'Coming out': Gender, (hetero)sexuality and the primary school

Emma Renold

'Coming out': gender, (hetero)sexuality and the primary school

EMMA RENOLD, *University of Cardiff, UK*

ABSTRACT *Foregrounding the primary school as a key cultural arena for the production and reproduction of sexuality and sexual identities, this article goes some way to addressing what are absent from many sociological portrayals of young children and schooling. Drawing on data derived from an ethnographic exploration into children's gender and sexual identities during their final year of primary school, the article examines how dominant notions of heterosexuality underscore much of children's identity work and peer relationships. The article further illustrates how boys and girls are each subject to the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, where to be a 'normal' girl or boy involves the projection of a coherent and abiding heterosexual self. The implications of recognising children's sexual cultures and the pressures to conform to a heterosexual culture are discussed briefly in the concluding section.*

Introduction: (hetero)sexualising the primary school

Since researchers have explored the school as a specific social and cultural arena for the production and reproduction of sexual and gendered identities, a number of ethnographic studies have begun to problematise and deconstruct dominant school-based sexual and gender identities (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, 1998; Haywood, 1996; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Redman, 1996; Hey, 1997). These studies, however, have predominantly focused on secondary schools, and, to date, there are very few ethnographic studies that locate the primary school as a key site in the production of sexual identities. Primary school studies have instead focused primarily on gender relations (Best, 1983; Clarricoates, 1987; Thorne, 1993; Jordan, 1995; Skelton, 1996, 1997; Francis, 1997) and rarely comment in detail on the dominance of sexuality in the construction of boys' and girls' gendered identities. Nor do they examine sexual relations with the same complexity that they use to explore gender relations. Only very recently has there been a focus on the primary school specifically in terms of its heterosexualising social processes (Epstein, 1997). This article goes some way to redressing this imbalance by illustrating how sexuality, and specifically heterosexuality, is part of the everyday experience in the worlds of primary school children and, furthermore, how heterosexu-

Correspondence: Dr Emma Renold, Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK

ality underpins most interaction and identity work as they live out the gendered categories 'boy' and 'girl'.

Coming Out: researching gender *and* sexuality

The data and analyses presented in this article derive from recently completed doctoral research exploring the salience of gender and sexuality through the accounts by, and observations of, boys and girls in their last year of primary school (see Renold, 1999). The fieldwork took place over a period of a year in two primary schools located in a small, semi-rural town in the east of England [1]. With little existing UK research into how children perceive and construct their gendered identities, I initially (summer, 1994) conducted a 6-week pilot study in two Year 6 classrooms, with a view to identifying, using ethnographic methods, including participant observation, in-depth unstructured exploratory group interviews and focus groups [2], what it means to occupy and live out the categories 'girl' and 'boy' at school. As in many ethnographic studies, the flexibility and reflexivity of the ethnographic process led to a shift in focus and the inevitable 'Pandora's box' indicative of qualitative research. From examining gender relations, I found myself increasingly exploring sexuality and, in particular, children's interpellation and induction into the processes of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) and the intersection and embeddedness of gender and sexuality.

'Coming out', the title for this section, was the phrase scribbled in my field notes as I witnessed the complex daily interactive network of heterosexual performances by both girls and boys as they negotiated their gendered selves. Moreover, by adopting methods that harnessed the 'children's standpoint' (Alanen, 1994), in which children could exercise some control over the focus of the research, previously unreported and private accounts of children's sexual cultures, described by Best (1983) as the 'third hidden curriculum', began to surface. What I offer in this article is an overview of the complex gender/sexual identity formations produced within and between boys' and girls' peer groups. More specifically, I examine the 'acting out' and experiencing of Judith Butler's (1990) 'heterosexual matrix' in which the real expression of masculinity and femininity is embedded within a presupposed heterosexuality. Thus, what follow are accounts by primary school children of how the compulsory nature of heterosexuality is experienced, negotiated and maintained.

Girls and Heterosexuality

Embodying Fashion: somatic and sartorial ideals

From my first days in the field, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which girls were investing in the production of their bodies as heterosexually desirable commodities. This involved embodying heterosexual somatic (bodily) ideals. Typical daily rituals included checking and regulating arms, legs, hips and thighs, positioning their bodies and others' as 'too fat' or 'too thin' and advocating the need to diet (see Bordo, 1990). Moreover, girls' bodies, as cultural texts, were read by their peers (male and female) almost wholly within a heterosexual framework of desirability:

ER: Do any of you diet or watch what you eat?
Mandy
and Kirsty: Yeah yeah/
Harriet: You don't need to Mand.

Mandy:	I do (*quietly spoken*).
ER:	Are you very worried about how thin or fat you are?
Sophie:	Errr no, not really (*sounds unsure*).
Mandy:	Yes yes yes yes yes/
ER:	But it does worry you though?
Mandy and	
Kirsty:	Yeah, very much.
ER:	Why you two?
Kirsty:	Dunno.
Mandy:	We're just worried about our legs particularly.
Kirsty:	Yeah.
ER:	Because of fashion or
Mandy:	Boys.
Kirsty and	
Mandy:	Boys.
[…]	
ER:	Does Todd (*Sophie's ex-boyfriend*) ever say anything about the way you look?
Harriet:	Yeah he does he calls her/
Sophie:	Yeah he says that I'm ugly when I'm not going out with him.
ER:	Does he?
Harriet:	Yeah but he says that she's really/
Sophie:	He thought I had nice legs when I was going out with him.

What I want to emphasise here is not only how girls construct their femininity, or what might be better described as 'hyper-femininity' (McRobbie, 1978), through a specific, culturally coded somatic ideal, but how bodies are only desirable when, through the validation of others, they are heterosexualised. As Sophie recalls, "he thought I had nice legs when I was going out with him". In fact, the ideals that the girls worked with often bore no relation to actual/'real' body size. Sophie for example, was positioned as 'fat', 'ugly', 'thin' and 'pretty' within one school term. 'Attractiveness', it seemed, was contingent on being heterosexually desirable or involved in a heterosexual relationship.

