazy” stories enjoyable and interesting because “he sells it so well.” Similarly Mr. A. confirms the engaging and “streetwise” nature of Adam’s company in *That’s a Bullet Belt*, “Yeah, I think Adam’s good to have a talk to ... I probably talk to him more than any of the others ... It’s like he’s being in a pub...” he says.

Adam’s ability to engage and monopolise attention through his displays of bravado positions him with power to shape and regulate the other boys’ masculine subjectivities and the group’s dominant discourses. Adam’s ‘masculine’ subjectivities seem to perpetuate three discourses within the group. The first two discourses involve the commodification* of physical dominance (or violence) and the commodification of physical risk as apparent within the first narrative *Your Truck Sucks*. The third discourse relates to sexuality and is manifest in Adam’s promotion of heterosexist perceptions of females. It is important to signify that these discourses are not interpreted as operating discretely or in isolation from each other. Indeed their intersection and interrelationship are important. For example, the discourse governing the group’s heterosexist
understandings of females is seen as critical in underpinning and informing the group’s embodiments of physical dominance, violence and physical risk. In this regard, consistent with Derridean metaphysical thought, the boys’ embodiments of physical dominance, violence and physical risk are interpreted as constructed and governed within their efforts to differentiate themselves from their essentialist and oppositional perceptions of females and femininity.

The narratives *Who Dares Wins* and *It’s More Than a Game* attest to Adam’s love of physical exertion in the form of challenging and dangerous pursuits, particularly those that gain the attention of others. Adam is distinctly aware of his deft physical ability and he revels in the attention gained from his knowledge and skill in this area. Mr. T. notes the other children’s admiration of physical and athletic ability generally: “most kids attract others to them because they’re seen as being good at something ... with the boys it’s going to be someone that’s good at something physical,” he explains in *Who Dares Wins*. More specifically, Mrs. W. notes of Adam in the same narrative, “...he’s very athletic therefore well thought of by the kids. Kids always admire people who are good sports people.” Adam’s subjectivities concerning the value of physical risk are thus legitimated through the attention he gains from public displays, as well as elaborate descriptions of his self-imposed dares and his attention-seeking bravado. “I would jump off a cliff wiv a parachute,” Adam boasts in *It’s More Than a Game*. Moreover, Adam clearly positions himself as leader and centre of attention in this context of physical exertion. The physical danger associated with this ‘risky’ behaviour seems to be particularly important to him. In the same narrative, for example, Adam assures us that he “likes ta be de risky one” because it’s “de fun bit” and he “hates” being the “catcher”. He also rejects non-physical dares, such as Jack’s suggestion of eating “two hundred pieces of pizza” in preference to physically challenging dares, “...like killin’ yourself like swingin’ up on de bars or somethin’...”

Adam’s attention-seeking stories of physical violence and bravado prevail as a strong theme within several of the narratives. His teacher confirms, in the first narrative, that he

*The words ‘commodification’ and ‘commodities’ are used throughout the chapter to refer to the boys’ assignment of social value to particular behaviours or ways of being.*
“is a physical little boy and often needs reminders about using his language rather than
giving someone a flick or a kick.” The girls also note Adam’s physical nature, “Adam
goes to boxing,” Jane remarks in the dialogue sequence prior to the narrative *Who Dares
Wins*. “Yeah, he likes to be rough and cool,” she says. Adam tells us boldly in *It’s More
Than a Game*, that he likes football because “you can bash de shit out of people.” He
also is convinced that rugby “doesn’t suck” and “isn’t for girls because y’can get really
sexy stitches an’ y’can knock people over an’ y’can bash ’em up.”

Adam persists in impelling violence in the narrative *That’s a Bullet Belt* in relation to his
explicit display of symbolic violence against me – ‘shooting’ me with his constructed
machine gun; his fighting with Matthew; and his jostling with the other boys for
positioning in front of the camera. In *I Hate His Guts*, however, the self-legitimation of
Adam’s subjectivities concerning aggression, physical dominance and violence gained
through attention-seeking displays of bravado, seem to be at their most pervasive and
shocking. Adam commands the boys’ attention through his explicit descriptions of his
hatred of, and violence towards, his ‘enemy’ Brian. He boasts of “bashing de crap out of
Brian: specifically, bashing ‘is head in.” “I hate him,” he seethes. He boldly
remarks that should Brian “touch” him “he won’t have a head,” indeed he will “kill”
Brian. Adam also describes a “more serious” incident where he bit Brian and “took a big
chunk outta ’is back” and “put a hole frough ’is shirt.”

Adam reconfirms his status at the top of the group’s attention structure through the
enticing and exciting nature of his inappropriate, daring and rule-breaking stories told
boldly and shamelessly. It is interesting also to consider Adam’s seeming justification of
this commodity through a discourse of aid and protection of his ‘friends’, which appears
to further legitimate or rationalise his positioning in the group. Initially, in the narrative *
I Hate His Guts*, he protects Craig from Phoebe: “she was attackin’ Craig so I jus’ went
bang”; next he talks about protecting Matthew, “but I didn’ help ’im ’cos I didn’ wanna
get in any more trouble.” Then Adam tells us he bashed “da shit out of Brian” on behalf
of Ben and, finally, he extends his protective discourse to Justin and Ravi. Adam informs
us that he “punched de crap outta” Brian to protect Justin. And Ravi informs us that
Adam is “a pretty good friend ’cos like when a grade six is up to me he gets in the way and bashes ’em in the head.”

Within his practice of self-legitimation, Adam also seems to gain attention, positioning his subjectivities as dominant within the group through his mockery and belittlement of the school’s authority structures. In I Hate His Guts, for example, he belittles the principal with dramatic mockery: “all ’e does is make phone calls all day,” Adam smirks, and mimics Mr. T., by picking up an imaginary phone and putting it to his ear, “He’s goin’ ‘yes, yes, bla, bla, bla’,” he mocks in an exaggerated ‘grown-up’ voice to his amused audience. Similarly, Adam mocks Mrs. W.’s authority stating “…I told de bitch ta get stuffed!” when asked what happened after being ordered to the principal’s office for his altercation with Brian. Moreover, when talking to Ravi about the perceived unfairness of a relief teacher’s behaviour, Adam advises, “You shoulda told her ta get stuffed.”

The other distinct area of discursive self-legitimation, through which Adam confirms his position as expert and leader, commanding the attention of the others, relates to his promotion of a particular perception of females and femininity, manifest in the shock value of his bold sexualised talk and display. In the narrative It’s More Than a Game Adam leads the talk with his confident assertions that playing football “can get (you) really good chicks ’cos dey think you’re butt’s cute” and your stitches are “sexy.” Indeed, Adam tells us that the best thing about football is “ya get sexy women … when dey watch ya and … you show off,” particularly when you tackle, “y’get blood rules” and “de girls go ‘oh geez that would’ve hurt’.”

The shock value of his sexualised display in That’s a Bullet Belt again commands attention from the group. Here we have Adam gyrating his hips in a sexually suggestive manner while ‘pumping iron’ with the two bar bell weights he had made from plastic construction pieces, panting, “Oh, oh yeah, look at that girls, oh sex all day!” while the other boys roll about the floor in fits of laughter. The attention-seeking value of Adam’s sexualised talk extends to evaluating the desirability of the female body. In It’s More Than a Game he commands the group’s attention when he talks about the certainty of his
taste in girls: he prefers them to have “sexy legs” - “Britney Spears isn’t too bad”; and is quite definitive in his distaste of “chubba chubs” or fat girls - they are to be “crossed out”. Next he brags to me, within earshot of the other boys, about watching the movie *Striptease*, “yeah … it was awesome!” and announcing his plans to attend a “strippin’ show to celebrate de 18th birthday!” with his father. The girls also seem aware of Adam’s sexualised talk with their commentary in *That’s a Bullet Belt*: “Adam thinks he’s really sexy,” they assert.

It seems that Adam commands additional attention and (re)legitimates the dominance of his subjectivities through sexualised behaviour in the playground. In *It’s More Than a Game*, he brags about the attention he receives in this context from the girls: “yeah, the ‘A’ man always gets the chicks.” Moreover, Adam’s popularity with the girls, apparent in his success at gaining their attention, seems to be recognised and almost envied by the other boys. Justin believes that Adam receives this attention “’Cos ’e’s sexy, they (girls) think that” and adds that “when they’re (boys) goin’ round the corner like they (girls) duck down and go ‘oooooooh Adam’.” Ravi complains that when he plays games with Adam and the girls, the girls give Adam all the attention and they don’t “give a stuff ’bout anyone excep’ for Adam.” Further to this, within this same narrative, Adam’s bravado in relation to his mockery and belittlement of the school’s authority structures, possesses the capacity to shock in a similar vein with the sexualised connotation in Adam’s denigration of a relief teacher. “I might as well stick it up ’er,” he responds to complaints from the others about her being a “meany ol’ bum.”

Adam’s continuous positioning as expert in these areas, together with the attention the nature of his daring stories attracts, seems to be his key strategy in (re)legitimating the dominance of his subjectivities within the group. Another avenue through which Adam gains attention and positions himself as expert involves the display of his intricate drawings depicting heroic violence. Subsequent to the first narrative, we are introduced to the boys’ self-portraits. Adam positions himself as expert through modifying Matthew’s drawing to be more like his own, adding the samurai sword, machine gun and grenades and changing the skateboard into a ‘turbo charged’ device.
In the narrative *Who Dares Wins*, Adam (re)legitimates his drawing ability and ideas as superior to those of the other boys, by positioning himself away from the rest of the group and concealing his work from their view. He attempts to protect his drawing from being copied by the others and becomes quite aggressive when Justin and Matthew try to glimpse his work. “Get lost! I’m gonna kill you!” he yells at Matthew, adding, “I’m gonna be a good cartoonist an’ everyone will pinch my ideas an’ kill dem.”

In this sense, Adam’s attempts to conceal his drawing from the others may also be seen as protecting the emulation of his work and his status as ‘best drawer’. In subsequent narratives Adam’s expert status as ‘best drawer’ continues to be reaffirmed by his own practices of self-legitimation and braggadocio. In *It’s More Than a Game* he boasts of being “a really good drawer” and positions his artwork as a valuable commodity within the group. “Who wants my drawing? ... To keep forever,” Adam asks the group proudly showing them his work.

### 5.1.1.2 Language practices of self-legitimation at the expense of others

The other key strategy Adam uses to (re)legitimate his leadership and validate his subjectivities in shaping the dominant discourses within the group, is through language practices designed to silence and belittle others. Most significantly perhaps, Adam’s continuous positioning of himself as expert and ‘knower’ and his resultant discussion monopoly within all of the narratives, work to effectively silence the other boys’ voices. Within this strategy of dominance, Adam also engages in discursive self-legitimation at the expense of the other boys through continuously drawing attention to himself by interrupting or responding disparagingly to their talk. Adam’s disparagement of the other
boys, while perpetuating his dominance, also serves to (re)construct the attention structure within the group, in terms of the dispersion of social power manifest in the relative importance assigned to particular members. To this end, Adam protects his position as leader and expert within the group and regulates the group’s attention structure through actively positioning himself with the power and authority to interrupt and belittle the other boys’ implicit and explicit attempts to threaten his attention monopoly and the dominance of his subjectivities. When confronted with challenges to his dominance and authority within the group, Adam uses directives, sarcasm, mockery and denigration to belittle the other boys and position them as inferior to himself.

Justin and Matthew suffer the brunt of Adam’s language practices of belittlement. It seems that both boys’ keenness to impress Adam and emulate his behaviour positions them as secondary to Adam and perhaps as ‘easy’ targets for his belittlement. In the first narrative, *Your Truck Sucks*, before the session commences, Adam belittles Justin’s favourite toy, effectively putting the younger boy firmly ‘in his place’ as inferior to Adam’s authority within the group. Justin’s challenges to Adam’s assertions about being boxing champion of the world in this narrative, are met with a disparaging reaction. Subsequent to Justin’s sceptical comments: “you’re not the real champion ... Rocky is the real champion,” Adam assumes the authority to position Justin as inferior to him. Through pointing out that the “champion of the world” could not possibly be a fictitious character: “Rocky isn’t even real … der!” - and amid the other boys’ laughter at his expense, Justin is positioned as foolish and lacking ‘legitimate’ knowledge. Further, when Justin subsequently appears to claim some credit for his larger size: “you’re only a little fella” he tells Adam, he is directed to “shut up an’ do us all a favour” with Adam’s smaller size (usually considered an impediment for boys) more than legitimated by the title ‘featherweight’ boxer. “Oh yeah, I forgot ta say, I’m a featherweight boxer,” Adam boasts.

Similarly, Adam positions Justin as inferior later in the same narrative when he assumes the authority of silencing Justin’s attempts at gaining attention. “Listen to what I have ta say Buster!” he tells Justin. “Not your turn ta speak Buster!” he retorts later.

Additionally, Adam positions himself with the authority to evaluate Justin: “you’re being
a pain in de butt,” he tells Justin. Justin’s challenge to Adam’s dominance and Adam’s belittling of him remain issues of contention throughout the research story. It seems that Justin’s physical capacities at sport present the strongest threat to Adam’s dominance and authority. After the first narrative, we are informed by Adam that Justin’s basketball trophy “sucks”. Justin’s achievement is further belittled by Adam’s comment that he has a “million of ’em (trophies) for boxing” with Adam further asserting his superiority over Justin with the disparaging remark: “I go boxing. In my opinion basketball really does suck.” In the narrative *It’s More Than a Game*, Justin’s football ability seems to threaten Adam’s dominance as leader and expert. Justin’s attempts at self-validation through talk of this ability are met with swift belittlement.

“We’re the best, skilful players, me and Jack in this class,” Justin remarked with confidence to the group after listening to Adam. “No ya not,” Adam snapped back, “ya’re hopeless. I am. (the best)”

Subsequently, when Justin again tries to legitimise his football ability, saying to Adam, “I’m a good footballer, y’forgot to mention that,” he is sharply told by Adam to “get real … ya couldn’ beat me at runnin’.” Adam’s disparagement continues later in this narrative with his mockery of Justin’s attempts at self-legitimation concerning the newspaper image of the ‘sporting casualty’, complete with swollen eye and stitches to his face. Justin’s stoic denials that he would cry if he were to suffer a similar fate are met with mockery: “oh sure Justin, he’s de big toughy … Yeah, an’ gee that would hurt Justin, ’cos he’s like ‘I’m de toughest man I’m made of steel’.” The mockery persists a short time later with Adam calling Justin a ‘wuss’ (a term derived from combining the words ‘woman’ and ‘pussy’) and a girl: “hey, you’re Josephine!” The girls also make mention of conflict between Adam and Justin in this narrative, in their reference to football and the prevalence of rough tackling. Specific mention is made of Adam’s attempts to physically dominate Justin. Alexandra, for example, recounts one occasion: “Adam jumped on Justin and Justin fell down on his tummy” (*It’s More Than a Game*).

While Adam’s language practices of belittlement directed at Justin recur consistently throughout the narratives, *The Cricket Season*, perhaps best portrays Adam’s assault on any of Justin’s threats to his leadership. It seems that these attempts in this particular
narrative, which often result in a competitive and aggressive dynamic, stem from Adam’s lack of cricket knowledge and ability and his consequent lack of dominance and authority in this specific arena. Adam’s practices of self-legitimation thus seem to be designed around denigrating cricket and disparaging Justin’s capacity to position himself with dominance and authority in this area.

Justin’s substantial cricket knowledge and ability are established early in *The Cricket Season* with his skilful bowling display. By contrast, Adam confuses baseball with cricket when he bowls underarm and swings the cricket bat with a baseball grip. It is apparent early in the narrative that Adam uses humour to deflect attention from his lack of cricket ability. Indeed, he invents his own bowling style which he dramatises to the amusement and admiration of the boys. However, while this strategy is successful in deflecting attention away from his lack of ability, and frustrating Justin who is batting, Adam is positioned as inferior to Justin moments later in the narrative, when it is his turn to bat and he is bowled out in front of his peers. Justin’s claims for leadership in this context are strongly rejected by Adam: “cricket sucks!” he tells the group. “Justin thinks ‘e knows everything … ’e was bossin’ us around so much we didn’t wanna play.”

Adam’s contempt for cricket persists throughout the narrative with his consistent reference to Justin’s ‘bossiness’: “he’s the know all! … Justin’s bein’ too bossy … that’s that mister bossy boots!”

Adam further (re)legitimates his own position and subjectivities at the expense of Justin through disparaging Justin’s ability at cricket: “Justin, you’d be lucky to get a bumble bee out” is his belittling response to Justin’s claim of bowling out a grade 5/6 boy. Part way through *The Cricket Season*, Adam scornfully invites Justin to “kiss his arse” and knocks over Justin’s carefully positioned stumps. Later in the game, Adam conspires with Matthew, “let’s see Justin make a fool of himself.” He yells “loser” when Justin hits the ball high into the air and “sucked in” when Justin gets out on his last ball. In this regard, Adam refuses to accept Justin’s dominance and authority.

The later dynamics of this game further illuminate the rationale behind Adam’s strong rejection of cricket, which he clearly feels dilutes his authority over Justin on the basis of
his inferior knowledge and ability. When it is Adam’s turn to bat, Jack and Justin deride Adam’s batting stance and highlight his lack of knowledge about cricket. Adam’s lack of cricketing skill is made obvious when he misses hitting the ball three times with his six ball innings, ending with a jubilant Justin bowling him out. Adam responds angrily: “Justin you made me out and I’m angry,” throwing the bat on to the ground in frustration. Thus, it seems that Adam’s rejection of cricket is only partly a reaction to Justin’s alleged ‘bossiness’ and is perhaps more an attempt to ‘save face’ and protect his legitimacy as leader within the group. Matthew’s knowing comment to me in reference to Adam’s belittlement of Justin (“let’s see Justin make a fool of himself”), at the end of the cricket game, is interesting in this regard: “he’s doin’ that ’cos Jack and Justin are the best.” It is apparent that in this context, Adam’s lack of skill and knowledge positions him as inferior within the group, and thus as vulnerable to challenge. To this end, Adam uses self-legitimation, in the form of disparaging language practices towards Justin, to protect his position of dominance and leadership within the group.

The teachers’ comments also seem to support these assertions regarding Adam’s rejection of cricket. Mrs. W. and Mr. A. talk of Justin’s confidence, leadership and skill in sports such as football, basketball and cricket. The teachers agree that sporting skills are a commodity with boys, with the value of this commodity increasing with age, “y’know in grade 5/6 those boys in the cricket team and the footy team, y’know, they’re the guys. They’re the ones to hang around with” Mr. A. comments (The Cricket Season). In this regard, they agree that Justin’s sporting skills will enable him to be “well placed” amongst his peers as he gains maturity: “Justin shows a little bit that counts for things,” Mr. A. remarks. The teachers also seem to recognise that Adam’s lack of ball skills may threaten his position of dominance and leadership within the group. Mr. A.’s comment in this narrative about Adam’s sporting behaviour reflects how Adam currently deals with this threat of leadership displacement: “Adam would be changing the rules wouldn’t he? To ‘no but you get another chance’ and ‘no you’re not out if you miss the ball because…’ and he’d be able to justify everything!” Additionally, he states:

“Adam’s suddenly a couple of shades behind the others and he wants to be ‘king-pin’ well he’s gonna be left with a couple of choices. He either tries to learn from
others or he says ‘This sucks, I’m not doing this’ and ah he decides to get aggressive, so what I need to do is punch you in the face. So they’ll be the choices he’ll be left with … yeah someone beats him to the ball he’s just gonna floor ’em.” *(The Cricket Season)*

Adam’s use of disparaging language practices towards Matthew also legitimises his position of dominance within the group. Through continually attempting to emulate or replicate Adam’s leadership behaviour and impress him, it seems that Matthew actively positions himself as inferior to Adam. By his own admissions Matthew concedes Adam’s dominance over him, subsequent to the first narrative *Your Truck Sucks*, that he isn’t “as good as Adam,” Adam is “too rough … hogs the ball” and “never passes it” to him. Adam seems to recognise Matthew’s insecurities and appears to take every opportunity to belittle Matthew’s efforts at emulation. The comment Adam makes in reference to Matthew’s lack of aggression in *I Hate His Guts*, for example, “Matthew’s weak, he didn’t even fight anyone! I mean how bad is that?” attests to this belittlement in relation to Adam’s assumption of physical dominance over Matthew and his commodification of this physical dominance.

Indeed, at times, Adam appears to take advantage of Matthew’s insecurities and inferior physical skill by setting him up for belittlement. It seems that Adam enjoys engaging with Matthew in particular physical activities, such as ‘chasey’ or dares, where he can outrun or outperform Matthew. These are activities Adam knows he can dominate. The girls also seem to recognise Adam’s dominance over Matthew and his keenness to impress Adam. “Adam told Matthew to jump off the stump and when Matthew was up there and um Adam came and whacked him down,” Sally explains in reference to a dare Adam instructed Matthew to perform. “Matthew’s tryin’ ta be good by jumpin’ off that stump thing with the sand in it an’ he’s an’ he’s hurt ‘imself instead,” Jane remarks referring to the same dare *(Who Dares Wins)*. In this particular narrative, Adam’s treatment of Matthew is quite deprecatory. Adam challenges Matthew to perform a “really scarewy” dare and then uses his superior physical ability to belittle Matthew’s attempts: “Matthew you never finished your dare, you was too much of a chicken to do dat super duper fing what I did, y’can’t idiot!” Adam remarks. Later in this narrative, Matthew’s efforts to reproduce aspects of Adam’s drawing are also met with belittlement:
“no doubt about it, yours is de dumbest alright,” Adam retorts in reference to Matthew’s drawing.

