

# Captured becomings: An assemblage of sexual difference, neoliberal capitalism and bodies in the boys' education debate.

MEd (Research) thesis by Brad Gobby

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institutions.

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Brad Gobby - June 2006.

## Abstract

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This study investigates the current influence of conservative political, social and economic forces in structuring the perspectives of five pre-service teachers on the education of boys. I argue that these perspectives are constituted by a conservative assemblage of essentialist discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism and these largely extend the indomitable power of conservative forces increasingly shaping social relations inside and outside the field of education.

The interviews reveal that conservative discourses of sexual difference dominate the perspectives on boys and their schooling and this reliance on essentialist notions of sexuality effectively gives rise to a conflicting roles discourse that informs a recuperative masculinity politics and feminist backlash. I argue the social transformation effected by neoliberal economics is largely silenced when discussing boys and education and this allows participants to largely ‘blame’ feminism for the transformation of labour markets, work patterns, family relationships and gendered subjectivities, silencing its powerful influence. I contend personal insecurity and anxiety generated by neoliberal economic transformation have proliferated conservative discourses of sexuality, producing a defence of rigid sexual boundaries that proscribe the potential of male and female bodies by capturing their ‘becoming’, and to this extent I argue that conservative discourses of sexual difference are coextensive with the aims of neoliberal capitalism. However, rather than position men as victims, I argue the conservative assemblage including the boys’ debate make available diverse ways for many individuals to experience their body powerfully, with the attributes and capacities of hegemonic masculinity being proliferated. The boys’ debate is one resource for producing powerful subjectivities while extending the territory of the conservative assemblage increasingly constituting our world.

Methodologically this is a qualitative inquiry that utilizes discourse analysis extensively informed by poststructural theories of knowledge, power and the subject. I also make connections with the work of Deleuze and Guattari and the theories of corporeal feminism, including a theory of the body as a machinic assemblage in order to interrogate the conservative territorialisation of subjectivity and social relations. Finally, I argue the need to consider the alignment of discourses of sexual difference, neoliberal capitalism and the body in order to create a future beyond the limits currently defined by our culture.

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# 1

## Introduction

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As an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), the boys' education debate has been generated through a complex mix of social, political and economic influences and having received significant political and media attention, it has become a battleground for powerful forces that extend beyond the field of education, particularly those aligned with conservative social and political agendas (Apple, 2001; Martino & Berrill, 2003). The shaping of the debate and educational policy and practice by these conservative social and economic influences has proliferated commonsense assumptions, propositions and practices that are met with limited critical engagement within the public domain, save feminist and pro-feminist academic research. This inquiry explores the significant influences of conservative discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism in structuring perspectives on the education of boys. I investigate the linkages and connections of these discourses to each other and to the assemblage of conservative tendencies that have captured public policy and social relations. Interviewing five pre-service teachers on their perspectives on the boys' debate, I utilize a discourse analysis to interpret the participants' responses, paying close attention to the discursive alliances that intensify the dissemination of these powerful conservative forces. I argue that the pre-service teachers' responses reflect the conservative political, social and economic forces generating the boys' debate, including conservative discourses of sexuality and the mobilizing discourses of neoliberalism. I argue that this allows participants to largely 'blame' feminism for the transformation of labour markets, work patterns, family relationships and gendered subjectivities, silencing the powerful influence of neoliberal capitalism. I contend that personal insecurity and anxiety generated by neoliberal social, political and

economic transformation have proliferated conservative discourses of sexuality, producing a defence of rigid sexual boundaries that proscribe the potential of male and female bodies by capturing their 'becoming', yet these discourses also function to make available a range of bodily alignments and subjective positions that are conservatively oriented. Consequently, the boys' debate should be understood as an assemblage that feeds into conservative networks of power providing the opportunity for the attributes and capacities of the male body and male power to be experienced, extended and consolidated in new ways. I begin with an overview of the boys' debate to provide a context for this inquiry.

In 2002 the Australian Federal Government published two reports on the education of boys. The Department of Education, Science and Training funded *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys* was a qualitative and quantitative study of schools across Australia, surveying and interviewing teachers and students on a diverse range of topics relevant to the schooling of boys. Informed by a feminist poststructuralist theoretical orientation and current sociological research and literature on education, the report emphasised the impact of constructions of hegemonic masculinity on boys' experience and achievement at school. The conservatively oriented parliamentary report *Boys: Getting it Right* ensued, procuring from the community, government agencies, experts and other stakeholders public submissions on the education of boys. Informed by commonsense assumptions of gender and perceived male disadvantage, the report emphasised the imperative of specific strategies for boys. That the reports had divergent conclusions and recommendations is symptomatic of the discursive tensions framing the boys' debate in Australia and other countries.

Gender has been central to educational policy-making in Australia since the 1970s, where the combination of a changing national economy and the ascendancy of liberal feminism generated a focus on the educational needs of girls. While earlier policy initiatives were constrained by a liberal humanist theoretical framework that tended to essentialise females and femininity, the 1980s heralded a more complex understanding of schooling, gender relations and female experience and achievement. However, the constitution of the educationally disadvantaged girl failed to address the complexity of student underachievement and possibly reinforced the fiction of female deficit and male achievement. Attentive to the class, racial, ethnic and sexuality differences that influenced female educational experience and attainment, public policy in the late 1980s and 1990s recognised the heterogeneity within the category ‘girls’ and undertook a nuanced delineation of female achievement. Arguably, the fiction of male potential and their structural advantage in social relations and the labour market kept boys from the public policy spotlight, until more recently.

While it would be impossible to comprehensively articulate the complex set of events from which the *educationally disadvantaged boy* emerged in the 1990s, some circumstances are relevant to this study. Previous policy initiatives that disregarded the underachievement of some boys and concomitantly the proclamation of policy success with female improvement in the maths and sciences distorted perceptions of female achievement and male underachievement. In addition, at a time when neoliberal social and economic transformations at the national level generated individual uncertainty and insecurity, the transformation of the status of women in the workplace and society along with changing gender ideologies provided fecund circumstances for the proliferation of anti-feminist self-help books marketed to males and similarly films that characterised

males as victims of a reformed gender order. Characterised as a *feminist backlash*, the rhetoric of male disadvantage problematically emerged in conservative social and political discourse, with the educationally disadvantaged boy remaining the thrust of current public inquiry and policy. Dominated by these conservative forces, the public debate on boys' education has become defacto school policy for many school leaders and teachers, who do not critically engage with its arguments or questionable assumptions (Mahoney, 2003). These conservative forces are rendered visible in this thesis.

I have pursued the study of the boys' debate as a path to critique the growth of conservative tendencies in Australia that potentially erode commitments to social equality, the celebration of difference, and the connection of individuals to community and self-knowledge. In Australia, for example, the conservative Howard government has consecutively won power for ten years and in that time it has presided over a number of socially conservative events I believe are significant. The mandatory detention of asylum seekers and its 'Pacific solution' has been of major public significance, garnering public support for its harsh treatment of asylum seekers while demonstrating its loose commitment to human rights principles. Ironically, at a time when there was concern for a negative population growth and its effects on the economy, rather than increase the immigration quota the government sought to address the declining birth rate of its citizens resonating with a 'populate or perish' discourse of previous immigration policies. This concern along with its Baby Bonuses policy and tax breaks specifically targeted towards families reflects the government's neoliberal commitments and growing moral conservatism through its economic and cultural investment in the heterosexual family structure. Moreover, its middle-class welfare regime has created a double standard of welfare entitlement as re-distributive policies for the truly economically and socially

disadvantaged are marginalised as the middle-class consider their increasing welfare, generated by self-interest, a rightful entitlement (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005). In education, the Federal Education Minister in 2005, Brendan Nelson, derided the use of sociology in education and proselytised an agenda of competitive educational markets and parental choice in education, a trend to free marketism reflected in most social domains. While increasing funding for private schools as their numbers expanded, Nelson presided over the institution of national benchmark testing for all students in literacy and numeracy as a means of managing school performance, the results of which were very publicly used to deride public education and the supposed leftist educational ideologues who preside over a putative dumbing down of the clever country. These events or circumstances in themselves are only significant for their alignment within a broader assemblage of conservatism constituting our current social relations.

Apple (2001) argues that in the United States conservative political and social movements have linked with neoliberal economics in powerful ways and this is evident in the Australian context. Educational policy has increasingly been subject to principles of the market, arguably the single most powerful cause of modern change in education, and this is eroding commitments to social justice and equity issues. Of great concern currently is the conservative government's industrial relations response to global economic demands. Its *Working Choices* policy is best characterized as a neoliberal economic reform agenda, with a movement towards an individual contract culture, the unsettling of traditional workers' rights and a concomitant erosion of union and collective power. This deregulation of labour markets, along with discourses of new managerialism and state disinvestment in welfare, are engendering a proliferous competitive individual subjectivity (Peters, 1996), which potentially strengthens conservative tendencies in the



lives of individuals. These neoliberal modes of governmentality produce enterprising and supposedly autonomous individuals imbued with choice whose freedom, however, is defined and operationalised through contemporary political and economic demands (Rose, 1996). Pertinently, Ball (1998) argues that the globalised economy and increased competitiveness produces insecurity in terms of finances, future and social position, which subsequently marginalizes concerns for social justice and equity. In fact, when the Conservatives secured their election win in 2004, this was largely attributed by many commentators to the Conservative spin of increased interest rates under a Labour government. In an increasingly competitive individualist world, appealing to people's anxieties about personal finances and social position is a political strategy which marginalizes social justice concerns and public investment, which is usually represented in the media as 'spending', aligning neoliberal economics with conservative social and political interests. I fear this conservatism also for its reluctance to experiment with the world by failing to embrace what lies Outside (Grosz, 1995) or beyond the norm, to reject difference for the security of the known, the same. Apathy pervades our times. While these trends may not have originated in the previous ten years, I am arguing they are manifestations of a conservative tendency reshaping human subjectivity and it is the site from which the life of this research springs, and to which its aims are directed.

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## Aims & significance of the inquiry

I arm myself with theoretical insights of poststructuralist thinkers in my review of the research literature and analysis of interviews with five pre-service teachers. I extensively draw upon Foucauldian theorizing and concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), especially those taken up by corporeal feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 2004).

This theoretical orientation assumes power/knowledge relations constitute social relations and meaning making, emphasising the social, political and historical contingency of all knowledge. Therefore, as conservative social relations are significantly shaping the nature of the boys' debate, a poststructuralist orientation provides the tools with which to critically engage with these conservative forces, particularly discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism. The choice of these interpretive frames has not been arbitrary: feminism has highlighted the immense impact of sex in the lives of humans, influencing social relations and positions available to bodies. Comparatively, as capitalism powerfully shapes social relations, neoliberal economic transformations are changing how humans view themselves, others and their relationship to the world, and therefore, the social must be explored with consideration of capital. I believe, therefore, sex/gender and neoliberal capitalism are the most powerful influences of how bodies are made sense of and how they are socially distributed and used. Specifically in education, these influences are profound with neoliberal capitalism and governmentality transforming people's notions of schooling and equity, being a student and a teacher while political and popular rhetoric such as the *Boys: Getting it Right* parliamentary inquiry deploys conservative and stereotypical notions of sexuality, which have driven problematic understandings of boys' education.

