# Primary School Boys' Identity Formation and the Male Role Model: an exploration of sexual identity and gender identity in the UK through attachment theory

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ABSTRACT    *This paper questions the concept of feminisation which has been invoked by some commentators to explain the widely reported difficulties with boys. Its focus is upon primary schooling, and the point is made that a literature dominated by the considerations of adolescence and secondary schooling has underestimated the degree to which younger boys are socialised into the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Attachment behaviour theory is used as the framework for analysis, and a detailed study of a primary school provides evidence for the central contention that peers, rather than teachers, are the main role models for boys. The discussion is therefore critical of the notion that an increased number of male teachers who will act as role models has any serious purchase in tackling the problems of boys' identity formation. The paper identifies a number of weaknesses in the conceptualisation of 'the problem with boys' and points out the degree to which homophobic and sexualised bullying is a largely unrecognised issue in primary schools. The conclusion is that such issues need to be tackled in the light of an understanding of the significance of peer attachments.*

## Introduction

In the UK, a number of episodes have combined to arouse public, and certainly government, angst about male role models for young boys. Amongst the most significant are the related problems of boys' apparent underachievement in national tests in England and Wales, and boys' disaffection from schooling (revealed in rising and gender-disproportionate school exclusion figures). Closely linked to these is a concern, actively addressed at present by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), about the number of male primary teachers (Foster & Newman, 2000). In the wake of this comes recently expressed concern by the Chief Inspector of Schools about retention rates in the teaching profession, which seems particularly to be a problem for young men. Perennially

manifest in popular writing, though perhaps inconclusively discussed in research, is the idea that boys from single (female) parent families might need compensatory male role models at school. Behind all these concerns lies a tendency to construct a 'problem with boys'. This in turn raises questions about the possible 'feminisation' of schooling which are given superficial credibility by girls' apparent success in academic league tables relative to boys.

Is there a genuine crisis of boyhood? In this paper I offer a critical perspective on the notion of feminisation which seems to underlie the male role model angst, both historically and in contemporary discussion. Drawing on a detailed study of attachment behaviour in an English primary school, I present evidence which justifies the claim that the current discourse pays insufficient attention to peer relationships. High status boys, rather than teachers, are shown in the study to be the most important role models for other boys. I develop a discussion which calls into question the historical orthodoxy which upholds the expectation that women will teach the younger children, whilst the 'more important' job of teaching the oldest children is reserved for any male staff. This orthodoxy is on the one hand shown to be breaking down as a consequence of social change, perhaps associated with feminist scholarship. At the same time, however, there would seem to be a danger of such progress stalling under the pressures of hegemonic masculinity which ultimately mitigate against the best interests of both boys and girls.

## Feminisation: the historical background

A common thread to relationships between men and boys intertwines home, school and voluntary sector activities, crosses many cultural boundaries, and appears at most periods in history. This is that masculinity must be defined in opposition to femininity. The imperative in the previous sentence has biological justification in that all children are born of and undergo a period of total dependence on women. Boys, at some time in their lives, must separate from this early and highly intimate relationship and undergo a period of gender learning which is fundamentally different from the experience of girls. Traditionally, a role has been reserved for adult men in this process. Uncertainty about the nature, significance and timing of this role is currently high at a time of rapid social change. Popular writers on boys, such as Biddulph (1997), have tended to adopt an essentialist stance with overtones of biological determinism. This runs contrary to the main current of scholarly work, which supports a social constructivist view of gender learning and sex role development (see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

A historical review tends to support the social constructivist position and reveals, furthermore, a constant interplay between ideology and pragmatism. Feminist scholarship, perhaps unsurprisingly, has uncovered the degree to which the dominant ideology is that for which Connell (1995) has promoted the term 'hegemonic masculinity'. Hegemonic masculinity preserves male power through the denigration of women and gay men. As I have argued elsewhere, it has led to a narrowing of cultural opportunities for boys through the perceived need to conform to narrow 'macho' stereotypes which requires boys to exclude themselves from any activity popular with girls (Ashley, 2002).

Harnett and Lee (2001), in discussing the history of women teaching in British elementary schools, identify this interplay between ideology and pragmatism. Thus they cite Clarke (1985) who reports that in the 1830s UK reformers arguing for the establishment of infant education stressed the need for infants to be under the rule of men. Pleck (1987), in his historical account of American fathering, suggests that at this

time the father was seen as the moral overseer of the family and possessed of superior reasoning powers to women, who were ruled by passion. Men, at this time, were generally not separated from their families by distant employment, and took an active part in 'discoursing with their sons'. The expectation was that approval or disapproval would be expressed, not affection or anger.