Adam also belittles Ravi and Jack in the practice of asserting himself as leader. However, incidents, which reveal the specific subordination of these two boys, occur infrequently. It seems that Ravi and Jack do not pose the same threat to Adam as do Matthew and Justin. In this regard, Adam seems to seek out far less opportunities to belittle these two boys. Nevertheless, in the narrative *It’s More Than a Game*, Ravi’s preference for soccer over football is met with indignation: “soccer’s a girl’s game! Don’t talk about soccer” with Ravi belittled for this preference: “hey Lucy what’s ya name again? Oh yeah, dat’s right Rowena! … You’re a sissy, you’re a girl ha, ha, ha. You play soccer!” Jack is also ‘put in his place’ during this narrative when he looks for his cousin in a one of the newspaper photos of a football team and is told by Adam, “Your cousin sucks.”

5.1.2 The other boys’ positioning of Adam as leader within the group

Adam’s language practices of self-legitimation are powerful in shaping and regulating the group’s social realities. Adam’s ‘masculine’ subjectivities, (re)validated through these language practices, are influential in constituting the dominant discourses of the group. These dominant discourses are made socially and politically effective within this peer context through the group’s continual and active compliance with their meanings, values and practices (Weedon 1987). In this regard, Adam’s discourses are interpreted as (re)legitimated through, and contingent upon, the other boys’ positive reinforcement of his leadership. It seems, as Harris points out, that the boys want most to be like Adam, “the kid with high status in their peer group” (1998: 245).

Matthew, Justin, Ravi and Jack actively and continuously position Adam as leader in two key ways: firstly, by allowing him to dominate and monopolise the group’s attention; and secondly, by emulating his behaviour. To these ends, the boys’ interest and engagement in Adam’s stories, and their attempts to impress him and gain his approval through copying his behaviours, (re)legitimate his leadership and strengthen his power to control the discourses and practices that emanate from the group. The boys’ compliance with
Adam’s (dominant) subjectivities is seen as critical for them in maintaining agency and status within the group and in avoiding exclusion. Thus, the other boys’ strategies of self-legitimation within the group are seen as entwined with their investment in, and active alliance with Adam’s positioning as leader because of the power and agency this positioning affords them.

5.1.2.1 Allowing Adam to dominate and monopolise

Throughout the research story the boys appear to be in awe of Adam’s talk. They seem to encourage Adam’s domination of the limelight with their genuine interest in, and attentiveness to, his stories. This is particularly conspicuous in the narratives *Your Truck Sucks*, *Who Dares Wins* and *I Hate His Guts*. During these narratives, Adam is rarely interrupted and enjoys the attention and genuine interest of the other boys when he tells his stories about being boxing champion of the world, performing daring stunts or bashing up Brian. Indeed, the other boys’ comments regarding Adam’s stories often reaffirm his position as expert and leader because they are invariably in the form of approval and interest: “I think that’s a really good career, like doing boxing,” Ravi says to Adam in the narrative *Your Truck Sucks*. “Can you do a rhino punch for us? … Can I come to your place?” Matthew asks in the same narrative. “Yeah, ’cos I’d like to do some boxing,” he adds in admiration. Adam’s teachers agree that the other children hold him in particularly high esteem. “The other kids are in awe of Adam,” Ms. C. states in *Who Dares Wins*. “He’s a little bit of a cult figure isn’t he,” Mr. A. remarks in the narrative *That’s a Bullet Belt*, with agreement from the others, and suggests that this “cult figure” status has much to do with Adam’s “streetwise” nature: “he’s more aware of things and he’s more daring and they appreciate his, you know, ability to come up with these one liners and actions and, you know, cool things. Like where he’s been with his dad and what he’s got up to.” Mrs. W. and Ms. C. make a telling observation during the teachers’ group discussion, featured in *Who Dares Wins*, which seems to sum up Adam’s magnetism. Following a lengthy conversation dominated by the teachers’ talk about Adam, Mrs. W. asks, “I mean here we are we’re talking about three children (Adam, Matthew and Justin) and who’s dominating the conversation?” “Adam” Ms. C. confirms. “Our ringleader” Mrs. W. adds.
Justin and Matthew, in particular, seem to actively reaffirm Adam’s leadership and dominance through their attention and admiration. Both boys’ emotional reactions to Adam’s comments and behaviours seem to attest to the value they place on having his approval. In the first narrative, Justin is reduced to tears as a result of Adam’s disparaging comment about his truck. Subsequent to this narrative, we hear of Matthew’s similar distress at not being “as good as Adam” at basketball. Mrs. W.’s comments seem to corroborate these remarks about both boys’ emotional insecurities and their keenness to gain Adam’s approval. She tells us that the ‘truck sucks’ incident “was a really big deal for (Justin)” and adds “but that’s how influential Adam is, this is how they seek his approval so much.” She alludes to Justin’s insecurities when she states that he is a “teary boy” when “things don’t go his way” and has difficulty coping with challenge.

Mrs. W. also perceives Matthew as “unsure” of himself and “lacking in confidence.” She speaks of Matthew’s tendency to seek approval from others: “he tends to ask people to play. He tags along ... he’s constantly checking to make sure that he has someone to play with.” While she links some of Matthew’s insecurity and distress to Matthew’s “pre-occupation” with his home environment: “there’s not been a father around for years” (dialogue following Your Truck Sucks), she also talks of the significance of Adam’s impact on Matthew’s behaviour. “It’s really sad the influence (Adam’s) had over Matthew this year” she tells us subsequent to the first narrative. “Matthew just aspires to be like Adam” Mrs. W. and Ms. C. concur. “Adam has actually knocked Matthew’s confidence because Matthew is so keen to please Adam ... and Justin,” she adds, “yeah he’s much the same I think ... Adam’s only a little tacker but he’s a very influential boy.”

Justin positions Adam as his leader when he chooses to draw him in the narrative Who Dares Wins: “I’m drawing one of Adam on those silver bars ’e jumps off da top of ’em.” Similarly, Matthew’s positioning of Adam as leader is apparent in his willingness to obey Adam’s directives: “Adam told me to do a dare one time, I had to go up dere an’ where it was real scarewy.” Furthermore, the other boys’ interest in, and attention to, Adam’s stories of violence in the narrative I Hate His Guts, helps to position Adam with prominence. Matthew and Justin, in particular, actively take on supportive positions to
Adam in this narrative by continually engaging with and corroborating Adam’s stories. Specifically, both boys, after Adam’s requests: “ask Matthew, ’e was there” and “hey Justin tell Ms. Keddie how I beat Brian” substantiate violent incidents between Adam and Brian in a detailed and earnest way.

The boys’ affirmation and praise of Adam’s drawings of violence in the narratives *Who Dares Wins* and *It’s More Than a Game*, further attest to their positive reinforcement of his dominance and position as expert. There seems an almost undisputable assumption, for example, that in comparing their drawings in *Who Dares Wins*, the boys consider Adam’s artwork superior and reserve it first place. Ravi, in particular, admires Adam’s artwork and validates his position as something to which to aspire: “awesome, oh man is that cool! Give me five!” Ravi exclaims of Adam’s drawing as he jumps up to meet Adam’s hand in a mid air ‘high five’. Even in his absence, Adam claims the limelight within the group through the boys’ pre-occupation with his drawing. They huddle around his artwork, “His one’s the best,” Ravi remarks, “Yeah, he does really, really awesome drawings … I really like all the details he’s put into that demon, like how how he’s got that mini um bomb there,” he adds.

In the narrative *It’s More Than a Game*, Adam’s drawing skills continue to be enthusiastically praised by the boys. First Justin attests in admiration: “he can do awesome drawings…” then Ravi asks Adam: “can you draw me one of them after school? … Can you do a really cool drawing for me?” and finally, when Adam asks, “Who wants my drawing? … To keep forever,” Ravi eagerly responds “Me, me, me, me.”

Additionally, the boys’ positive reinforcement of Adam positions him with the authority to interrupt the other boys, gain their attention and take over their turn at talking. At the end of the narrative *Who Dares Wins*, for example, Justin, Matthew and Ravi remain pre-occupied with Adam’s drawing and ignore Jack, whose turn it is at sharing his drawing. Jack begins describing the dare depicted in his artwork, after Adam’s lengthy description: “it’s my turn now, um, my favourite dare…” but is interrupted by Adam, who regains the boys’ attention: “oh yeah an’ the killer bird’s also got two spears,” Adam remarks.
proudly referring to his elaborate artwork. “Two Spears!” marvels Justin, inspecting Adam’s “killer bird,” “Two Spears! Give me a look” adds Matthew, as he scrambles in a huddle with Justin and Ravi around Adam’s drawing. The boys, too engrossed in Adam’s drawing, ignore Jack who resorts to giving the details of the dare in his drawing to me.

5.1.2.2  Emulating Adam’s behaviour

Adam’s subjectivities gain increasing value within the group throughout the research story through the boys’ consistent imitation or emulation of his behaviours. As well as perpetuating Adam’s dominance through the further legitimation of his subjectivities, agency and status within the group are gained through this imitation. The boys are interpreted as emulating Adam’s behaviour in two main ways: firstly, on an individual basis, the boys tend to imitate or replicate particular ‘approved’ behaviours; and secondly, the boys form alliances with Adam against others within the group.

Imitating particular behaviours

Throughout the research story the other boys’ recognition of the attention, approval and status Adam gains from expressing particular subjectivities concerned with physical risk and dominance, violence and heterosexist perceptions of females, result in their imitation of particular behaviours. Adam’s dominance of the limelight with his violent boxing stories within the first narrative (Your Truck Sucks) has been detailed. In this narrative, we also see how the other boys identify with Adam’s subjectivities as valuable commodities within the group. To this end, we begin to see an imitation or replication of Adam’s subjectivities in the other boys. For example, in response to the attention and admiration Adam receives with his roguish boxing dialogue and “rabbit punch” demonstration: “de easiest way t’knock out their tooth … is ta go like dat an’ then you smash de jaw line,” Ravi refers to his sport: “I go to karate,” he says after listening to the other boys’ envious comments about Adam’s boxing equipment and home gym. After interest from Matthew: “um, is it fun at karate?” Ravi gains the attention of the group and, approval from Adam, through referring to the “little bit of boxing” he does at karate, and demonstrating his “tiger whack”. In this regard, it appears that Ravi recognises the
value Adam’s commodification of physical dominance and violence represents within the
group.

In the narrative *Who Dares Wins*, Adam’s subjectivities within the group are further
validated through Matthew’s imitation of his behaviour. Matthew recognises physical
risk as a valuable commodity within the group. He replicates Adam’s daring behaviour
early in the narrative with a similar display of his “tricks” in the school playground and
continues this imitation later in the narrative when he explains his secondary positioning
to Adam, who he clearly positions as the authority on physical risk. “Adam told me to do
da dare one time like his dares … dat’s how I learnt my dares.” These imitations prove to
be successful in replicating some of the interest and approval associated with Adam’s
behaviour. Despite belittlement from Adam: “…you never finished your dare, you was
too much of a chicken to do dat super duper fing what I did, y’can’t idiot!” Matthew, for
a short while, is centre of attention, with the other boys clearly interested in discussing his
dares. Ravi thinks Matthew’s dares are “pretty good” but perhaps “a little too daring.”
Jack is also wary “you might hurt yourself badly,” he remarks. Justin, while initially
believing Matthew’s dares to be “dumb”, changes his mind after listening to the other
boys, “I think they’re pretty cool,” he remarks, adding “but they scarewy um, ’cos you
might break your neck, yeah if you fall.”

Violence and physical dominance as a valuable commodity within the group continues to
be affirmed in the narratives, *It’s More Than a Game, That’s a Bullet Belt* and *I Hate His
Guts* by means of the boys’ imitation or emulation of Adam’s behaviour. When Adam is
asked why he likes football, near the beginning of *It’s More Than a Game*, he is
forthcoming in his reply, “I know why, ’cos you can bash de shit out of people.” This
response is consistent with the high value he places on violence and physical domination.
The other boys seem to imitate or reproduce the sentiments of this statement throughout
this narrative. When Jack is asked what he likes about football subsequently, he answers,
“y’can hurt people like and make blood go on them.” Justin similarly continues to affirm
the value of violence within the group with his statement later in the narrative, “I love
football ’cos y’can tackle and y’get blood rules.” The girls’ commentary in this narrative
also makes reference to the prevalence of violence and competition for physical
dominance in the boys’ football games, “Oh there’s always somebody jumping on someone, someone hurting someone, somebody snatching the football off,” Jane asserts.

Furthermore, in imitating Adam later in *It’s More Than a Game*, Justin uses the group’s commodification of physical dominance and violence as a strategy of self-legitimation. To elevate his status within the group, Justin explains to Adam that he is not a “wuss … ’cos I bash me dad up.” Similarly, Justin attempts to elevate his status within the group through stoic denials that he would cry in the event of being the recipient of violence. Specifically, Justin assures the group that he would not cry in the event of being hit in the face.

In the construction narrative, *That’s a Bullet Belt*, the theme of physical dominance and violence continues with Adam’s declaration that he is going to make a machine gun. Matthew then takes up this theme, emulating Adam’s declaration with his announcement that he is going to make a bazooka. Adam then informs the group that he is making a “machine robot who goes to war.” Matthew responds to this, again emulating Adam’s comment by yelling, “I’m going to war!” and shooting the air with his plastic bazooka: “pwaarr, BOOM.” Next, Adam, having finished his machine gun construction, aims his gun at me and tells me he is going to “shoot all the staff … like you!” he adds as he ‘shoots’ me - “BANG!” Matthew and Jack, imitating Adam’s behaviour, also decide that they will ‘shoot’ me: “I can shoot you!” Matthew shouts, pointing his gun at me.

“Mine’s a gun and it’s gonna shoot your head off,” Jack asserts. Ravi and Justin also take up this theme of violence with Ravi constructing a gun and Justin a bullet belt. Justin is explicit in his attempts to take up Adam’s theme of gun violence, rather than continue with his own theme, when he decides, after advice from Matthew and Adam, to construct a bullet belt instead of a crown. “It’s a bullet belt,” he is told by Adam and Matthew, “don’ go on ya head.”

Throughout *It’s More Than a Game* the boys emulate Adam’s comments concerning his heterosexist perceptions of females. “Well I like football ’cos y’can get really good chicks ’cos dey think you’re butt’s cute… And ya get sexy women,” Adam explains early in the narrative. Matthew agrees and repeats Adam’s latter comment directly after
he utters it, “yeah, you get sexy women.” Justin also agrees with his subsequent commentary concerning football players and girlfriends, “y’have to have a cute butt and lots of girlfriends if you’re playing AFL,” he explains. Similarly, Justin and Jack concur with Adam’s view of soccer, with Justin imitating Adam’s belittlement of Ravi who admits to liking soccer. Following Adam’s comment, “Soccer’s a girl’s game! Don’t talk about soccer,” Jack concurs, “Soccer’s silly!” and Justin remarks “(Ravi’s) a girl then!” with both boys joining in to laugh at Ravi’s expense when Adam enthuses, “Hey Lucy, what’s ya name again? Oh yeah, dat’s right Rowena!”

Further legitimating Adam’s subjectivities is Ravi’s change of opinion, from his admission to not liking football, early in the narrative, to stating that he’d like to play football subsequent to belittlement from Adam, “soccer’s a girl’s game!” Similar (re)legitimation occurs when Ravi and Justin take on Adam’s valuing of physical risk. Both boys, in *Who Dares Wins*, admit that they don’t like taking risks because they are too dangerous. However, after Adam brags about his daring prowess in *It’s More Than a Game*: “give me a dare an’ I’ll do it an’ I’ll complete it for one dollar,” assuring the group that he would do anything on a dare, Ravi and Justin change their stories. “I do, I do I like my dares,” Ravi affirms, “Yeah, I like takin’ speckies! I like back speckies,” Justin adds.

**Within-group alliances with Adam against others**

Throughout the research story, it appears that Matthew, Jack and, to a lesser extent, Ravi increasingly form alliances with Adam against Justin. In this regard, it seems that these boys recognise not only the self-validating power, agency and status gained from imitating or allying with Adam’s subjectivities, but also the self-validating power, agency and status gained in allying with each other against another group member. Needless to say, these alliances with Adam against Justin further perpetuate Adam’s dominance through the consistent reaffirmation of his subjectivities.

The dialogue sequence prior to *Who Dares Wins*, and accompanying the boys’ self-portraits, reveals Matthew’s and, to a lesser extent, Jack’s alliance with Adam against Justin. It seems that Matthew, in particular, directly imitates Adam’s disparagement of
Justin: “get real Justin,” Adam sneers in response to a comment Justin makes about his skateboarding ability. “Sure Justin,” Matthew parrots with a smirk. “Get real Justin!” Adam again retorts seconds later after another comment from Justin. “Yeah, get real Justin!” Matthew again parrots grinning at Adam, with both boys chorusing in unison “Oh sure! … Sure, sure Justin,” in response to Justin’s fishing story and claim of catching sixty-six fish.

The imitation of, and alliance with, Adam’s belittlement practices directed at Justin appear to increase in their intensity in the narrative The Cricket Season. Justin’s attempts at positioning himself with dominance as leader within this narrative are not only rejected by Adam, but also Matthew and Jack who form an alliance with Adam in imitation of his subjectivities. In this regard, Justin is not permitted to monopolise and dominate in the way that Adam does. Early in the narrative, subsequent to the establishment of Justin’s enthusiasm and comparatively high level of skill at cricket, Adam is strong in his rejection of this sport and his belittlement of Justin: “cricket sucks! Justin thinks ’e knows everything … ’e was bossin’ us around so much we didn’t wanna play.” Matthew is quick to ally with Adam as his subsequent comment suggests, “He is a real bossy boots.” Jack too admits that Justin is “sort of” bossy, but concedes that he doesn’t mind playing with him. With the teacher-imposed task of compiling cricket rules later in the narrative, rejection of Justin is more explicit. Adam repeats his disdain for the sport: “I’m not even gonna play any more, I hate cricket!” and pointedly glares at Justin when he states his first rule for Matthew to write: “when you’re out, y’gotta take it.” Following this, Jack is equally pointed in directing his rule at Justin, “y’gotta share,” he offers looking at Justin as Matthew writes. Adam’s next rule, similarly, belittles Justin, “Everybody gets a bat,” he states for Matthew, “…write, ‘he will give you a bat and his name’s Justin’.” Matthew also seems obvious in his alliance with Adam’s position when, following Adam’s first rule, he ignores Justin’s attempt to submit a cricket rule and again ignores him when Justin later requests to submit another rule.

Next, both Matthew and Jack affirm Adam’s subjectivities concerning cricket despite their previous obvious enjoyment of the sport. Following Adam’s insistence that he “never liked cricket,” Matthew agrees that “it sucks now” and Jack concurs, “well I think
cricket sucks now.” Matthew’s continued alliance with Adam against Justin is transparent later in the narrative during the cricket game. When Justin bowls Adam out, Matthew is sarcastic, “That’s good Justin, real good. You’re not perfect at everything Justin … I think you’re dumb at everything.” At the end of the cricket game, Adam and Matthew laugh together conspiratorially: “let’s see Justin make a fool of himself,” Adam jeers. Finally, at the end of the narrative, Justin allies with the rest of the group with his lack of participation in cricket: “we used to play cricket but we don’t play it no more,” he remarks. “Yeah, I don’t play it no more.”

The text box following the cricket narrative is further evidence of Matthew and Jack’s alliance with Adam’s subjectivities in relation to his belittlement of Justin. The dialogue sequence is characterised by Adam’s initial and continued disparagement of Justin, with Matthew and Jack parroting and emulating aspects of this disparagement subsequently. The disparagement seems to escalate with each interaction characterised by a highly contingent dynamic where the boys outdo each other in attempts to ‘go one better’ in their alliance against Justin. The dialogue seems to be particularly incisive in its development with Adam, Matthew and Jack engaging in an escalating discussion about how they think a horse could kill Justin by “kicking”, “bucking” and “smashing” him.

5.2 The dispersion of power between groups: group solidarity against others

The dispersion of power between groups in relation to the distinct practice of group solidarity against others occurs throughout the research story. In this regard, the boys form an alliance as a group and adopt Adam’s strategies of self-legitimation to mark difference from non-group members. The following discussion explores how Adam’s masculine subjectivities, manifest in the group’s dominant discourses commodifying violence, physical domination and risk and heterosexist perceptions of females, are illuminated and exaggerated in this process of group legitimation against non-group members.
5.2.1 The group’s alliance against Brian

Aspects of *I Hate His Guts* reveal the ways in which Adam is positioned as leader within the peer group. Specifically, this narrative confirms how the group’s dynamics interact to (re)legitimate Adam’s subjectivities concerning violence and physical risk. Adam actively positions himself as leader through language practices of self-legitimation. The aggressive, violent and daring nature of his displays of bravado: “guess who I bashed the crap out of?” his protective discourse: “I punched de crap outta him ’cos ’e had Justin,” and his mockery of the school’s authority structures: “you shoulda told her (relief teacher) ta get stuffed,” capture and dominate the boys’ attention. Additionally, the other boys actively position Adam as leader and his subjectivities as legitimate through their attention to, and interest in, his stories of violence. In this regard, the group’s (re)legitimation of, and alliance with, Adam’s subjectivities within this narrative shape the group’s dominant discourses and regulate the boys’ understandings concerning physical domination, violence and physical risk.