Girls' body projects also involved sartorial expressions through what I have termed the 'flirty fashion' discourse [3]. This incorporated the wearing of mini-skirts, high heels or 'platforms' and a cosmetic culture in which the ultimate goal is being 'attractive' to the opposite sex. The following extracts illustrate the specialised knowledge required to access the 'flirty fashion' discourse and how girls perform their bodies as objects and subjects of heterosexual desire:

Tina:	And you know I only wear a lipstick coz I think that eye shadow is a bit too over the top. Sometimes/I put really light colours just a little bit and you can't hardly see it but you feel good.
Danni:	I know/
Sally:	I put that peach and that white together, Tina I put that peach and that white together.
Tina:	Mmm (*nodding approvingly*).
ER:	So why do you like wearing it then?
Tina:	Coz you like feel fashionable and/
Sally:	You just sort of look prettier.
[…]	

ER: But you're still conscious about how you look/like you still want to be fashionable?

Tina: Yeah yeah/

Sally: Well it depends really, because it depends where there are most boys then er

Danni: If Mosely (*a boy that Sally 'fancies'*) was walking down the street/and she looked really horrible she'd probably hide.

Sally: I'd get mega dressed up.

ER: You'd get mega dressed up?

Sally: Yeah.

ER: What would you wear then?

Sally: Don't know/

Danni: She'd probably wear her 'Love' top.

The girls in this extract took delight and pleasure in the projection of their desirability. Discussions about length of skirt, styles of shoes, combinations of make-up and glittery nail varnish and which lip balms would stain their lips pink very clearly marked these girls as highly visible within the school arena. By drawing ideas and influences from popular magazines such as *Shout, Sugar* and *Just 17*, which seemed to act as 'barometers of girlhood' (McRobbie, 1997), the official school uniform could be transformed to reflect dominant high street fashion, producing a range of unofficial school uniforms. Some of the aforementioned examples could be interpreted as girls internalising the 'male gaze' (see Holland *et al.*, 1998) in so far as they are regulating and producing femininities within normative heterosexual standards of desirability. Many, however, achieved a real sense of agency and power in their new-found 'sexy' bodies, particularly, it could be argued, when being 'sexy' contradicted official (childhood) 'innocent schoolgirl' discourses (Walkerdine, 1996).

A major contradiction in official and unofficial discourses surrounding the production of 'girls' in the primary school is the ambivalent attitude towards sexual knowledge and practice, and notions of an 'innocent' and 'protected' childhood'. For example, heterosexuality and heterosexual practices could be actively promoted at the school disco (Rossiter, 1994), yet similar displays of sexual awareness during the school day would, and did, cause concern and were deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, girls with rounded hips, almost fully developed breasts and who were aware of and used their sexuality (often to attract boys) within the school were sometimes treated as sexually deviant. One girl, for example, was referred to me (privately) by her class teacher as a 'tart' because she was openly displaying and enjoying her sexuality with other boys and girls. Thorne (1993), using Douglas's (1966) concept of pollution, also discovered this in her study:

> In our culture we draw sharp divisions between 'child' and 'adult', defining child as relatively asexual … and the adult as sexual … charged with sexual meaning, fully developed breasts seem uncomfortably out of place on the body of individuals who are still defined as children … a sense of pollution derives … from the violation of basic lines of social structure. (Thorne, 1993, p. 143)

I would also add, however, that the majority of girls who 'violated' the adult/child binary were not those who possessed pubescent/'adult' bodies, but those who enjoyed using their bodies in a sexual way, 'developed' or not. However, such erotic sexual images and signs present in the 'flirty fashion' and cosmetic cultures are often unspoken and under-researched in primary school studies, although the notion of children possessing sexual

knowledge or engaging in sexual activity has provoked wider media debates in the form of moral panics. The next section further explores how some girls within the school are inscribed by discourses more indicative of research on adolescent girls and women.

'Tarty but not too Tarty': contradictions in the production of a heterosexual girl

Rossiter (1994, p. 6) argues that the male gaze is an unchangeable ideal and states that 'the girls must obey the rules of discourse that are themselves contradictory'. As the next few extracts illustrate, one of the difficulties the girls faced was being 'tarty, but not too tarty':

(*discussing fashionable clothing*)	
Claire:	I don't like being left out.
Trudy:	You don't want to like, erm, go too far looking like out of the/
Anabel:	*I don't want to look too/tarty*
Trudy:	*But/you want to look a bit tarty*
ER:	So you want to look attractive but not too tarty?
Al:	Yeah yeah/
Anabel:	Yeah that's it.
[…]	
Carrie:	I'm not being horrible, but have you seen Trudy's skirt, it's her five year-old sister's … it's like up here (*draws an invisible line well above her knee*).
ER:	And you think that's too short?
Carrie:	Yeah.
ER:	Why have girls started wearing short skirts?
Hannah:	Because one person does/then everybody else does.
Carrie:	They like to show off their legs.
ER:	Why?
Carrie:	Coz they want to impress the boys I suppose, like Trudy when she bends down you can see her bum.
Hannah:	People really dress up.
Carrie:	Yeah Trudy does, she puts blusher and make-up and eye shadow and lipstick.
Janine:	She gets carried away with make-up.
ER:	Do people think she goes over the top, does everyone?
Carrie:	Some people say she's a tart.
ER:	Is she?
Carrie:	No.
Hannah:	Like it happened to Debbie but it blew over.
ER:	What happened to Debbie?
Hannah:	People calling her a tart/because she wore her skirt up there.
Carrie:	Did they? Did they?
ER:	So who would? Other girls/or boys as well?
Carrie and Hannah:	Girls.
Janine:	Girls are bitchy.
ER:	How do you know which length skirt to wear/without being called a tart?

Carrie:	I think it's just above your knee.
Janine:	Or just below.
Carrie:	Just above, coz if it's like that it's too
Hannah:	Yeah—not like that (*hitches her skirt up well above the knee*).