Significantly, the norm after divorce was for paternal custody. Similar cultural norms in the UK are reported by Edley and Wetherell (1995). However, pragmatic circumstances seem to have intervened and forced changes to which ideology needed to adapt. By 1914, 75% of all UK elementary teachers were women, a factor which could be explained on both sides of the Atlantic by more attractive employment opportunities for young men outside school teaching, and the rising perception of school teaching as a good exercise for the young unmarried female (Schmuck, 1987; Evans, 1992).

At home, men became separated from their families through new industrialised patterns of employment. Whilst men, as distant breadwinners, remained as heads of the family in overall terms, a significant ideological shift took place in which the home came to be ruled by the woman. The purity of the feminine sphere was emphasised, and the idealised, nurturing and unselfish qualities of women became prized as the desired influence on young children. Maternal custody became the norm, and in the USA Horace Mann and Ichabod Crane actually campaigned for more female teachers (Pleck, 1987).

The early twentieth century, however, saw the rise on both sides of the Atlantic of a reaction to the potential 'softening' of boys. In the USA, it seems that a real fear of loss of frontier wilderness coupled with strong patriotism drove the desire for 'real men' to become scout leaders. The ideal scoutmaster would not be 'sissy', he would be 'mainly a patriot with common sense and moral character … no Miss Nancy need apply' (Hantover, 1998).

This was matched in the UK by the Baden-Powell scouting movement which was similarly concerned with the need for frontiersmen in 'all parts of our empire' who would be 'trappers, explorers, mounties, missionaries, able to look after their health, strong, plucky, ready to face danger, help each other and their country' (Mangan & Walvin, 1987). Edley and Wetherell (1995) draw attention to the importance of class ideology here. Middle-class notions of masculinity rose to prominence in the USA and England at this time, but particularly in England through the influence of the 'public' (i.e. fee paying, private) schools. Texts such as Mac an Ghaill (1994) have sometimes seen the problem of boys' rejection of academic work and the cult of athleticism (or football) as a working class issue. However, Mangan (quoted by Edley & Wetherell) quotes thus from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (a novel about public school life written by Thomas Hughes in 1857):

> Tom Brown … is a thoroughly English boy. Full of kindness, courage, vigour and fun—no great adept at Greek or Latin, but a first rate cricketer, climber and swimmer, fearless and skilful at football, and by no means adverse to a good stand-up fight in a good cause …. (From Mangan, 1987, p. 137, quoted in Edley & Wetherell, 1995)

Here we see the long history of 'cool' or the rejection of academic striving in favour of 'natural', manly sporting prowess. Mahony (1998) is probably right to signal the hazards of ignoring such factors as social class and ethnicity in producing generalisations about boys, and it is likely to be equally the case that most of the issues thought 'current' in the debate about boys have been around for most of the previous two centuries. Tom Brown serves as a useful cautionary tale both historically and culturally. As Noble and

Bradford (2000) suggest, the present focus on boys' underachievement may be due more to the methods of assessment that have become popular since the introduction of school performance league tables than any significant shift in the underlying attitudes of boys to schooling. The classic text of J. W. B. Douglas confirms beyond doubt that each and every one of the 'problems with boys' thought current by the UK media were issues during the 1940s and 1950s (Douglas, 1964). Indeed, it may even be that there were 'problems with boys' then that have not yet been 'discovered' by the current generation of commentators given to polemic pronouncements (for example, Byers, 1998 or Woodhead, 1996). The possibility that test and assessment methods used in schools may not reliably indicate the long term interests and achievements of boys must always be considered.

Pleck's account viewed the period 1940–1965 as one in which there was a popular focus on men as sex role models for boys, a fact which he believed could be explained by post-war absent fathers, but was also fuelled by a 1950s' perception of an epidemic of juvenile delinquency, particularly in the USA. Passive fathers, on the one hand tamed and domesticated, on the other hand irresponsible and uninterested in children, were the natural inheritors of media blame for the 'boy problem' during the post-1965 period when the 'new man' began to emerge. It is this particular aspect of social change, underlined by successive waves of feminism and more liberal attitudes to gay sexuality, which gives much of the context for the current debate.