Of greater significance perhaps, within *I Hate His Guts*, is the group’s adoption of Adam’s dominant subjectivities in alliance against a non-group member. Here we see the commodities of physical domination, violence and physical risk illuminated in group legitimation and solidarity against Adam’s ‘enemy’ Brian. This narrative also elucidates the within-group power dynamic manifest in this group legitimation process which refers to how the boys’ highly contingent practice of ‘going one better’ against Brian results in the exaggeration of Adam’s dominant subjectivities and the escalation of particular behaviours. The girls also seem to be aware of this group dynamic which fuels an escalation process within the group. They characterise this dynamic as “over silliness”. Kate explains, with agreement from the other girls that “sometimes when they are together they (the boys) get a little over silly and sometimes they just be silly and sometimes try to hurt you.” Similarly, Mr. A. refers to this escalation: they “get carried away, they’re set a task and they’ll sort of take it to the next level which is a little bit more physical, it might involve a bit of running around and might end up with a bit of a wrestle.”
This dynamic of ‘going one better’, although apparent elsewhere in the research story, in particular on occasions when Adam, Matthew and to a lesser extent, Jack, ally together in belittling Justin, seems to be most potent in this narrative in terms of fuelling the escalation of hostile behaviours. Harris’ (1998) concept of ‘us versus them’ and her notions of group ‘contrast effects’ and intergroup hostility are helpful here. In this regard, the introduction of Adam’s ‘enemy’ Brian, a non-member, into the group’s discussion shifts the boys’ focus from me to us and makes ‘groupness’ salient, shifting within-group competition to between-group competition. This ‘groupness’ results in the boys identifying with their own group and contrasting or differentiating their group against others not in their group, amplifying difference through “the tendency to dislike the category the self isn’t in” (1998: 242). This ‘us versus them’ ‘groupness’ mentality, within Harris’ theoretical framework, explains the exaggeration of behaviours common to the group as efforts at differentiation underpinned by a “deep-rooted tendency to be loyal to one’s own group. I am one of us, not one of them. I don’t want to be like (yuck) them” (1998: 243). The boys’ hostility toward others who are not members of their peer group (elsewhere described as ‘othering’) is interpreted within this paradigm. Thus, through positioning Brian and other non-group members as inferior to the dominant understandings of their peer group, the boys (re)legitimate the status of their own group and gain a sense of power and agency as a group.

The beginning of I Hate His Guts vivifies Adam’s hatred for his ‘enemy’, Brian. Not only does Adam tell us that he wants “to kill” Brian and boasts of bashing “de crap out of” him, but we also learn about Adam’s history of conflict with this boy: “las’ time it was a lot more serious ‘cos it involved blood wiv Brian ‘cos I took a big chunk outta ’is back. Dat was las’ year,” Adam explains. Mrs. W. also notes, “Brian and Adam were in the same class last year together and they didn’t get along.” In this regard, Adam’s hostility towards Brian, and his emotional investment in differentiating himself from him clearly begins as Adam’s issue rather than one concerning the other boys in the group. As the narrative develops, however, the other boys’ alliance with Adam against Brian becomes apparent in the group’s solidarity. This group solidarity is impelled through various within-group alliances and seems to manifest itself in two key ways which centre
around the boys’ adoption or emulation of Adam’s practices of self-legitimation: firstly, group alliance is formed through mockery or belittlement of Brian; and secondly, through physical violence against Brian.

5.2.1.2   **Group alliance formed through belittlement or mockery**

Group alliance in the belittlement or mockery of Brian persists as a strong theme throughout the *I Hate His Guts* narrative. Much of this belittlement seems underpinned by oppositional perceptions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. Within this binary the boys mark difference from, and position themselves as superior to, Brian through denigrating him as inferior and associating his behaviour with their essentialist understandings of females and femininity. The within-group dynamic constituting this alliance of belittlement is characterised by the boys’ practice of ‘going one better’ against Brian, resulting in the exaggeration of Adam’s subjectivities. Following Adam’s story of his conflict with, and hatred towards, Brian early in the narrative: “well I bashed ’is head in … I’ll kill him if he touches me … I hate him” - he begins to belittle Brian in an attempt to explain his hostility. He boasts that Brian couldn’t hurt him because “’e’s as weak as water” and mocks Brian’s “weak” response to being hurt. “All he does is goes, ‘oh, oh, oh’, Adam mimics in amusement jumping around in pretend pain. He continues mocking Brian’s ‘weakness’ through explaining that, “he’s always annoying, ’e always acts like a chicken an’ um ’e always screams like a girl and ’e thinks ’e’s so good.” This belittlement is taken up by Jack with his subsequent comment, “Yeah he screams like a girl” and Justin’s mock screaming imitation of Brian, “Mrs. Waaallkeer!” Moments later Adam again confirms, “Yeah and he (Brian) screams like a girl” with Justin supporting this statement, “I seen him scream like a girl in the toilet.” The alliance against Brian is then strengthened with Adam’s comment, “Yeah and for chasies he goes ‘arhhhh arhhhh arhhhh’ … ‘don’t get me I’m running!’ Arsehole!” and the boys’ escalatory practice of ‘going one better’.

“He’s an arsehole,” Justin agreed.
“Yep, he’s a bitch,” Matthew added.
“Yeah and a bitch,” Justin reiterated.
“A son of a bitch an’ I say, what I would say, I say ‘hey Brian, I know you are but what am I y’no good arsehole’, ” Adam retorted.
“…and I go ‘you’re a dickhead’,” Justin asserted. “I hate his guts!” he added surely.

The boys’ alliance against Brian in the form of mockery and ‘going one better’ in their belittlement seems to gain further momentum following Adam’s report of Brian’s attempt to impress the girls by showing them “dis big scar because um ’e had to had his intenticiles cut out.”

“Well if y’ask me all de boys said ‘what’s he got dat I haven’ got?’” Adam replied. “An’ I said ‘one, scar, two, dickhead, free, dickhead, four, dickhead, five, dickhead, six, dickhead…’”

“A million, a million dickheads!” Jack interjected.

“…seven dickhead, eight dickhead’…” Adam continued.

“And one bitch,” Matthew interrupted.

“Yeah an’ one bitch, yeah an’ six thousan’ dickheads!” exclaimed Justin.

“He’s two million dickheads actually,” Jack decided.

“Yeah!” Justin agreed enthusiastically.

“So you don’t like it how he tries to impress the girls?” I asked.

“No,” Adam stated firmly. “I hate his guts! ’E better watch out ’cos I go ta boxin’, I know how to hold a punch.”

Adam’s earlier comments about Brian: “he shows off to the girls all the time. All the girls like ’im ’cos he shows off wiv his tricks n’that, he goes ‘watch me BABY!’” - and his dislike of Brian’s attempts to impress the girls, are emulated later in the narrative with further belittlement by the other boys. Matthew, Justin and Ravi parrot Adam’s commentary, also scornful of Brian because he is “a big show off” to the girls. Matthew and Justin decide that he’s a “dork”, a “really big jerk” and “an idiot” because he tries to impress the girls. Jack too seems not to approve of Brian’s antics: “how ’bout he’s a girl or something,” he offers. Further to this, Matthew also belittles Brian’s “tricks”: “well I can do better tricks than him,” he confirms with certainty. “He can only go up the ladder and go back down.”

5.2.1.3 Physical violence against Brian

An indication of the beginnings of group alliance in the form of physical violence against Brian emerges early in *I Hate His Guts* with Matthew’s admission that, along with Adam, he too would like to “kill” Brian. These beginnings then seem to develop with Matthew’s positioning as supporter and spectator in Adam’s physical battle with Brian. Following
Adam’s detailing of hatred and violence involving Brian and the other boys’ escalating belittlement and mockery of Adam’s ‘enemy’, we hear Matthew emulate Adam’s hatred of Brian with his assertion, “Sometimes I just go up and punch ’im (Brian) in the guts.” Next we hear Justin strengthen the group’s alliance of physical violence against Brian with his remark, “I just go punch him in the nuts and punch him in the eye ball.” The group alliance which involves physical violence against Brian occurs later in the narrative: “I saw Justin, Matthew and … Adam laying into Brian,” Mrs. W. informs us. Justin and Adam confirm: “fishface, we bashed him, we hate him,” Justin sneers. “Yeah we hate his guts, we bashed the crap out of him,” Adam remarks. Furthermore, Justin appears to gain both satisfaction and attention from his emulation of, and alliance with, Adam’s subjectivities made manifest by his participation in violence towards ‘the group’s ‘enemy’. His animated telling and demonstration of how Adam punched Brian in the torso after Brian hurt his head indicates much satisfaction and results in an attentive audience.

Justin is forthright in his reason for joining with Adam in the violence against Brian. While Adam reasons his violence, stating that he “did it” for “Benny boy,” Justin admits that he “bashed Brian” for the sake of “getting attention”. Similarly, Justin is forthright in his efforts to illuminate the value of the group’s commodity of violence throughout the narrative with his intermittent attention and approval seeking comments: “I’ve been, I’ve bashed someone up,” he remarks to no one in particular. “Bashin’ people is what it’s all about,” he later confirms and seems proud with his announcement to me, “I bashed up Brian! I bashed up Brian!”

5.2.2 The group’s alliance against females

The dispersion of power between groups, apparent in group solidarity and alliance against non-group members, is particularly evident in the peer group’s dominant understandings of, and behaviours towards, females. In this regard, Adam’s subjectivities seem again to shape and regulate the group’s behaviour, with the group’s collective efforts to differentiate themselves as oppositional to females resulting in the contrast effects of intergroup hostility evidenced in the illumination and exaggeration of particular understandings and behaviours based on heterosexist perceptions of femininity (and
masculinity). Indeed, the group’s efforts to differentiate themselves from these essentialist understandings of women and girls are thought to underpin their embodiments of physical domination, violence and physical risk as commodities within the group.

It appears that the boys’ perceptions of women and girls are understood within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality. Implicit within this framework as it relates to the group’s ‘othering’ of girls, exists the closely related discourses of denigration and objectification of females. The discourse of denigration seems enmeshed within this framework of compulsory heterosexuality because the boys’ understandings of the male/female partnership are based on oppositional and dualistic thinking. In this regard, group differentiation occurs through the boys positioning themselves as the ‘first principle’ (Derrida in Sarup 1988) within the ‘unmarked’ category: masculinity. Thus, the boys’ masculine subjectivities are interpreted as defined and (re)legitimated by what they exclude: femininity; and are actively maintained through positioning girls and women in binary opposition as inferior and ‘other’. In this sense, the boys’ discourses commodifying physical domination, violence and physical risk are validated because they are seen by the boys as exclusionary of, and superior to, females and ‘female-like’ behaviours. The boys’ use of the ‘readily available’ discourse of objectifying females by evaluating their physical appearance and regarding them as objects of possession seem to be further illumination of this oppositional thinking in terms reinforcing the binary of males as ‘powerful’ and females as ‘powerless’.

My understandings of the boys’ framework of compulsory heterosexuality, are also informed by Seidman (1993). After Altman and Young, he explains, this repressive and sexist regime places heterosexuality as central in thinking and being ‘masculine’. In this regard, the boys’ use of this discourse can render, not only females, but also males, ‘other’ by virtue of being positioned ‘feminine’ (as illustrated with the boys’ associating Brian with being ‘girl-like’ in the previous section). Within this framework of understanding, the gender (male/female) and sex (hetero/homo) dualities are seen as interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Against this backdrop, the boys’ ‘othering’ in the form of sexism (in terms of their denigration and objectification of girls and women)
and homophobia (in relation to their denigration of boys and men) are seen as entwined because of the underpinning ‘othering’ of ‘femininities’ within a heterosexist framework.

5.2.2.1 Discourse of denigration

The boys’ positioning of females as ‘other’ and inferior to males is a consistent underlying theme throughout the research story. A discourse of denigration characterises the boys’ talk of girls and is used by the boys to differentiate themselves from girls with the purpose of (re)legitimating their ‘superior’ masculine identities. This differentiation process results in intergroup hostility and is made manifest in an ‘us versus them’ mentality. This works to (re)affirm dualistic perceptions of gender through an exaggeration of the perceived differences between the groups ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ (Harris 1998). In marking difference to these ends, the boys use the term ‘girl’ as a continual definer of what one shouldn’t be like. In Who Dares Wins, for example, we hear of the denigration associated with being called a ‘girl’ and the desire to avoid such denigration with Adam’s announcement about performing dares:

“Well (a dare) is like someone tells you ta do somethin’ what’s really dangerous an’ y’don’ wanna do it or dey call you a ‘chicken’ or a ‘girl’ so y’go ‘okay jerk I’m gonna do it!’”

Similarly, Adam assures us in It’s More Than a Game of the relative merits of rugby, as opposed to soccer. Adam insists that rugby “doesn’t suck” and in this regard, is not a “girl’s game” because “y’can knock people over an’ y’can bash ’em up.” Soccer, on the other hand, is described, by Adam, Justin and Jack, as a “girls’ game” because of its association with weakness.

In this regard, daring and dangerous pursuits are associated with the ‘strong’ and ‘courageous’ masculine half of the binary, whereas not performing such pursuits is associated with the ‘weak’ and ‘cowardly’ feminine half. In subsequent narratives, being called a ‘girl’ is often used as a form of ridicule and rejection, which further defines perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours along essentialist lines. For example, in It’s More Than a Game, the group’s commodification of physical domination and violence is evident in a general consensus (consistent with Adam’s position), of
football’s appeal. You “can bash de shit out of people.” This consensus regarding the value of football and violence sets up the ‘first principle’ from which the boys define acceptable or desirous, strong and courageous behaviour. Ravi’s preference for soccer over football in this narrative thus constitutes him as ‘other’ to the group’s choice of football and he is differentiated as oppositional and inferior and referred to as ‘girl-like’ and weak. The boys’ ridicule of Ravi: “he’s a girl … ‘hey Lucy’ and his preference for soccer: “soccer’s a girl’s game,” (re)legitates the ‘superiority’ of the ‘strong’ and ‘courageous’ half of the binary. Thus, the group’s solidarity regarding the commodification of physical dominance, violence and the desirability of ‘strength’ and ‘courage’ is (re)legitimated through intergroup hostility at the expense of girls or ‘girl-like’ things.

Later in this narrative, ‘girl-like’ behaviour as something to be distanced from and denigrated as oppositional and inferior to desirable group behaviours is further emphasised during a discussion about dares. Consistent with the group’s commodification of physical risk, Justin explains that he would be called the derogatory term ‘wuss’ if he didn’t perform a particular dare. Intergroup hostility based on the boys’ perception of girls as possessing traits oppositional to the group’s value of physical risk is then apparent in Adam’s insult, confirming Justin’s status as ‘wuss’. “‘Cos y’are (a wuss) Justin,” Adam remarks. “Hey, you’re Josephine!” Justin then attempts to distance himself from this insult by using the group’s commodity of violence to justify and distinguish himself as ‘boy-like’ rather than ‘girl-like’ within the oppositional ‘tough/wuss’, boy/girl binary. In response to the question, “Why wouldn’t you think you’re a wuss?” Justin replies, “‘cos I bash me dad up.”

In I Hate His Guts the group forms an alliance against girls and ‘girl-like’ behaviour through denigration of Brian. Again Adam initiates this belittlement with the others following suit in explanation of why they dislike Brian. The boys’ justification for disliking Brian is based on his apparent weakness and ‘girl-like’ behaviour. “He’s (Brian) always annoying, ’e always acts like a chicken an’ um ’e always screams like a girl and ’e thinks ’e’s so good,” Adam explains. “Yeah, he screams like a girl,” Jack agrees, preceding a high-pitched mocking screech from Justin, an apparent imitation of
Brian’s ‘girl-like’ behaviour. Later in this narrative, following Matthew and Justin’s insults directed at Brian: “he’s a really big jerk … he’s an idiot,” Jack offers his insult: “how ’bout he’s a girl or something.”

The boys’ group solidarity against girls is more straightforward during the narratives It’s More Than a Game and That’s a Bullet Belt, in relation to their professed and candid dislike for girls: “no” is Adam’s simple response when asked if he likes girls in It’s More Than a Game. Ravi, Jack and Justin agree with Adam and confirm that they also “don’t like girls.” In That’s a Bullet Belt, the boys strengthen their group solidarity by directing their allied aggression against girls. Adam, Jack and Matthew, decide to ‘shoot’ me, “because you’re a girl! … We don’t like girls here,” Adam confirms, “they’re stinky winkies!” “Yeah, I don’t,” adds Jack. Mrs. W. also notes Adam’s negative attitude towards females, perceiving it as a reflection of his father’s attitudes towards females.

“…he (Adam) is very anti-female,” Mrs. W. pondered. “His dad is so anti Woman in general,” she added, “I’ve never seen dad by the way, dad has never been into this classroom. Twice he has contacted the school or been contacted by Mr. A. but he has not communicated with any female staff this year”. (It’s More Than a Game)

While it is beyond the scope of this work to explore, in any depth, parental subjectivities in shaping masculinities, it appears that Adam’s father is clearly implicated in the shaping of Adam’s dominant subjectivities, particularly his aggressive and heterosexist sexuality.

5.2.2.2 Discourse of objectification

The boys’ group solidarity and ‘othering’ of girls as an essential category is further strengthened through their use of the ‘readily available’ discourse of objectifying females by perceiving them as objects of possession and evaluation. Compulsory heterosexuality is the foundation underlying use of this discourse and illuminates the boys’ oppositional thinking, in terms (re)affirming the dualistic male/female binary. In this regard, the boys’ alliance and group solidarity are formed through positioning themselves with ‘power over’ females: firstly with power to ‘acquire’ or ‘possess’ females; and secondly, with power to reduce females to objects of the ‘male gaze’ in relation to valuing females who possess particular physical attributes.
**The power to acquire and possess**

The acquiring and possession of girlfriends within a discourse of objectification characterises much of the boys’ talk about females throughout the research story and constitutes a general sense of group solidarity. This discourse seems to be governed by the boys associating attention from girls and girlfriend acquisition with male power and status, and in this regard, is used as another form of self-legitimation. Thus, attention from girls and acquiring or collecting “lots of girlfriends” are seen as desirable, even enviable and worth fighting over, provided these girls are the ‘right’ types of girls.

The desirability of attracting girls’ attention and acquiring “lots” of girlfriends is illuminated in many of the narratives. In *Who Dares Wins*, Matthew admits that he performs daring tricks so that he can “get lotsa girlfriends” and then boasts of the number of girlfriends he has to disbelieving comments from the other boys.

> “You don’t even have a girlfriend,” Jack argued.
> “Yeah I do,” Matthew insisted, “I have three.”
> “Oh, dream on Matthew,” Adam sneered.
> “Yeah dream on! Dream to Dream World!” Justin added.
> “I got Charmaine, Jamie and Portia,” Matthew listed, counting on his fingers.

Similarly, in *It’s More Than a Game*, Adam boasts of having two girlfriends and brags, “oh an’ I’ve had a heap of girls who’ve kissed me … the ‘A’ man always gets the chicks.” During this narrative, the epitome of male power and status is embodied in the boys’ commentary about the esteemed image of the footballer and his power to attract female attention. The notion of girls being attracted to a particular masculine stereotype, and regarded as property to collect (‘the more the better’), continues as a strong theme. “I like football,” Adam announces, “’cos y’can get really good chicks, ’cos dey think your butt’s cute” and, he adds, with Matthew’s agreement, “ya get sexy women (because) … dey watch ya and den you show off.” “Y’have a cute butt and lots of girlfriends if you’re playing AFL,” Justin offers moments later. The girls also make mention of the boys’ efforts to attract female attention, noting that boys in general, but Adam, Matthew and Justin, in particular, “like showin’ off to girls ... just so girls like them” (*That’s a Bullet Belt*). The boys also seem to associate female attention with bravery, physical
dominance and violence. “When you’ve got de blood rule, all de girls go ‘oh geez that would’ve hurt’, so den y’get all de attention and y’look more sexier,” Adam remarks. Indeed, it seems that the boys’ view ‘larrikinism’ and the attraction and possession of lots of girlfriends as essential to their highly revered image of the successful footballer: an image in which they see demonstrates so many of the traits that underpin the group’s subjectivities.

The discourse of assuming the power to attract and collect females appears to be extended in the later narratives, *That’s a Bullet Belt* and *I Hate His Guts*, to the boys perceiving females as property to fight over. In this sense, the boys’ commodification of physical domination and violence and their heterosexist perceptions of females further intersect. In *That’s a Bullet Belt*, following Adam’s sexualised display of ‘pumping iron’ with his plastic bar bell weights: “oh, oh yeah, look at that girls, oh sex all day,” he engages Matthew in violent competition over the possession of girlfriends. “Get y’hands off my girlfriend or I’m gonna smash y’head in!” Adam states in an American accent as he begins to wrestle Matthew, moments later punching him (‘playfully’) on the arm. “You took my girlfriend and you’re dead!” Matthew responds as he grabs Adam from behind around the waist. “You will regret it mate,” he adds. Similarly, in *I Hate His Guts*, Adam’s violence towards Brian relates to him being “pissed off” because “Brian always gets his girl.”

This notion of males fighting over, or competing for, females as possessions or acquisitions is identified by the girls in *That’s a Bullet Belt* in their recognition of the intersection of physical dominance, violence and ‘heroic’ heterosexual relations. Jane tells us that if a boy sees “another boy with his girlfriend um they would act up and push ’em down and go walking off with her, then he’ll come around and punch him out of the way.” Additionally, Sally and Jane tell us that boys make guns to be “sexy” and to “show off” so “girls like them.” Sally elaborates, “If a girl doesn’t like another boy, like he would make a gun and try to pretend to shoot her.”

Enmeshed within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality, the girls’ gendered subjectivities are further evidenced in their pre-occupation with Adam’s ‘girlfriends’ and
their interest in the boys’ heterosexual perceptions of them. “I think Adam likes me,” Jane confirms in *It’s More Than a Game*. “Adam’s got two, three (girlfriends) actually, I think,” Sally tells us with agreement from Alexandra later in the same narrative. “Who?” Jane asks wide-eyed. “I hope it’s not me,” Sally and Jane concur excitedly. Jane and Sally even argue over the status of Adam’s girlfriend acquisitions. “He (Adam) really likes me...” Jane remarks in the same narrative. “No he doesn’t,” Sally tells Jane. “Yes he does,” Jane insists. Jane is then told that Adam has a “different girlfriend”. Jane’s pre-occupation with Adam’s girlfriends continues in the later narrative *That’s a Bullet Belt*: “how come Adam’s got a girlfriend and ’e doesn’t like girls?” she asks. “Did you know that Adam’s got a girlfriend?” she adds. Moreover, Sally admits to being “pretty jealous” of Adam, because she hasn’t got a boyfriend yet (*It’s More Than a Game*). In the same narrative, the girls’ interest in the boys’ heterosexual perceptions of them is apparent in their enjoyment of boy/girl paired games such as ‘chasey’. “...chasing’s fun and they like to chase us ’cos boys might really like us,” Jane remarks. Further to this, interest in boys’ positive perceptions of them is made manifest in the girls’ recurring interpretation of boys’ “silly” behaviour as somehow a contradictory sign that boys “like” them. While Sally notes, “boys don’t really want to play with us. You know, they don’t come and ask us or anything. Not many boys like, I mean we’re not very popular,” she also notes:

> “You know how boys sometimes are, a lot of boys are a bit silly sometimes and rude,” Sally told me. “I think they might like us or something.”
> “Yeah,” Jane agreed, “they really like us.”