These extracts echo the sexual double standard that Cowie & Lees (1981), Lees (1987, 1993) and Hey (1997) discovered when teenage girls discussed their sexual reputations. However, comments surrounding 'tarty' and 'tart' refer not to sexual activity but to sexual identities and performances (Lees, 1993). The girls in the extracts stress the difficulty and constant negotiation involved in positioning themselves as fashionable and desiring a fashion that at one moment rendered them attractive and at another labelled them a 'tart' in the regulation of their bodies and their bodily expression. I was particularly struck with the finding that it was the girls themselves doing most of the positioning. However, Rossiter (1994, p. 11) also notes how 'girlfriends were the harshest critics and potential sources of abandonment'. Both through self-surveillance and surveillance of others, the girls seemed to be regulating what Hey (1997, p. 128) describes as the 'socially coercive presence of the male gaze', where discourses of hyper-femininity are bound by the ambivalent notion of 'tart/y'. Ambiguities and inconsistencies surrounding the production of girls as sexual beings is discussed further in the following section as some girls invest in one of the most prestigious legitimators of femininity and heterosexuality; the subject position of 'girlfriend'.

Girlfriends and Going Out: love letters, messengers and mediators

The study on which this article is based contributes to a growing number of studies which highlight the salience of the heterosexual positions of girlfriend and boyfriend, particularly towards the later years of primary schooling (Thorne & Luria, 1986; Thorne, 1993; Redman, 1996; Adler & Adler, 1998). Breaking the myth that heterosexual relations symbolise entry into 'adolescence', Epstein and others note how 6 year-olds date, dump and two-time and how 4 and 5 year-olds practise heterosexuality (Walkerdine, 1990; Epstein, 1997; Connolly, 1998). This study is no exception.

Heterosexual activity involved a complex daily interactive network, from kissing in the playground or cloakroom, computerised matchmaking diaries, secret love letters, and various tokens of affection (such as teddy bears branded with red hearts on their chests to chocolate love hearts), to blind date competitions, an 'agony aunt' problem-solving magazine and even a telephone 'love line'. Within and outside the school, the heterosexualisation and sexual regulation of girls (and boys) bodies was also constructed through discursive practices such as 'going out, 'dumping' and fancying'. Despite the active connotation of the phrase 'going out', couples rarely went anywhere. 'Going out' was a particular discourse which signified and made available the subject positions, 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend'. For most girls and boys, it also signified monogamy and for a few, legitimate sexual activity, often no more than kissing and holding hands. Some examples follow:

ER:	So what about you Kirsty?
Mandy:	She's going out with Robby, big time, they can't keep their hands off each other (*they laugh*).
Kirsty:	Shut up/
ER:	And before you were going out with/
Kirsty:	James.
Er:	And is it quite serious? (*with new boyfriend*)

Kirsty: Mmm.

Mandy: Yeah, you should see them at the park.

ER: More physical than with James is it?

Kirsty: Yeah James is immature, well Robby can be/

Mandy: You should see them at the park.

ER: (*I laugh*) Is this out of school?

Kirsty: Yeah, over there (*points behind the school*).

ER: I don't suppose you can get up to much in school/

All: (*They laugh*)

Mandy: Yes … mmmmmm.

[…]

Harriet: Robby's a show-off.

Mandy: Kirsty don't care, she just wants his body (*Sophie laughs out loud*).

ER: So do you fancy him physically quite a lot?

Kirsty: (*Nods vigorously*)

Mandy: She does.

ER: What about Pete?

Mandy: (*Laughs and nods*)

ER: OK, what about you two?

Mandy: They're single.

[…]

Looking towards the end of the field I see Kirsty, Neil, Mandy and Pete. They are both lying down next to each other, coupled up, facing each other. Neil has now moved on top of Kirsty, straddling her. He then lies on top of her and they start kissing. The two ladies on dinner duty are chatting together approximately 100 metres away. They do not notice Kirsty and Neil. Kirsty then pushes Neil off and trips up Mandy. They trip each other up and then settle back down in their pairs. Neil gets up and does a cartwheel and then swings his hips in a thrusting movement towards Kirsty, they all start laughing.

Surprisingly few girls (seven) were actively going out with boys on a regular basis. Much of the heterosexual activity involved heterosexual gossip networks (who fancied who) and messengers who mediated and relayed love letters, dumping letters and proposals such as 'will you kiss …' or 'will you go out with …'. Interviews rarely concluded without some discussion of current or past heterosexual relationships. Strikingly, every girl in the study, at some time, positioned herself firmly as heterosexual. Some girls delved back to their infant days. Some constructed fantasy boyfriends. The pressure to story oneself as heterosexually desirable was overwhelming and even involved girls 'going out' with boys who were verbally abusive to them. One girl, Erica, had a boyfriend who routinely called her a 'slag' and a 'slut'. Another girl, Tina, admitted that she would go out with boys she did not 'fancy'. For many, the pressure to perform as heterosexually desirable and to access the position of girlfriend was too overwhelming to resist, so fundamental, it seemed, were heterosexual performances in the construction of and investment in a 'proper' femininity.

The Power (?) of Love: dumping, being dumped and heterosexual harassment

There were some girls in the study who found their positions as 'girlfriends' and their hetero/sexual knowledge as particularly powerful. Two girls took great delight in

challenging the male gaze with a sexual female gaze, with offers of future sexual encounters or relationships to often less desirable, 'effeminate' boys. Other girls, as the following extract reveals, experienced a great deal of power from being able to terminate or 'dump' relationships:

ER: Do the boys get really upset if you dump them?
Tina: No, they just act all tough but I think they're really hurting deep down inside.
ER: What do you mean by acting tough?
Carrie: They say, 'Oh who cares I was going to dump her anyway'.
Sally: Yeah, that's what, that's exactly what Philip said.
ER: Do you have more power if you dump them?
Sally: Yeah you feel like ha-ha-ha.