My broad objective in this thesis is to investigate pre-service teachers' perspectives on the boys' education debate. While the debate has been conducted for well over a decade now in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, my aim is to explore how pre-service teachers formulated and articulated the issues, problems and strategies related to the teaching of boys in 2005/2006 and to map the linkages between these responses and the broader boys' debate assemblage. Furthermore, acknowledging largely

conservative forces constitute the debate, I aim to situate the boys' education debate within a conservative assemblage currently powerfully transforming social relations and to make these visible through my analysis of the participants' responses. Specifically, as sexual difference and capitalism are identified as powerful influences in people's lives, through the questions I asked of my respondents, I wanted to explore the discourses informing the perspectives on sexual difference, the influence of neoliberal capitalism on people's perspectives on boys' education and the linkages between these perspectives, discourses and other social and political forces within the context of the boys' debate. Therefore, this thesis aims to map the significance of these linkages and how they feed into the powerful conservative assemblage. Foregrounding the body in my analysis of these forces, my objective is to emphasise how the body is seized by these force relations and deployed in ways that reinforce particular ways of seeing, being and becoming in the world. However, such a focus also aims to emphasise the potential of all bodies such that new bodily practices can disrupt those current forces shaping our conservative times. Furthermore, I have chosen teacher education students because they are at the chalk face, working with students and in many cases mobilising commonsense understandings of sexualities, and likely to effectively transform the knowledge and potentially the lived experiences of students.

In chapter two I review the literature and research on social and educational change through neoliberal economic influences and progress to perspectives on the boys' debate. I illustrate the existence of feminist/pro-feminist and conservative/populist tendencies driving the debate. The feminist tendency is characterised by trenchant sociological critiques of subjectivity, knowledge and power that problematise commonsense ontological and epistemological assumptions, especially of sexual difference. On the

contrary, the indomitable conservative tendency eschews a critical sociological engagement, and its populist prevarication of male disadvantage and underachievement presupposes problematic understandings of social relations and notions of subjectivity and sexual difference. I particularly draw attention to the nature of these two tendencies. Apple (2001) argues that the 'Right' is constituted by the labile and subsequently powerful discursive alliances of moral and political neoconservatism and neoliberal economics. I argue that reducing the debate to two cohesive movements or political identities undermines the differences and complexity of the debate, especially the reason the conservative position has become so powerful. Firstly, the alignment of conservative discourses with neoliberal economics is a powerhouse for the extension of the conservative machine and, secondly, the shifting discursive alliances informing perspectives on the education of boys can best be understood as open-ended and partial. The boys' debate, therefore, is conceptualised as an assemblage constituted by a Deleuzian heteromorphic machinic connectivity, constituted by these conservative and feminist tendencies.

I argue in the literature review that neoliberal economics provide a context for transformations in education and educational subjectivities and these are a part of larger global economic changes that are producing greater competitiveness in the lives of individuals. In fact, the mode of individuality is being increasingly shaped by this economic influence producing a consumer-oriented, self-interested, competitive subjectivity whose communitarian concern is increasingly lessened. These economic changes have given rise to concerns about boys and previous feminist efforts to address disadvantage for women are being displaced by a backlash against feminism. In addition, the presupposition of neoliberal notions of social relations and subjectivity in

conservative discourses de-emphasise group disadvantage and socio-economic influences, fundamentally recasting equity concerns and strategies. I then cast an analytical eye over the construction of the boys' debate exemplified by feminist and conservative tendencies. Examining the feminist/pro-feminist literature, I am attentive to the conservative notions of sexuality deployed in the political and social fields to articulate the problems for boys and the strategies for their overcoming. I argue that a critical deconstructionist approach to sexual relations is crucial for addressing the needs of boys. I conclude by suggesting an interpretive lens of neoliberal economics and discourses of sexuality are essential for addressing the current conservative polemic of boy/male disadvantage, arguing that these conservative discourses powerfully shape human subjectivity, education and schooling, and their deployment in the boys' debate represents a strengthening of conservative tendencies in individuals' lives and social relations. The literature review powerfully establishes the influence of conservative forces on education and society presently and their shaping of human subjectivity.

The methodology chapter that follows the literature review argues that a poststructuralist orientation is particularly appropriate for critiquing social relations and challenging the deterministic ethic that often pervades liberal and conservative knowledges. A poststructuralist orientation destabilises the foundations of western epistemology by critiquing the liberal humanist concepts of reality, truth, knowledge and the subject and is particularly useful for analysing the constitution of social relations through signifying practices. This inquiry, for example, assumes reality and truth is an effect of the production of knowledge and therefore truth claims of the conservative tendency are manufactured through politics and power. The signifier/signified disjunction that characterises poststructuralist methodologies emphasises the struggle over meaning of the

world and subsequently, these theoretical tools are useful for creating spaces beyond the tolerance of the dominant culture by seizing the potential for ‘things’ to be otherwise, placed into a different semiotic flow. For example, the meaning of being a boy presupposes all that is written about boys’ education yet one’s beliefs regarding the male body and ‘boy’ is highly contingent on the knowledges available in the culture. Subsequently, the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity is highlighted because knowledge provides the available modalities of being and becoming. This inquiry is attentive to the discourses that subjectify bodies as particular kinds, in particular, the sexual subject and the often silenced competitive individual subject. I utilise a poststructural theory of discourse, subjectivity, sexual difference and the body to critique the conservative discourses’ constitution of certain modes of being/becoming, allowing me to argue that conservative discourses of sexuality and economic neoliberalism traversing the boys’ debate are based on problematic assumptions which ultimately narrow and restrict human being and becoming by harnessing the energies of bodies within established networks of power.

The meaning of sexual difference is central to the boys’ debate, informing what is said and written by academics, politicians, the media and parents. I argue in the methodology chapter that thinking the debate and the participants’ responses through a corporeal feminist theory of sexual difference emphasises the limitations of the conservative notions of sexuality. While essentialist notions resonate more powerfully in the community, especially as conservative tendencies capture social and economic relations, these tend to be restrictive because they define the differences between males and females in opposition to each other and posit the capacities of one’s bodies as a result of one’s sex, whether these are produced through natural hormonal, chemical, genetic or

physiological causes. Interestingly, all of the participants in the study have a multi-faceted view of sexual subjectivity, yet they mobilise various discourses around a core yet labile notion of masculinity and femininity; even notions of gender as fluid coalesce around a certain ‘natural’ difference. I do not disavow sexual difference or the different body morphologies of males and females, which influence one’s relation to the world and self (Grosz, 1994). On the contrary, I argue body morphologies are diverse yet they are not necessarily deterministic of one’s relations, capacities or potential. Therefore, while essentialist perspectives reinscribe binary sexual norms by reference to an innate substance, this inquiry acknowledges that cultural and bodily practices produce the fiction of sex, and that bodies possess a power and potential to transcend the cultural boundaries erected around sexed bodies. If essentialist accounts largely disregard the cultural production of subjectivity, this inquiry highlights the body’s adaptability and the diversity of differences within all humans, opening the potential and possibilities available to the female and male body: “... the most significant point here is the wide variety amongst men and women, which should focus attention on their potential for variability rather than the reductionist search for a single dominant form” (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, 44).

Drawing upon corporeal feminist theorizing, the body is pivotal to my discussion of sexual difference and the education of boys because knowledge and power seize hold of the body. The inscription of discourses of sexuality on bodies signifies an “interweaving of genetic and environmental factors” (Grosz, 1994, 142), which determine the materiality of the body and its deployment. These discourses are potentially restrictive, naturalising the form and capacities of the sexed body through regulatory mechanisms. The history of humankind, however, has shown that the limits of a body’s capacity and

potential are not determined in advance and evolutionarily, sexual difference reveals itself to be a potential beyond our sexual binary (Grosz, 2004). While the meaning of maleness and femaleness are struggled over in the public and policy formulations of the ‘problem’ and its ‘solutions’ and continues to be in this thesis, the body is the ever-important site for such cultural inscription, and the potential for their overcoming. I argue the discursive authority of the attributes of hegemonic masculinity and those capacities traditionally associated with the male body marginalises alternative bodily styles and capacities, including the capacities of the female body (Gatens, 1996). This comes into critical focus in this thesis.

These poststructural concepts are applied to the responses of five pre-service teachers I interviewed, which are provided in chapter four with interpretive commentary. The pre-service teachers are a unique group as they come to the field of education with presuppositions regarding the education of boys informed largely (not totally) by the feminist backlash and the moral panic of boys’ education, and they are in a position where universities can intervene in their education of schooling before they qualify as teachers. Developing a threshold knowledge of the social construction of sexuality, especially in teacher education, has been identified as crucial for the development of effective practices for teaching boys and girls (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003; Kalmbach Phillips, 2002), and with limited teaching experience, understanding what the pre-service teachers bring to their learning experiences as a result of these powerful conservative forces is relevant for this intervention. Significant research, for example, has established that teachers’ perception of the boys’ debate together with their gender stereotypes influence their perception of student behaviour and achievement, constructing male students as underachieving and female students as achieving, rendering invisible



female underachievement (Jones & Myhill, 2004a). Moreover, failure to interrogate the social construction of the sexual binary reinforces restrictive masculine and feminine subjectivities and subsequently the misogyny and homophobia through which hegemonic masculinity is constituted and policed, reinscribing relations of domination and subordination that negatively impact on many students' experiences of schooling. Therefore, addressing the problematic opinions and practices of these soon-to-be-teachers informed by the boys' education debate is integral to improving the schooling experience and achievement of boys and girls, signalling possible interventions and direction for further research.

The final chapter is a discussion and conclusion, drawing together the literature review and deploying the strategies and theories outlined to analyse the participants' perspectives on the education of boys. I illustrate how the boys' debate is a production of political, economic and social forces and these forces are particularly conservative in character, with participants enacting a range of discourses (sometimes conflicting) to make sense of boys' education with some of these discourses 'plugging' into the 'conservative machine'. I argue that those discourses associated with conservative moral, social and political tendencies align in particular ways to generate problematic assumptions, beliefs and practices of the social world that feed into established networks of power that further extend the territory of conservative tendencies. I also argue that essentialist notions of sexual difference dominate discussion of boys' education and these give rise to a 'conflicting roles discourse' that informs a recuperative masculinity politics and feminist backlash. I argue the social transformation effected by neoliberal capitalism is largely silenced when discussing boys and education and this allows participants to largely 'blame' feminism for the transformation of labour markets, work patterns, family

relationships and sexual subjectivities, silencing its powerful influence. In fact, I contend personal insecurity and anxiety generated by neoliberal social and economic transformation have proliferated conservative discourses of sexuality, producing a defence of rigid sexual boundaries that proscribe the potential of male and female bodies by capturing their 'becoming'. To this extent, I argue that conservative discourses of sexual difference are coextensive with the aims of neoliberal capitalism. The responses illustrate the need for teacher education courses to address broadening notions of sexuality, develop understanding of the powerful influence of neoliberal capitalism and to position the body pivotally in analysis of educational subjectivities. The literature review in the next chapter establishes the context for this research.

## 2

### Literature review

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This chapter provides an overview of the significant propositions in the boys' debate. It will outline the broad cultural, economic and political machinations framing the conceptualising of education and achievement and precipitating the 'moral panic' of boys' education as one articulation of a recuperative masculinity politics. While the populist discourse constitutes boys as educationally disadvantaged, I elucidate the research that reveals a complex picture of achievement, failure and performance. In addition, the intersection of boys, schooling and masculinities occupy much of the literature on boys and education and I will cover some of the major works that comprise this and conclude with possible future directions for sex and education.

Neoliberal capitalism influences the social, political and economic context for the development of the boys' debate and a critical engagement with its operations will provide the tools for understanding its effects. Capitalism operates as an open, disorganised, consumer-oriented system whose proliferation is wrought through the manufacture of a specific mode of subjectivity: the competitive individual (Peters, 1996). The competitive individual is a virtual effect of political and economic discourse and practice that assume individuals as 'rational utility-maximisers' directed towards self-interest and the fount of knowledge, action and moral authority, imbued with consumer choice and varying degrees of communitarian disregard (Peters, 1996). Hamilton and Denniss (2005) argue neoliberal economic market reform has 'infected' people with the fiction of higher income and consumption as a route to happiness and social status, subsequently resulting in over-consumption in Western society, with the high price being

increased personal debt, disconnection from others including family, higher rates of mental illness and environmental damage. This market-driven form of individuality is the means for capitalist power to seize hold of bodies, controlling their distribution and use, harnessing their creative potential and coding their desires within capitalist logic.