*The power to evaluate*

Within the framework of compulsory heterosexuality, the boys form group solidarity in ‘othering’ girls and women by taking up the ‘readily available’ discourse of objectifying females by evaluating their physical appearance. In this regard, the boys position themselves with the power to reduce females to objects of the ‘male gaze’.

Adam states quite candidly, in *It’s More Than a Game*, with agreement from Matthew and Justin, that ideal females are “sexy”. He also boasts of having watched and enjoyed the movie *Striptease*, in which actress Demi Moore plays the role of nightclub stripper:
“it was awesome” and expresses eagerness at the prospect of attending a “strippin’ show” on his 18th birthday, where “girls take deir clothes off.” While the boys’ professed dislike for girls is expressed throughout the research story, within this narrative there seems to be consensus among Adam, Justin and Matthew about the relative value of particular types of females. “Britney Spears isn’t too bad. She’s okay,” Adam admits with agreement from Justin. Both boys agree on the attributes which constitute female desirability: “thin” girls with “sexy legs” are worthy of their attention. “Chubba chubs” or fat girls are to be “crossed out,” Adam asserts with agreement from Justin. Indeed, “fat” girls are to be made fun of: “oogga chucka oogg chucka,” Adam sings stomping on the spot, blowing out his cheeks and bending his arms up, while the other boys laugh in amusement. “Fat” girls, it seems, according to Matthew and Justin, even deserve to be deliberately kicked in the head (It’s More Than a Game).

5.3 Contextualising the peer group’s discourses: the broader institutional structure of the school

Analysis and interpretation of the teachers’ and principal’s data in relation to identifying the philosophies and understandings underpinning their intervention in the boys’ behaviours was thought critical in attempting to locate the shaping and regulating of the boys’ subjectivities within the broader authority structures of the school.

5.3.1 Teacher and principal intervention

Inspection of the teachers’ comments throughout the research story, points to a shared acknowledgment of Adam’s aggression and emerging ‘anti-school’ mentality. Mrs. W. and Mr. A. seem to think Adam’s home environment and his chosen sport of boxing may contribute to these subjectivities. Mrs. W., while guarded in her judgement, makes reference in the first narrative to her belief that Adam’s home environment is “not ideal” (Your Truck Sucks) and to her disappointment at Adam’s lack of academic development at school. “He’s a good 12 months behind now, he’s really working at a lower level than he should be,” she tells us in That’s a Bullet Belt. In this narrative, Mr. A. and Mrs. W. agree that school is “not a priority” for Adam or his dad, with Mrs. W. associating this with his father’s parenting and his attitudes towards school. She notes
that Adam spends a “fair bit of his time” in the pub with his father, and sometimes doesn’t get to school at all “’cos he’s off with dad.”

The teachers also associate Adam’s aggression with his participation in competition boxing. “I wouldn’t have said boxing would be a great choice for him ’cos yes that’s leading him to act that way, yeah someone beats him to the ball he’s just gonna floor ’em,” Mr. A. tells us in The Cricket Season. Despite Mrs. W.’s concerns about the inappropriate nature of Adam’s boxing: “a bit scary for a little boy who is eight years old,” she remarks in Your Truck Sucks, she also accepts that she, “can’t step over that line, it’s not up to me to decide what he does.”

The teachers also agree that Adam’s behaviour demonstrates the potential to escalate and become increasingly problematic for those charged with his care in the future. “Potentially because of his learning problems, yeah, I think his behaviour will deteriorate as he goes through,” Mrs. W. notes of Adam in The Cricket Season.

“I think Adam will be one child who later on if teachers choose to confront him in the yard and make it a confrontation or a ‘stand off’ they’ll come off second best,” Mr. A. remarked. “Because,” he continued, “Adam will be the one who will quickly give them a mouthful of abuse and walk off. Someone will wear that aggression shortly, I reckon.”

Moreover, Mrs. W. expresses concern about Adam’s impact on the other children in her class. “Those in the class who are quieter kids just steer clear of him because he’s quite active, loud and bossy,” she tells us in the first narrative. More specifically, she expresses concern about Adam’s impact on Justin and Matthew in relation to their “keenness” to please him and aspirations to be like him. She notes that Adam’s treatment of Justin resulted in “toughening him up” (Your Truck Sucks). In I Hate His Guts, she expresses sadness regarding Adam’s “influence” over Matthew: “it’s upsetting him” being involving in Adam’s “bullying” and “pushing people around”. This involvement she perceives as “knocking Matthew’s confidence” in his attempts to be “popular with the ‘in’ crowd.” In this regard, Mrs. W. seems to acknowledge that Matthew’s positioning of Adam as his leader and superior, and his consequent desire for approval, attention and
acceptance from him, is responsible for his attempts to emulate the group’s violent subjectivities.

It seems paradoxical then, that despite the boys’ violence towards Brian, the concerns about Adam’s aggressive behaviour and his impact on others, the principal and the group of teachers do not appear to consider the boys’, and in particular Adam’s, behaviour to be particularly problematic. For example, regarding the group of boys, Mrs. W. notes in the final narrative: “they’re not actually ‘out of control’ kids, I mean, they’re not what I would consider ‘behaviour problems’.” Mr. A. and Ms. C. agree that they “haven’t needed to manage much behavioural issues at all.” Mr. T. seems also to agree with the teachers, “I don’t think that they (Adam, Matthew and Justin) are in the general run of things huge problems,” he remarks (I Hate His Guts). Indeed, the principal does not regard the school’s specific intervention programs on “anger management” or “social skills” to be necessary for these particular boys. Perhaps this is because Adam and the other boys “know how to behave when there’s an adult around” and are “well aware of the right thing to do” (Mrs. W. in Your Truck Sucks). Or perhaps it is Adam’s ‘boyish’ appeal - he is perceived as “interesting”, “great company” (Mrs. W. in That’s a Bullet Belt) and “good to have a talk to” (Mr. A. in That’s a Bullet Belt). Mrs. W. thinks he has “a lovely personality”, is a “bright spark” and “a goer” (Your Truck Sucks).

The ‘cherished’ notion of childhood as ‘innocent’ and ‘free’ which continues to inform much early childhood educational philosophy and practice (see, Alloway 1995a; Clark 1993) may help to explain the teachers’ and principal’s understandings: their perception of the boys’ behaviours as not particularly problematic; and their relative ‘non-intervention’ in this regard. Briefly, this philosophy, underpinned by psychological theories of ‘age/stage’ child development (see Piaget in McInerney & McInerney 1998), explains human behaviour as progressing along rational and predictable pathways and tends to view young children’s personal constructions of what they know and understand of the world as valid, and somehow free from socially constructed inequities, because they are understood as emerging ‘naturally’ within a framework of childhood ‘unadulterated’ innocence. To these ends, minimal intervention in a child’s development is advocated (Alloway 1995a).
The teachers’ understandings of the boys, reflected in their agreement with Mrs. W.’s comments in the final narrative, seem to indirectly advocate minimal intervention. This is apparent in her perception of their behaviour as somehow inevitable, relatively harmless and readily responsive to adult authority. “I’m their teacher, they’re only little kids and they want to please me,” Mrs. W. remarks. “…they’re of the age where you don’t need to be too heavy with them … All I have to say to them, is look down to the ground and say, ‘I’m disappointed’ and they’re devastated.” Mr. A. similarly seems to frame his understandings of the boys within a notion of protecting childhood innocence. “Yeah, he’s still a little boy,” he says of Adam, “and still has emotional needs and yet … you assume that he’s being forced to grow up probably quicker than he really probably wanted to. He’s around with men and … he still wants cuddles from his mum.” Mr. A. remarks that because of his young age, “he would find it very hard to be too coarse with him” or the other boys, “yeah um I don’t think I’d be too hard on them.” In this regard, a notion of a pre-determined childhood innocence is preserved because it is framed relative to a pre-given or ‘natural’ adult/child power differential. Children’s behaviour is thus viewed as ‘pliable’ and easily ‘fixed’ with minimal intervention.

Similarly, the principal’s commentary indicates that he regards the boys’ behaviour as somehow innocent or harmless. His ‘objective’ presentation of their aggression as ‘the way it is’ seems informed by a discourse of child development as emerging ‘naturally’ and as predictable or pre-determined. Indeed, his comments indicate that he expects such aggressive behaviour in boys. “Yes, the physical violence side of things is the boys’ domain,” he tells us in the narrative *Who Dares Wins*. In *That’s a Bullet Belt*, he elaborates his position. By way of explanation he proffers, “boys of that age” are heading into “that really boisterous stage” where “everything is physical … they’re all going at a thousand miles an hour” - playing their fighting games of “kung fu or pretending to shoot each other … they just thunder through their games,” he explains. He seems to characterise this behaviour as an inevitable part of boys’ development. “Of course they’re physical,” he notes. “Of course that leads to conflict too.” Mrs. W. appears to share similar fatalism in assessing Adam’s behaviour: “he’ll get through, he’ll survive,” she tells us in *That’s a Bullet Belt*. Moreover, Mr. T. appears also to qualify this physical
conflict and aggression as somewhat of an innocent and non-intentional bi-product of boys’ misguided boisterous games that manage to “get out of hand.”

“We’re all having good fun, we’re all pushing each other. I push you hard and you fall on your head instead of on your bum and so the reaction is you get up and you want to fight or you want to push him back harder…” (That’s a Bullet Belt)

The same theme of predictable inevitability seems to characterise Mr. T.’s comments, about the social behaviour of children’s groups. The “born leaders” never get hurt. They “orchestrate, watch, accept and reject kids,” he tells us in Who Dares Wins. However, while Mr. T. seems to think that boys’ physical conflict, social hierarchy and inequitable power dispersion are somewhat pre-determined parts of life, he also remarks on the learned nature of this inequitable stratification: “leaders … followers … thugs … victims … they’re just learning those skills”; and the school’s potential to positively impact on this inequity: “if we can get to the kid that’s going to be a bully … young enough,” he explains, “to convince him that it’s not the way to go it might do him some good” (I Hate His Guts).

While the teachers’ and principal’s interventions seem to be underpinned by a notion of childhood innocence and a discourse of child development as emerging ‘naturally’, they have developed distinct ways of managing the boys’ behaviour. These are manifest in their clear and seemingly well-established intervention procedures and strategies. A logic of individualism appears to underpin these procedures and strategies with the boys’ behaviours tending to be ‘dealt with’ in isolation. In this regard, while the teachers’ and principal’s interventions, in the form of preventative measures and punishment, acknowledge the contextual and contingent nature of the boys’ behaviour, these strategies do not deal with the context underlying such behaviour.

The teachers’ main intervention strategy to prevent potential conflict acknowledges the contingency of the boys’ group behaviour. The teachers recognise the group context as encouraging disruptive behaviour: “they seem to feed off each other,” Mr. A. notes in It’s More Than a Game. In a group context Mr. A. and Mrs. W. agree that the boys are “boisterous” and “physical with each other” (That’s a Bullet Belt). To this end, the
teachers prevent potential conflict through the much-used pedagogic strategy of not allowing the boys to play or work together (see Browne 1995a). Mrs. W. for example, “bans” the boys from playing cricket (*The Cricket Season*) and engaging in dares (*Who Dares Wins*) to prevent conflict between them. “…as far as in the classroom goes,” she adds, “they don’t work together” (*That’s a Bullet Belt*). “I’ve kept them separated since a couple of weeks into first term because they fought a bit and because they all want to be the dominant figure,” she explains. “…there are consequences if they choose to work together when they know they’re not allowed to,” she further asserts. Ms. C. also tends not to “let them work together.” On rare occasions that the boys are permitted to work together, Ms. C. uses the threat of separation as a deterrent for disruptive group behaviour: “it’s just a simple case of choose to sit sensibly or choose to sit in another place if you can’t sit together and listen…” she explains in the final narrative.

The teachers’ talk of separating the boys following the violent incident with Brian, and as a more long-term strategy for the following year, to bring Adam “down a cog or two” also suggests that they acknowledge Adam’s behaviour as situational and contingent on the response of others. Similarly, the teachers’ agreement in *I Hate His Guts* that “non-confrontational” strategies are best when dealing with Adam further attests to their acknowledgment of group behavioural contingency. “Whenever I’ve needed to talk with him I always find a way of making it very private,” Ms. C. remarks. These intervention strategies, however, while being effective in dissolving problematic behaviour in the short term through removing Adam and/or the other boys from the context of enactment, are probably ineffective in the longer term *because* they remove the boys from the context of enactment. In this regard, the boys are not able to develop an understanding of their behaviours as contingent and contextual because their behaviours are isolated and individualised - the peer context of enactment is ignored as the cause of the problematic behaviour (Hickey & Fitz Clarence 2000b). Similarly, the principal’s primary concern (detailed in the narrative *I Hate His Guts*) with determining degrees of guilt, through individually ranking the behaviour of the boys involved in the violence against Brian to determine the appropriate degree of punishment, critically ignores the contingency of behaviour and its group context of enactment. Interestingly, however, punishing the boy
who was “in the background just agitating” suggests that Mr. T. acknowledges the importance of dealing with the contextual and contingent nature of particular behaviours.

Mrs. W.’s intervention strategy for dealing with the boys’ behaviour during cricket, also acknowledges the contingent and contextual dynamic of the boys’ behaviour (The Cricket Season). She recognises the ‘groupness’ of their “fighting” and “excluding others from joining in their games” and asks them to collectively construct a set of “cricket rules” so that the boys might “settle arguments”. Unlike other intervention strategies, she does not individualise the boys’ behaviours. Her strategy however, is not effective in disrupting the hierarchical dynamics of the group or stemming further conflict between the boys. Perhaps this is because the boys are left to their own devices and do not possess the personal resources or desire for dealing with or re-working relations of dominance and hierarchy within the group. The boys do not share Mrs. W.’s understandings about the importance of rules and in this sense, even though they construct the rules themselves, they do not take on or legitimise the rationale for the rules or the rules themselves as their own. Rather, the boys eventually abandon playing cricket altogether. Additionally, Mrs. W.’s authority over, and impingement of, the boys’ ‘space’ seems to be resented, as evident in their obvious lack of motivation in constructing the rules and their rapid dismissal of them. “No one’ll listen,” Adam remarks after Mrs. W. talks about each rule’s implications and consequences. “I’m not playin’ anyway, cricket’s dumb,” Adam mutters to Matthew a few moments later. Mrs. W., on the other hand, assumes that the rules, rather than the boys’ abandonment of the game are responsible for the boys’ lack of future conflict during cricket. “They had to sign the contract and they’re the rules that they decided upon and we haven’t had any problems with cricket since,” Mrs. W. remarks in The Cricket Season.

5.3.2 The girls’ understandings of boys and physical dominance

Many of the girls’ comments throughout the research story, concerning the boys’ aggression and violence, seem to share Mr. T.’s ‘theme of inevitability’. While the girls disapprove of the boys’ violent and aggressive behaviours, their comments also suggest that they expect boys to behave in such ways. In the narrative That’s a Bullet Belt, the girls’ disdain of the boys’ gun construction is clear. “That’s bad,” Sally reveals with
distaste when I show her the photos of the boys in various gun-toting poses. “Boys are so violent,” she adds with agreement from the other girls. Boys’ violence and aggression, however, seem to be perceived by the girls as inevitable and almost accepted parts of their school life. This inevitability seems to be underpinned by the essentialist notion of strength and physical dominance as “the boys’ domain,” consistent with Mr. T.’s statement in *I Hate His Guts*. This notion also seems to play a role in informing the girls’ oppositional understandings of themselves and their behaviours. Indeed, Jane boasts in *It’s More Than a Game*, of “boxing” her “stronger” brother “in the head” and making him cry, as some sort of triumph - a girl beating a boy at his own game, it seems. Subsequent to the first narrative, Sally explains her thoughts on the inevitability of boys and physical dominance. “Sometimes boys are like um like do that kind of stuff sometimes, like pushing in.” Jane agrees, “...they like to be you know a bit rough.” “...boys always fight,” Alexandra informs us (*I Hate His Guts*). “Boys like fighting games and action games,” Jane tells us in *It’s More Than a Game*. Additionally, in this same narrative, the girls also seem to accept the boys’ dominance in the playground in relation to activity choice when they play with boys. They note that sometimes the boys play with them, “but we need to play what the boys play.”

An ‘us versus them’ male/female dualism seems to underpin much of the girls’ understandings and perceptions of the boys’ behaviours, amplifying difference through creating group contrast effects. The girls’ assumptions of inevitability concerning boys and physical dominance, together with their statements of morality regarding the boys’ behaviours, suggest, on a simplistic level, that this oppositional framework is characterised by associating boys with ‘badness’ and girls with ‘goodness’. Thus, the language the girls use to represent ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ is couched within oppositional terms: “them” and “they” for boys and “we” for girls. “...they could do something silly ... they’re gonna hurt you ... they’re all showing off ... they’re being very silly” the girls inform us of the boys’ behaviour in *That’s a Bullet Belt*.

A theme of morality seems to underpin this oppositional framework and is apparent in the girls’ presiding in judgement over the boys’ behaviours. To these ends, the girls can be seen as distancing themselves from their understandings of the category ‘boys’ through
essentialising boys and their activities as ‘rough’ and non rule-abiding and dismissing them as morally deficient. “I won’t play with them when I see them fight,” Alexandra remarks with agreement from Jane in *It’s More Than a Game*. “…football is a bit rough because they (boys) still don’t follow the rules…” we are told later in this narrative. “Look, they’re all showing off and I don’t want to see that,” Sally says dismissing the boys “silly” behaviour in *That’s a Bullet Belt*. Further, the girls appear to position themselves as the boys’ ‘moral guardians’. In *That’s a Bullet Belt*, for example, the girls see it as their duty to inform their teachers of the boys’ fighting: “…when they were fighting with each other in football ... we just tell a teacher and then we go off playing together,” Jane explains. Moreover, they describe, in this narrative their attempts to “break apart” a fight between Justin and Adam during a football game to help them “sort it out,” despite their acknowledgement of the potential physical hazard to themselves.

Additionally, it seems the girls’ commentary, concerning the impact of the media and boys’ action toys on their behaviour, in *I Hate His Guts*, makes excuses for their behaviour. Sally, Alexandra and Jane believe that the “silly people who invent action toys” and violent media images are the reason boys fight. The other girls agree with Sally that the boys “fight” and “kick” because they “want to be cool just because of their action toys and they copy what it does.”

While the girls’ moral judgments regarding the boys’ activities may be seen as their oppositional attempts to validate themselves as ‘good’ and rule-abiding against boys’ ‘bad’ and morally inferior behaviours, the work of Gilligan (1982) offers a more comprehensive explanation of this theme of morality. Within Gilligan’s (1982) frame of understanding, the girls’ perceptions of the boys’ behaviours can be seen as reflecting the social and embodied disparity between boys’ and girls’ concepts of morality. Gilligan’s extensive empirical work, exploring understandings of self and morality, theorises girls’ moral development within the context of human connection and a concern for the construction and maintenance of social affiliations and relationships. Gilligan’s work characterises boys’ patterns of moral thought within theories of conventional developmental psychology (see Kohlberg in Gilligan 1982), where applying systems of hierarchical logic and separation, rules and boundaries in solving moral dilemmas and
conflict underpins ‘moral maturity’. Boys’ application of aggression and violence in solving moral conflict, within her paradigm, are explained as arising from a lack of connection and knowledge about human relationships. By contrast (and in critiquing conventional and masculinist theories of child development as disregarding female experience), Gilligan characterises girls’ ‘moral maturity’ as informed by a context of relationships. In this regard, “a sense of interconnected responsibility and care for one another and a perception of the significance of response” in situations of moral conflict (1982: 30) are seen as principal characteristics. While Gilligan is careful to say that these disparate ‘voices’ are located within the social and thus can be taken up by either sex, against this backdrop, the girls’ expressions of concern and aversion for the boys’ “rough”, “fighting” and “silly” behaviour and their seemingly heightened awareness of ‘doing the right thing’ and being ‘good’ students can be understood within their emerging concepts of self and morality as informed by an ideal of human connection and coherence underpinned by a concern for the well-being of the self and others. As Gilligan posits:

…if aggression is tied, as women perceive to the fracture of human connection, then the (concern with) activities of care … are the activities that make the social world safe, by avoiding isolation and preventing aggression rather than by seeking rules to limit its extend. In this light, aggression appears no longer as an unruly impulse that must be contained but rather as a signal of a fracture of connection, the sign of a failure of relationship. (1982: 43)

Within the girls’ developing sense of self and morality, one may understand their anxiety and disapproval of the boys’ competitive, daring, aggressive and violent behaviours (That’s a Bullet Belt, It’s More Than a Game and I Hate His Guts) as implicated in their concern for how these behaviours may threaten their ideal of humanity “as dependent on connection, as sustained by activities of care, (and) as based on a bond of attachment” (Gilligan 1982: 57).

Interestingly, the girls’ perceptions of the boys’ physical dominance tend to recognise the potency and contingency of peer culture in shaping their behaviour. While, generally, the girls seem perplexed at the rationale behind some of the boys’, ‘daring’ and attention-seeking behaviours (“they don’t have any brains in their head,” Alexandra tells us of the
boys’ dares in *Who Dares Wins*), their commentary acknowledges this behaviour as attempts to ‘look good’, ‘fit in’ and ‘impress’ the group.