Dumping (common to both schools) was a time when partners asserted their dominance. There was always a struggle/race to be the first to deliver the 'you're dumped' message. Many girls viewed relationships as 'not serious' and changed their boyfriends quite frequently, much to many boys' dismay. For some, heterosexual relationships often seemed the only domain in the school where they felt they had power over the boys. It was one area where they could assert their dominance. Thus, using boys was not just a way of exploring their sexuality but an area where they could assert their dominance in an unequal field of gender relations, and possibly undermine 'traditional' heterosexual masculinities.

For others, however, being 'dumped' was a hurtful and emotional experience. Skeggs (1997, p. 115) similarly explains that although heterosexual encounters 'offered a space for hedonism, autonomy, camaraderie, pleasure and fun', they were 'simultaneously regulating and generating insecurities' and unhappiness. These unhappy experiences filtered into classroom/working contexts and consolement parties, where friends rallied round. Although some break-ups could be amicable, others could be verbally abusive, as with Sophie's break-up with Todd and his derogatory comments about her body. Other common painful cases included boyfriends choosing other girls over them.

Moreover, while learning how their bodies and new-found sexual knowledge can be exciting, pleasurable and a source of power in particular contexts, girls were also learning how their bodies could also be both threatening and a site of potential and actual danger. During a final interview, three girls disclosed their experiences of sexual harassment, both within and beyond the school gates. However, due to fear of conflict, ridicule and embarrassment, their disclosure not only remained untold, but unchallenged, thus reproducing the boys' behaviours as 'normal' and 'natural'. Such experiences resonate with the well-documented pervasiveness of heterosexual harassment within secondary schools (Jones, 1985; Wolpe, 1988; Halson, 1989; Jones & Mahony, 1989; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997) but are underresearched within primary schools (although see Clark, 1990 and Renold, 1999).

Top-girls [4] and Tomboys: alternative femininities and heterosexuality

Not all girls invested in the hyper-femininity and heterosexuality discussed so far. Some girls constructed their gender identities by differentiating from 'girlie' femininities and challenged the 'male gaze' through embodiments of alternative dress and fashion. The following accounts explore how some girls' views destabilised the gendered status quo:

Hayley: I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't want to look like that coz they're so skinny and I wouldn't want to be anorexic or anything/
Jo: No coz a lot of people go anorexic just to look like the models.
ER: So you're quite wary of that are you?
All: Yeah.
Harriet: I don't care what they/look like, I look like I wanna look like.
Jo: I don't care what they look like/

The challenge of dominant bodily ideals led some girls to a kind of somatic flexibility that challenged dominant body discourses and provided a discursive space within which they could transform dominant notions of (bodily) femininity. It can be suggested that their critique of somatic idealism led to moments of freedom, choice and agency to 'be' and to 'look' exactly how they liked. However difficult it was to achieve, it was not impossible, and became a source of strength and independence (from dominant 'body' discourses) for some girls. Such transformations and alternative feminine performances were particularly marked in their style of dress:

Harriet: I just wear jeans and stuff/
Amanda: Some people like something that's comfy and then some people think 'oh I've got to look like tarty'/
Harriet: Yeah going around and getting all the boys around you.
ER: So you don't feel like that at all?
Harriet: No, if boys like you then they like you for the way you are not coz of how you look or how fashionable you are.
ER: What about you Amanda, do you feel the same or not?
Amanda: Yeah the same because you can't, I mean the boys can't fancy you like just coz you've got good clothes on/
Harriet: Yeah, they fancy you just … they should go out with the clothes not you (*laughs*).
[…]
Amanda: … we don't really care/
Harriet: We don't care very much about what we look like/
Amanda: I don't care whether I look fashionable or not and she does/she like puts make-up on just to go to like Tesco's (*talking about sister*).

The girls (Harriet and Amanda) in these extracts have rejected the 'flirty-fashion' of the majority of girls, favouring instead 'comfy' over 'tarty'. Their style could be described as 'sporty', swapping high heels for trainers and cycling shorts (under their skirts) for mini-skirts. Disliking and rejecting the notion that bodies are only heterosexual objects of desire for (predominantly male) others, when Harriet says "they should fancy you, not your clothes", their sporting fashion does not overtly signify their sexuality, but fitness, comfort, practicality and perhaps, most of all, their flight from 'girlie' femininities. Thus, it could be suggested that their choice of clothes symbolised rejection of dominant heterosexual discourses as much as it rejected dominant fashion and body discourses.

Resisting and/or rejecting hyper-feminine discourses and practices, however, only seemed possible through active heterosexual performances and competencies (see also Hey, 1997). Although they did not 'throw themselves into romance' (Davies, 1982), there were moments when they were subject to the patriarchal surveillance of the male gaze (almost literally) when all four of them waited for 3 days for one boy, Pete, to pick one of them for his girlfriend. Girls who resisted hyper-feminine discourses but who did not engage in heterosexual practices or who were not positioned as heterosexually desirable

were denigrated and rendered 'non-girls', signified by insults such as 'weirdos' and even 'boys' (Renold, 1999). Thus, it seemed that alternative femininities could only be constructed if girls projected and secured their heterosexuality.

A significant departure from the hyper-feminine heterosexuality of the 'girlie-girls' was that boys were not solely pursued or perceived as potential boyfriends. Harriet neatly summed this up when she declared that "boys aren't just for boyfriends and girls aren't just for girlfriends". However, many of the girls reported the difficulty of mixed-sex platonic relationships (see also Clarke, 1990; Thorne, 1993; Rossiter, 1994):

Harriet: The other people on the table, all I do is talk to them, I don't want to be boyfriends or girlfriends or anything.

Mandy: Yeah.

Harriet: Like Pete, her boyfriend (Mandy), I just to talk to him, it's not … he's just like a friend, not boyfriend or girlfriend … coz you need some boys to talk to sometimes, not just all girls all the time but you don't want to get in a … like a relationship with them … but you still do.