Traditionally private concerns such as child-care, and even one's body and its desires are in the public domain, commodified by capitalism, reflecting capitalism's reduction of all social relations to commodity relations (Olkowski, 1999). While individuality resonates with the dominant neoliberal discourse of freedom, this mode of subjectivity is a production of power that proliferates the reach of capitalism and those knowledges that take the individual as its unit of measurement while regulating them at arm's length (Rose, 1996). This neoliberal governmentality is characterised by entrepreneurial, responsible individuals whose conduct is directed towards various notions of 'self-fulfilment' through multiple and molecular regulatory practices (Rose, 1996).

Importantly, neoliberalism might be seen as a part of the conservative assemblage as it shares with conservatism the desire to lead supposedly autonomous individuals into responsible conduct defined through a concept of 'citizenry' in alliance with the institutions of the family and market (Dean, 1999). This subjectivity underlies the proliferation of the free market and consumer culture, the restructuring of the public sector including education, the transformation of equity discourses, the ascendancy of multinational company influence and the control of bodies.

Neoliberal economic discourses (our modern mode of capitalism) and conservative moralism represent a political and social assemblage of disparate groups such as populist-authoritarians, neo-liberals, managerialists and neo-conservatives (Apple, 2001). The 'Right' in the United States have captured the 'signifying economy', appropriating the

language and discourses of liberals and mobilising the free-market principle of choice within conservative moral tendencies. The 'Right' eschew critical sociology by powerfully mobilising 'commonsense' to legitimate the retraditionalising of sexual relations and the family structure, and most importantly, the individual as an *a priori* political category (Apple, 2001). The growth of neoliberal, marketist discourse in education in the United States reflects the education reform agenda of the 1980s in the United Kingdom with a comparable emphasis on choice, competition and modernization, which paradoxically undermined traditional conservative social ideologies (Arnot et al., 1992). The restructuring of education by the marketist discourse of choice, outcomes and performance, regulated through standardised testing, managerialism and performance management reflects the state's increasing investment in education for the generation of national wealth within the context of global competition (Ball, 1998; Peters, 1996; Sharp, 1998).

The changing global economy has transformed education, the labour markets and traditional gender relations, producing greater individual competitiveness and insecurity. Changes in the global economy, including the demand for human resources, have altered the gender order in education as the economy has produced greater access to a broadened curriculum for many girls and boys (Arnot, 2002; Sharp, 1998). Middleclass females have been particularly active in seizing these opportunities because education is needed to sustain their class position within the competitive economy (Arnot, 2002; Sharp, 1998). Changing labour markets also require students to remain at school longer, disadvantaging working class males whose previous transition from school to the traditional masculine trades has become less certain (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Moreover, changing economies towards informational and service industries have

disrupted traditional paths, particularly working class and middleclass males whose changing patterns of employment are producing greater competitiveness and in terms of the middleclass, creating a defensiveness mitigating against principles of equality in education (Ball, 1998).

The economic transformation of education is reconstituting teacher subjectivities. In a culture of performance and outcomes, the ‘effective teacher’ is measured against outcomes, performance managed, regulated through policy and protocols, and manages increasing loads of administrative tasks while their students’ performance increasingly become a measure of the teachers’ competency. Accordingly, educational reform is not simply restructuring educational organizations but a mechanism for reforming teachers, producing new types of teachers, enterprising neoliberal professionals through a “new management panopticism” (Ball, 2003, 219). Within the current new managerialist culture, teachers’ relationship to their work is reconfigured with concerns for performance and effectivity: “The increases in effort and time spent on core tasks are offset by increases in effort and time devoted to accounting for task work or erecting monitoring systems, collecting performance data and attending to the management of institutional ‘impressions’” (Ball, 2003, 221). Consequently, neoliberal economic regimes increasingly reterritorialise teachers’ conception of teaching, learning, equity and social justice (Hatton & Grundy, 1995; Mahoney, 2003). Pertinently, within these profound influences individual teachers may resist the organization of their energies and forces into established networks of power of managerialist regimes that regulate the ‘effective teacher’ (Honan, 2004).

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## Neoliberalism and equity

The competitive, free-market culture severely proscribes appropriating education within a social reform agenda (Sharp, 1998). The commodification of education through developing education markets changes the internal management of schools by using corporatist regimes of performance management and evaluation directed towards efficiency and effectivity, while emphasising the importance of public image and marketing in response to the demands of the market place (Ball, 1998; Ball, 2003). Imposing a marketist logic on education, neoliberalism aims to improve performance and efficiency in education through choice and competition. However, neoliberalism is inimical to equality because markets value comparable differences and not a school's equitable provision or equality of outcomes for all students (Hayes & Lingard, 2003). Despite faith by conservatives in the equalising potential of the free market, economic prosperity has previously bestowed economic and social rewards for the middle classes, signifying its incompatibility with equality (Sharp, 1998). In addition, neoliberalism's presumption of the competitive individual subject constrains addressing gender equity issues in terms of social relations, and structural and group disadvantage (Arnot, 2002; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). In the United Kingdom and United States, the 'effective schools' discourse decontextualises schooling by presuming equal investment in education by students while the re-emergence of the individual deficit subject marginalises discussion of group disadvantage (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The wide-ranging impact of neoliberalism on education is concomitant with a conservative social reform agenda, and particularly, feminist backlash. In Australia, this has occurred through structural backlash, a restructuring of policy-making and educational systems by entrepreneurial masculinity in policy-making slowing

women's advancement and occupation of management positions (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). To this extent, social and economic reforms are coextensive.

The discursive positioning of boys in Australia as disadvantaged in the Gender Equity Framework (MCEETY, 1997) represents a compromise of competing discourses and interests. Although research advocates a 'which boys, which girls?' approach to delineate disadvantage (Collins et al., 2000), the political and public power of the 'boys' lobby', along with neoliberal restructuring and downsizing of the state and other policy decisions that compromised previous feminist gains, 'femocrats' were placed on the defensive, having to resist incursions of recuperative masculinity politics (Lingard, 2003).

Subsequently, whereas previous policy for girls recognised the structural inequalities that women occupied within social relations, the new policy presumes equality between the sexes, silencing the historical and cultural context that produce differential relations to power, resources and discourses, along with the interrogation of dominant masculinity and sex-based harassment that maintain these differences (Ailwood, 2003; Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). In fact, the Gender Equity Framework appropriates feminist discourse of gender equity in conservative ways, a powerful strategy of realigning equity and social justice discourse around conservative social and concomitantly economic interests (Apple, 2001; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Sharp, 1994). Presupposing a neoliberal enterprising individual generally unencumbered by social relations, girls and boys are framed as equal victims with different needs in the policy, which subsequently weakens the objective of equality by taking a non-relational view of the sexes and essentialising the sexual binary (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). This arguably represents neoliberal incursions in educational policy making, which are aligned with conservative social agendas that circumscribe subject positions and free exercise of will. Within the current



economic and social context, state social disinvestment and uncertainty created by neoliberal capitalism, means “gender equity (for women) can often be seen as a luxury” (Lingard & Douglas, 1999, 5). Interestingly, Hayes (2003) suggests the economy’s demands for human resources have arguably produced the biggest shift in boy and girl subjectivities in educational policy more so than equity policies.

Previous feminist efforts to address female achievement share parallels with the current boys’ debate. Liberal feminist notions of equity were informed by a discourse of opportunity and access while discourses of boys’ disadvantage emerged from those same spaces that feminists created for addressing female underachievement (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). These previous reform agendas conceptualised failure in terms of poor female success in traditionally male subjects such as mathematics and science areas, however these failed to problematise the definition of success or finely disaggregate patterns of failure. Subsequently, for many schools gender reform signifies a preoccupation with subject selection within a liberal discourse of the individual, access and choice (Kenway et al., 1997). Moreover, liberal humanist theories that framed those approaches to subjectivity and subjectivation through socialization tend to silence the complex knowledge/power relations through which educational subjectivity is produced (Hayes, 2003; Tsolidis, 1996). Without such analysis debates about boys and girls perpetuate the tendency to homogenize boys and girls without recognition of differences within the group as well as lead to strategies based on changed gender expectations and consciousness without interrogation of these power/knowledge relations (Skelton, 2001).

Subsequently, the current debate homogenises boys. It relies on sex role theory in their encouragement of male role models, and uses stereotypical assumptions to justify a ‘boy-

friendly' curriculum, rationalised by the putative success of females in 'improving' their academic performance in mathematics and sciences. Accordingly, Kenway astutely observes "the discourse of the under-achieving, disadvantaged boy was able to gain a stranglehold on gender reform precisely because of the dominant gender reform discourse on success for girls" (Kenway et al., 1997, 62). While later policies directed at females emphasised a 'which girls?' approach to delineating failure, producing positive school environments, improved teacher pedagogies and interrogation of how complex social contexts impact on girls (Yates, 1993), these directions are undervalued in the populist discourses of boys' education.

Why has boys' achievement become an object of concern? What has produced and fuelled the 'moral panic'? While I have described the political, cultural and economic context for the debate, there are a variety of explanations for its emergence. The release of a number of media reports, films and books on men and masculinity, the 'Backlash Blockbusters' have fuelled concern for boys and prevaricate that males are victims of a feminist world, thereby abnegating responsibility for current social configurations (Mills, 2003). While there is potential for disruption of masculinity and sexual relations in these texts which have subsequently 'given men a gender' (Mills, 2003), it should be noted that concern for male achievement is hardly a new phenomena, evident since the advent of the public school system (Cohen, 1998). In fact, Cohen's (1998) historical analysis reveals that notions of hegemonic masculinity have influenced people to think the curriculum and process of learning and achieving are counter to boys' natural proclivities and legitimated boys' under-performance in traditionally feminine subjects such as languages. Moreover, boys have been protected from public scrutiny because of a belief in their 'natural potential'; however, within the context of feminist backlash and transformed economies

their failure and achievement have become a focus. While there was justification for consideration of male failure during the reform agenda for girls, this was not seen as a concern, however it would be misguided to assume this was ignorance or deliberate (Yates, 1997). Instead, boys' behaviour and relationship to school was seen as natural and healthy and their potential in school had never been questioned (Walkerdine, 1989). The stereotypically active, challenging behaviour of males has been constructed as a positive for learning, while the perceived stereotype of the passive, compliant behaviour of females has been considered a problem, with boys considered to have intrinsic potential, while female success was a result of diligence. Concern for boys' achievement has been precipitated by performance driven educational reform (Skelton, 2001) while others have noted the attention toward boys when it appeared girls outperformed in top marks (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Yates, 1997) or in the traditionally male domains of maths and physical sciences (Cohen, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

There is a range of discourses that constitute the boys' debate (Epstein et al., 1998). There are the 'Poor Boys' discourse which constitutes boys as father-less victims of feminism which has produced a privileged focus on the needs of girls; 'Failing Schools, Failing Boys' discourse which constitute boys as victims of ineffective schools; and 'Boys will be boys' discourse where conventional modes of being a male are not valued (Epstein et al., 1998). A discourse analysis of those opposed to a feminist agenda commonly characterise boys as discriminated against, and use a mix of free choice, biological determinism and the transformation of the heterosexual family structure to attack emerging sexual relations, which subsequently complicate efforts towards equality (Kenway, 1995). Constituting males as victims of feminism produces the 'competing victims syndrome', creating a wedge between the two sexes, marginalizing consideration

of the heterogeneity within the two groups. This discourse usually include statistics on male suicide rates, suspension rates in school, standardized literacy test marks, tertiary entrance scores and female success in exams and maths and science to argue for male underachievement (House of Representatives, 2001). Furthermore, the discourse of the underachieving boy is characterised by its 'presumptive equality': that women and girls have achieved equality and that men and boys are equally but differently disadvantaged (Foster et al., 2001). Unfortunately, these discourses of boys' disadvantage potentially proscribe discussion of girls' disadvantage (Hayes, 2003).