“Sometimes boys say silly things, just to get in a club, a boy club or somethink to go with a group or somethink, they do silly things just to go with a group,” Kate explained … Yes some people do badder things than that, like they tell them to jump off a tree or something like that.” (*Who Dares Wins*)

The girls’ remarks clearly acknowledge the contingency and potency of peer culture in terms of recognising the boys’ strategies of marking difference from others manifest in their practices of self-legitimation at the expense of others. Sally tells us in *Who Dares Wins* that the boys “show off just because they can do it and like if the girls can’t do it, or anyone, then they tease them just because they can’t do it. They just show off to think they’re smart.” She believes that the boys may dare other people to engage in dangerous activities “to make them scared” and “to call them scaredy cat.” In the same narrative Jane tells us that the boys “show off” because they “are tryin’ ta be better than other people.”

### 5.4 Contextualising the peer group’s discourses: competitive sporting culture and bodily expressions of masculinities

The significance of sport and physical activity in the boys’ understandings of masculinities is a pervasive theme throughout the research story. The group’s dominant discourses thus cannot be seen in isolation from a contextualising within sport as an institution which transmits particular understandings of masculinities. As Mr. A. remarks in *The Cricket Season*: “y’know sporting ability really counts amongst boys it really does.” Sport and physical activity seem to be the boys’ central means of self-legitimation. However, while the demonstration or display of physical capabilities throughout the research story can be seen to prove and validate the boys’ masculine worth and prestige, a lack of such capabilities can also be seen as exposing ‘inferiority’ and ‘inadequacy’.

The peer group’s dominant discourses embodying physical risk, physical dominance and heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviour may be seen as consistent with the values and norms transmitted through male-dominated competitive team sports.
such as those engaged by the boys. In particular, the boys’ understandings of football culture seem to underpin their promotion of these discourses. The boys’ presentation of the football archetypal hero as being victorious, strong, highly aggressive and “having” lots of girlfriends, all while being intoxicated (It’s More Than a Game) comes to mind as applicable in this regard in capturing their image of football culture.

Whitson (1990) and Kidd (1990) talk of the male institutions of competitive team sports, such as football, as major masculinising sites. They concur that the public celebration and acclaim attributed to physical strength, confrontation and fighting skills, male solidarity and the inordinate pressure to win at any cost, perpetuate and reinforce a sporting culture and hegemonic masculinity which is highly combative, gender divisive and homophobic. Whitson (1990) in particular, believes that the celebration and acclaim of these ‘masculinised’ values, as well as confirming structures of male domination within sporting institutions, also confirms patriarchal structures outside sport. In reference to the boys’ peer group, such celebration and acclaim of physical dominance and strength is manifest in the value the group places on particular sporting pursuits, such as boxing and football, and particular ‘masculinised’ risk-taking activities. The group’s perpetuation of violence against Brian thus, may be seen as one step further in the celebration of sporting combat and physical dominance.

A celebration of such physicality is evident in the boys’ preoccupation with, and participation in, highly energetic activities such as dares and competitive and often combative sports such as football. Together with their emphasis on physical aggression and participation in violence, this physicality must be understood as embodied expressions of masculinity. Thus, the social processes and symbolism within the peer group’s dominant discourses are seen as referring to the boys’ bodies and what they do (Connell 2000). Dominant discourses thus become socially embodied through interplay with, and appropriation of, bodies. While difficult to analyse and theorise, because bodies are both “agents and objects of practice” (Connell 2000: 26), the research story illuminates ways in which the boys’ appropriate their bodies in their expression of their masculinities. Indeed, the excitement, desire and emotion of expressing their masculinity bodily seems to provide the boys (albeit differentially) with an ontological security. In
this regard, the boys’ embodiment of social processes to do with power derived from physical strength, domination and skill, may be seen as a major means through which they achieve ‘masculine’ agency.

The narratives, *Who Dares Wins*, *It’s More Than a Game*, *The Cricket Season* and *I Hate His Guts*, illuminate the ways in which the group’s dominant discourses appropriate the boys’ bodies and the sense of power, agency and enjoyment the boys seem to derive from this appropriation. The boys’ bodily expressions of masculinities in these narratives are enacted through physical energy, competition and the experience of pushing their bodies to the limit. In *Who Dares Wins*, for example, the group’s appropriation and embodiment of physical risk is experienced as pleasure, excitement, anticipation and fear derived from the challenge, high energy, physical strength and physical skill of performing competitive dares. The boys’ enjoyment in *It’s More Than a Game* and *The Cricket Season*, of the pleasure they derive from physical competition and strength in performing football and cricket skills, is an embodiment of the social processes underpinning the group’s discourse commodifying physical dominance. The group’s commodification of physical risk, physical dominance and violence are particularly evident in relation to football’s appropriation of the boys’ bodies in the physical combat of tackling and fighting for ball possession (*It’s More Than a Game*). Perhaps the most potent and worrying appropriation of the boys’ bodies within these social processes, however, is the group’s violence against Brian. In particular, the agency, pleasure and power Adam, Matthew and Justin seem to derive from their physical domination of, and violence towards, Brian.

The appropriation of social processes through bodily expressions of masculinity in reference to the group’s promotion of heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘femininity’, is perhaps implicitly inferred within the descriptions above. The male/female, heterosexual/homosexual binaries and the boys efforts to distinguish themselves as ‘male’ and ‘heterosexual’, and thus perform an exaggerated ‘hypermasculinity’ of physical strength in opposition to their essentialist understandings equating ‘femininity’ with weakness, may be applicable in this regard. Explicitly, bodily expressions of this discourse are also apparent within the research story in Adam’s sexualised gesturing, in particular his sexually suggestive hip gyrations with a ruler and
while ‘pumping iron’ and making sexual remarks in *It’s More Than a Game* and *That’s a Bullet Belt*. Further to this, the boys’ bodily expressions of masculinity associated with this discourse are evident in their heterosexist games of “chasies”. Again, Adam describes his enjoyment of this game and playing with girls. In particular, having the girls “put their legs up on (his) shoulders” while swinging on the bars as part of a “chasies” game.

### 5.5 Resistances and contestations to the dominant discourses of the peer group

Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced. (Weedon 1987: 112)

The strength and potency of the peer group context in shaping and regulating the boys’ masculine subjectivities has been illuminated in sections 5.1 and 5.2. Specifically, Adam’s leadership, perpetuated by particular language practices of self-legitimation, have been interpreted as potent in defining the group’s dominant conceptions of ‘masculinity’. Entwined within the desire for agency and status within the group, the other boys’ overwhelming support of, and often unquestioning deference to, Adam’s leadership and dominance have been interpreted as actively (re)legitimating these group conceptions. To these ends, the group has been interpreted as discursively (re)constituting a set of dominant and essentialist masculine subjectivities within discourses commodifying physical dominance, violence, physical risk and heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviours.

Critical in acknowledging the complexity and multi-vocality (Jones 1992) of the research story, however, is an interrogation of the boys’ dialogue for areas of disunity and resistance to the group’s dominant discourses (Weedon 1987). While such dominant discourses are interpreted as reducing and framing meaning to a particular subjective and partial focus (Lather 1991a), they are also interpreted as dynamic and fluid, rather than resolute and unitary because they are discursively (re)constituted through social interaction. Thus, the boys’ (re)production of meaning and their understandings of
themselves are perceived as complex and tenuous and, in this sense, far from fixed and always subject to differing interpretations (Weedon 1987).

With this in mind, interrogation of the data reveals that the impact or potency of the peer group’s dominant discourses in shaping and regulating the boys’ masculinist subjectivities is not without contradiction or disruption. Contrarily, the numerous points of relative disunity point to the instability of these dominant discourses. Perhaps of most significance, within the study’s argument of the peer group’s primacy in shaping particular behaviours, Adam’s level of power in governing the boys’ subjectivities, seems to be greatest in the affinity group context. While, this context represents ‘preferred’ peer relationships, and in this sense, may be seen as constituting the ‘masculine’ subjectivities the boys “most want to be like” (Harris 1998: 245), my observations of the boys in other contexts, namely the playground, note plurality in terms of their enactment of alternative versions of masculinity. To be sure, Adam, Matthew and Justin, frequently play games of physical skill and strength together, as several of the narratives illuminate. However, on numerous occasions, all of the boys, Ravi and Jack in particular, are observed engaging in a variety of other games with other groups of children. In other contexts, alternative power dispersions position the boys in different ways to how they are positioned within the study’s affinity context. Jack and Justin, for instance, within other peer groups, are observed taking on leadership positions. Against this backdrop, the significance of social context in shaping behaviour and understandings can be seen, specifically, the sensitivity and variability of behaviour depending on self-categorisations and social context. Within this frame of analysis, the boys’ subjectivities are seen as highly sensitive to the peer group context and highly contingent on the behavioural dynamics of whatever group happens to be salient (Harris 1998).

The behavioural dynamics constituting disunity, contradiction and disruption within the research story seem to fall into two key areas. The first key area refers to the implicit and explicit contestation and disruption of Adam’s leadership and dominance. The second key area refers to the boys’ resistance in the adoption of, and participation in, the group’s dominant discourses.
5.5.1 Contestation and disruption of Adam’s leadership and dominance

While Adam’s authority within the group remains strong throughout the research story, his leadership and dominance are contested in explicit and implicit ways. Justin is the first to contest Adam’s authority in the first narrative, when he questions Adam’s fantastic boxing claims of being “champion of de world”: “you’re not the real champion,” Justin states with suspicion. “You’re only, you’re a little fella,” he adds moments later. Despite his usual deference to Adam’s leadership and emulation of his subjectivities, Justin further challenges Adam’s dominance as leader in the narrative *The Cricket Season* through his superior sporting skills and knowledge of cricket. Section 5.1.1.2 details how Justin disrupts Adam’s authority through positioning himself as superior in this context, thus setting up a contest for dominance within the group. In this narrative, disruption to Adam’s leadership seems to occur through Matthew and Jack’s interest in, and enthusiasm for, cricket, which runs counter to Adam’s strong rejection of the sport. In this regard, Matthew, and to a greater extent, Jack are at times in alliance with Justin against Adam. While both boys eventually ally with Adam’s view that cricket “sucks” and cease to play, Matthew, at least initially, allies with Justin in his enjoyment of the game. Similarly, Jack maintains interest in cricket throughout most of the narrative, despite Adam’s continual rejection and belittlement of the game. Jack clearly upsets Adam’s leadership monopoly when he allies with Justin in belittling Adam’s lack of cricket ability when Adam confuses baseball with cricket.

Further disruption of Adam’s dominance within the group occurs through Jack allying with Justin: “go as hard as you can!” he shouts as Justin prepares to bat, and in his defence of Justin against Adam’s accusations of not sharing the bat: “but Justin only had one bat,” Jack remarks. Matthew also seems to support Justin against attack from Adam with his comment concerning Adam’s belittlement of Justin. “He’s doin’ that (denigrating Justin’s cricket ability) ‘cos Jack and Justin are the best,” he explains.

Ravi’s lack of alliance with Adam’s subjectivities, evident in his supportive commentary of the other boys throughout many of the narratives, also disrupts the strength of Adam’s leadership and dominance. In this regard, Ravi seems to partly counteract Adam’s strategies of self-legitimation at the expense of the other boys. In *Who Dares Wins*, for
example, while Ravi responds with particular enthusiasm for Adam’s drawing: “awesome, oh man is that cool!” - he also seems genuine in his interest in, and support for, the other boys’ drawings and in this sense resists allying with Adam’s lack of interest and support. Subsequent to Adam’s denigration of Matthew’s drawing: “no doubt about it, yours is de dumbest alright,” Ravi shows interest in, and praises Matthew’s drawing: “can I take a look at it? Oh, that looks cool.” Similarly, counter to Adam’s disparaging comment about Justin’s drawing of him: “what’s that s’posed to be?” and Justin’s self doubt: “mine looks stupid ... Mine’s gonna come last,” Ravi is supportive and considerate of Justin’s feelings: “yours looks great,” Ravi assures Justin. “I bet yours would come second,” he consoles. Moreover, Ravi does not comply with the other boys’ belittlement of Justin on any occasion throughout the research story. While Matthew and Jack, on several occasions, actively take on Adam’s strategy of self-legitimation at the expense of Justin, Ravi resists taking on such strategies. Mrs. W. notes Ravi’s “kind and thoughtful” nature in *Who Dares Wins*: “people like working with Ravi. He’s very kind. If anybody needed anything or was hurt or anything, he’d be there.”

Of all the boys, Jack seems to most disapprove of Adam’s leadership monopoly and thus seems to be most consistent in his attempts to disrupt Adam’s dominance within the group. Jack appears not to defer to Adam’s leadership to the same extent as the others. For example, in *Who Dares Wins*, while Ravi, Matthew and Justin huddle in overt admiration around Adam’s drawing, Jack is positioned away from the group and resists allying with the three boys. Jack seems to be convinced of his own merit and abilities: “mine’d come first,” he confidently remarks about his own drawing. Similarly, in *It’s More Than a Game*, Jack’s confidence in his football ability contests Adam’s dominance. After listening to Adam’s lengthy diatribe about his opinions on football, bashing people, “getting really good chicks” and the like, including belittlement of Justin’s football ability: “y’are hopeless” - Jack is firm in his response to Adam: “I’m better than you Adam” he assures the group, “You don’ even know, you don’ even know how to kick a football…” Further to this, Jack contests Adam’s leadership by challenging his verbal dominance of the discursive space. In *Who Dares Wins*, Jack tells Adam to “Shut up!” after being interrupted by Adam and insists on the group’s attention. Later in the same
narrative, Jack again demands attention following Adam’s discussion monopoly: “it’s my turn now,” he states impatiently in anticipation of sharing his drawing with the group. Moreover, in It’s More Than a Game, Jack shows distaste for Adam’s dramatic attention-seeking display regarding his interpretation of the activities of a victorious football team depicted in a newspaper clipping.

Additionally, Jack appears at times to disapprove of Adam’s swearing and behaviours. Twice in It’s More Than a Game Jack is bothered by Adam’s use of the word “shit”. “Oh you said the ‘s’ word again,” Jack remarks in response to Adam’s comment, “I can bash de shit out of people.” “You said the ‘s’ word again,” Jack repeats in annoyance later in the narrative subsequent to another of Adam’s comments, this time about boxing, “…it’s not very good when y’get da shit bashed out of you…” In the final narrative, I Hate His Guts, Jack continues to be bothered by Adam’s language and behaviour, “I beg your pardon,” he remarks in disapproval when Adam confirms, “I jus’ bashed da shit out of ’im” in explanation of his conflict with Brian.

5.5.2 Resistance in the adoption of, and participation in, the group’s dominant discourses

All of the boys adopt and participate in the peer group’s dominant discourses centred around Adam’s subjectivities concerning the commodification of physical risk, physical domination, violence and heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviours. However, Matthew and Justin’s willingness to participate in these discourses, evident in their continual imitation of Adam’s subjectivities, appears to be far more apparent than Jack or Ravi’s compliance. Indeed, at various times throughout the research story Jack and Ravi are explicit in their resistance to the group’s dominant discourses, thus weakening their potency to impact on shaping the group’s behaviours and understandings.

The group’s dominant discourse of commodifying physical domination and violence is most pervasive in I Hate His Guts. In this narrative, the use of physical domination and violence is (re)legitimised through Adam’s bravado about bashing up his ‘enemy’ Brian and through the group’s interest in, and attention to, this bravado. In particular, the whole
group’s alliance in the mockery and belittlement of Brian, and Matthew and Justin’s willingness to ally with Adam in physical violence against Brian, strengthens the legitimacy of this discourse. Varying degrees of resistance to this discourse are evident, however, in relation to Jack and Ravi’s reticence to participate in alliance with Adam, Matthew and Justin. While Jack, and to a lesser extent Ravi, show interest in the conflict and take part or become entangled in some of the group’s verbal belittlement of Brian, they clearly do not share or ‘take on’ Adam’s hatred of Brian to the same extent as Matthew and Justin. Their resistance in allying with Adam contrasts markedly with Matthew and Justin’s active verbal and physical support of Adam. Thus, Ravi and Jack can be seen as contributing only partly to the group’s commodification of physical domination and violence through their peripheral and implicit involvement.

Ravi is the only group member to demonstrate explicit resistance to the boys’ commodification of physical domination and violence. This resistance is most apparent in the narrative *It’s More Than a Game.* Adam, Justin, Matthew and Jack all concur that they like football because of its physical violence. “I can bash de shit out of people,” Adam states. “You can hurt people,” Matthew adds. “Y’can hurt people like and make blood go on them,” Jack agrees. “I love football ’cos y’can tackle and y’get blood rules,” Justin confirms. Conversely, Ravi definitively rejects the group’s valuing of football (“I don’t actually like football,” he says) on the basis of its physical violence. Despite mordant belittlement from the others concerning his interest in soccer, “Soccer’s a girl’s game! … Hey Lucy, what’s ya name again? … You’re a sissy, you’re a girl ha, ha, ha. You play soccer!” - Ravi remains firm in his preference for soccer and in his reasoning for not liking football.

Additionally, Ravi resists promoting the group’s commodification of physical domination and violence: firstly, through his non-participation in the boys’ verbal conflicts; and secondly, through his attempts at pacifying conflict and potential violence. In *It’s More Than a Game,* during an escalating commotion involving Justin, Adam, Jack and Matthew arguing over the relative value of their football teams, Ravi is heard to say, “Remember guys, we’re on tape recorder” in an effort to calm the conflict. Similarly, in *That’s a Bullet Belt,* following the pandemonium of ‘gun play’, Ravi expresses concern:
“guys, come on,” he says as the group’s playful turns to roughness. Further pacifying of conflict and potential violence occurs in the narrative *The Cricket Season*. Ravi watches quietly as the arguing escalates between the other boys as they jostle and contest to be second behind Adam in the batting order subsequent to their cricket game. “Why don’t we take turns from oldest to youngest?” he offers as a solution to their conflict.

The group’s commodification of physical risk is evident in both *Who Dares Wins* and *It’s More Than a Game*. In these narratives, while Adam and Matthew instigate the promotion of physically ‘risky’ behaviours, apparent in their participation in playground dares, the other boys also promote the value of this commodity through their interest and ‘awe inspired’ approval of Adam and Matthew. However, despite Ravi and Justin’s eventual alliance with Adam and Matthew in their apparent participation in physically risky behaviours: “I do, I do I like my dares,” Ravi remarks. “Yeah, I like takin’ speckies! I like back speckies!” Justin adds, along with Jack, they are initially quite cautious and sceptical about the value of this commodity of physical risk. Referring to Matthew and Adam’s dares, Justin remarks: “um, dey dumb … they scarewy um, ’cos you might break your neck, yeah if you fall.” Ravi also thinks that they “might be a little bit too daring” and Jack concurs: “um, I reckon they’re, they’d be pretty bad, ’cos you might hurt yourself badly.”

The boys’ group solidarity in alliance against females is a strong theme throughout the research story and is interpreted as undergirding much of the boys’ understandings of themselves more generally. Within many of the narratives, in a more specific sense, the boys ally with each other in power over girls as a group, evident in their adoption of, and participation in, the discourses of denigration and objectification of girls and women. To this end, the boys assume power to position girls and ‘girl-like’ behaviour as inferior to ‘boy-like’ behaviour. While this assumption is potent in shaping the boys’ subjectivities, resistance to these two discourses is apparent throughout the research story. The discourse of denigration manifest in the use of the term ‘girl’ as insult is taken up and perpetuated by Adam with Matthew, Justin and Jack in firm alliance. The boys’ alliance in their expressed dislike for girls, their rejection of soccer on the basis of it being a
‘girls’ game (*It’s More Than a Game*), and their denigration of Brian as ‘girl-like’ (*I Hate His Guts*), is applicable in this regard. While Ravi, in alliance with the other boys, is clear in his dislike for girls in *It’s More Than a Game*, he nevertheless regularly resists in allying with them in their use of ‘girl’ and ‘girl-like’ behaviour as an insult.

A discourse of objectifying females as expressed in the boys’ perceptions of girls and women as objects of possession to acquire and evaluate is illuminated in *Who Dares Wins, It’s More Than a Game* and *That’s a Bullet Belt*. In these narratives Adam, Matthew and Justin concur about the value of “getting lots of girlfriends” through participating in dares and football, with Matthew and Adam extending this notion of girlfriend acquisition and possession to the level of competition. “Hey, get y’hands off my girlfriend or I’m gonna smash y’head in!” Adam asserts in *That’s a Bullet Belt*. Moreover, Adam, Matthew and Justin insist on evaluating females according to their physical appearance and form alliance over their perceptions of the ‘ideal’ female, who is “sexy” and “thin”, and their denigration of fat girls, who are to be mocked or “kicked in the head” (*It’s More Than a Game*). Jack and Ravi, on the other hand, do not comply with this discourse of objectifying females. Their resistance is noteworthy, even though it is most often demonstrated simply through non-participation. It is additionally significant, as the following examples show, that Jack and Ravi challenge the discourse’s legitimacy by actively questioning it at times.

In *It’s More Than a Game*, Jack is first to question the legitimacy of this discourse with his seeming disapproval of Adam and Matthew’s reasoning for liking football: “you get sexy women.” “You’re rude” is Jack’s retort. He further challenges these boys’ objectification of females later in the narrative with his dissent concerning Adam, Matthew and Justin’s acquiescence that “y’have a cute butt and lots of girlfriends if you’re playing AFL.” “That’s stupid, I don’t even know…” he objects. Similarly, in *That’s a Bullet Belt*, Ravi challenges the boys’ discourse of objectification, with his questioning of Adam’s contradictory desire to acquire girlfriends when he professes to strongly dislike girls. Ravi asks, “if you’ve got so many girlfriends, why don’t you like girls much?”
Mrs. W.’s comments concerning Jack and Ravi appear to hold significance in terms of conceptualising how the potency of the group’s dominant discourses may be disrupted or contested to support more diverse understandings of masculinities within, and indeed beyond, the group. She notes, in *It’s More Than a Game*, that both boys’ “…personalities are strong enough not to be sucked into this competitive thing.” She remarks on the independent character of Ravi and Jack, explaining that both boys are “bright” and “confident” enough to remove themselves from participation within the group when they so choose. Additionally, she notes both boys’ popularity with other children. Jack, she tells us, is “very popular with all of the children … he can mix it with the lot.” Jack and Ravi, she and the other teachers’ acknowledge, are respected by the other children, and in particular, Adam, Justin and Matthew, for their independence.