The social attitudes which have promoted the acceptability of women rising to positions of power in professional and managerial life have, perhaps less stridently, upheld the rights of males to encroach on the traditional female territory of the caring professions. A consequence of this for boys' role models has been a questioning of the tradition that the youngest children should be taught by women, whilst the available men teach the older ones. Harnett and Lee (2001) record that this was official UK policy in 1951: 'Nevertheless, the infants' schools and classes *must be taught by women* teachers and will be under quite extraordinary pressure during the next few years as a result of the high birth rate of 1946–47' (Ministry of Education, 1951, my emphasis).

A current debate, as presented in texts such as King (1998) and Cameron *et al.* (1999), is centred around the issue of whether men should teach very young children (i.e. aged from 4–8+) as much as whether there are enough men available to act as role models for older boys, although this important question is not always apparent in TTA recruiting campaigns. A discourse is thus developing in which the question is whether men should aspire to be nurturing and 'soft' with small children, or should aspire to the more traditional role of enforcing 'stricter' discipline and more focussed, subject-based cognitive learning. There are clearly complex issues regarding gender identity and perhaps even sexual orientation here. Kincaid (1992) has argued that much of the traditional expectation of women teaching younger children is predicated on the ideology of a 'sacred trust' of caring for 'desexualised' children. Men, perceived as at least potentially sexually predatory, can disturb this myth. A man who cares for small children and thus has to face such question as whether to help undress them for PE might be more vulnerable to paedophilia suspicion than a man who is able to assert his hegemonic masculinity through demonstrating to older children that the time for 'soft nurture' by women is now over.

The potential conflation of paedophilia with sexual orientation is a further dangerous complication in a debate that is largely media driven and often ill-informed. Homophobia, or fear that boys will be subjected to influences that promote homosexuality, might itself be part of the dominant ideology of hegemonic masculinity. It is interesting to read

sources that associate the fear of homosexuality with too much exposure to women. For example, Friedan (1963) equated too much mother contact with homosexuality, and wrote about this 'spreading a murky smog throughout every area of American life, especially the arts'. This contrasts with a fear of enclosed, all male institutions, traditionally influential in the UK, which are sometimes suspected as sources of homosexuality.

The evidence to support the notion that men should be excluded from working with younger children in conventional day schools for such reasons is hardly conclusive or convincing. The theory of vulnerable 'desexualised' young children does not stand up to studies such as Haugaard (1987), Doll (1992), Jones and Jenny (1997) or Barter (1997) which all point to the role of peers in sexualised institutional abuse. Such a prospect would be concordant with the emphasis upon peer attachments in the present paper. Jones (1993), in a detailed study of the abuse of boys by the headteacher of a private school for boys with learning difficulties, highlights the degree to which abuse of power and corruption of authority structures were significant. Such a picture needs to be contrasted with the power structures in female dominated primary schools where the opportunities for such orchestrated abuse by predatory males teaching young children (if they exist) must be more limited.

A more pressing problem might be that the existence of male teachers as role models might perpetuate some of the less desirable facets of hegemonic masculinity. Whilst hegemonic masculinity itself might rapidly condemn anything that might remotely be construed as paedophilia, condemnation of entrenched sexist attitudes might be much slower, and more dependent upon feminist-inspired viewpoints. Skelton (1999) argues convincingly against football-based initiatives to appeal to boys in her account of a primary school ethnography. This study appeared to demonstrate the existence of male primary teachers with sexist and macho attitudes favouring older boys who played football. She does not, however, consider adequately the difficulties faced by men who might themselves wish to counter such stereotypes. There is some doubt as to whether female writers, who are inevitably 'outsiders' with regard to relationships between men and boys, are capable of the necessary insight. Indeed, the label 'pro-feminist' (men) which is used is indicative of a certain attitude.

Men who are to act as role models for primary aged boys must first take up a position with regard to the many attitudinal choices that are presented by cultural history. They must then negotiate the proscriptions of their own peer group, and finally they must do all this from the disadvantaged position of being under a public gaze which might regard them as potentially sexually predatory. In spite of the considerable media attention that boys' issues have attracted, there has to date been little serious analysis of whether the 'problem with boys' has anything to do with an absence of adult males in the pre-adolescent years. With notable exceptions such as Skelton (2001) and Hey *et al.* (2001), recent literature on boys' problems at school gives scant attention to the primary phase, either ignoring it altogether, or relegating it to an introductory chapter before the 'real' business of adolescence is tackled (see Bleach, 1998; Head 1999; Francis, 2000; Noble & Bradford, 2000; Frosh *et al.*, 2001).