A nuanced analysis of the research data on achievement in Australia reveals boys are not as a group disadvantaged as suggested in the media and politics (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Other factors impact on the performance of students more significantly such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, 'race' and sexuality (Collins et al., 2000; Connell, 2003). Working class boys and working class girls are equally disadvantaged (Lingard & Douglas, 1999) while girls rely on education more than boys for future success (Collins et al., 2000). Gender difference in performance decreases the higher one goes up the socio-economic scale and increases as one goes down and in literacy testing males from lower socio-economic groups achieve below their male counterparts from higher socio-economic groups, yet males from higher socio-economic groups outperform working class girls (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). It should also be noted that girls from higher-socio economic groups perform well in maths and sciences but girls are less likely to be studying these and therefore, female success is exaggerated and misrepresented (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kenway et al., 1997). These conservative discourses of male disadvantage often normalise socio-economic differences, silencing the effects of economic change. Perhaps redefining the terms of the debate will produce a more just

perspective: is educational disadvantage measured by poor performance in learning areas or is it being unable to convert schooling into productive training, education or work? (Collins et al., 2000; Yates, 1997).

While we need to be cautious about using the term ‘the Right’ to designate what is a disparate group of interests, ‘the Right’ have been successful in framing the needs of boys through mobilizing common-sense assumptions of gender (Martino & Berrill, 2003). University entrance scores, measures of standardized tests such as literacy have been used to dictate equity discourse (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Men’s rights see school as feminising and masculinity ‘under siege’ (Kenway, 1995) with a subsequent need for a ‘male repair agenda’ (Skelton, 2001). Boys are seen as unable to achieve in school because of the preponderance of female teachers, especially in primary schools and teacher pedagogies that favour girls’ natural inclinations, a variety of commonsense claims prevalent in the public discourse. A variety of measures are advocated, including a suspiciously neoliberal simplistic ‘tips of teachers’ (Martino & Berrill, 2003), providing boys with more hands on, active learning experiences, more masculine choices of texts and more male teachers/father figures (Biddulph, 1994; House of Representatives, 2000). Unfortunately, the boys versus girls logic means high achieving girls are compared to low achieving boys and therefore rationalising calls for special programmes for boys as a group, which militate against interrogating the complex picture of achievement, the significance of the gender order or how gender relations are produced (Kenway et al., 1997; Mahoney, 1998). Pro-feminist/feminists are highly critical of the men’s rights and conservative groups’ lack of social analysis, problematic assumptions and gender-normative and sometimes gender-blind strategies. Attempts to constitute boys as victims of feminism situate it squarely in the domain of feminist backlash (Kenway, 1997; Yates,

1997). Moreover, conservative reterritorializing of our understanding of injustice, disadvantage and inequality with the presumption that males and females are equally disadvantaged in society and schooling, reveals the political and volatile potential of the terms of the debate. As well, its alliance with neoliberal discourses reduces the complex social relations of teaching and schooling to technical processes free from its context for the production of individuals who are generally 'all the same'.

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## Masculinity and schooling

The strategies of conservative discourses are directed towards reclaiming boyhood masculinity which schooling supposedly suppresses (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mills, 2001a). These strategies presume the existence of an essential, natural, 'deep masculinity' that feminism and modern society prevent boys from accessing, consequently producing frustration and violence, anger, aggression, classroom disruption and anti-authority attitudes. The prominence of estranged fathers and single-mother families exacerbate male underachievement and poor behaviour, requiring amelioration through male role models (Biddulph, 1994; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). However, such a theory of sex role socialisation is inadequate for explaining the complex social construction of masculinity (Connell, 2003; Skelton, 2001). Instead of a natural masculinity or femininity residing in male and female bodies respectively, poststructuralism approaches gender as performative, discursively constructed through the available ways of being a man in ways that may appear natural, but are one in a myriad of possibilities (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Weedon, 1987). These are produced through relations of power, which proscribe certain possibilities and legitimate others.

A large body of research has focussed on the discursive construction of masculinity in the lives of boys and men and how these interact with other social relations to produce positions of domination and subordination (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Much of the pro-feminist literature draws upon the need to interrogate hegemonic masculinity using deconstructionist approaches that critique the dichotomous construction of gender (Beckett, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). This theoretical tendency has been integral to counter the strategies of the ‘What about the boys?’ discourse that insist on a boy-friendly curriculum and more male teachers, two strategies particularly prevalent in Australia (House of Representatives, 2002).

Rather than being feminised, sexualised discourses associated with management, sport, knowledge, assessment methods and relationships with others (Kenway, 1995) within the school, structure hegemonic sexual relations (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). In fact, school organizations reinforce the gender order through its forms of discipline, positions of authority, organization of curriculum and students’ time (Arnot et al., 1992; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Many school cultures value sports and sporting achievement over academic and creative achievements and subsequently produce cultures of hegemonic masculinity and social hierarchies heavily based on gender/sex (Department of Science & Training, 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Unfortunately, powerful regimes of truth, particularly models of individualist developmental psychology, reinforce gender-normativity and circumscribe sociological approaches to gender in education by rendering the classroom asocial and apolitical (MacNaughton, 2000). Critical sociology, however, deconstructs the masculine/feminine binary, exposing the production of hierarchies of multiple masculinities (Connell, 1995).

Mac An Ghail's (1994) case study of a state school in the United Kingdom found three forms of masculinities produced through the school structures and curriculum: the macho lads, new enterprises and academic achievers. The weft and weaving of a changing national economy with compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny and homophobia were discernibly the constitutive elements of becoming a man.

The 'natural behaviour' of boys represented in populist discourses is problematised by the pro-feminist/feminist literature. Name-calling, sexism, physical harassment and domination of others represent the masculinizing practices of boys who draw upon the broader social relations of power that imbue such practices with status (Kenway et al., 1997; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003; Salisbury and Jackson, 1996). Normative heterosexual masculinities are constituted through homophobia and misogyny, while homophobia is deployed to police the acceptable limits of adolescent masculinities (Epstein, 2001; Martino, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Many boys, working-class and middle-class, value traditionally masculine pursuits such as sport and deride creative tasks and literacy as feminine (Martino, 2001). Martino (1999) uses a Foucauldian panopticonic diagram of disciplinary power to analyse the subjectivation of adolescent masculinities, arguing that regimes of normalising truths of sexuality produce self-regulation through technologies of the self. While the behaviours of boys intersect with other relations of power, such as class, race and ethnicity, to produce local inflections of masculinity, their power is indebted to the status, force and potency wielded by hegemonic masculinity in broader social relations.

The construction of boys as victims of the feminisation of schooling absolves boys and men of responsibility to boys' underachievement, in particular, the incommensurability of



attributes of hegemonic masculinity with the values of the schooling system. Academic success and compliance to authority often signify feminine attributes for boys and therefore, their deployment of anti-academic and anti-authority attitudes run counter to academic achievement, keeping boys from succeeding (Foster et al., 2001). In fact, in populist discourse boys' disengagement, disruption and anti-school attitude signifies irrelevance of schooling to boys' lives rather than the production of masculine subjectivity (House of Representatives, 2002). Interestingly, negative attitudes to school are common amongst girls from the lower socio-economic background, however, it has been read as a specifically boy issue (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). It appears a teacher's normative construction of sexual difference combined with the public scrutiny on the underachieving boy influences their perceptions of the classroom, student behaviour and achievement (Jones & Myhill, 2004b). The stereotype of the loud and disruptive boy and the quiet and compliant girl result in teachers' construction of boys as underachieving while the girls are perceived as ideal and achieving students, which unfortunately renders invisible girls' underachievement. Pertinently, the typical attribute of an underachiever in the classroom is simply quiet disengagement (Jones & Myhill, 2004b). It appears to be the case that the boisterous and disruptive behaviour of boys renders them more visible, detrimentally affecting addressing the needs of girls (Arnot, 2002).

More male teachers and single sex classes are two strategies of conservative discourses aimed at re-masculinizing schooling and boys (House of Representatives, 2002). While it is important for children to have a range of people in their lives, the type of male teachers proposed is unproblematised. If regimes of sexuality normalise a binarized construction of gender, then the exclusion of the feminine in hegemonic constructions of masculinity

signifies a misogynistic tendency and valorizing of physical strength, competition and domination. If these characteristics of masculinity are culturally pervasive, then close attention should be paid to the type of males because male teachers who demonstrate sexist behaviour would certainly not make good role models (Skelton, 2001; Martino & Frank, 2006). In fact, homosociality is more likely to reproduce sexism instead of interrogation of the gender order and problematic forms of masculinity (Mills, 2000, 2001a; Francis, 2000). Desire for more male teachers problematically assumes the feminisation of schooling, however, along with the sexualised schooling processes mentioned above, the deployment of hegemonic modes of masculinity in bodily deployment and pedagogy of male teachers in response to normalizing judgments of students suggests that schooling is infused with hegemonic masculinity (Epstein, 1998; Francis, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Martino & Frank, 2006; Roulsten & Mills, 2000). Therefore, the recent argument for a boy-friendly curriculum assumes that schooling and the curriculum content are not appropriately masculine, yet this assumes a stereotypical notion of masculinity:

A research project apparently concluded that in foreign language learning boys are put off by being required to talk about topics that are completely ‘alien’ to them. Since these alien topics are identified as ‘shopping, friends and family’ it seems reasonable to conclude that the research was intergalactic (Mahoney, 2003, 78-79).

Gendered assumptions of male interests, personality and disposition, learning styles and strengths inform the above strategies including single-sex classes, however, they do not attend to the diversity within the category ‘boys’. Consequently, the regimes of sexuality

informing conservative strategies in schools potentially marginalise those boys and girls who do not occupy privileged positions in the social hierarchy.

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## Conclusion

This chapter has articulated aspects of the social, political and historical context of the current boys' debate. While there appear to be two opposing positions on the issue, a conservative and feminist, the debate is far more complex than those two categories suggest. The men's rights movement is not a homogenous organization coalesced along similar interests; there are varying degrees and positions on sexual difference and feminism, from defending the patriarchal order and rigidifying traditional gender relations to the critique of hegemonic sexual relations, yet whose arguments assume problematic propositions. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the growth of the anti-feminist neo-conservative movement in the United States is an assemblage of complementary and competing interest groups, revealing the amorphous character of the conservative social movements. Attempts to characterise this movement may lend itself to a new political ontology as that outlined by Deleuze (May, 2005), yet for the purpose of this research, I have simply attempted to emphasize the power of hegemonic neoliberal mode of capitalism in advanced capitalist societies, with its provisional discursive alliances, as a force transforming education and educational subjectivities, producing material effects in the work of teachers and the performance of students.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) argument that capitalism has the power to code all territories with its own logic, including education, bodies and subjectivities is particularly powerful. The capture of education by neoliberal capitalism and governmentality has

produced numerous effects: the nomenclature of markets, performance, outcomes, management, choice, accountability and the associated regulative policies, protocols and administrative tasks, have disciplined the teacher. Consequently, gender is increasingly less an issue of group disadvantage but individual will and individual choice; and equity is no longer a goal of the teacher. Furthermore, economic transformations have altered patterns of work for women and men; men's unfulfilled expectation of power and status has produced feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty and oppression among some. One important consideration should be how transforming economies are impeding men's/boys' path of attaining status and power through work, not to placate men's sense of entitlement but to address the interaction of gender and economics, including how the male body is deployed to fashion privileged hyper-masculine styles that give purchase to social status through aggression and domination outside of the work realm (Arnot, 2002; Connell, 1997; Mac An Ghail, 1994). More importantly, this is not a preserve for males because any body has the potential to develop those potent body alignments and capacities usually associated with hegemonic masculinity, and which enhance the individual's will to power in ways that oppress others.