Against this backdrop, it seems that the independence of both boys, as demonstrated by their relative lack of reliance on the group and their willingness to confront and challenge leadership within it, together with the respect the other children afford them, conveys their potential to disrupt and perhaps deconstruct and diversify the limited understandings of the group.

5.6 Reflective notes

5.6.1 The peer group’s dominant discourses

This chapter has detailed the relationship dynamics of a young males’ peer group. Through my interpretive focus, I have described how the dispersion of social power within and between peer groups (re)produces particular subjectivities in the establishment and (re)legitimation of the group’s dominant discourses. The study’s first research question sought to identify these discourses. The three key discourses found as dominant within the group, taken up to varying degrees by each of the boys, were interpreted as underpinned by essentialist perceptions of ‘masculinity’. These discourses involved the commodification and embodiment of physical domination, violence, physical risk and the promotion of heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviours. Such discourses were not interpreted as operating discretely or in isolation from each other - their intersection and interrelationship were thus acknowledged. Nevertheless, the boys’
peer group experiences were interpreted as given meaning and understood according to these particular discourses and were therefore seen as constituting the boys’ consciousness, and the positions with which they identified as structuring their sense of themselves, their subjectivity (Weedon 1987).

The discourse of physical domination and violence was interpreted as commodified within the group through the endorsement of sporting violence which was evident in the boys’ approval and explicit glorification of the more aggressive aspects of boxing, football and rugby. This sort of heroic violence was valorised in the boys’ symbolic gun drama, their drawings and in discussions of violence within Adam’s discourse of aid and protection. The group’s commodification of physical domination and violence was found to be most pervasive, however, in alliance against Brian, a non-group member, culminating in Adam, Justin and Matthew’s physical attack on him. The interrelated discourse commodifying physical risk within the group became dominant through the boys’ participation in, and approval of, such behaviours. This was manifest variously in the endorsement of physical danger associated with ‘risky’ behaviour relating to the boys’ competitive displays and elaborate descriptions of their daring playground pursuits and the extreme physical risk depicted in their drawings. The commodification of physical risk, physical domination and violence was found to intersect with the group’s approval of, and participation in, risky and violent sporting behaviours and the physical risk associated with violence against others.

The commodification of heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviours became dominant within the group through the interrelated discourses of denigration and objectification within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality. A discourse of denigration was taken up within the group differentially in relation to use of the term ‘girl’ as a continual definer of what boys shouldn’t be like. Girls or ‘girl-like’ behaviours were disparaged as ‘weak’ and ‘cowardly’. A discourse objectifying females was also taken up within the group in varying degrees, in relation to the boys’ perception of females as sexualised objects of possession and objects to evaluate. To these ends, girlfriend acquisition and possession characterised much of the boys’ talk about females with collecting “lots of girlfriends” seen as something desirable, even enviable and
worthy of competition. In this regard, violence, physical domination and physical risk intersected with this discourse of female objectification in relation to the notion of ‘fighting over’ girls and gaining female attention through ‘heroic’ violence, whether it be symbolic gun violence or violence in a sporting context. The desirability of female attention and girlfriend acquisition was qualified, however, within a discourse of evaluation. The boys were explicit, albeit to varying degrees, as to the type of girls worthy of their attentions - “thin” girls with “sexy legs” were acceptable, whereas “chubba chubs” or fat girls were to be “crossed out”. The significance of the intersection of the group’s dominant discourses was also noted as consistent with the values and norms of male dominated competitive sport.

5.6.2 The shaping and regulation of the group’s dominant discourses

The study’s second research question sought to examine the shaping and regulation of the group’s dominant discourses. These were found to be regulated through the social dispersion of power within the group and between peer groups. Underpinning the dynamics of this power dispersion and fundamental in regulating and maintaining the group’s dominant discourses, were essentialist understandings of masculinity as an antithesis to femininity. The boys drew on the readily available social discourses which position males as having power over females. Specifically, the boys were seen to engage in heterosexist denigration and objectification throughout the research story. Within this framework, the group’s dominant behaviours were (re)legitimised and perpetuated as ‘masculine’ enterprises through the boys’ perceptions of themselves and their gender identities as oppositional and necessarily ‘superior’ to, and more ‘powerful’ than, females and femininity. These essentialist perceptions were thus seen as informing the group’s understanding of appropriate ‘boy-like’ behaviour. To these ends, congruent with essentialist perceptions of the ‘masculine’ half of the male/female binary, the discourses of physical domination, violence and physical risk were established and perpetuated.

5.6.2.1 Social dynamics within the peer group

The way social power was organised within the peer group, in deference to Adam’s leadership, was interpreted as critical in establishing the group’s dominant discourses.
Adam, as the most mature and admired group member, actively positioned himself, and was positioned by the other boys, with this social power. These positionings, governed by this leadership, were interpreted as producing the group’s hierarchical structure. Adam was assigned the power to shape and regulate the boys’ dominant understandings and behaviours through the (re)legitimation of his subjectivities. Adam reinforced his leadership and social power within the group through employing specific language practices centred on gaining the attention of the other boys. Adam was found to continually position himself as expert and superior within the group by virtue of his capacity to dominate their discursive patterns. Much of this dominance centred on his roguish and daring stories, his bragging and dramatic displays of bravado often related to violence and aggression. He perpetuated this inequitable social order and strengthened the potency of the group’s dominant discourses in shaping behaviour by engaging in practices of self-legitimation at the expense of the other boys, in the form of silencing them through his discussion monopoly and belittling behaviour, deemed ‘inappropriate’ or ‘non-desirous’, through sarcasm and mockery.

The social and political effectiveness of Adam’s leadership was strengthened through the group’s continual and active motivation and desire to comply with the meanings, values and practices of his subjectivities. The other boys were complicit in constructing and governing the group’s dominant discourses. They actively and continuously positioned Adam as leader and renewed the substance of his subjectivities within the group, in two key ways: firstly, they positively reinforced and deferred to his leadership, allowing his domination of discussion; and secondly, they emulated his behaviour. Adam’s dominance within the group was perpetuated through the other boys’ interest and engagement in his stories and their attempts to impress him and gain his approval through allying with, and continually imitating, his behaviours. Moreover, the boys were interpreted as investing in this deference to Adam’s leadership because agency and status within the group were seen as dependent on their compliance with his subjectivities.

5.6.2.2 Social dynamics between groups

The group’s dominant discourses were found to be further legitimised and regulated, indeed amplified, in solidarity against non-group members: Adam’s ‘enemy’ Brian, in
particular, and girls, in general. The group achieved collective agency and power through positioning themselves as superior to ‘others’. The boys’ ‘othering’ strategies were interpreted as understood within their oppositional perceptions of the ‘masculine/feminine’ binary and, in this sense, involved belittling practices that positioned ‘others’ as ‘girl-like’ and powerless and inferior to the boys’ powerful and superior ‘boy-like’ positionings. Harris’ (1998) concepts of ‘groupness’, group contrast effects and intergroup hostility were found useful in explaining these group behaviours. In this regard, ‘groupness’ was found to govern the boys’ behaviour towards non-group members, and was manifest in the boys’ strong identification with the group’s dominant discourses in collective efforts to contrast themselves as oppositional to Brian and to females. These group contrast effects were seen as essentialising and amplifying sameness (the dominant understandings of the group) and difference (perceptions of others) through the ‘us versus them’ mentality of intergroup hostility that was often characterised by a highly contingent and competitive dynamic of ‘going one better’ fuelling the escalation of behaviours. In Brian’s case this escalation of behaviours culminated in Adam, Matthew and Justin’s physical attack on him.

5.6.3 School authority structures: the teachers’, principal and girls’ understandings

The teachers’ and principal’s perceptions of the boys’ behaviour were interpreted as underpinned by notions of childhood as ‘innocent’ and ‘free’. Their perceptions were seen as framed within a Piagetian notion of age/stage child development as progressing rationally along a pre-determined and inevitable pathway. This was apparent in their seeming advocation of minimal intervention in relation to their recognition of the boys’ behaviour as not particularly problematic. In this regard, the boys’ disruptive behaviours were seen as relatively harmless and ‘easily fixed’ in terms of being readily responsive to adult authority. To these ends, the boys appeared to be characterised as somewhat innocent and defenceless because the teachers positioned them within an adult/child power differential. Indeed, the teachers seemed to have a paternalistic affection for the boys. Adam, in particular was well liked: his ‘boisterous’ behaviour couched within perceptions of him as a “bright spark … a real goer.” Thus, despite acknowledgement of Adam’s aggression, the potential for this aggression to escalate and his impact on the
other boys’ behaviour, specific intervention programs such as those concerning anger management were not considered appropriate for the group. The theme of predetermined inevitability was apparent in the girls’, teachers’ and principal’s self-perpetuating, general acceptance of disruptive and aggressive behaviour in boys per se. The principal and the group of girls, in particular, appeared to expect such behaviour, with the girls understanding the boys’ disruptive behaviours within their developing sense of morality as informed by a concern for human connection and relationships (Gilligan 1982).

A logic of individualism was found to inform the teachers’ and principal’s intervention procedures and strategies for addressing the boys’ disruptive and aggressive behaviours. The boys’ behaviours tended to be individualised through preventative measures. These measures took the form of disbanding the ‘context of enactment’, through group dispersion and individual isolation, individual and non-confrontational ‘talks’, and a concern with the determination of individual degrees of guilt and punishment. In this regard, while the teachers’ and principal’s interventions acknowledged the contextual and contingent nature of the boys’ behaviour, their strategies failed to address this context of enactment underlying the boys’ disruptive behaviour.

5.6.4 Resistances and disruptions

While each boy in the peer group adopted and perpetuated the group’s dominant discourses, to varying degrees, the potency of these discourses in shaping and regulating the boys’ masculine subjectivities was marred by resistance and disruption. Identifying and examining these inconsistencies was the focus of the study’s third research question. Interrogation of the data revealed numerous points of disunity found to destabilise the pervasiveness of these discourses in shaping the boys’ subjectivities. These points of disunity were found within the other boys’ contestation and disruption of Adam’s leadership and dominance and their resistance in the adoption of, and participation in, the group’s dominant discourses. In this regard, Adam’s authority in the arena of cricket was questioned and invalidated through an alliance between Justin and Jack; and his subjectivities manifest in his practices of self-aggrandisement and the disparagement of others weakened through Jack’s consistent disapproval and Ravi’s counteractive support.
and approval of the other boys. In stark contrast with Matthew and Justin, Jack and Ravi were also found to resist taking on aspects of the group’s commodification of physical domination and violence. This was evident in their non-participation in Adam’s, and eventually, Justin and Matthew’s hatred of, and violence towards, Brian. Ravi was found to be most explicit in his resistance of this discourse, actively questioning its legitimacy. For instance, he rejected the group’s valorisation of the more aggressive aspects of football and attempted to pacify conflict within the group. In relation to the group’s discourse promoting physical risk, despite admiration for this behaviour, Jack, Ravi and Justin were found to resist this discourse in varying degrees. This was apparent in their scepticism and general caution about such behaviour and their non-participation in engaging in such behaviours. The boys’ solidarity in denigrating and objectifying females was also weakened through Ravi and Jack’s resistance. Both Jack and Ravi were found to question this discourse. This took the form of non-participation and active disapproval. Their willingness to confront and challenge the group’s dominant discourses was interpreted as significant in disrupting the potency of ‘groupness’ in shaping and governing the boys’ behaviour and was seen as critical in relation to identifying and exploring ways to diversify the group’s understandings of themselves and others.
Chapter 6
Discussion and Implications

This, the final chapter of the thesis, discusses each of the study’s three research questions, drawing theoretical and practical implications by creating a dialogue between my interpretation of the research story and related research in the area. The chapter is organised around the study’s primary investigative focus, being the position of the peer group in shaping masculinities. Drawing on the study’s analytic tools, of group socialisation (Harris 1998) and feminist poststructural theories, clear parallels to associated research are presented in strengthening the study’s theorising of masculinities. The key threads connecting the study and the literature acknowledge peer masculinities as hierarchically established through the dispersion of socio-political power; produced and maintained within a dynamic of competition and differentiation, and policed through the perpetuation of gender and (hetero)sexual dualisms. Significant connections are also made in identifying the implications of the school’s gendered and heteronormative infrastructure (such as the dispersion of power within the school, the teachers’ and principal’s gendered expectations, and philosophies and practices for managing behaviour) in endorsing and perpetuating particular dominant modes of being masculine. Further associations with related research are then discussed, as these pertain to the positioning of girls within patriarchal frameworks of compulsory heterosexuality.

The final part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the resistances and disruptions within the peer group. Drawing on the feminist poststructural availing of theorising the boys’ subjectivities as tenuous and fluid, potentialities for reworking the group’s dominant discourses in ways which generate more affirmative, but equally legitimate, ways of being masculine are explored. The elaboration of these potentialities suggests that a clear warrant exists for working with early childhood affinity groups. Underpinned by an understanding that the peer group’s disciplining forces are not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies, but also enabling and generative of affirmative subjectivities (Seidman 1993), ways of working with peers in their broader school
contexts to explore and engage with a broad range of masculinities are proposed. A location of these proposals within the necessities for broader institutional reform concludes the chapter.

6.1 The shaping and regulation of the group’s dominant discourses of masculinity

Gendered and heterosexist perceptions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘male-like’ behaviour as oppositional and superior to ‘femininity’ and ‘female-like’ behaviour were seen as fundamental in informing the boys’ dominant understandings of masculinities. In this regard, the boys’ investments in violence (seen, for example in *I Hate His Guts*), physical risk (*Who Dares Wins*) and physical domination (*It's More Than a Game*), were seen as perpetuated, (re)legitimated and regulated, in the peer context, through their efforts to differentiate themselves from their heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘female-like’ behaviour in all of the narratives.

Understanding the group’s dominant discourses means locating them within broader institutional contexts (Connell 2000; Seidman 1993; O’Connor et al. 1999). Through this frame of analysis, the research story can be seen as a micro reflection of adult macroculture within global, state and institutional contexts: a culture which endorses particular masculinities while marginalising others. Against this backdrop, for example, the promotion and global celebration of the archetypal football hero can be seen as mirrored in the boys’ reverence for their own sporting icons (*It’s More Than a Game*); while the discrimination against homosexuals in Australian family law is replicated in the assumed heterosexuality and homophobia implicit in the same narrative. While it can be seen that the boys in the study’s peer group, to some extent, distorted and exaggerated many dimensions of adult culture (Harris 1998), it can also be seen that their dominant understandings of masculinities are entirely consistent with aspects of a valorised masculinity promoted and revered on a global scale. One can detect the implicit permeation of these broader cultural structures within the boys’ gendered and heterosexist talk and their real investment in a masculinity which equates power with physical strength and domination. Within the more localised context the research tells the story of
how this revered masculinity is explicitly shaped and regulated through the boys’ peer group context, the school’s infrastructure and sporting culture.

**6.1.2 The perpetuation of the group’s dominant discourses through the gendered and heteronormative assumptions within school culture: the peer group**

The study’s primary thesis submits peer culture as the central force shaping and regulating the boys’ understandings of masculinities. To be sure, ‘groupness’, in relation to the boys’ self-categorisations and their potent desire for self-legitimation and belonging is seen as pivotal in the construction of their subjectivities or sense of ‘identity’. Harris’ (1998) theoretical framework informing the study’s understanding of peer group relations, specifically this notion of groupness as exhibited through differentiation, attention structure or hierarchy and intergroup hostility, shares strong resonance with related work in this area. Specifically, the work of Connell (1989; 1996; 1995), Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Martino (1999), in a secondary context; as well as that of Alloway (1995a), Epstein (1999), Jordan and Cowan (1995), Davies (1993), Connolly (1995), Danby (1998), Thorne (1993), Kamler et al. (1994) and Lowe (1998), in an early childhood/primary context. Drawing on Harris’ (1998) framework for conceptualising peer behaviour within the study’s broader feminist poststructural lens, the following discussion connects the research story to this related work. These parallels are critical in strengthening the study’s understandings and propositions in relation to offering considered implications for theory and practice.

The centrality of peer micro-culture in shaping and affirming the boys’ understandings and practices of masculinities seems best explained through Mac an Ghaill’s (1994: 53) description of this context as a “symbolically safe space”. In understanding the materiality of this micro-culture in this way, it can be seen that the peer group provides the boys with a ‘safe’ place to experiment with particular (albeit limited) masculine subjectivities and formulate a sense of identity and belonging (Kamler et al. 1994). Given their distortion of adult culture and the notion of the peer context as reflector of a wider society, it is not surprising that the boys’ sense of collective identity shares striking similarities with the dominant (read hegemonic) peer masculinities described within
research in secondary schools. It could be argued that the boys in this study are ‘shaping up nicely’, to use Kamler’s phrase (1994), to become the next generation’s *Macho Lads*, (Mac an Ghaill 1994), *Party Animals* (Martino 1999) or *Cool Guys* (Connell 1989).

Certainly the boys’ understandings of an ‘ideal’ masculinity, as framed around investments in violence, power, physical risk and domination within heterosexist perceptions of females and ‘femininities’, are entirely consistent with the ‘macho’ version of masculinity celebrated in the secondary context. It is the level, pervasiveness and primacy of this seemingly ‘unchecked’ peer group potency in shaping and legitimating such young boys’ understandings and behaviours that clearly warrant direct attention and scrutiny within early childhood education.

The boys’ peer group masculinities conceptualised as hierarchically produced through the dispersion of socio-political power can be paralleled with research in secondary and primary/early childhood contexts in distinct ways. Masculinity as ‘performance’ (Connell 2000), in relation to the need to prove oneself (Martino 1999) in pursuit of self-legitimation, status and prestige (Connell 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 1999) within the peer group’s ‘pecking order’, central in defining masculinities in the secondary sphere, is strikingly enacted throughout the research story. The bravado, toughness and boasting of Mac an Ghaill’s *Macho Lads*, for example, are echoed in the drama of Adam’s boxing dialogue and risk taking (*Your Truck Sucks* and *Who Dares Wins*), Matthew’s girlfriend collection stories (*It’s More Than a Game*) and Justin’s sporting and physical pursuits (*It’s More Than a Game* and *I Hate His Guts*). Similarly mirrored within the research story are Lowe (1998) and Danby’s (1998) observations of the establishment of boys’ peer hierarchies through displays of ‘toughness’ designed to differentiate and mark prestige and can be seen in Adam’s espousals of “bashin’” those who “try to hurt” his friends (*I Hate His Guts*).

Performances of self-legitimation, often at the expense of others, which Mac an Ghaill describes as ‘amplified’, ‘ritualistic’ and ‘obsessive’, echo throughout the research story. Seemingly an inevitable bi-product of these practices, these descriptors can be seen in the boy’s continual and escalatory attempts to ‘go one better’ or ‘outdo’ each other. Adam’s consistent and compulsive belittlement of the other boys and the boys’ within group
alliances against Justin (Cricket Season) and Ravi (It’s More Than a Game) are applicable here.

Practices of self-legitimation at the expense of others, in the form of dispersing hierarchical power through policing masculinities (Connell 2000) is reported to be a central strategy in marking difference and prestige between groups through intergroup hostility (Harris 1998). Proving one’s masculinity through a “regime of abusive practices” such as verbal put-downs and humiliation, enacted to “get a laugh” at the expense of “those boys designated as other” (Martino 1999: 243) are expressions of this. The policing of masculinities between groups within an early childhood context, in the form of self-legitimation at the expense of others, is often conceptualised within the frame of ‘gender borderwork’ (Thorne 1993). Here, as with the ritualised threats of power to establish a hierarchy (Danby 1998) and the assertion of collective power and dominance when unable to dominate alone (Lowe 1998), boys achieve group solidarity through the active exclusion or inclusion of others (Kamler et al. 1994).

Collective ‘masculine identity’ and the dispersion of socio-political power between groups overwhelmingly occur through practices reinforcing the oppositional male/female, heterosexual/homosexual power binaries. Here, intergroup hostility (Harris 1998) and the promotion of an oppressive masculinity is underpinned by investments in essentialist gendered and heterosexist perceptions and perpetuated through the regulatory practices of sexual harassment and homophobia. As Mac an Ghaill (1994: 92) remarks, these are “crucial elements in setting the parameters of prescriptive and proscriptive” schoolboy performance masculinities. The well-defined hierarchies of status and influence understood through equating ‘the masculine’ with power and domination and ‘the feminine’ with powerlessness and subordination undergird these oppressive understandings and practices within all of the secondary and early childhood settings reviewed. These binaries also provide boys with the power to position girls and women as powerless ‘objects’ to evaluate within a circumscribed frame of compulsory heterosexuality.
Consistent with Epstein’s (1999: 103) comment, “…in the primary-school context, the worst thing a boy can be called is a ‘girl’, even worse than being called a ‘gay boy’, ‘poof’ or ‘sissy’,” the boys in the study’s peer group consistently subordinate and draw individual and collective power in this regard. Their ‘enemy’ Brian, for example (I Hate His Guts), is ridiculed and effectively excluded through being labelled a ‘girl’ and defined as ‘girl-like’. The boys’ dialogue, throughout the research story, is also peppered with homophobic insults in the processes of self-legitimation and intergroup hostility. Differentiation from girls and ‘girl-like’ behaviour is most visible, however, in the boys’ pre-occupation and investments in violence, physical risk and physical domination. Here proving oneself and legitimating a revered ‘masculinity’ to the group seems directly aligned with the boys’ amplification of masculine conventions in effort to contrast themselves with anything ‘soft’ or ‘weak’ (read ‘girl-like’). The combative and hierarchical physicality of Jordan and Cowan’s (1995) ‘warrior masculinity’ fits the profile best in this regard and resonates strongly with the research story. While implicit enactments of oppositional ‘toughness’ run throughout the data, the gun-play of That’s a Bullet Belt and the collective violence against Brian (I Hate His Guts) are explicit demonstrations of the real power the boys derive from these investments.