Is the conclusion thus to be that the status quo of women for pre-pubescent boys is largely to be maintained? The term 'feminisation' would hardly seem appropriate when the historic data show so clearly that the initiation of boys by men has for so long been generally reserved for the years of puberty and beyond, and that men teaching younger boys must inevitably be part of subordinate or marginalised masculinities (Connell, 1995). In attempting an answer to this question, I now turn

to attachment theory. Attachment theory provides an analytical framework for examining the essential process through which boys separate from their mothers in order to undergo gender socialisation. It is thus a potentially powerful tool in tackling the 'problem with boys'.

## Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is generally traced back to the seminal work of John Bowlby for the World Health Organisation (Bowlby, 1952, 1969). Perhaps Bowlby's most significant achievement was to establish in a skeptical, if not hostile, world that infants required emotional as well as physical care in order to thrive. Significant developments in the theory were the *secure base* by Ainsworth (1967), *anxious attachments* (Ainsworth & Wittig 1969), *facilitating environments* and *holding in mind* (Winnicott, 1965; Heard, 1978). Studies such as Main *et al*. (1985), Barrett and Trevitt (1991) and my own (Ashley, 1995) have looked particularly at the applications of the theory to children of primary school age. Head (1999) has referred to the theory in his discussion of boys' separation from their mothers.

Fundamentally, the above literature furnishes an account of the development of a *secure separation* from the primary care giver. The primary care giver, by convention, is the mother, but there is nothing in Bowlby's theory to preclude other carers, including fathers, from this role. The secure separation is one that allows the child to function effectively as a learner and as a socially confident, independent individual. It is built upon an important paradox which is the source of much misinterpreted behaviour. The secure base described by Ainsworth (1967) postulates the notions of *attachment behaviour* and *exploratory behaviour*.

Attachment behaviour, which consists of a repertoire of attention-eliciting stimuli, is directed at the goal of the *attachment state*. The attachment state represents a position in which the child, feeling secure, ceases to exhibit attachment behaviour and instead ranges away from the caregiver on forays of exploratory behaviour. The success of the child in learning through exploratory behaviour is dependent upon low anxiety about the attachment state. Winnicott's notion of *holding in mind* describes the ability of a securely attached child to engage in protracted feats of independence and exploratory behaviour through the retention of a mental image of the caregiver, with the expectancy of her/his future availability.

As Head (1999) points out, the attachment between child and primary caregiver cannot continue for ever. The possibility that the years of primary schooling represent a transitional phase of partial separation in which the teacher 'scaffolds' the process of separation through acting as an intermediate attachment figure is clearly a rich one.

Barrett and Trevitt (1991) hypothesised that remediation of learning difficulty was possible through an educational 'attachment figure' and reported some success with this principle, describing positive outcomes in English schools with 'learning disabled' boys aged between seven and sixteen. In these cases, the 'attachment figure' was a therapist. There were no reported studies of the class teacher as an attachment figure, which is surprising given the stress in the literature on the role of the primary teacher as carer, and the historic emphasis of the idealised 'nurturing' role of the female teacher.

The potential richness of an attachment study increases exponentially when it is considered that boys may undergo very different experiences to girls. This was the possibility that was investigated during a detailed study of one primary school in a country town in the South West of England that is now described.

## The Hypothesis

According to attachment theory, attachment behaviour is the consequence of feelings of insecurity. Smiling, cooing or grasping would be mild manifestations in infants, whilst crying, screaming or clinging would signal greater urgency. As children mature during the years of primary schooling, attachment behaviour is increasingly manifest as various forms of disruption, classically labelled as 'attention-seeking'. Given that attachment behaviour and exploratory or learning behaviour exist according to the theory in inverse proportion, the existence of disruptive, underachieving children can be explained as insecure separation and the relative absence of the secure *attachment state*. An intuitive belief held by many teachers is that the attention-seeking child should be ignored on the grounds that a reward of attention will increase the level of attention-seeking behaviour. Attachment theory is counter-intuitive in that it predicts the opposite.