Thus, even at this age and even before sexual activity is involved, the pressure to heterosexualise mixed-sex interactions is very strong, thus preventing the development of boys' and girls' friendships. The only girl in the study who successfully managed to interact with boys (through football and friendships) was Erica, a self-defined tomboy. However, towards the end of Year 6, even she began to feel the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, with her public disclosures of elaborate romantic dreams about older boys. The demise of the 'tomboy' subject position and the experiences of Harriet and her friends' mixed-sex friendships signals all too clearly how the heterosexual matrix underscores most boys' and girls' gender identities and interactions with an increasing pressure as girls reach the end of their primary school years. As other studies are beginning to illustrate, however, boys and men are also subject to the heterosexual matrix and the 'male gaze', which similarly regulates and constitutes their sexual and gender identities (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connolly, 1998; Holland *et al.*, 1998).

Boys and Heterosexuality

There has been a growing volume of educational research into the production of male heterosexualities within the secondary and post-16 sectors (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 1996; Kehily & Nayak, 1996, 1997; Haywood, 1996). However, with a few exceptions (Redman, 1996; Epstein, 1997), there is a lack of critical and detailed exploration of the diversity and ambiguities surrounding boys' heterosexual cultures within primary school research. This section, following Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Connell (1995), explores how hegemonic masculine performances are inextricably tied to dominant notions of hetero-sexuality. Yet, where a legitimate femininity involved successful heterosexual perfor-mances, hegemonic masculinity could be secured through the subject position of 'boyfriend' *and* through the discourses and practices of fighting and football (Renold, 1997). Nevertheless, with the pressure for girls to secure boyfriends and the status of 'boyfriend' as a key signifier of hegemonic masculinity, the majority of boys invested, albeit tenuously, in the production and projection of their heterosexuality. The following accounts reveal the complex ways in which boys construct, define and maintain their heterosexual identities through compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny and homophobia (Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and how integral heterosexual performances are to the production of proper 'boys'.

Girls and Girlfriends:fears, frustrations and shattered fantasies

Over the year, nine out of a total of 21 boys publicly engaged in 'fancying', 'asking girls out' and being 'boyfriends'. Although its acceptable and assumptive status created pressures to conform for boys and girls, 'coming out' as heterosexual, was, for boys, often a complex and contradictory process fraught with fears and frustrations:

Liam:	Aaron hangs around with Kirsty.
Aaron:	I don't.
Liam:	Yeah, Aaron hangs around with Kirsty.
Aaron:	I don't, I play footy.
Liam and Martin:	Aaron fancies Kirsty.
Liam and Martin:	Aaron fancies Kirsty, Aaron fancies Kirsty, Aaron fancies Kirsty, Aaron fancies Kirsty/
ER:	OK OK (*they quieten down*) … (*Aaron picks up the tape recorder*)
Aaron:	I hate Kirsty's guts.
Liam:	All right, Aaron doesn't really fancy her but he does, he did a few years, a few weeks ago.
Aaron:	I, I've been out with her three times but er, but/
Liam:	He likes her but/
Aaron:	But she's a fat cow.

Competing discourses surrounding the sexually innocent child and the sexual adolescent created contradictions and conflicts for many girls. Boys' contradictions, however, lay in their ambivalent attitude towards proximity to girls, which could, at any given time, give rise to teasing behaviours associated with fear of the 'feminine' and/or an expression and confirmation of boys' heterosexual masculinity. Teasing and ridicule often led to misogynistic discourses and the objectification of girls ("fat cow"). In an attempt to resecure 'masculinity', boys would draw on alternative hegemonic discourses and generate examples like Aaron's comment (in response to being teased about fancying Kirsty): "no I don't, I play footy". The following extract further illustrates the confusions and anxieties when heterosexual relationships were secured:

ER:	What do you think has been the hardest thing to cope with being a Year Six?
Colin:	Girls.
ER:	Martin?
Martin:	SATS.
Colin:	Girlfriends.
Martin:	Yeah, coz if you have a girlfriend you have everyone saying 'oh can you come and kiss me/, can you come and kiss meee' (*singsong*).
ER:	And you don't want to?
Colin:	NO.
[…]	
Colin:	On the practice walk, Samantha asked him out.
ER:	Did she?
Darren:	Yeah but now she wants to go out with Adrian.
ER:	So what happened to the other girls, did they dump you/or did you?
Darren:	They dumped me, they always dump me, it's not fair.

Colin: They always dump me.

[…]

ER: What about you Aaron?

Aaron: I did have Claire but she's a cow.

ER: Why is she a cow?

Aaron: Because she always uses me, the last time she used me/

Liam: Go on, and let's get the popcorn.

ER: What happened last time?

Aaron: Well when I was going out with her, I, I, she dumped me right, and I go, 'why did you dump me?' and she didn't say anything and about an hour later she goes, 'I was using you anyway'.

Some boys were teased for not having a girlfriend. However, for the majority of boys, who sporadically engaged in heterosexual practices of 'fancying' and 'going out', these relationships were riddled with a combination of unease and tension. When asked what were the most difficult times during their final year at primary school, Martin, Colin and Darren said "girlfriends". Martin, for example, expressed his anxiety of heterosexual behaviour, not wanting to 'kiss' his girlfriend. Alternatively, Darren's frustration at "always being dumped" positioned him as powerless and he viewed girls as merciless manipulators ("they just use you"). Neither one of these boys experienced the dominant and powerful subject position associated within the wider heterosexual discourses of patriarchy. They, and others, were confronted with girls who would dump them if they so desired.

"I Play Football Instead": compulsory heterosexuality?

ER: So what about you three, any girlfriends David? (*shakes his head*) Ryan? (*shakes his head*) Jake? (*shakes his head*) So no girlfriends/

Ryan: I got up to novice two in carting.

[…]

Darren: I still like a girl I used to go out in the comp with called Amanda.

ER: I remember … what about you Timothy?

Timothy: I haven't got a girlfriend.

ER: Would you like one?