Distinct parallels can be drawn from Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) and Connolly’s (1995) research in relation to the use of sexual power within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality or heterosexism. The male heroic sexual conquests within “categorical imperatives to act like heterosexual men” (Mac an Ghaill’s 1994: 91) can be seen, for example, to resonate with the heroic symbolism in the boys’ drawings and their symbolic fighting over girlfriends (That’s a Bullet Belt and I Hate His Guts). The misogynistic boasting in the style of Mac an Ghaill’s Macho Lads can be detected throughout the research story. The competition for status derived from the boys’ talk of ‘collecting’ the most girlfriends (Adam and Matthew in Who Dares Wins and It’s More Than a Game), is applicable here and seems to be epitomised with Adam’s boast, “The ‘A’ man always gets the chicks” (It’s More Than a Game). Within an early childhood context Connolly’s conception of his Bad Boys’ compulsory heterosexuality as understood within a framework of power, domination and violence, is mirrored throughout the research story.
and enhances the study’s understanding of the boys’ use of sexual power. Connolly’s *Bad Boys* derive (hetero)sexual power from talk of “sexing” girls in “production-like” fashion and from harassment and abuse of girls in games of kiss-chase (1995: 181). Adam derives a similar form of power from sexualised displays, for example, his ‘pumping iron’ drama of “sex(ing) girls all day” (*That’s a Bullet Belt*) and the status he gains from the attention he receives from girls in games of ‘chasey’ (*It’s More Than a Game*). Consistent with Walkerdine’s study which illuminates the sexual power of two three-year old boys (in Reid 1999; Epstein 1994), the group is distinctly aware of how they can sexualise or objectify an adult woman and reduce her power in their discourse. “I might as well stick it up ’er,” is Adam’s sexualised remark in response to complaints about a relief teacher.

### 6.1.3 The perpetuation of the group’s dominant discourses through the gendered and heteronormative assumptions within the school’s infrastructure: the teachers’, principal’s and girls’ perceptions and philosophies about gender

Chapter Two illuminates the significance of analysing formal and informal school structures to reveal how they actively produce, normalise and hierarchically order particular versions of gender and sexuality. In this regard, boys’ investments in particular versions of masculinity may be seen as endorsed and maintained through the school’s stratified organisation and dispersion of power (Askew & Ross 1988; Browne 1995a; Connell 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Kenway & Willis 1998; Martino 1999; Redman 1994). Banrock Primary seems to be typical of many primary schools’ gendered organisation in terms of the general location of males in positions of authority and females in positions subordinate to this authority (Lingard & Limerick 1995). While only two males work at Banrock within a staff of approximately 20, they occupy the two most senior positions, principal and senior teacher. Additionally, these two males are formally responsible for whole school behaviour management. ‘Real’ or ‘serious’ behavioural problems, such as the group violence perpetrated against Brian in the narrative *I Hate His Guts*, are typically referred to either of these two men. This practice helps to reinforce dualistic understandings of gender, through conveying the message to children, that
female teachers are less powerful and have less authority than their male counterparts (Kamler et al. 1994).

Critical in the school’s dispersion of authoritative power, research examining particular teacher practices suggests that the modelling of authority, differentially gendered expectations and philosophies locating the ‘masculine position’ as unproblematic, are potent in ignoring or endorsing particular ways of being masculine (Adams & Walkerdine 1986; Alloway 1995a, 1999; Clark 1993; Davies 1988, 1993; Reid et al. 1994). The behaviour management strategies of the boys’ class teacher and school principal can be seen as consistent with research associating adult authoritarian behaviour with boys’ investments in control and their tendency to adopt ‘power over’ strategies with others (Browne 1995a; Davies 1993). In this regard, authoritarian practices have been associated with contributing to relations of dominance and hierarchy (Browne 1995a). Authoritarian strategies of ‘power over’ are clearly demonstrated in Mrs. W.’s and Mr. T.’s reactions to the three boys “laying into Brian” (I Hate His Guts). Mrs. W. shouts the command “GET TO MR. T.’S OFFICE RIGHT NOW!” and Mr. T. “gets to the bottom” of the problem “after a lot of roaring.” As Browne (1995a: 179) remarks, in reference to boys using power as a strategy of domination over others, “No matter how much we adults talk about respect and fairness, young people are acutely aware of what we actually do when we are faced with conflict or difficulty.”

The teachers’ and principal’s comments throughout the research story are consistent with work in areas associated with the construction of gendered expectations and the endorsement of particular ways of being male (Adams & Wakerdine 1986; Reid et al. 1994; Kamler et al. 1994). Adams and Walkerdine’s (1986: 26) comment rings true here, “The high-spirited child is traditionally regarded with affectionate tolerance. Boys will be boys. A boy who never gets up to mischief, it is suggested is not a proper boy.” The teachers’ thoughts about Adam resonate with this comment. As Chapters Four and Five enunciate, the teachers share a concern for Adam’s “high-spirited mischief” and his “active … loud” and “bossy” behaviour (Mrs. W. in Your Truck Sucks). Their comments, however, also illuminate a sense of affection and approval of Adam. In conjunction with the greater time and attention Adam receives from the teachers relative to the other
children (he dominates the teachers’ conversations as Mrs. W. and Ms. C. admit in *Who Dares Wins*, for example), they describe him as having a “lovely personality”, as being a “survivor … a bright spark” and “a goer”, as “interesting … great company” and “good to have a talk to.” It seems that Adam is indeed behaving like a ‘proper boy’ (Adams & Walkerdine 1986) in terms of ‘getting his gender right’ (Davies 1988) within teacher expectations that ‘cherish’ (Kamler et al 1994) his ‘boyish’ behaviour.

The ‘boys will be boys’ discourse Adams and Walkerdine (1986) refer to, seems also to underpin how the teachers’ and principal interpret the boys’ aggressive and disruptive behaviour as somehow pre-determined and inevitable. The principal is explicit in this regard with remarks such as, “boys of that age … they’re heading into that real boisterous stage (*That’s a Bullet Belt*) … yes, the physical side of things is the boys’ domain … of course they’re physical” (*I Hate His Guts*). Although less explicit, the teachers also seem to rationalise the boys’ disruptive behaviour as reasonable. While expressing concern for the boys’ aggression, they counter these concerns with qualifications, which suggest that such behaviour is not ‘out of the ordinary’. “They’re not actually out of control kids … they’re not what I would consider behavioural problems,” explains Mrs. W. with agreement from the others (*I Hate His Guts*). In a similar vein, the ‘childhood as innocence’ discourse, through which the teachers sentimentalise the boys and position them as powerless, is exemplified in Mrs. W.’s comment, “they’re only little kids” (*I Hate His Guts*). In doing so Mrs. W. attests their behaviour as somehow harmless.

Further sentimentalising of the boys as passive and innocent is evident in Mrs. W.’s remarks concerning an “ideal” home environment. To these ends, she partly attributes the boys’ less positive behaviours to their less than ideal home environments. Mrs. W. associates Matthew’s “insecurities” (*I Hate His Guts*), for example, with “dad not being around” and Adam’s poor academic achievement to his father’s attitudes towards school (*That’s a Bullet Belt*).

The teachers’ and principal’s adoption of these discourses of sentiment, passivity and inevitability shifts responsibility for the boys behaviours away from the boys, validates their personal constructions of what they know and understand of the world and reproduces inequalities through leaving relations of power unquestioned (Alloway...
Against this backdrop, the teachers’ and principal’s expectations locate the boys’ highly gendered and heterosexist behaviours as unproblematic (Alloway 1995a) and thus unwittingly comply in their perpetuation. This is consistent with other work in this area where teacher expectations can be seen as reflecting the conservatism of early childhood education (Casper, Cuffaro, Schultz & Silin 1998; Epstein & Johnson’s 1994). Within the current dominant and traditional ideologies of teacher training, which endorse the conservative, rational and individualistic (and many would say, masculinist) thinking of developmental psychology in explaining child development, however, these perceptions seem hardly surprising (Fitzclarence 2000; Gilligan 1982; Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997). In this regard, the adherence to the popular image, within which children’s gender and sexual knowledges and behaviours are seen as passive, innocent and natural, appears all-pervasive.

The girls’ constructions of femininities are seen as critical in understanding how particular versions of gender and sexuality are hierarchically (re)produced and normalised (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Redman 1994). Davies (1993: 55) notes that girls, in order to be accepted by adults, “recognise the centrality of obedience and conformity, even when it might be to their own detriment.” When looking at the girls’ understandings and philosophies of gender outlined in Chapter Five (5.3.2 The girls’ understandings of boys and physical dominance), one can see Davies’ assertion in the girls’ concerns for ‘doing the right thing’ and being ‘good’ students. In light of Gilligan’s (1982) theorising about the disparity between girls’ and boys’ concepts of self and morality (also outlined in section 5.3.2), one can see beyond understanding the girls’ investments in morality in binary terms of ‘goodness/badness’, ‘obedience/disobedience’ (girl/boy). Nevertheless, the girls’ concepts of self and morality mean that they describe the boys’ behaviours through essentialist and oppositional terms. Similarly, and entirely consistent with the teachers’ and the principal’s understandings, the girls also perpetuate binary relations through positioning the boys’ aggressive behaviour as pre-determined or inevitable within a ‘boys will be boys’ discourse. In this regard, both the girls’ and boys’ reductionist philosophies about gender and sexuality and their investments in particular
oppositional versions of femininity and masculinity may be seen as self-generating and self-perpetuating.

The relational perspective offered by Mac an Ghaill (1994), concerning the wielding of sexual power over females, offers the study a significant reference point for understanding the constitution and regulation of femininities within masculine heterosexuality. Mac an Ghaill notes the ambiguities and confusion female students express in relation to, desiring male attention and approval, on the one hand while, on the other, fearing disparagement or exclusion through being positioned within practices of objectification, fixation and conquest. In a similar vein, the girls’ pre-occupation with Adam’s girlfriends, their interest in the boys’ perceptions of them and their enjoyment in being objects of desire to ‘be chased’ in girl/boy games, suggest their active endorsement of being positioned as ‘feminine’ within discourses of masculine heterosexuality. The girls, in this sense, seem to draw a form of self-legitimation and ‘power to attract’ from positioning themselves as recipients of the male gaze. Part of this self-legitimation, it appears, is the girls’ recognition, alongside the boys, of the status gained in being seen to ‘have’ a heterosexual partner, as Sally’s admittance of wanting a boyfriend (It’s More Than a Game) indicates. However, Harrison’s (1997: 495) work suggests a more complex interaction, between the “unpredictable effects of desire, pleasure and fantasy,” is at work here. In this regard, the disciplining and ritualistic practices of being positioned within discourses of masculine heterosexuality hold the tensions of a ‘double-edged’ sword for the girls. It seems that being ‘coveted’ objects of the male gaze is desirable and pleasurable, on the one hand, but highly risky on the other, because the girls defer the power to evaluate and appreciate to the boys.

As with Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) research, the girls in the study identify the riskiness in being positioned in such a way in terms of their awareness of the confusion and ambiguities these positionings constitute. For example, the girls note the boys’ dislike for them, on the one hand, but identify the boys’ desire to chase them and have lots of girlfriends, on the other hand. Further, they are perplexed by the boys’ “silly” and sometimes violent behaviour, interpreting it as somehow a sign that the boys “like” them (It’s More Than a Game). As work in this area suggests (see Harrison 1997; Walkerdine
1990), understanding the constitution of femininities within discourses of masculine heterosexuality must attend to the power of embodied non-rational disciplining norms. These girls are not just being “acted upon” but are actively participating in the fun, fantasy, pleasure and desire of ‘doing’ femininity (Harrison 1997: 514).

6.1.4 The perpetuation of the group’s dominant discourses through the gendered and heterosexist assumptions within sporting culture

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

Consistent with studies of male peer culture in a secondary context (Connell 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 1999; Walker 1988), male-dominated sports feature throughout the research story as significant in the definition, enactment and legitimation of dominant masculinities. In this regard, competitive sports provide a vehicle through which bodily expressions of masculinity can enact and mark physical difference and prestige (Lingard & Douglas 1999). Here, gender is experienced and embodied – the boys’ bodies appropriated and defined through the gendered dispositions of combative sport (Bourdieu 1984; Connell 1995). Banrock Primary, like most Western primary schools, reflects a broader mass media and commercial culture which celebrates and accords high-status to competitive male-dominated team sports. Thus, McLean’s (1996: 30) assertion concerning the high rewarding of boys’ competitive sports within school structures rings true at Banrock. The school’s vast allocation of playground space to sports such as soccer and football, the formal rewarding of sporting achievements in assemblies and the high status accorded to students who achieve individual sporting success are examples of the school’s active endorsement and celebration of male-dominated sports.

The peer culture’s active endorsement and celebration of sports such as football is consistent with the observations of Hickey and Fitz Clarence (1997). They describe how the ‘hero worship’ of sporting stars, the formation of allegiances, and the dreams of success and glory are powerful aspects of ‘footy’ culture. The boys competitive banter
about obtaining their favourite footy player’s autograph, their ‘going one better’ quips concerning their level of devotion to particular football teams and their comments on the pleasures of victory and winning (It’s More Than a Game) typify this celebration. Their endorsement of ‘macho’ sports is further demonstrated in their active approval of Adam’s boxing stories (Your Truck Sucks) and their continual self-validation concerning their sporting achievements, “I’m the best footballer in the class,” (Justin in It’s More than a Game). Mr. A.’s comment (The Cricket Season) seems to sum up the importance of these investments: “y’know in grade 5/6 those boys in the cricket team and the footy team y’know they’re the guys. They’re the ones to hang around with.”

The group’s dominant discourses commodifying violence, physical risk and physical domination within heterosexist perceptions of females and femininity can be seen as highly congruent with the dominant discourses of sporting culture. While violence in sporting culture is publicly condemned, the necessarily ‘hard’ and ‘aggressive’ nature of these sports (Hickey & Fitzclarence 1997) prompts clear associations between competitive sports and violence (Miedzian 1992). Certainly, the boys consistently make associations between male-dominated sport and violence. “Y’can bash de shit out of people,” (Adam’s comment about why he likes football in It’s More Than a Game) exemplifies this association and the boys’ awareness that in sports ‘winning’ equates to physical domination. Adam’s comment, and many similar expressions he and the other boys make in reference to competitive sport (see It's More Than a Game), also demonstrates an awareness that these boys see sport as a legitimate arena to promote male supremacy (Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). In this regard, it can be seen that the boys’ differentiation as ‘superior’ to anything ‘soft’, ‘weak’, and in their perceptions ‘girl-like’, is legitimised on a massive scale in reference to sporting culture’s glorification of physical strength and dominance.

Thus, the culture and symbolism of male-dominated sport, underpinned by extremely oppositional gendered and heterosexist assumptions which position females as objects and ‘female-like’ behaviour as the worst form of denigration (Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990), can be seen as validating and endorsing the boys’ investments in ‘hypermasculine’ discourses. The ease with which the boys use the
common and effective sporting slurs of ‘poofter’, ‘sissy’ and ‘girl’ throughout the research story makes their gendered and heterosexist investments clear. The boys’ descriptions of the victorious football team (*It’s More Than a Game*), illuminates their understandings in this regard. Here we have our triumphant football hero complete with “cute butt” and “lotsa girlfriends” celebrating his victory and, it seems, his social latitude to “get really really drunk” and “smash things”.

The burgeoning research in this area presents the male-institution of sport as central in the social production of masculinities (Whitson 1990; Hickey & Fitzclarence 1997; 1998b; Messner & Sabo 1994). This centrality is reflected in the obvious investments the young boys in the study have in competitive male-dominated sports. As this body of research testifies, and resonating strongly with the research story, the embodiment of this sporting culture constrains boys’ experimentation with other ways of being male, subordinates a broad range of masculinities and femininities and sets up differentiation and competitiveness as a main means of communication and social interaction.

### 6.2 Resistance and disruption of the group’s dominant discourses: the peer group

The analytic tools of feminist poststructuralism provide a way of exposing the power dynamics within the boys’ peer group and how these dynamics interact to (re)constitute the boys’ understandings of being male (Davies 1993). It can be seen, within this frame of understanding, that the boys’ subjectivities are discursively produced through social interaction and, in this regard, are dynamic and fluid. Within theorising that acknowledges diversity and difference one can also identify the multiple inconsistencies, contradictions, disruptions and resistances throughout the research story and expose the instability of the groups’ gendered and heterosexist discourses. Indeed, while these discourses are acknowledged as potent in shaping the boys’ subjectivities, this analysis uncovers their often tenuous and fragmented nature and makes visible their amenability to change. As Davies (1993: 197) asserts, while the constitutive political and social power underpinning and structuring discourse, must be recognised, “the possibility that this (constitutive power) can also be laughed out of existence, played with, disrupted, or
used to manufacture new possibilities, can also be recognised.” Herein lies the theory’s radical political potential for re-working taken-for-granted ways of being.

Chapter Five (5.3 Resistances and contestations to the group’s dominant discourses) examines the numerous points of disunity within the boys’ social interactions and illuminates the tenuous hold the group’s dominant discourses have over the (re)constitution of the boys’ subjectivities. Consistent with Weedon’s (1987) explanation of socio-political power and the construction of meaning (outlined in Chapter Three), analysis of the boys’ social interactions can expose the mechanisms through which they are spoken into existence. From a range of possible forms of subjectivity, the boys can be seen as (re)constituting themselves each time they think or speak “on subjection to (and interpretation of) the regime of meaning of a particular discourse” (Weedon 1987: 34). This plurality illuminates partiality and fragmentation and signals the existence of alternative knowledges in the group and the potential of these alternative knowledges to generate “affirmative identities” (Seidman 1993: 134). Through poststructural lenses, ‘critical moments’ of political struggle can be recognised (Weedon 1987) and deployed to generate opportunities to re-interpret, challenge and redefine dominance.

In analysing Ravi and Jack’s resistances and contestations, the implications and usefulness of these alternative knowledges in generating affirmative subjectivities based on non-hierarchical relations can be identified. This is where Seidman’s (1993: 134) suggestion to “theoretically engage the practices of individuals organised around affirmative identities” (1993: 134) seems applicable. In this regard, identity constructions, while understood as “slippery”, “elusive” and historically contingent (Fuss 1989: 19) can be viewed as “personally, socially, and politically enabling” and need not be reduced only to “modes of domination and hierarchy” (Seidman 1993: 134).

To identify the usefulness of alternative knowledges in exploring affirmative identities based on non-hierarchical relations, it is important to examine the different ways the boys use socio-political power to disrupt and contest the group’s dominance and hierarchy. Examining Jack and Ravi’s interactions within the group reveals that power is used as resistance in two main ways. Jack, on the one hand, posits alternative knowledges within
the group and resists dominance and hierarchy through taking up similar ‘power over’
 modes of domination to Adam. For example, he questions the legitimacy of Adam’s
leadership through, belittlement, “I’m better than you Adam … you don’ even know how
to kick a football” (It’s More Than a Game) and challenges Adam through attempting to
dominate (“Shut up!” he directs Adam in Who Dares Wins) and evaluate (“You’re rude …
That’s stupid,” he tells Adam in It’s More Than a Game). These authoritative uses of
power can be seen as contributing to relations of dominance within the group through
perpetuating the dynamics of competition and differentiation.

Ravi, on the other hand, posits alternative knowledges that draw on the personally,
socially and politically enabling qualities of the group, such as friendship and loyalty. He
implicitly opposes the group’s dominance and hierarchy through offering consistent
support. “Your’s looks great,” he assures Justin, for example, after Adam disparages his
drawing (Who Dares Wins). Moreover, Ravi resists the group’s dominant discourses in
ways that never belittle the others even when the others choose to belittle him. His
definitive rejection of football on the basis of its physical violence (It’s More Than a
Game) exemplifies this. Here, Ravi quietly and calmly explains his preference for, what
he sees as the less violent game of soccer. Importantly, he maintains this preference in
the face of the other boys’ strong allegiances to Australian Rules Football and their
mordant belittlement of him. In a similar vein, Ravi chooses not to partake in the group’s
discourses that belittle girls and ‘girl-like’ behaviour. In this regard, it can be seen that
Ravi does not contribute to dominance and hierarchy, indeed his ways of resistance often
dissolve competition and differentiation. His attempts to pacify conflict (It’s More Than
a Game, That’s a Bullet Belt and Cricket Season) are applicable here. To these ends,
both Jack and Ravi are successful in disrupting the potency of the group’s dominant
discourses. However Jack’s resistances posit alternative knowledges which are based on
domination and competition, and thus perpetuate investments in authoritative uses of
power within the group, while Ravi offers alternative knowledges based on affirmative
identities that generate empowerment. In understanding the generative nature of Ravi’s
alternative non-hierarchical knowledges it is revealing to note that he is the only group
member who chooses not to play combative sports and is actively involved in drama and
imaginative play. Thus, it can be seen that Ravi is learning alternative knowledges, which provide him with legitimate ways of being powerful.