It was hypothesised in the study that there would be successful children who exhibited little attachment behaviour but high levels of learning behaviour, and less successful children who more frequently exhibited attachment behaviour with lower levels of learning behaviour. It was further hypothesised that the successful children, on the basis of a secure base in the home, would successfully transfer the secure base to the school through identification with the class teacher as a secondary attachment figure. The study thus sought to investigate this possibility empirically through detailed examination of the behaviour and relationships of 15 boys.

## Methodology

The five most disruptive children in the school (all boys) were first identified through a process of teacher consultation. A contrasting group of five academically successful boys and a third random control group were then identified. Each of these boys was systematically tracked on a rota basis over two school terms. Using methods derived from ethology (Lorenz, 1937; Harlow & Harlow, 1971; Blurton-Jones, 1974), every playground interaction of the observed child was observed, classified and mapped against a large database of the social relationships of all the 240 or so pupils in the school. Extensive use was made of sociometric testing and mapping. Detailed interviews were conducted to ascertain the attitudes of the other children and teachers towards the target children. An analysis of reported attitudes and observed behaviours was undertaken.

These data were compared with teachers' reports of classroom behaviour and a range of data on academic performance. The physical somatotypes (after Sheldon, 1942) of the target children were also measured and compared with all the children's judgements in response to three hypothetical drawings. The children were also interviewed about their feelings and opinions. Detailed reports of this methodology, together with relevant data tables, can be found in Ashley (1992, 1995).

## Results

It proved necessary to revise the original hypothesis. Predictably, the low achieving boys scored poorly in sociometric testing and were shown to have weak or poor relationships with their teachers and peers. However, no evidence could be found to support the notion that the successful boys had secure attachments with their teachers. These boys and their teachers seemed to enjoy pleasant working relationships, but at the same time the boys

made no emotional demands of their teachers and passed from one year's teacher to another without any symptoms of concern.

When the detailed data on peer relationships were examined, however, it became very clear that a robust explanatory paradigm could be constructed around the principle that it is peer attachments and not pupil/teacher attachments that dominate the process of separation from the primary caregiver. Three types of peer attachment were identified. The first type consisted of boys who had strong peer attachments and performed well at school. These boys were either 'sociometric stars' who exerted considerable influence on the pattern of social relationships, or they were less extrovert boys who nevertheless enjoyed strong attachments which were reciprocated by the social stars. These boys had strong attachments in their own group, and were generally liked by the other children.

The second type consisted of boys who had strong attachments to a smaller group of other boys. These boys were likely to be either disruptive or generally anti-learning in their attitude. They enjoyed good relationships in their own group, but were disliked by the majority of other pupils. The third type consisted of boys with no strong attachments or group identity. These boys tended to be moderate to indifferent performers academically, and were not highly visible in the general milieu of social relationships. Teachers were found to have either no influence or a negative influence on these groupings. The negative influence (which was strong) was found to be that of reinforcing children's dislikes of the already unpopular children.

Other studies of social groupings within primary schools have given very similar accounts, notably Pollard (1985). A more extensive literature on secondary school peer relationships, admirably summarised in Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), attaches greater significance to the academic effects of boys' cultural groups, to which descriptors such as 'nerds' or 'scruffs' are applied. It is only in more recent times that a strong case has begun to be made that such groupings are as significant in primary schools. Renold (2000) points out, for example, that very few ethnographic studies locate the primary school as a key arena for the production of sexual identities. She then provides evidence that peer relationships in primary schools are indeed significant. Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000) have recently made out a strong case in which the effects of primary school boys' social groups and older teenage boys' groupings are compared. They conclude that peer group as opposed to teacher influence is as significant with 7–9 year olds as with older teenagers.

## Discussion

Skelton (2001) questions the degree to which the current debate places high expectations on role models. She points out the lack of evidence available to support the proposition that the 'problem with boys' might be addressed by increasing the number of adult male role models in primary schools. The literature reviewed in this paper has confirmed that there is nothing new in the female domination of primary teaching, thereby confounding the simple feminisation theory. Similarly, it has confirmed that the 'problem with boys' is not new either. It could, of course, be argued that these two observations go hand in hand to provide an explanation. Primary schools have been female-dominated for a long time. There has been a 'problem with boys' for a long time.