Timothy: No, not really/

Pete: No he's more into football.

ER: You're more into football are you?

Timothy: (*Nods*)

Not all boys engaged in heterosexual boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Some expressed a desire for a 'proper' relationship proceeding primary school, which involved intimate sexual activities. A couple of boys stressed that they were "too young" or "not ready" to have a girlfriend. Their position as (non-sexual) 'children' within primary school discourses seemed to make acceptable the absence of heterosexual performances. However, unless they successfully performed as 'tough-guys', 'footballers' or were 'sporting competent', their 'heterosexuality' would be called into question and they would often be 'homosexualised' and denigrated as 'gay' (explored further in the following section). In fact, the foregoing extracts emphasise the two routes through which boys defined their hegemonic masculinity; girlfriends and sport (Connolly, 1994). Pete, for example, offers the latter ("he's more into football") as if the two subject positions of

boyfriend and footballer are interchangeable. In a similar way, Ryan's positioning, as successful 'sportsman', immediately follows his negative response to having a girlfriend. Being competent at sport was not always a sufficient signifier for heterosexual masculinity.

Misogyny, Homophobia and Heterosexual Assertions

In the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, undermined by the refusal of girls to occupy passive and sexual subject positions, heterosexual identifications were defined through misogynistic and homophobic discourses, and heterosexual fantasies. The following four extracts illustrate the overt ways in which boys formed their heterosexual identities. These included the following:

(1) Symbolic sexual performances

Juliet starts singing a song when pupils have been told to be quiet. Darren spins round on his chair and leans forward in front of Juliet. He then mouths the word 'fuck' at her, I am not sure why. He looks annoyed at something.

(2) Public sexual innuendoes

Mrs Fryer tries to quieten the class down. She asks them to put their lips together. Adrian shouts out 'oo err, I'm not kissing everyone in this class'. Many of the boys and girls start laughing. Mrs Fryer looks at me, smiles, rolls her eyes and gives Adrian a long look (of disapproval?).

(3) Sexual storytelling

Jake is telling Ryan a story concerning Nick Park's characters, 'Wallace and Grommit'. I overhear the sentence, 'yeah, and Wallace is fucking a sheep covered in Mustard and he's going "uh uh uh uh" ' (Jake mimes fucking a sheep). They both burst into laughter.

…

Jake is laughing and joking with his friends. He tells them with a serious, but cocky face, 'I had Pamela Anderson in my bedroom last night'. He then explains how he has a picture of Pamela Anderson directly above his bed. They all fall about laughing again.

(4) Sexual objectification of girls (and women—see earlier)

ER: So what about you Darren?

Pete: Well, he's been out with Mandy, I mean, not Mandy, I mean, er er Victoria about three times in the past three months init? Or something like that and once he went out with her for about a month didn't ya?

Darren: Mmm.

ER: What happened, why aren't you seeing her any more?

Pete: Because she, because he called her a fucking bitch and/

Darren: I … I just always get in a stress over some things, like I was in a stress that time/and I don't know why.

These extracts parallel Mac an Ghaill's findings in so far as the boys' 'sex talk' and sexual performances seemed 'publicly to validate their masculinity to their friends' (and, as extracts 1 and 2 illustrate, to other girls in their class) and went some way to reinforcing

dominant heterosexual masculinities, while subordinating femininities. Such performances, particularly their misogyny and sexual objectification of women, also went some way to reinstating boys' heterosexual dominance, often undermined and denied through conventional and 'real' boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Further heterosexual assertions included overt homophobia and essentialist naturalised discourses surrounding homosexual practices:

> As Colin walks into the classroom, he clips Aaron around the head. Aaron responds with 'get off ba-by' to which Colin, horrified, shouts, 'urgh, you gay'. Aaron laughs this off and tells me about the latest fight between two girls in the playground.
>
> …
>
> ER: When you say gay Jake, what do you mean by that?
> Jake: You know, like/really sad.
> Sean: A bender (*Sean, Ryan and Jake laugh*)/
> Ryan: And you can sound gay can't you/
> David: Simon (*peer*)/he sounds gay.
> Ryan: Our next door neighbour/
> […]
> Jake: You know that 'supermarket sweep' (*game show*)?
> ER: Yeah.
> Jake: Well, there was this man on there/
> David: And he (*host of show*) goes, 'you're really pretty aren't you'.
> Jake: Yeah, and he won it right, about £2000 and he goes up to him and he can't stop kissing him (*laughing*), he kisses him about 2000 times/
> Ryan: Yeah that's like Michael Barrymore/
> Jake: Yeah and/he smacked Michael Barrymore in the other day/
> Sean and
> Ryan: Yeah (*they all cheer and clap*)/
> David: Who did?
> ER: Why is that good?
> Sean: Coz he's gay.

Discourses of homophobia were expressed vehemently by boys who did not engage in overt heterosexual boyfriend/girlfriend relationships and more frequently than by boys who *did* 'have girlfriends' and who *were* 'going out'. At times, these discourses were particularly disturbing, such as the explanation, "coz he's gay", offered to my questioning of their delight at Michael Barrymore being "smacked in". This appeared as little less than an advocacy of 'queer bashing'. Aside from homophobic narratives communicated in the group interviews, homophobic performances infiltrated classroom and playground interactions. These were directed at boys who got too close to other boys and those boys who failed or chose not to access hegemonic masculine discourses/practices. Differentiating oneself, and subordinating homosexualities, by shouting out or positioning other boys as 'gay' were all ways in which these boys asserted and attempted to make coherent their heterosexual identities. The extracts also reveal how homophobic performances are more about gender than sexual practices and are a means of regulating and policing the boundaries of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities, as Kehily & Nayak, quoting Butler, explain:

> We see homophobic performance as a style which gives masculinity the

appearance of substance, produced through the 'regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence'. (Butler, 1990, p. 137, cited in Kehily & Nayak, 1996, p. 225)

The pressure and struggle that some boys experienced in forming heterosexual relationships and their perceived powerlessness (being dumped, being used) produced contradictory heterosexual identities (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Thus, homophobic performances and misogyny seemed to offer a way of producing 'heterosexual coherence', which in turn signified a coherent 'masculine' identity.