Conservative discourses of sexual difference attribute bodily expression to an internal substance which strengthens the restrictive binarised system of sexual difference by catering to what is perceived as their natural capacities, disregarding expanding boys' range of abilities and capacities. The pro-feminist/feminist literature advocates the critical deconstruction of masculinity and femininity and these regimes of sexuality that produce sex/gender as a natural expression of one's body. The importance of deconstructing the sexual binary and developing a threshold knowledge of gender as social construction (Martino et al., 2006) is evident in the fact that as economic, family and sexual relations

shifted, boys have generally strengthened sexual boundaries which may severely disadvantage some males and females (Arnot, 2002). Accordingly, the social relations that marginalise female subjectivities in the formation of masculine subjectivity through a binary logic of sexuality must be interrogated (Martino, 1999). Consideration of the body and its practices must move the discussion beyond ideologies and consciousness that characterise some feminist writing and, moreover, such research might delineate the body as a power and virtual potential in a process of becoming in relation to other bodies. Finally, teacher professional development and teacher education are two suitable fields for this interrogation, which should pay attention to the masculinizing forces of schooling. This is particularly pertinent within the current political and economic environment where professional cultures may undermine efforts to address these problems, either because the reformation of teachers and their work constrains this, or because students are constructed as 'individuals' with individual needs, or because questions of equity and gender become unintelligible.

### 3

## Thinking about [the] research

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In this chapter I expatiate and clarify the process of inquiry, including the choices made in investigating the field and elaboration of the theoretical underpinnings that guide the collection of data and its analysis. Beginning with a brief consideration of the epistemological implications of using feminist poststructuralism in qualitative research, I then consider the specific concepts and tools of feminist poststructuralism for approaching this research and the interpretation of the data, concluding with a discussion on the important question of ontology.

Qualitative research using poststructural theory challenges the epistemological and ontological foundations of positivist research (Lather, 1991; St Pierre, 2000). Negating the correspondence theory of reality (Patton, 2002), poststructuralists question the assumption of an external and neutral reality from which knowledge is gained. Instead, reality is entangled in cultural processes inextricable from its institutions and subjectivity, giving rise to a multitudinous reality. This anti-foundationalism is particularly important for conducting research because if reality is contingent on historical, social and political relations, then research is a process of knowledge production delimited by these relations. Social researchers' claim to objectivity overlook the power relations which structure the social and, therefore, the individual's assumptions of the social world may be reflected in the researcher's methods, operational categories, data analysis or findings. This has been particularly important for poststructural feminists who critique 'universal' knowledge production as 'malestream' because it reflects the perspectives of male subject positions that marginalise groups without purchase to the legitimated processes of knowledge

production (Gross et al., 1986). Subsequently, poststructural feminist researchers eschew liberal humanist principles by paying close attention to the relations of power, knowledge and practices that constitute the social field and subjectification. Moreover, poststructural feminists examine the structuring of social relations through language and its naming, classifying and categorising of the world.

These theoretical underpinnings have significant implications for this inquiry. I acknowledge this research produces certain knowledge structured by knowledge/power relations which determine the legitimacy of asking certain question, deploying certain methods to produce certain truths. I do not claim to discover any universal truths because the methodological choices define and assess the world through discourse and discursive practices that are permeated with assumptions about the social world (Britzman, 2000; Lather, 1991). Therefore, knowledge production and truth claims of any inquiry are imbued with relations of power and linked to particular ways of knowing and seeing the world (Lather, 1991; Paecheter, 1996). One may ask, what use is research if it does not speak to the truth of the social world? How do you judge one's research if all methods are the politically loaded weapons I have portrayed them? This chapter aims to answer these questions.

Another important implication of poststructuralism is the challenge to essentialism. While I have acknowledged that reality and individuals are produced through knowledge which are historically contingent, this means the world is not a fixed state of affairs open only to description. The taken-for-granted structures, meanings and processes of the world are denaturalised because they are the historically contingent production of power relations; thus, embracing the constructive potential of the culture means embracing the

potential for things to be otherwise, particularly important for feminist researchers (Coffey & Delamont, 2000). Moreover, interrogation of cultural processes and structures is a critical practice that examines the operations of power, in particular, its production of people's thought, desires and actions, which is a corollary to examining asymmetrical relations to power. Rather than concern for the individual consciousness or unconscious of people like the research participants, attention is paid to the knowledges which structure the individual's thoughts and the objects of which they speak. The individual subject does not possess a coherent identity that is the truth of that person, but a mode of being, and becoming, constituted through grids of knowledge/power in often contradictory ways (Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1997).

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## The participants

As pre-service teachers are studying education and are entering the teaching field, they were selected as an important group to offer their perspective on the topical issue of boys' education. It is assumed that pre-service teachers' thoughts on boys' education may be integral to their pedagogical approach to male and female students. In addition, teacher education courses have an important interventionist role in providing informed research so that pre-service teachers can make informed decisions regarding gender and education. This research, therefore, may be useful for considering problematic commonsense knowledge and assumptions that exist in the pre-service teacher population and directions for possible future research in this field.

The research aimed to establish how pre-service teachers' perspectives on boys and education resonated with the problematic conservative discourses prevalent in the public



and political spheres. The participants were selected from a Western Australian university and who were studying for a degree or diploma in primary or secondary education. During a lecture for a compulsory education unit, potential participants were asked to nominate themselves for a 30-45 minute taped interview with the researcher. The compulsory lecture was attended by 80 people and was an ideal location for the selection of the participants because it presumably had a broad spectrum of people from different backgrounds and ages, not being heavily concentrated with particular opinions like an elective unit may do. Having a wide selection of opinions was suitable for the aim of the research, which was to establish the variety of ways the conservative discourses were articulated and connected. Furthermore, when requesting the participants, I did not go into much detail regarding the project content, especially as the orientation of the research was pro-feminist. The current public discourse reveals the emotional and somewhat irrational response of people to the boys' debate and feminism's putative role in boys' disadvantage and therefore I did not want people to assume there was a bias in the research design. In addition, the current feminist/pro-feminist literature suggests the need to consider boys in relation to girls, without silencing girls. Therefore, I was interested in people's perspectives on boys' education as it was an issue that had received a lot of recent attention and it was important to understand the challenges faced by boys and girls in school and how to best improve the education of these students.

Thirteen pre-service teachers responded to the request. Self-selection as a method of procuring participants has the benefit of involving pre-service teachers interested in or who have knowledge of the issue of boys' education or who had knowledge or interest in gender and education. Five of the thirteen were randomly selected to participate in the semi-structured interview, and while the five different perspectives suggest source

triangulation (Patton, 2002), their selection provides a multiplicity of perspectives from which to generate connections. This qualitative design was not intended for generalisation and therefore need not be representative of the population, however, the insights of the participants and the research findings may speak to or confirm other research and theories in the field.

The open-ended interview was structured in two halves, reflecting the dichotomous nature of the debate; what are the problems faced by boys and what strategies are effective for the teaching of boys? Within this guide, there was flexibility for the participants and myself to pursue ideas and themes as they arose, providing the opportunity for the clarification of meaning as needed. As a basis to freely explore their thoughts and feelings I believed this structure would produce thick data (Patton, 2002). Specifically, the pre-service teachers were asked about their perception of the problems faced by boys in school and what factors affect their achievement and experiences of schooling. As the research literature suggests many girls experience difficulties in school, hence participants were also asked what they felt were the major problems experienced by girls in school to gauge whether the relative absence of the question of girls in the public debate was mirrored in the participants' responses. The participants were also asked whether males and females had natural strengths and weaknesses and to what extent feminism has impacted on the achievement of males and females. As mentioned above, it was not the individual's consciousness that was important, but what knowledges they spoke and to what extent they resonated with the conservative discourses currently dominating public policy and other social relations. The question of 'extent' required an interview process that was capable of exploring the complexity of the issue.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted in the relaxed atmosphere of a café at the university the participants were studying at. Making the participants comfortable and secure through the interview location, the semi-structured interview process, a relaxed interview style and open, relaxed body language, is crucial for obtaining data that could be considered reliable.

While I am not attempting to draw causal links between events in people's lives to their views on boys' education, it is important to see people's positions as discursively situated within a complex assemblage of textual and life experiences. It is for this reason I give a very brief overview of the participants: Ben (30s) is a father of two toddlers, a male and female and is a stay at home dad after a decade of working in his father's business. He briefly discussed how he wishes to spend time with his children that his father was not able to spend with him, a position reinforced through his reading of Steve Biddulph. Positioning herself as a conflicted feminist, Janet (40s) was one of the first females to work in the mines, a job she entered after completing school and which left her first son to be raised by his father. She is now a single parent who has a 10 year-old son whose achievement at school has been declining. Likewise, Kylie (40s) has an 11 year-old son attending a Christian school and whose achievement and behaviour has been declining. She is a single parent who was working as an accountant before beginning her studies. Jackie (30s) has stepchildren and recently returned from living in England after working in the music industry. David (20s) doesn't have children, remembers his experience at school as difficult and worked as a mechanic on graduating with his secondary certificate. All the participants felt they had something to contribute to the research.

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## Useful poststructural concepts

The following section elaborates on the useful concepts of poststructuralism through which the boys' debate and the participants' contributions will be conceptualised. In particular, Foucault's work on discourse, power and subjectivity are used to pry open the perspectives of the participants to unpack the insidious operations of power which generate the production of certain knowledges and truths. Within a poststructuralist orientation whereby research is characterised as knowledge production within particular theoretical or discursive frames, a rigorous theoretical elaboration informing the production of this knowledge, including the claims made, is crucial for establishing the inquiry's credibility (Patton, 2002).

Foucault's powerful critique of the 'arborescent model' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of knowledge provides the foundation for analysing the boys' debate. Knowledge is a culturally, historically and politically situated 'event' produced through relations of power, with Foucault's term power/knowledge signifying this coextension. This represents an epistemological shift from 'Western', rationalist explanation of knowledge as a continuous progression from the past towards an enlightened future through technological and scientific advancement (Peters, 1996). For Foucault, knowledge is an instrument of power and it is the relation between the two that augment the transformation and production of knowledge and the extension and realignment of power (Grosz, 1994). The power/knowledge nexus operates through discourse, a term whose conception varies depending on its deployment in linguistic and social science domains. In this research, discourse refers to the regulated use of language (Weedon, 1987) and "the complex of... notions, categories, ways of thinking and ways of communicating that constitutes a power-infused system of knowledge" (Meutzenfeldt in Taylor, 1997, 25).

However, ‘discourse’ should not be reduced to the constraints of linguistic definitions that ignore its constitutive character. Discourse, therefore, is a specific regularity in the use of language that produces, distributes and arranges statements, objects, concepts and strategies, within historically and culturally contingent institutional, economic and social relations, creating the possibility and impossibility of what can be spoken and practiced at any given moment (Foucault, 1972). Discourse constitutes “the objects of knowledge, social subjects and forms of ‘self’, social relationships, and conceptual frameworks” (Fairclough, 1992, 39), and subsequently discourse forms “the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, 49).