6.3 A way forward: a warrant for working with peers

It is through people’s actions in micro-political contexts and in both individual and collective ways, that general structures are reproduced or transformed. In this sense, among others, the personal is indeed the political. (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 225)

The study conceptualises the peer group’s disciplining force as not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies but also as enabling and productive of social collectivities, moral bonds and political agency (Seidman 1993). In this regard, one can view this context as a generative space for identifying and exploring affirmative alternatives to dominant modes of being masculine. As Browne (1995a: 181) asserts, “because such unacceptable behaviours are learned in groups or, at the very least, maintained and refined in groups, it is important that they are unlearned in groups.” The argument for working with affinity groups to challenge and disrupt dominant storylines is further advanced in light of research in the area of the peer group and sexuality (Gourlay 1996; Redman 1994). This work confirms the peer group’s primacy in providing young people with information about sexuality and suggests capitalising on this ‘primacy’ to challenge particular assumptions and positionings. This research also suggests that discussion of contextualised and relevant student-centred issues within peer contexts can facilitate “more liberal” attitudes and behaviours through broad and deep explorations of individual and group dilemmas, understandings and emotions (Gourlay 1996: 46). Further, Hickey and Fitzclarence’s (2000b) work in the area of adolescence asserts the “need for education to recognise the centrality of affinity groups” in shaping dominant peer masculinities and urges educators to engage with the stories of young males from within groups with which they have an affinity. Of critical importance, Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000b) emphasise the need for engagement with collective masculinities in contemplating how teacher pedagogies and practices might be re-thought to facilitate generative dialogue with young males.
In illuminating behavioural contingency and context in shaping the boys’ understandings of masculinities, the research story uncovers a need for re-thinking teacher pedagogies and understandings. Harris’ (1998: 277) words come to mind here: “having, or not having, a group to identify with could make all the difference to a kid who isn’t sure what sort of person he is.” In thinking of the peer context in this way, as a space to ‘fit in’, the ramifications of context and contingency in shaping behaviour are exemplified. Matthew and Justin seem to fit Harris’ description particularly well in this regard, in terms of their active submission to Adam’s authority and willingness to comply with the group’s dominant discourses. In accepting Harris’ (1998: 284) assertions about the importance of leadership in shaping group behaviours and her proposal that ‘delinquency’ is “something kids do with their friends,” it can be seen that instances such as Matthew and Justin’s violence against Brian are temporary, situational and highly contingent upon their desire to impress and belong. The boys’ behaviour is thus appropriate to the social context of enactment. In Harris’ view, “they are doing what it takes to gain status in their group, or doing what it takes to avoid losing status” (1998: 284).

In light of the potency of peer investments, teacher practices which individualise and pathologise behaviour, such as those typically used by teachers to sanction boys’ behaviour, are clearly inadequate (Browne 1995a; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b). Common interventions used to dispel and punish group conflict such as banning particular activities, ‘time-out’ isolation periods and choosing not to group students in particular ways, like those that feature in the research story, while having the “advantage of making the individual responsible for his own behaviour” (Browne 1995a: 179) can only superficially ‘manage’ behaviour. This is because these strategies fail to deal with boys’ investments in perpetuating such behaviours or the situational and contingent nature of their behaviour (Browne 1995a; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b). As the research story illuminates, in line with Browne’s (1995b) assertion, peer culture often supports and rewards these very same behaviours. Further to this, these interventions may also be seen as inadequate because they apply ‘rational’ and systematic sanctions and remedies to ‘non-rational’ and highly emotive situations (Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997; Fitzclarence 2000).
In exploring masculinity, violence and schooling, Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) and Fitzclarence (2000) make some principal assertions in this regard and outline clear implications for educational theory and practice. They describe ‘emotional neutrality’ and ‘hyper-rationality’ as “core structuring values of school cultures and education systems” (Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997: 125) and delineate the limitations inherent in the school’s application of these values. They explain, that this framework of understanding, grounded in traditional and conservative assumptions about child development, employs hyper-rationalistic solutions (such as strict codes of behaviour and regimes of discipline and control) to deeply emotive issues (such as aggression and violence). Fitzclarence asserts that these ‘solutions’ or strategies are inadequate because they are one-dimensional and:

…fail to account for the multiplicity and complexity of human behaviour. As such rational inquiry becomes an ideology that fails to acknowledge that human behaviour does not always follow a rational and predictable path. (2000: 151)

Further, it is argued that pedagogies of rationality, specifically the privileging of the rational and instrumental over the relational and affective are likely to perpetuate violent cultures through ignoring or devaluing the world of emotions and feelings and actively denying irrational experiences as aberrational (Fitzclarence 2000; Fitzclarence & Kenway 1997). Against this backdrop, these commentators critique the dominant approaches to educational theory and practice. Rationalising behaviour through individualising, pathologising and controlling through repressive measures, they argue, defines students’ identities clinically within conservative, narrow and incomplete paradigms.

In examining alternative ways of working with young males, it is seen as critical to dispel authoritarian power relations between teacher and student in ways that generate more equitable interactions and understandings (Browne 1995b; Davies 1993; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b). After Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000b), the study posits working with, rather than in opposition to male peer groups, as critical in providing the necessary framework for exploring, deconstructing and rebuilding the meanings and commitments young males attach to dominant storylines and particular ways of being. It is within the
affinity context that educators can help facilitate the development of personal resources that young males may draw on to position themselves in ways that explore alternatives to dominance. Within this frame of understanding, Kenway and Fitzclarence’s work (1997) on masculinity and violence, offers an alternative to strategies of authority and control in their illumination of the significance of developing a ‘pedagogy of emotions’ so that teachers might facilitate students’ exploration and understanding of powerful feelings such as suffering, fear, anger, rage, humiliation, jealousy, revenge and remorse, as well as joy and pleasure as implicated in their dominant storylines and gender(ed) subjectivities.

Interpretation of the study’s data clearly supports the argument for education to recognise the centrality of affinity groups in the shaping of dominant masculinities (Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b). However, the study’s data also illuminate the grave inadequacies of overlooking the early childhood sphere in this argument. To echo Alloway’s (1995b: 19) phrase, and in strong resonance with the data: “eight’s too late, to begin thinking about issues of gender.” The malleability of gender identities and subjectivities in the initial years of schooling (read ages 4-5) point to an opportune time to begin work with affinity groups in exploring behaviours and emotions and reworking dominant storylines and restrictive notions of gender. As Jordan (1995: 72-73) explains, “children (at this early age) are still very far from having a fixed notion of what (gender) positioning implies socially” and “have only a very hazy impression of what sort of behaviour that (gender) membership demands of them.” In reference to peer culture, Harris adds (1998: 226), “in elementary school the cliques are still fluid; kids can move into and out of them. When they move, their attitudes shift to match those of their new friends.” She notes that by the time students reach secondary school:

…most of them have been ‘typed’ by their classmates and by themselves. The temporary cliques of earlier years have solidified into fairly rigid social categories... (1998: 226)

The fluidity of the boys’ ‘clique’, on the one hand, in conjunction with the peer group’s situational potency in shaping and regulating behaviour, on the other, presents a clear warrant for working with the mechanisms of ‘groupness’ in the shaping of gender and sexualities with early childhood affinity groups.
6.3.1 Strategies for disrupting dominance: peer culture

While not specifically focussed on the potency of peer culture in shaping subjectivities Davies’ (1989; 1993) work with young children on the critical analysis of dominant storylines offers valuable insight into the ways children can disrupt and rework restrictive notions of gender. While acknowledged as being far from a simple task, Davies’ philosophies and strategies are presented here as critical starting points for disrupting the potency of the peer group’s dominance and hierarchy in working with affinity groups. Davies advocates making the skills of critical deconstruction within a feminist poststructural framework accessible to children through links to their lived and imagined experiences. By engaging with these skills, she argues, children can recognise the historical and cultural specificities of language and meaning and thus make visible the “constitutive force of what is said and what might be” (1993: 200). Through catching “discourse in the act of shaping subjectivities,” she believes that children can identify the constructed nature of cultural patterns and engage in “a collective process of re-naming, re-writing (and) re-positioning themselves in relation to coercive structures” (1993: 200).

It is the facilitation of these skills of deconstruction, through exploring the illegitimacies of discourse, that the study posits as central in boys learning to come to terms with the potent and often destructive nature of peer group relations. Learning these skills and drawing on these resources within the context of the peer group (Browne 1995b; Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000b) will enable boys to position themselves within alternative and empowering discourses and storylines (Davies 1993). Davies’ work is testimony to young children’s (frequently underestimated) capacities in exploring complex issues and understanding “different ways of looking, listening, writing and telling new stories” (1993: 197). Her work, together with other work in this area (Martino & Mellor 1995; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995; Sears 1999) has a strong language-based focus, advocating the use of non-sexist and counter-homophobic literature as resources for exploring alternative masculinities.

Davies’ (1993) research offers generative possibilities for working with dominant peer masculinities, particularly in early childhood where these group positionings are still
fluid. One can see that the tenuous and fragmented nature of the boys’ peer group subjectivities can be (re)worked to expose and call into question taken-for-granted assumptions underpinned by gendered and heterosexist discourses. Central to the “opening up of a different kind of agency” (Davies 1993: 199), the research story illuminates the boys’ willingness to explore their pleasures, emotions, ‘irrationalities’, investments and competencies within their social worlds. The discursive and affirmative spaces, moreover, from which to begin such questionings and “invent what might be” (1993: 200) already exist in Ravi’s resistances and disruptions to the group’s dominant storylines. These can be seen as legitimate avenues through which to explore alternative and less oppressive ways of being, most significantly because they stem from different interpretations within the group and are thus relevant to the boys. Davies (1993) notes that identification and legitimation of convincing alternative subject positions are critical in encouraging boys to resist familiar, and perhaps more convincing, dominant and dominating modes of being.

Resonating with Maclean’s research (1999) with young children’s peer groups, it seems that Ravi possesses the intertextual strategies to take control in the construction of his subjectivities. His affirmative positionings within the group suggest that he is able to see the “textual staging of knowledge” and “lack of innocence” (Lather 1991a: 13) in the group’s dominant discourses and use his personal resources to position himself against their constitutive power in generative, rather than dominating ways. Ravi’s critique of football (It’s More Than a Game), for example, reveals a valid and considered argument which might be used as a starting point to ‘talk out of existence’, or at least posit alternatives to accepting a revered masculinity built on brute physical strength and combative violence. In this regard, the validity of alternative positions (beginning with Ravi’s), can be opened within the group through exploring the multiple ways through which discourses within football might position and marginalise others. As Reid (1999: 170) argues, “the feminist poststructuralist recognition of different standpoints and different ways of seeing increases the potential for different ways of enacting.”

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

(Children) need to discover the way in which the cultural patterns constantly repeated in stories are taken up as their own, becoming the thread with which life is woven and desire is shaped. They need to see the author as a person with intentions and ways of understanding that are expressed through shared cultural symbols, assumptions, connections, images, metaphors and storylines. They need to see that while on the one hand, authors cannot guarantee meanings because of the active way in which their texts are read, their intentions may nevertheless be discernible and might be called in question.

In light of the study’s interpretation concerning the primacy of heterosexism in shaping the boys’ dominant and repressive understandings of masculinities, specifically the interrelated and mutually reinforcing positions gender and (hetero)sexual dualities play in the boys’ defining their very being (Altman in Seidman 1993), facilitating this analytic with young males would necessarily involve deconstructing the binary of compulsory heterosexuality. This is where Seidman’s (1993) talk of gay liberation and gay poststructural theories (i.e. questioning the privileging of heterosexuality) as being ‘gender revolutions’ come to the fore. Consistent with other work in this sphere, in the “context of developing conventional gender roles” (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 170), the boys can be seen as enacting a particularly rigid masculine heterosexuality (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Given the wealth of distorted knowledge the boys possess in this area, arguments pointing to the irrelevancy, immorality or perversion of exploring sexualities in early childhood are not only ill-informed and out-dated, but may unwittingly
perpetuate these distortions by leaving them unchallenged (Bickmore 1999; Misson 1996; Redman 1994; Epstein & Johnson 1994). Indeed, in reference to the sexual power the boys enjoy wielding over girls within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality, there is a clear warrant for demystifying these issues in the early childhood classroom. For it can be seen that children are learning “very negative” lessons about sexuality in the school’s informal contexts (Redman 1994: 147). Thus, as Connell (1995), Martino (1996) and Pallotta-Chiarolli (1997) argue, we cannot address masculinity effectively unless we address homophobia, heterosexism and homosexuality.

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

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

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

6.3.2 Strategies for disrupting dominance: the school

Lessons or teaching units designed to enhance awareness of social justice issues through exploring children’s understandings of constructs such as marriage and family may be usefully and legitimately included within formal curriculum areas such as the Human Development Strand of the Health and Physical Education Key Learning Area (Curriculum Corporation 1994). However, in shifting classroom and school culture to be more inclusive of gender and sexual difference and diversity, any such teaching units are likely to be more effective when embedded within broader curriculum initiatives (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995; Patrick & Sanders 1994). In embedding these units within a broader framework of social justice, “as with antiracism and antisexism, antihomophobic principles and objectives will inform what we teach, why we are teaching it and the methods used in that teaching” (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995: 69). To these ends, heterosexism and homophobia might be effectively deconstructed and ‘re-written’ in generative and creative ways within themes of social justice, marginality and discrimination through other key learning areas, such as language, drama, art and social studies (Davies 1993; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995).

The incorporation of anti-homophobic principles into more formal documents such as existing classroom and school policies, within broader structural support systems has been seen as important in enhancing the effectiveness of challenging restrictive notions of gender and sexuality (Pallota-Chiarolli 1995). For example, anti-homophobic principles might be written into the school policy. In an early childhood context, the ‘class
constitution’ might include anti-homophobic ‘rules’, discussed and incorporated within prohibitions of ‘name calling’ or the use of ‘put-downs’. Anti-homophobic school initiatives, alongside other celebrations such as NAIDOC and International Women’s Day, might include recognition in assemblies, newsletters and school activities, of World AIDS Day or Lesbian and Gay Pride Week (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995; Patrick & Sanders 1994). Other whole school consciousness-raising initiatives to challenge homophobia and break down stereotypes might include the display of anti-homophobic posters, the public and positive recognition of famous people who identify as homosexual or lesbian or the invitation of gay guest speakers (Palotta-Chiarolli 1995). Against this backdrop of openness, acceptance and empathy, students can access and appreciate affirmative and diverse knowledges about alternative ways of being. In this sense, the unmentionable becomes mentionable and the unfamiliar can be made familiar. There is an extensive and applicable literature on teaching about so-called ‘minority’ issues, with much of the more useful work having its genesis in Britain in the last two decades of the twentieth century (see Hicks 1981).

The centrality of the boys’ social, emotional and physical investments in bodily expressions of masculinity, and the study’s association of these investments with violence, risk and differentiation, clearly warrants exploring with boys in the pursuit of alternative forms of masculine embodiment. The challenge here, in disrupting these investments, is to promote equally desirable avenues through which boys can physically express alternative forms of masculinity. Given the media saturation of combative male-dominated sports and the adulation of football stars, this is clearly no easy task. To work from Davies’ (1993) suggestion, however, in ‘tapping into’ boys’ existing patterns of desire, affirmative pleasures of the boys’ physical expression may be identified and channelled into non-violent and self-empowering physical activities. In resonance with many commentators on sport and masculinities (Hickey & Fitzclarence 1997; Kidd 1990; Lingard & Douglas 1999; Messner & Sabo 1994), Whitson’s (1990) assertion makes sense here, “it is important not to come across as ‘sports bashers’.” To these ends, Whitson (1990) emphasises the significance of promoting the positive aspects within sport such as strength, skill, physical expression, grace and cooperation. To refer back to
Davies’ (1993) notion of tapping into the boys’ experiences, one can glean from the research story, that while the boys privilege a combative form of embodiment, which must be questioned (Lingard & Douglas 1999), they also derive much pleasure from embodying the affirmative aspects to which Whitson refers.

Against this backdrop, generative spaces do, at least potentially, exist from which to promote ‘legitimate’ alternatives to combative sports such as football. Indeed many boys place more value on intrinsic satisfaction and aesthetic creativity when experiencing their physical embodiments of strength, endurance and skill as expressed in non-combative sports such as tennis, running, swimming, rowing, diving and gymnastics (Lingard & Douglas 1999; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). Additionally Kenway (in Lingard & Douglas 1999) refers to the affirmative possibilities arising from boys’ involvement in female-dominated sports such as netball, where girls’ skills will often exceed those of boys. Along these same lines, affirmative possibilities also exist in boys’ greater participation and appreciation in activities traditionally ascribed ‘feminine’ such as cooking, cleaning and childcare (Lingard & Douglas 1999).

Schools can assist this process of legitimating alternatives to combative and competitive sports by raising the profile of non-combative sport and other forms of physical expression such as dance and drama (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995). In the school context boys can begin to think positively about alternatives to a combative dominating masculinity and “to imaginatively know ways of being which might replace the existing ones” (Davies 1993: 200). This might be achieved through, for example: the allocation of public space to dance; the greater celebration of success and achievement in dance and music events such as Australia’s national Rock Eisteddfod challenge; and the greater promotion of school drama productions and particular role-models who derive their status from artistry and grace.

6.3.3 Broader institutional structures

This research has provided a clear warrant for working with young boys’ peer groups to disrupt the legitimacy of dominance and to explore alternatives ways of being masculine. While the strategies proposed for encouraging boys to change can be seen as critical
starting points in challenging dominance within this potent micro-culture; and while one would hope that these initiatives might generate change through, to use Pallotta-Chiarolli’s (1995: 69) metaphor, acting “like pebbles thrown into a pond – the ripples spread out further and further,” the gravity of broader institutional structures in shaping and regulating boys’ desires and investments in dominant and dominating masculinities is immense (Connell 2000; Davies 1993; Lingard & Douglas 1999). One can see the patriarchally defined private/public split of global, state and institutional contexts reflected in the boys’ oppositional discourses equating a revered masculinity with superiority and power and alternative masculinities and femininities with subordination and powerlessness.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that boys will continue to take pleasure in appropriating their bodies through combative sports while these sports continue to saturate media coverage. It is doubtful that boys will shift their investments while the individuals who excel at combative sports, are publicly glorified as heroes and given a social licence to behave in ‘privileged’ ways. Boys’ investments are unlikely to change when the many legitimate alternatives of bodily expressions of masculinity are not acknowledged or promoted in similar ways. Boys will continue to invest in discourses which view combative violence as a legitimate means of conflict resolution while their playroom GI Joe and machine gun toting dramas are amplified realities of male-dominated war on a global stage. Here, boys continue to learn powerful lessons about the way in which ‘real men’ get their needs met. Foremost, they learn that they can achieve ‘successful’ masculinity through calculated physical dominance and the exclusion of anything soft or weak (read ‘girl-like’).

Boys will continue to participate in oppositional discourses, denigrating what they consider to be ‘feminine’ masculinities, while homophobia continues to be rife in broader institutional contexts such as sporting culture; while homosexuality continues to be stereotyped and parodied in the media (take the recent Disney blockbuster The Emperor’s New Groove and the popular Australian television program The Footy Show); and while homosexuality continues to be perceived as an illegitimate form of sexuality by the state. Boys will continue to access (hetero)sexual power over females and position them as
objects to evaluate and denigrate when advertising billboards and music videos objectify and bestow icon-status to the display of semi-naked, silent and ‘impossibly’ beautiful women. Similarly, boys will continue to perceive femininity along heterosexist and oppositional lines within a neo-liberal welfare state that perpetuates the public/private dichotomy and endorses patriarchal notions of the family (as described in Chapter Two).

Shifting the masculine/feminine dualism in global, state and institutional contexts will mean a public ceding of cultural, social and economic prestige to that which is ‘feminine’. While masculinities continue to be associated with the public sphere and femininities with the private sphere, and while success in the public sphere equates to social and economic status and ‘success’ in the private sphere to social and economic dependency, that which is ‘feminine’, will be perpetually relegated subordinate status (Holter 1995; Lingard & Douglas 1999). Within this frame, one can see the boys’ denigrations of the traditional femininities of ‘softness’ and ‘weakness’ amplified on a massive scale in institutional structures that denigrate traditional femininities as evidenced in the low value society assigns to responsibilities such as child-birth and child-rearing. Nevertheless, Lingard and Douglas (1999: 151) stress the urgency in:

> …encouraging boys to broaden their modes of expression to encompass what has been traditionally seen as feminine, instead of progressively limiting their options as they attempt to continue to define themselves in contrast to girls, women, and their identification with the feminine.

While the success of encouraging boys to aspire to the ‘feminine’ seems a formidable task, radical transformations in social perceptions of gender and sexuality over the past thirty years offer considerable hope. The recent changes to legislation in The Netherlands now recognising same-sex marriages, for example, constitute an important step forward in signifying to boys that alternative masculinities, and in particular, ‘feminine masculinities’ are legitimate ways of being.
6.4 Reflective notes

In assembling my thoughts by way of drawing this final chapter to a close, and in attempting to illuminate the significance of this research, I ask myself: What does it all mean? To this question, I posit the following:

It means understanding the peer group as a potent site of essentialism where context and contingency mean that ‘boys will be boys’; where some ways of being are more possible than others (Davies 1993); where exaggerated masculinities are defined as power, physical dominance, aggression, conflict and violence; where proving oneself means conforming and where fitting-in and belonging means everything.

It means understanding the peer group as a site where the mordant and cruel belittlement of others is perpetuated as a form of self-legitimation; where boys who don’t measure up are filled with self-doubt; where homophobia is rife; where boys and girls are violated and harassed; where anything feminine is treated with disdain.

It means understanding that the peer group is a site of fun, friendship, loyalty, support, belonging and inclusion; where some boys feel confirmed and secure in their masculinity; where early childhood subjectivities are fluid and malleable; where discursive spaces exist to generate, explore and legitimate affirmative alternatives to dominance; where asymmetrical power relations can be questioned and their constitutive power exposed; and where acceptance and the positive valuing of difference can be promoted and maintained.

It means understanding the inadequacies of authoritative power relations and the individualising and pathologising of boys’ behaviours. It means conceiving of boys’ behaviours as neither pre-determined nor inevitable. It means exploring collaborative or cooperative uses of power within school structures. It means engaging actively with boys’ affinity groups from early childhood to explore emotions and politicise positionalities by exposing gender as a social production. It means calling into question taken-for-granted knowledges and ways of being through constantly encouraging and
facilitating challenges to dominance, hierarchy and outmoded notions of masculinity and manhood. It means exposing binaries, problematising the masculine and promoting the traditionally feminine. It means disrupting assumed certainties and opening up new possibilities by seeing gender as negotiable and free.

It means offering boys legitimate alternatives to dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which tap into their existing knowledges and desires. It means working within a framework of social justice, anti-sexism and anti-homophobia. It means decentring heterosexuality and demystifying homosexuality. It means talking about sexualities.

It means countering boys’ bodily investments in combative sports by promoting and legitimating alternative ways for boys to physically express themselves. It means re-educating boys’ bodies, energies and patternings to explore the pleasurable physical experience of moving in skilful, creative and graceful ways. It means promoting dance and drama, running and netball. It means celebrating skipping.

Finally, it means being an agent of change within the gravity of broader patriarchal global, state and institutional structures.
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