Conclusions

While by no means exhausting the complex ways in which children forge their sexual identities, I have shown throughout how girls and boys are subject to the pressures of a compulsory heterosexuality and in different ways and to different ends struggle in the constitution and conflation of their gendered and sexual identities. The majority of girls in the study produced their femininity through dominant notions of heterosexuality, policed through the surveillance and regulation of their own and others' bodies and behaviours. Those who challenged 'girlie' hyper-femininities, by rejecting the notion that girls exist solely for the objectification and pleasure of boys, seemed only to be successful, however, when they were accompanied by competent heterosexual performances and relationships. Interestingly, there was no simple powerful/powerless binary divide in the boyfriend/girlfriend positions, but the sexual double standard, however, remained in the contradictory and arbitrary discourses of 'tarty' and 'tart'. Moreover, the disclosures of sexual harassment and feelings of anxiety and despair for those girls whose femininity pivoted on heterosexual desirability and the securing of boyfriends illustrate the persistence of age-old sexual inequalities.

For the majority of boys in the study, overt heterosexual practices, such as being a boyfriend, were not the only routes to the formation of their masculine identities. Fighting and football were alternative signifiers, thus challenging the notion of compulsory heterosexuality for boys. However, not to participate in sporting or fighting practices involved being subject to ridicule and ostracism in the form of heterosexist and homophobic jibes and insults (Renold, 1997). Furthermore, the conflation of femininity and homosexuality rendered proximity to girls (even within the discourse of heterosexuality) a fragile and ambiguous experience. Many boys resorted to defining and asserting their heterosexuality through discourses, gestures and practices of misogyny and homophobia.

In light of these findings, however, raising awareness of children's sexuality free from sensationalism and scandal will be no easy task given the current and past surge of restrictive, prohibitive and oppressive sound-bites and clauses. (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, 1998). This article, for example, was written against a backdrop of governmental moralising rhetoric surrounding sexual scandals of pregnant 12 year-old schoolgirls and a call for the values of marriage (and thus, by default, the institution of heterosexuality) to be part of the primary school curriculum (Dennis, 1999). On a more positive note, however, recent debates, such as the National Union of Teacher's response to government curriculum proposals for the year 2000, offer encouragement. Commenting on the new personal, social and health education framework for 5–16 year–olds, general secretary Doug McAvoy tells of the bullying that children experience through homophobic insults and jokes and requests that children in primary schools should learn about

lesbian and gay sexuality beyond the knowledge they pick up on the playground (Cassidy, 1999).

Although underdeveloped in this article, my findings support these proposals in so far as the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality to conform have particularly damaging consequences for those boys and girls who are positioned as Other to the normalising and regulatory (heterosexual) gendered scripts. I would also add that sexuality needs to be included as an equal opportunities issue that can deal with the *everyday* realities of boys' and girls' early sexual experiences. As Epstein (1999) concludes, 'we need to grasp the nettle of sex education and develop a broader sexuality education, in schools, where sexuality in its broadest sense is recognised, and where difference is valued and respected'. In this way, not only can the more damaging practices of misogyny, heterosexism and homophobia be legislated against, but 'hidden injuries', 'paradoxical pleasures' and the more 'fluid forms of dominance and subordination' (Kenway *et al.*, 1997, p. 22) can also be recognised. However, only a curriculum and policy framework that is sensitive to and reflects pupils' *own* sexual cultures can support children's experience of their developing sexual and gendered identities.

Key to Transcripts

( ) Background information (includes body movement, emotion, name of speaker, interruptions, tone of voice)
… Pause
/ Moment when interruption begins
" " Direct quotation
??? Inaudible responses
[…] Different extract from same interview or extract from a different interview to follow

NOTES

[1] Pupils attending both schools were predominantly white English and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.
[2] The main study involved visiting one Year 6 classroom in each site, for 2/3 days (each), every fortnight, for a period of a year (1994/95).
[3] I am using the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as socially organised frameworks of meaning which are shaped by and shape/regulate our behaviour, and which can delimit what can be said and done at particular moments in time (Foucault, 1978).
[4] 'Top-girls' was initially a term used by a group of boys to describe a dominant group of girls. I maintained the term, drawing further on the feminist evocations surrounding Carol Churchill's (1990) play, *Top Girls*, which resonated with the feminist discourses engaged with by the girls who accessed what I have termed the 'top-girl' subject position (see Renold, 1999).

REFERENCES

ADLER, P.A. & ADLER, P. (1998) *Peer Power: pre-adolescent peer culture and identity* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press).
ALANEN, L. (1994) Gender and generation: feminism and the child question, in J. QVORTRUP, M. BRADY, G. SGRITTO & H. WINTERBERGER (Eds) *Childhood Matters: social theory, practice and politics* (Aldershot, Avebury).
BEST, R. (1983) *We've All Got Scars: what girls and boys learn in elementary school* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press).
BORDO, S. (1990) Reading the slender body, in: M. JACOBUS, E. V. KELLER & S. SHUTTLEWORTH (Eds) *Body/Politics: women and the discourses of science* (London, Routledge).
BUTLER, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London, Routledge).

CASSIDY, S. (1999) Teach primary pupils about gays, says NUT, *Times Educational Supplement*, 9 July.

CHURCHILL, C. (1990) Top Girls (London, Methuen).

CLARK, M. (1990) *The Great Divide: gender in the primary school* (Melbourne, Curriculum Development Centre).

CLARRICOATES, K. (1987) Child culture at school: a clash between gendered worlds, in: A. POLLARD (Ed.) *Children and their Primary Schools: a new perspective* (London, Falmer Press).

CONNELL, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities: knowledge, power and social change* (Cambridge, Polity Press).