In analysing the boys’ debate and the participants’ responses, it is important to consider what objects or entities of interest have been produced in the field and what conditions have allowed for such existence, such as scientific, political, institutional and cultural relations and practices. I find it useful to quote Foucault at some length to explicate how discourse is a practice of arrangement of elements within the broader social milieu that allow the production of certain statements and practices:

Discursive relations are at the limit of discourse: they offer it objects of which it can speak, or rather... they determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to deal with them, name them, analyse them, classify them, explain them, etc. These relations characterise not the language (langue) used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice (Foucault, 1972, 46).

Therefore, discourses must be thought of as an ‘event’ (Roy, 2004), an open system arranging, distributing and connecting with other discursive assemblages, whether they be institutional, semiotic, or social practices, and which then determine the possibilities of legitimate thought, speech or action by individuals whose ways of acting in the world do not necessarily spring forth from their minds so much as through their connection to discourse and discursive practices. In other words, discourses in their pervasiveness capture the molecular multiplicities of life by imposing “normative prescriptions on the proper forms and functions of things” (Gatens, 2000, 62).

The intelligibility of statements and ways of thinking can only occur within the rules of discourse, however, society is constituted through the play of competing and complementary discourses. Discourses largely construct the social field, or reality, and operate, although not exclusively, through language and the practices of institutions in society, through the play of power. It is in these relations that ‘truth’ is produced:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, 1980, 131).

Truth is not an object to be discovered but an historically contingent production through the legitimated discourses of the sciences. These discourses, which do not have unmediated access to ‘truth’, have the authority to produce knowledge and truth, which

translates into material effects; the practices and beliefs of a society that have legitimacy and value, and what can be counted as true. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) maps the discursive formation of the modern penal system from the sovereign system of spectacular punishment through economic, institutional and juridical relations and practices. This transformation towards disciplinary punishment reflected changing investments in the body by social institutions, which began the categorization, examination and regulation of bodies and their use and distribution. Normalising techniques of the dominant social science discourses produced the psychologised delinquent subject, while precipitating the legitimacy and dispersion of carceral techniques for prisoners and other groups such as students. Therefore, these discourses serve largely normalising aims by producing more detailed knowledge of those bodies as the truth of the 'human', and of particular bodies through which to govern individuals and society. In poststructural thinking, discourse is a site of critical interrogation because the 'truths' produced through discourse militate the organization of society, including its inequities. Concomitantly, as truth and normality are powerful regulatory mechanisms of the culture, they are particularly useful tools for interrogating relations of power in the production of knowledge.

As the object of my analysis centres on the issue of the education of 'boys', there are important implications from this poststructuralist critique of knowledge. Individuals come to know themselves as certain kinds of individuals through the arrangement of discourses in society, therefore, subjectivity is an effect of power. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) elaborates a 'diagram' for this modern mode of power in the Panopticon, a prison designed to produce the constant effects of power on the prisoners who are made visible, studied and subjected. No longer is power about repression,

inciting or provoking, in the case of disciplinary societies, “we should say: to allocate, to classify, to compose, to normalize” (Deleuze, 1988, 28). Power and knowledge are coextensive, taking hold of the body, its practices and desires through various regulatory methods such as measuring, examining, supervising and regulating the deployment of the body, its production of desire and pleasure through the abovementioned ‘regimes of truth’. Foucault (1977) writes of a micro-physics of power as the minute techniques controlling the energies and use of bodies in a Deleuzian nomenclature of ‘machines’:

“Over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, fastening them to one another. It constitutes a body-weapon, body-tool, body-machine complex...” (153), and: “Discipline is [an art of] composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine... the body is constituted as a part of a multi-segmented machine...” (164). Knowledge/power offers subject-positions and subject-functions (Foucault, 1991) through which to harness the energies and force of bodies, producing the ‘truth’ of bodies and identities through powerful normalising truths and technologies of the self. Foucault’s concept of power is radical: it is neither repressive nor possessed by people from above; instead, it produces subjectivity and is exercised as a relation of force between people. Furthermore, it is circulated in capillary form: “the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault, 1980, 39). Power through discourse assembles subjectivity, an assemblage of non-human social, cultural, environmental and technological machinic connections with the human body through networks of power, a particularly powerful way to think differently (St Pierre, 2004), which I elaborate below in theorizing the body. These modes of subjectivity animate power/knowledge relations. As the liberal humanist framework of an *a priori*, free-willing, stable, rational and conscious individual is



inadequate in accounting for the finer operations of power, this inquiry deploys a poststructural concept of subjectivity. Shedding light on how these power/knowledge relations govern the conduct of individuals through their very formation in these relations, the study's participants and their discussion of sexual subjectivities are framed within the available discourses of sexuality and cultural practices within this specific historical and cultural moment.

Thus far I have elaborated on the poststructural concepts of discourse, truth and normality, subjectivity and power and their linkages in constituting social relations and signifying the potential of our culture. I have also emphasised three important principles of discourse that constitute the focus of my discourse analysis of the participants' responses. Firstly, I have considered the emergence of objects and how these are constrained and enabled through cultural and political relations (thus constituting what is said and thought). Secondly, I have highlighted that discourses constituting the social are far from monolithic, rather they exist through a matrix of complementary and competing knowledges, ways of thinking and doing although certain discourses are afforded legitimacy and the status of truth, which constitute the norms of our times. Finally, I have drawn attention to how these power/knowledge relations contribute to the construction of social identities, social subjects and types of self (Fairclough, 1992) and relationships between these people and thus constitute the available modes of being and becoming of individuals. Considering these above principles, it is through attention to language that my discourse analysis takes place.

This significance of language in this inquiry is twofold. As discussed earlier, language structures the way we think about the world, through categories, classifications and

connotations. However, there are many ways of describing the world because objects or things do not have a direct relation to words, there is a play between signified and signifier, a gap between language and things (St Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Consequently, language reflects power and politics, specifically, the power to name and classify the world in particular ways, which are affected by discourse. Fairclough (1992) outlines three functions of language which coexist with discourse a which provide a focus for my analysis:

The identity function relates to the ways in which social identities are set up in discourse, the relational function to how social relationships between discourse participants are enacted and negotiated, the ideational function to ways in which texts signify the world and its processes, entities and relations (Fairclough, 1992, 64).

To this extent, the participants' speech as language/text becomes the object of analysis because it reflects particular ways of knowing and seeing and being in the world, mobilising particular discourses. According to Weedon (1987) therefore, "Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle" (1987, 24). This social value of language (as social practise) also resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) collective assemblages of enunciation which give language a social value; there are no individual statements, only statements produced through connections to other statements, connected to social practices or social-technological machines; there are many voices in a voice: "... collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I draw my voice" (Deleuze

& Guattari, 1987, 84). Recognising language's historicity and fluidity and therefore, that the meanings 'attached' to the world are not immutable, the goal of discourse analysis is to draw attention to the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge, subjectivity and truth to render its objects problematic, tentative and complex (Patterson, 1997).

Language is also significant to this inquiry because it is a form of social practice, "one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other" (Fairclough, 1992, 63). Language intervenes in objects (or bodies in its broadest sense) in the world, an action incommensurable with the 'naming' of the world, which simply implies an overlay of language onto inert objects or bodies:

A text is not simply a tool or an instrument; this makes it too utilitarian, too amenable to intention, too much designed for a subject. Rather, it is explosive, dangerous, labile, with unpredictable consequences... Texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments (Grosz, 1995, 125-126).

The language-function signifies the pragmatic power of language to perform actions, reminiscent of J.L. Austin's speech act thesis. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), language does not simply communicate information but effectuates events through the implicit presuppositions inhering in language; language is a mode of becoming of subjects (Colebrook, 1999). For example, within the boys' debate there are assumptions about what being a boy means such that when someone utters the words to a child, 'You are a boy now!', the implicit presupposition of this comment produces changed behaviour in the child within the cultural norms of acceptable adolescent male behaviour thus

producing new configurations of bodies. Similarly, language is immanent with objects/bodies in the world and subsequently transforms these objects in its ordering. The instantaneous incorporeal transformation of object/bodies occurs in the expression of a judge's sentencing, whereby an accused is made a convict by the imposition of an incorporeal attribute – the expressed: 'Guilty'. Subsequently, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987):

[We] cannot say that the body or state of things is the “referent” of the sign. In expressing the noncorporeal attribute, and by that token attributing it to the body, one is not representing or referring but intervening in a way... expression or expressed are inserted into or intervene in contents, not to represent them but to anticipate them or move them back, slow them down, speed them up, separate or combine them, delimit them in a different way (1987, 86).

In terms of this research, the oft-repeated phrase, 'boys will be boys' actualises specific incorporeal transformations available to the male body within the culture, which delimits that body's possibilities and its mode of becoming, and accordingly, the participants' language must be analysed for its virtual and material effects. Significantly, this inquiry resists the seduction of searching for an authentic voice of its participants, a concept of voice commensurate with some feminist research that tends to essentialise 'woman'. Youngblood Jackson's (2003) rhizovocality, however, signifies a Deleuzian concept of voice that attends to the complexities and partiality in speech, and whereby vocality is a process of becoming in its interlinking and intensification: “In their becoming, vocalizations are not reaching for a more full, complete, coherent status; rather they are opening up territory, spreading out, and “overturning the very codes that structure

[them]... putting them to strange new use...”” (2003, 707). Rather than reinscribe a coherent consciousness to people’s speech, positing a sayer behind the said and overlooking the interior as a fold of the outside (St Pierre, 1997a, 1997b), my analysis of the participants’ responses attends to the play of discourses from which people’s voices are drawn, identifying general themes, making visible their assumptions and their linkages to other discourses and bodily and cultural practices. My thoughts and analysis are directed by the following questions: What territory is opened up through the participants’ vocalisation? What linkages and connections do these vocalisations create? What assemblages are the vocalisations drawn from and to which do they feed in their territorialisation of the social?

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## Neoliberal subjectivity

Contemporary modes of subjectivity constituted through the discourses of our current cultural moment bear significantly on the boys’ debate and the participants’ perspectives. Discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism are two of these influences and these constitute the interpretive frame of this inquiry. Below I briefly elaborate on my conception of neoliberalism and follow this with a discussion of a theory of sexual difference through which I understand the issue of boys’ education and the pre-service teachers’ responses.

As a modern mode of capitalism, neoliberal capitalism promotes free-trade and the marketisation of economic relations, the disinvestment in the state and public ownership, the flow of goods and capital across national boundaries, and the promotion of the

individual consumer with choice as *a priori*. While this list is not exhaustive, there is a shift from the welfare state of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to advanced liberal democracy of the past fifty years that values technological, social and political alignment with imperatives of economic interests. This is aligned with neoliberal modes of government, which characterises a governance of populations at arm's length, as the power of the state is putatively eschewed.

Within the field of governmentality, neoliberalism features as the modern mode of governance of individuals distinct from liberal and welfare governmentality. As the economic increasingly influences the social, transformations in regulation function with the aims of neoliberal capitalism, an economic machine reinscribing subjectivity through the principles of consumerism and enterprise. The network arrangement of power within this assemblage marks its distinction from previous centralised conceptions of state power:

“The strategies of regulation that have made up our modern experience of “power” are thus assembled into complexes that connect up forces and institutions deemed “political” with apparatuses that shape and manage individual and collective conduct in relation to norms and objectives but yet are constituted as “non-political” (Rose, 1996, 38).