The 'problem with boys' is conceptualised by the media only in achievement terms. The feminist critique, however, would see the issue more in terms of the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, the denigration of femininity and alternative masculinity, and

the ultimate domination of high status occupations and positions in society by males, in spite of girls' superior performance in scholastic tests. Apparent underachievement in KS2 league tables (for 10–11 year olds), which is arguably a transitory issue linked to short term political fashion and media attention, may be of significantly less long term importance than the social reproduction of hegemonic masculinity itself. Studies such as Renold (2001) confirm this. Renold cites a number of sources that suggest the gender-based or sexualised nature of school bullying is 'depoliticised' (Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and that the literature on bullying seems inexplicably reluctant to confront the issue. Nevertheless, the role of gender-based and sexualised harassment is quite clear in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Renold, 2001).

Renold's major contribution, as with Skelton (2001), has been to draw attention to the fact that primary school boys engage in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity through a discourse of 'gay' and 'girlie' against peers who do not overtly engage in the hegemonic performance of 'football, fighting and girlfriends' (p. 19). This is not far removed from Mac an Ghaill's now classic 'fighting, fucking and football' in the secondary school (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill 1996). The 'presumed innocence' of primary school boys clearly has to be questioned, and with this questioning must come a re-examination of the orthodoxy of 'low status mothering women' for the youngest children and the 'high status man' for Y6. Whilst it is certainly true that this stereotype is indeed undergoing deconstruction and challenge, the question remains of whether the existing female teaching force is capable of managing boys' peer relationships to the degree that is required.

The issue is not one of direct role modelling, but one of intervention within the context of entrenched hegemonic masculinity; a context that has been shown to disadvantage women in the secondary school (Askew & Ross, 1988). Boys' sexuality has traditionally been invisible in primary schooling in a way it is not in secondary schooling. The presumption of sexual innocence has been credible in the past because of the prepubescent status of primary school boys. Superficially, testosterone-induced changes still offer a rationale for an association of primary schooling with 'mothering' and secondary schooling with an induction to the world of adult males. However, the degree to which gender attitudes have been shown to be socially constructed increasingly makes such a model begin to appear untenable. If the sexualised nature of bullying in primary schools has been depoliticised as Renold (2001) claims, it may also be that boys' emotional attitudes to sexuality have been similarly ignored or rendered invisible.

Few sex education materials for the primary phase tackle the sexualised nature of bullying and the sexualised nature of the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. The traditional mechanical focus upon puberty coupled with emotional focus on 'the new baby' and bolt-on moralising about marriage may need to be questioned. A whole new series of questions about female competence to intervene in such areas is waiting to be asked. Equally, however, there are questions to be asked about male competence, particularly given the reported tendency of some male primary teachers unwittingly to enforce entrenched attitudes and emotional dispositions. The enduring tendency for prepubescent children to form same-sex friendships cannot be ignored, particularly given the failure of naïve early attempts at enforced gender mixing. Attachment theory offers a promising theoretical framework for further work here, as an alternative to earlier latent homosexuality theories and an alternative to pure biological determinism based upon testosterone levels.

Pratt's study of boys' friendships in the primary school (Pratt, 2000) is remarkable for its degree of concordance with my own study reported above, as well as my current work

on boys' self-policed exclusion from music (Ashley, 2002). Pratt cites qualities of friendship which include admiration for a particular skill, such as 'good at sport'. This is well known. Perhaps less well known was the importance of physical attributes ('you look nice'). This perhaps less well appreciated finding is strongly substantiated by my attachment behaviour study which clearly demonstrated boys' preference for the meso-morphic (athletic) physique amongst their peers (Ashley, 1994). The significance of my findings here was that women teachers were not only unaware of this but may unwittingly have reinforced it through their own interactions with children.

Pratt and Burn (2000) confirm the importance of close male friendships forged through activities such as football which allow aspects of male bonding that might be disrupted by a feminine influence. The possibility of comparing interventions by female teachers who wish to disrupt what might be considered undesirable aspects of male bonding with interventions by male teachers having similar objectives (Gard, 2001) is a rich one. There is, however, little such documented practice to investigate at present. A well-informed approach to addressing the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity will require much overt questioning of a deeply entrenched status quo. The base of knowledge and understanding for such an informed approach is only beginning to emerge within the research literature, and is certainly not well communicated to practising teachers.