CONNOLLY, P. (1995) Boys will be boys? Racism, sexuality and the construction of masculine identities amongst infant boys, in J. HOLLAND & M. BLAIR (Eds) (1995) *Debates and Issues in Feminist Research and Pedagogy* (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters).

CONNOLLY, P. (1998) *Racisms, Gendered Identities and Young Children: social relations in a multi-ethnic, inner-city primary school* (London, Routledge).

COWIE, C. & LEES, S. (1981) Slags or drags, *Feminist Review*, 9, pp. 17–31.

DAVIES, B. (1982) *Life in the Classroom and Playground: the accounts of primary school children* (London, Routledge).

DAVIES, B. (1993) *Shards of Glass: children reading and writing beyond gendered identities* (Cresskill, NJ, Hampton Press Inc.).

DOUGLAS, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, Routledge).

EPSTEIN, D. (1997) Cultures of schooling/cultures of sexuality, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1, pp. 37–53.

EPSTEIN, D. (1999) Sex and sensibilities, *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 July.

EPSTEIN, D. & JOHNSON, R. (1994) On the straight and narrow: the heterosexual presumption, homophobias and schools, in: D. EPSTEIN (Ed.) *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

EPSTEIN, D. & JOHNSON, R. (1998) *Schooling Sexualities* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

FOUCAULT, M. (1978) *The Will to Knowledge: the history of sexuality*, Vol. I (trans. R. HURLEY) (Harmondsworth, Penguin).

FRANCIS, B. (1997) Power plays: children's constructions of gender and power in role plays, *Gender and Education*, 9, pp. 179–191.

HALSON, J. (1989) The sexual harassment of young women, in L. HOLLY (Ed.) *Girls and Sexuality: teaching and learning* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

HAYWOOD, C. (1996) Out of the curriculum: sex talking, talking sex, *Curriculum Studies*, 4, pp. 229–251.

HAYWOOD, C. & MAC AN GHAILL, M. (1996) Schooling masculinities, in: M. MAC AN GHAILL (Ed.) *Understanding Masculinities: social relations and cultural arenas* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

HEY, V. (1997) *The Company She Keeps: an ethnography of girls' friendships* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

HOLLAND, J., RAMAZANOGLU, C., SHARPE, S. & THOMSON, R. (1998) *The Male in the Head: young people, heterosexuality and power* (London, Tufnell Press).

JONES, C. (1985) Sexual tyranny: male violence in a mixed secondary school, in: G. WEINER (Ed.) *Just a Bunch of Girls* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

JONES, C. & MAHONY, P. (Eds) (1988) *Learning Our Lines: sexuality and social control in education* (London, Women's Press).

JORDAN, E. (1995) Fighting boys and fantasy play: the construction of masculinity in the early years of school, *Gender and Education*, 5, pp. 157–167.

KEHILY, M.J. & NAYAK, A. (1996) Playing it straight: masculinities, homophobias and schooling, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 5, pp. 211–229.

KEHILY, M.J. & NAYAK, A. (1997) Lads and laughter: humour and the production of heterosexual hierarchies, *Gender and Education*, 9, pp. 69–87.

KENWAY, J. & FITZCLARENCE, L. (1997) Masculinity, violence and schooling: challenging poisonous pedagogies, *Gender and Education*, 9, pp. 117–133.

KENWAY, J. & WILLIS, S. with BLACKMORE, J. & RENNIE, L. (1997) Are boys victims of feminism in schools? Some answers from Australia, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1, pp. 19–35.

LEES, S. (1987) The structure of sexual relations in school, in M. ARNOT & G. WEINER (Eds) *Gender and the Politics of Schooling* (London: Hutchinson).

LEES, S. (1993) *Sugar and Spice: sexuality and adolescent girls* (London, Penguin).

MAC AN GHAILL, M. (1994) *The Making of Men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

MAC AN GHAILL, M. (1996) Deconstructing heterosexualities within school arenas, *Curriculum Studies*, 4, pp. 191–207.

MCROBBIE, A. (1978) Working class girls and the culture of femininity, in: WOMEN'S STUDY GROUP (Eds) *Women Take Issue* (London, Hutchinson).

McRobbie, A. (1997) More! New sexualities in girls and women's magazines, in: A. McRobbie (Ed.) *Back to Reality? Social Experiences and Cultural Studies* (Manchester, Manchester University Press).

Redman, P. (1996) Curtis loves Ranjit: heterosexual masculinities, schooling, and pupils' sexual cultures, *Educational Review*, 48, pp. 175–182.

Renold, E. (1997) 'All they've got on their brains is football': sport, masculinity and the gendered practices of playground relations, *Sport, Education and Society,* 2, pp. 5–23.

Renold, E. (1999) Presumed innocence: an ethnographic exploration into the construction of sexual and gender identities in the primary school, unpublished dissertation, University of Wales, Cardiff.

Rich, A. (1980) Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence, *Signs*, 5, pp. 631–660.

Rossiter, A.B. (1994) Chips, Coke and rock 'n' roll: children's mediation of an invitation to a first dance party, *Feminist Review*, 46, pp. 1–19.

Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender* (London, Sage).

Skelton, C. (1996) Learning to be tough: the fostering of maleness in one primary school, *Gender and Education*, 8, pp. 185–197.

Skelton, C. (1997) Primary boys and hegemonic masculinities, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18, pp. 349–369.

Thorne, B. (1993) *Gender Play: boys and girls in school* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Thorne, B. & Luria, Z. (1986) Sexuality and gender in children's daily worlds, *Social Problems*, 33, pp. 176–190.

Walkerdine, V. (1990) *Schoolgirl Fictions* (London, Verso).

Walkerdine, V. (1996) Popular culture and the eroticization of little girls, in: J. Curran, D. Morely & V. Walkerdine (Eds) *Cultural Studies and Communications* (London, St Martin's Press).

Wolpe, A.M. (1988) *Within School Walls: the role of discipline: sexuality and the curriculum* (London, Routledge).