These objectives are perceived as non-political because power operates through regulating the private in its molecular multiplicities; hence, everyday practices reflect the inherence of power in the lives of individuals. Ruling at arm's length, the state seeks to shape and utilize the freedom, capacities and wills of individuals through a diverse range

of mechanisms including bio-political and social technologies of governments and experts (Rose, 1996). This constitutes a network of power through which rule is exercised and individual conduct regulated. ‘Government of the soul’ is a term used to describe how neoliberal government constitutes a mode of subjectivity that defines the individual as responsible, enterprising and consuming, an individual whose goals and desires reflect political imperatives closely aligned with the logics of capital (Dean, 1999). This has included shaping the wills and powers of entities through the:

...implantation of particular modes of calculation into agents, the supplanting of certain norms, such as those of service and dedication, by others, such as those of competition, quality and customer demand. It has entailed the establishment of different networks of accountability and reconfigured flows of accountability and responsibility in fundamental ways (Rose, 1996, 56).

I wish to emphasise that the power of neoliberal governance is in its capacity to operate at the level of individual desires and practices, by harnessing the potential and power of bodies at the molecular level ‘covertly’. Ball (2003) and Peters (1996) have highlighted the impact of neoliberal economic and social transformations in education and the significance of outlining this mode of subjectivity is crucial for framing the discussion on the participants’ responses to equity.

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## Theory of sexual difference

I will now direct attention to the poststructural insights for feminism, in particular, corporeal feminism. Poststructural feminists have critiqued the fixed concept of male and female, challenging the gender binary and revealing the socially constructed nature of sexual difference. The question of gender or sexual difference is central to the boys' debate – the discursive constructions of sexuality inform the perspectives and policies on the issue. For this reason, I have adopted a corporeal feminist perspective of sexual difference, one that situates the body centrally to the question of sex and sexuality. Foucault demonstrates that bodies have been a major regulatory mechanism of disciplinary power over the past two hundred years. His elaboration of bio-power is central to the feminist perspective informing my approach to understanding the subject through their bodies. Below I will elaborate the theoretical insights to sexual difference that frame the analysis of the participants' responses beginning with an overview of essentialist accounts of sexual difference.

The conservative tendency in the debate posits an essentialist notion of sexual identity, a pre-given fixed essence of one's being that is defined by one's sex and which manifests in one's thoughts, behaviours, feelings, etc. Conceptually, this derives from a liberal humanist notion of subjectivity, imbued with a psychological depth generally unencumbered by social and power relations. However, there is a range of perspectives embedded in essentialism, from extreme rigid notions of innate manliness and femaleness, to less rigid yet conservative positions that recognise the social constructions built around a body's biological sex, usually reduced to a notion of expectations, but still adhere to the notion of a 'nature' that defines being a man or woman (a thing that is somewhat elusive). For some, a masculine spirit or psyche based on a mythic past explains masculine identity



while scientific discourses are often mobilised to justify sexual differences, even though biology does not find an unfettered expression free of environmental factors. The merit of using these biological, hormonal and psychological factors to explain sexual differences are unresolved and inconclusive: “It seems clear... that to see the brain structure, genes or chemistry as the cause of some overriding masculine personality type, with constraint and unalterable characteristics, is simply unfounded” (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, 43). Not least because these findings are commonly produced through an epistemology that assumes binary sexual difference in the first place.

Foucault’s work on power, knowledge and desire centres the inscriptive practices of society on the body including the production of sexuality. As mentioned above, bodies are the material through which power works, its object and instrument. Furthermore, the sex of that body in modern society is produced as the truth to one’s being requiring study, control and regulation. Sex is, therefore, the mechanism for power and knowledge to take hold of the body, establishing through science that biology is the truth to our sexuality. Sex and discourses on sexuality are integral for the control of bodies and populations, which posit sexuality/sexualities as a coherent identity of one’s psychical interior, rather than a set of practices or things one does:

[Sex] was at the pivot of the two axes along which developed the entire political technology of life. On the one hand it was tied to the disciplines of the body; the harnessing, intensification and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of energies. On the other hand, it was applied to the regulation of populations, through all the far reaching effects of its activity. It fitted in both categories at once, giving rise to infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls,

extremely meticulous ordering of space, indeterminate medical and psychological examination, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body... Sex was a means to access both to the life of the body and the life of species (Foucault quoted in Grosz, 1994, 152).

According to Foucault there is no essential subjectivity or nature to be discovered outside of the normalising effects of power/knowledge as sex is the artificial unity of the manifestation of sexuality, which itself is a social construct. Of concern to some feminists is Foucault's scant attention to the morphology of the body; for Grosz, his work assumes a neutral body, thus within Western philosophic traditions, a male body (Gatens, 1996; Grosz; 1995).

Butler (1990) shares with Foucault the argument that social practices inscribe the surface of bodies, which signify the putative 'truth' of that person. Normative discursive constructions of gender and sexuality constitute the terrain in which individuals enact through bodily practices and styling a gendered subjectivity. The repeated citation in the culture of these signifying practices, its performativity, reinforces the regime of truth regulating gender. Moreover, the repeated and repeatable actions produce the effect of an internally coherent gender identity, or sex:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport

to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler, 1990, 173).

Repeated citation conceals the discursive operations, and posits 'sex' as the cause of sexual experience, behaviour, and desire, of which 'gender' is its expression. Therefore, becoming a man or woman involves the implication in, or deployment of, certain bodily practices and self-fashionings from the available discourses of masculinity and femininity, a repetition of significations already socially established, and through which regulative normalizing judgements are made. According to Butler there is no outside to the signifying processes of subjection, therefore, destabilisation of heterosexuality and the illusory coherent gendered self occurs through subversive acts that draw attention to gender's performative character.

Australian feminist, Moira Gatens, is critical of the use of the term gender arguing that it is situated within liberal traditions that neutralise sexual difference by positing a supposed universal 'human-ness' to every body while accepting it as a biological given:

...let me be explicit, there is no neutral body; there are at least two kinds of bodies: the male body and the female body. If we locate social practices and behaviours as embedded in the subject... then this has the important repercussion that the subject is always a sexed subject (Gatens, 1996, 8).

Gatens argues that liberal traditions whose 'degendering' project resides in changing consciousness ignore that the subject is always sexed, that the body is implicated in its history within a network of power relations and practices that produce it and its powers

and capacities within a gender binary. Therefore, changing people's consciousness does not address the bodily differences that subordinate female embodiment:

...it is also clear that there is a contingent, though not arbitrary, relation between the male body and masculinity and the female body and femininity. To claim this is neither biologism nor essentialism but is rather to acknowledge that importance of complex and ubiquitous networks of signification to the historically, psychologically and culturally variable ways of being a man and a woman (Gatens, 1996, 13).

Masculinity and femininity are not necessarily an arbitrary assemblage of behaviours that can be applied to any body. They have been produced through the male and female body respectively and subsequently, the body and its capacities and powers are historically and culturally produced through networks of power, which have reduced the multiplicity of differences in all bodies to the binarized conception of male and female. Furthermore, Gatens argues that western culture valorises the male body and the capacities and styles associated with it and significantly, the way subjects live their masculine and feminine traits is connected to the meaning and significance they place on their sexed bodies through the cultural construct of gender. Consequently, political struggle must challenge networks of power and practices that sustain the valorizing of the capacities and styles of the male body and the subordination of capacities and powers associated with feminine embodiment (Gatens, 1996). Gatens argues, however, that bodies are not trapped into the binary logic of gender because sexual difference is the power and potential of bodies that exceed this sexual binary.

Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz radically rethinks gender and sex by utilising the body and Deleuze's philosophy of difference. Grosz responds to feminist writing that reduces sex to meaningless stuff (Colebrook, 2004) that awaits its organization through the social inscription of gender, yet her work is not about reinscribing essentialism to males or females. The body is not opposed to nature, nor is it simply a pre-given natural biology: its being is a material process of production through its connection with the world which inscribes its surface and whose social categories it "incorporates into its physiological interior" (Grosz, 1995, 35), thus determining its potential and to some extent its biology. Grosz argues that the body is pure difference, a process of incalculable differing through its multiplicity of forces and power within the realm of the world and the social. This is an important point that bears repeating: the body is not an uncoded, inert, raw material awaiting inscription of its sexual difference but an "open materiality" (1995, 191), a potential whose functions and capacities differ depending on cultural norms. Grosz is critical of the conception of the body as a neutral, blank slate awaiting cultural inscription, which is implicit in the work of Foucault. It is not that Grosz desires an ontology of the female body, but the neutral body tends to reduce bodily differences to passive sameness, enacting a Western philosophical tradition of subordinating the body to the rational mind, which reduces the body to a fiction of consciousness (Colebrook, 2004; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994). For Grosz, the 'materiality' of the body and its power precedes social inscription and in fact determines the forms that inscription takes; a male body cannot be inscribed with female sex/sexuality because the materiality of the 'page/body' where inscription takes place affects the meaning of that inscription.

As mentioned above, Butler argues for political struggle against regulatory gender norms through the subversive performance of one's gender, with the intent to reveal a

disjunction between gender and sex: the possibility of feminine behaviour in a male subject. This strategy is supposed to reveal the performative, and therefore, arbitrary nature of gender, however, Grosz argues that if sex is falsely assumed to be a natural set of practices, pleasures, desires and bodies produced through regimes of sexuality, then it is more subversive to reveal that one's body does not conform to one's sex. She argues that gender is a redundant second order expression of sex because sex itself is an expression of bodies: "Isn't it even more threatening to show, not that gender can be at variance with sex... but that there is an instability at the very heart of sex and bodies, the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what my body is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture?" (Grosz, 1995, 214). Believing that gender reduces sexual difference to an opposition, Grosz wants to open up bodies in ways that exceed our current conception of sex or sexual difference. For Grosz, sex signifies, not the distinction between two tendencies, but the production of multiplicities of sexual difference on bodies:

"Sex" refers to the domain of sexual difference, to the question of *morphologies of bodies*... Sex is no longer the label for both sexes in their difference... a generic term indicating sexed... it is now the label and terrain of the production and enactment of sexual difference (1995, 213).

Grosz's argument is that while acknowledging that 'sex' is a product of regimes of sexuality, sex and sexuality are "marked, lived, and function according to whether it is a male or female body" (Grosz, 1994, 213). Therefore, avoiding the re-inscription of the binary system of sex that currently exists, sex for Grosz is the actualising of the potential of bodies, the terrain for the production of sexual difference. Sexual difference, therefore,

is the domain of a multiplicity of differences, “the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but is implied in the very possibility of an entity, an identity, a subject, an other and their relations” (Grosz, 1994, 209). Grosz, therefore, maintains her insistence on the importance of the pre-discursive ontology of sexual difference without the discursive significations of an essentialist, biological sex. While currently in feminist writing sexual difference refers to the contrast of two sexual identities, Grosz argues sexual difference is the ground for these identities, and all those differences *beyond* male and female. Grosz overcomes the neutralising of the body within Foucault’s work giving ‘sex’ the significance of difference and not identity, maintaining that all differing modes of materiality of the body, especially the ‘sexually-specific’ body, produce different relations to the world.

Sexuality, therefore, has its significance not strictly in the ‘sex’ of a body but in its idiosyncratic morphology, an expression of the body’s capacity for production, of difference. Grosz’s reading of Darwin’s theory of evolution places sexual difference at the centre of all creation and difference; that is, because all life is the proliferation of difference and variation, sexual difference is that irreducible and incalculable difference that produces difference and variation: “...sexual difference is unlikely to be removed but only complexified, elaborated, further developed, perhaps even beyond the human” (Grosz, 2004, 67). Currently, our sexuality is limited by the social norms that reduce the capacity of bodies to their ‘sex’, male or female, but bodies have a power and potential beyond knowledge. Grosz wants to move beyond identities and conceptualise the body in what it does, its capacity, what connections it makes, and therefore, as an unpredictable, open production of connections with a potential in excess of our culture. Grosz (1994)

argues that bodies are difference-in-process, teeming with forces and energy never fully apprehended within discourse:

[the body] can be understood as a series of surfaces, energies and forces, a mode of linkage, a discontinuous series of processes, organs, flows, and matter. The body does not hide or reveal an unrepresented latency or depth but is a set of operational linkages and connections with other things, other bodies.... The ways in which (fragments of) bodies come together with or align themselves with other things produce what Deleuze has called a machine: a nontotalized collection or assemblage of heterogeneous elements and materials. In itself the body is not a machine; but in its active relations to other social practices, entities and events, it forms machinic connections... (1994, 120).