In addressing this, there is a need for vigilance with regard to subjective or ideological positions within the literature. For example, Walkerdine (1981) confidently illustrates graphically how four year-old boys in a nursery class make use of sexist, violent and oppressive language to position themselves powerfully in relation to their nursery teacher. A very different interpretation, however, is provided by Phillips (1993) who, describing a similar situation, finds it hard to believe that the boys were acting out their right to be authoritative, forceful or masterful. Her interpretation is that 'they felt lost in this great big world with no Mummy figure to look after them' (p. 209). Interestingly, she continues by describing a gender difference in which girls monitor the behaviour of their peers and pull the unruly back into line. The boy who is 'neither cute nor charismatic, but is miserable or demanding' will not have the attention of a peer group seeking to modify his behaviour. 'He will simply be left alone' (p. 210).

It is Phillips's rather than Walkerdine's interpretation that resonates with the evidence of the attachment behaviour study. The sociometric data are entirely concordant with the proposition that the miserable, demanding boy will be left alone by his peer group. Similarly, the data support the notion of a 'take it or leave it' attitude to the social stars. Boys had two ways of being 'in'. They could either model themselves on and seek the (entirely unstated) approval of the leaders of what was called in the study the 'football crowd', or they could be 'in' with the much smaller but explicitly anti-school 'disruptive group'. The alternative was marginalisation from the male power base of hegemonic masculinity. The difficulty lies with the unfortunate use of the term 'Mummy figure'. This is itself a highly gendered if not sexist conception which excludes men from the possibility of nurturing little boys who feel 'lost in a great big world'. As a male writer, I would disagree with both Walkerdine and Phillips, and point towards the need for alternative interpretations.

Walker and Kushner (1999) reveal that, given the opportunity, far more boys than currently do would rebel against hegemonic masculinity and its cultural proscriptions. Many boys are unhappy with the enforced dichotomy between public and private self (Walker, 2001; Frosch *et al.*, 2001). How might this happen? The alleged inability of boys to confront emotional difficulty is sometimes problematised in feminist writing, or

in writing about boys which highlights a claimed male deficiency in talking about relationships (Sainsbury & Jackson, 1996, p. 216.) For as long as the debate portrays care and nurture in essentialist terms of femininity, the possibility that men can also provide care and nurture will be regarded as slightly eccentric and marginalised by hegemonic masculinity. For as long as boys are problematised, or regarded as 'other' by female teachers, progress will be slow. This discussion has demonstrated that the role model notion with its desire for more male teachers is probably naïve. It has demonstrated that boys role model themselves primarily upon other boys, and that the direct influence of teachers is limited. If it has succeeded, it has raised the role model question to a different level: are females inevitably 'outsiders' with regard to boys' peer relationships, and is there thus a limit placed upon the ability of a female teaching force to impact upon the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity?

## Conclusion

An equal society which is not constrained by essentialist assertions of gender difference would surely hold that the gender of the teacher should be immaterial. It would be unremarkable, therefore, for a male to teach very young children. Equally, it would be unremarkable for a female to teach a subject such as physics at 'A' level to 16–18 year-olds. This does not remove the sense of unease that is commonly felt by many concerning the gender imbalance in primary education. It is surely a near axiom that in a society of gender equality, the gender balance of the teaching force should be more equal than has historically been the case. This paper has shown, however, that the reasons given for increasing male recruitment may be sometimes misplaced. It has also shown that a panic-driven focus on boys' issues may obscure matters of real significance.

If there are problems with boys' gender identity, or boys' attitudes to women and gay men, the first area that needs to be tackled is not teacher recruitment, but the lack of appreciation of how important the boys' peer group is from the earliest years of the primary school upwards. Within the classroom, there are improvements that might be made. Gender equality requires that pupils see men in roles with young children. One male teacher working with the youngest children in a school is likely to be worthwhile in this respect, even if he teaches only one out of several classes. This statement is true, of course, only if that male teacher is committed to equality and deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity.

Important questions, however, need to be asked about where boys are going and what boys are doing when outside school. Peer attachments formed through participation in activities such as football outside school are clearly likely to carry over into the classroom. The historic neglect of the significance of playtime is paralleled or surpassed by the neglect of the significance to schooling of what boys do when not at school. The most challenging question of all, however, probably concerns the reluctance to confront the sexualised nature of bullying and the invisibility of prepubescent boys' emotional responses to their sexuality. Sex education which is geared to the production of babies may be telling only half the story. Attachment theory is in its infancy in this area, but holds the promise of a rich maturity.

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