Grosz and Gatens believe the ‘discursivisation’ of the body (Grosz, 1995) potentially reinscribes the problematic nature/culture, mind/body, sex/gender, masculine/feminine binaries which structure contemporary feminist thinking on gender. Grosz’s and Gatens’ use of a Deleuzian ontology of the body, however, allows for a consideration of sexual difference within and beyond analysis of language and discourse by unlocking the power of the body to become. For Deleuze, a body is defined by a kinetic longitude and dynamic latitude; that is, an extensive composition of other ‘bodies’ in relation of speeds and motions and the intensive power of the individual body to affect a potential (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Gatens, 2000). To better understand this proposition I will outline the key ideas applicable here.



Society is constituted by the connection of all kinds of bodies, chemical, semiotic, material etc., which subsequently form machines, the assembling and aligning of bodies. Bodies have an open structure, amenable to connection like a meshwork (De Landa, 1999) and this heterogenous connectivity is the constitutive nature of 'things': the rhizome is an acentred system of circulating states where any point connects to any other point regardless of type, it "operates as variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots..." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 21). The rhizome is an ontology of becoming and difference, characterised by 'machines'. These machinic assemblages are formations constituted through the connection of multiplicities of the rhizome, acting on semiotic flows, material flows and social flows and necessarily changing with each connection, overcoming the foundational binaries that constrain us in the arborescent model of linearity, hierarchy and teleology. The surface of bodies are marked by the *socius* (society), a process of surface inscription that works at the interface of the connection of two bodies, and which bring into alignment and connection certain body configurations, whether they be chemical, language, discursive, human bodies or body-parts (which are themselves bodies) on a macro or micro level - essentially a process of differentiation. What brings two bodies into a connection? According to Deleuze, desire is the relation between two bodies, a force that no longer represents a psychoanalytic lack but connection for its own sake, a constant production of difference, with the connection of bodies generally driven by the extension of the functionality or power of the assemblage; this is relevant to the discussion of discursive alignments/alliances and bodily alignments of individuals because it emphasises the open ended-ness of entities and their implication into other assemblages and flows. Polymorphous desire, the production of production, is coded however by the *socius* through relations of power which consequently segment,

rechannel, constrain and distribute its flows to produce certain alignments instead of others.

Operating at the level/event of desire/connection through surface inscription, the socius proscribes certain connections while producing a smooth fit between other bodies – ‘everything’s running smoothly’ (Bogard, 2000). As an example, Foucault’s panopticon is an inscription machine that marks bodies, in the case of *Discipline and Punish* (1977), prisoners, in certain ways. It operationalises the relations between bodies through practices such as architecture, disciplinary schedules, routines, plans and processes, which “optimise the coordination of bodies, assigning limits to their connection and differentiation... generating predictable flows of energy and matter” (Bogard, 2000, 278). A Deleuzian sociology takes the connection of bodies as the elementary basis for understanding the operation of social systems (Bogard, 2000).

Human bodies are constituted by the organization of molecular bodies, forming a machinic assemblage. As part of the socius, discourses (themselves assemblages) limit the potential of the body, particularly assigning its limits according to whether it is a male or female body. Discourses of sexuality are events of inscription of bodies, marking their difference so they may fit into the social assemblage. Such coding, or deterritorialisation, allows bodies to realign and recombine in new ways placing new surfaces into contact or separating established ones. Discourse, for example, ensures the habitual deployment and connection of particular bodies, valorizing normative becomings of bodies, and in particular, the power and status associated with the capacities of the male body (Gatens, 1996). Power assembles bodies as it does subjectivity. The configuration of bodies, their connection and alignment, reflect operations of power constituting the sexual subject,

which is a formation of bodies entering into compositions with other bodies, as an assemblage of machines in a web of connections and codes and flows of energy (Bogard, 1998). However, the limits of a body's capacities are unknown, culturally and biologically. Bodies possess a potential power beyond the tolerance of our culture, and therefore, this research replaces the question of identity or what a body is with the question of what bodies can do, and what connections bodies make in constituting itself as a force of difference.

This methodological approach to the inquiry and the data has several benefits. Firstly, as the principle of connectivity means the connection of heterogenous entities and forces in an open process of becoming, then the arrangement of entities are contingent, partial, non-teleological and not intentionally hierarchical. Therefore, discourse and social practice are read in terms of their connection to broader social relations, implicated within assemblages and driven by expansion of its force or life. Secondly, the inquiry is attentive to how power/knowledge assembles entities into particular configurations, in this case human bodies and their capacities at a molecular level. This means rejecting a psychoanalytic principle of psychological depth and other accounts of the body as rational and intentional. To this extent discourse delimits the production of certain arrangements and distribution of bodies and their capacities in individuals, which can be read at the level of the everyday practice. Finally, connectivity orients the inquiry towards creativity and experimentation rather than fixity and essentialism, embracing the potential to be otherwise.

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## Conclusion

Under the normalizing disciplinary gaze of the social sciences, this chapter has explicated the theories informing my methodological choices, which involve a critique of the foundations of western thought, a postmodern tendency heralding the crisis of representation, the crisis of reason, and the death of the subject. These poststructuralist concepts have problematised those positivist concepts of validity and truth and demand alternative ways of thinking about research and the world it fleetingly captures, in particular, re-thinking the dominant, linear “narrative of knowledge production” through which judgements of credibility and validity are made (St Pierre, 1997b, 179). For instance, perspicacious theoretical and methodological elaboration is one mechanism for establishing credibility for qualitative and feminist researchers (Patton, 2002), yet this is a confessional mode of regulatory practice operating within the social science discipline whereby judgments are made through the lens of legitimated ‘scientific’ research methods (Paechter, 1996). In fact, I can’t help but think establishing methodological credibility and validity signifies the ‘problem’ that no research can capture the world, an acknowledgement of its limitations. How, then, to best write about the chaotic world that resists representation at every turn?

Inscribing the world is a tentative process because a rhizomatic world of positive difference always is in excess of ways of thinking and writing about it. I celebrate the poststructuralist tendency away from capturing the truth of what is, towards creating perspectives on what is and, more importantly, what could be. With its inscription this thesis changes the contours of the world, in effect, forming a rhizome with it by bringing about new alignments, making new connections in what might best be described as an experimentation with the world’s constitutive ‘bodies’. If new ways of thinking lend

themselves to new ways of being or becoming, this research should be judged according to what it does, what connections it makes and what experimentation it does or makes possible! Subsequently, I have elaborated on the principles and methods that frame my research so it is possible to see how this inquiry is made to work.

## 4

### The responses

#### Producing sexual difference

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In this chapter, a feminist poststructuralist framework is deployed to analyse the textual fragments of the interviews with the five pre-service teachers whom I interviewed. This analysis assumes that the deployment of specific discourses of sexual difference, and therefore sexed subjectivities, connect with the participants' construction of the boys' debate by limiting the scope by which to understand the sexes, bodies and schooling. I attempt to connect the disparate and sometimes contradictory ideas of the participants, and tease out the assumptions, which underlie the cogent operation of these discourses.

Despite the extensive media coverage on boys' education, the five pre-service teachers interviewed were unfamiliar with contours of the boys' education terrain. David avoided the media and became familiar with the issues through Steve Biddulph's books, *Manhood* and *Raising Boys*, two of the 'Backlash Blockbusters' (Mills, 2003). Kylie said she understood from the media that boys learn differently from girls and that boys were being asked to '*act more like girls*', two assertions with which she agreed. Jackie had a feminist perspective arguing that people incorrectly tend to see boys as disadvantaged because of the putative improvement of girls' achievement. Interestingly, all participants had their perspective on boys' education, undoubtedly an assemblage of personal experience and media hype.

Essentialist discourses of sexual difference pervade the constructions of male and female students by the participants. Ben enacts a socio-biological discourse of an essential

difference between males and female when reflecting on his young daughter and son's interactions at playgroup:

Ben: ...even at a playgroup level [the boys] want to establish a pecking order straight away, it's almost like king of the jungle kind of thing, while girls want to establish a group and friends straight away, it's two completely separate camps and they do interact but they are definitely in two separate camps.

Ben's '*king of the jungle*' comment invokes a hunter-gatherer explanation of the differences between the interaction of his daughter and son, which resonates with Kylie's description below which constructs males as naturally active and physical and females as passive and communicative:

Kylie: Girls are probably more talking, communicating, and boys are more hands-on... They like to make things, understand things and nut things out deeply when they're involved and engaged and it's got to be cool. [They are]...

Question: So it needs to be physical?

Kylie: Physical more so. They quite like the Playstation, Nintendo, X-Box type games, racing car ones, they tend to like the shoot-them-up ones... Things where they can get in and get dirty they just tend to really enjoy it... in a general tone the messiest, the dirtiest, the end product is important... Girls: communicating; boys in physical agility and strength.

For Kylie, these natural proclivities for action and making and manipulating objects do not extend to the realm of child-care, where boys struggle with the activities associated with nurturing:

Kylie: ...if [males] want to do child-care... I mean, doing up, brushing the hair, a little baby's hair, is a lot harder for him, or bathing the baby, or doing shoe laces up is going to be more challenging, or fixing and sewing a button because its not natural or normal maybe for him. But given the chance and once he's had the opportunity to practise I think they're fine at it.

Kylie does not explain why it may not be normal or natural, however, she obviously presupposes essentialist constructions of masculinity that demarcate the private sphere as invested primarily in the female body. David also mobilises an essentialist discourse of sexual difference that associates the female body with passivity and male body with action:

Question: To what extent do males and females have natural strengths and weaknesses?

David: I think particularly at school age, females are better at communication. I really wasn't very good at communication while I was at school. It wasn't until afterwards when I was forced into a retail environment that I was forced to interact with people I didn't know... so I think women probably communicate better... strengths in boys – again, probably tactile things. I wasn't big into sport but I did enjoy the wood-work and metal-work and all that sort of thing... I



don't know how true it is but you hear of statistics where boys are generally better at the sciences and women better in the English side of things... I'd probably have to agree with it.

Similarly to Kylie, putative differences in the choice of subjects in school are a consequence of the natural interests and strengths of the female and male body rather than see *choice* as governed by regulative sexual norms, which consequently invest differently in the male and female body's capacities. Therefore, David thinks sports and the manual arts attract males because it requires an active body while females are proficient at communication and caring-centred subjects such as English and child-care.

The oppositional construction of sexual difference mobilised by Ben, Kylie and David is implicated in a hierarchy of socially pervasive oppositional differences and which extend beyond the simplistic construction of passive femininity and active masculinity. For example, when Kylie elaborates on the interests of secondary school girls she associates masculinity with the scientific mind and femininity with creativity:

Question: What are some of the problems faced by girls in school?

Kylie: [Kylie draws out her words in a tone of derision] Oh, girls... yeah... fashion, hair accessories, jewellery, lip gloss, yeah... all the important things for girls.

[Kylie returns to a serious tone] If it looks pretty, you know, I noticed when I was doing science with the kids at high school and I talked to the kids, the guys

thought it was pretty cool how to drop three colour dyes into the milk and then put detergent on to stage surface tension and how it moved together they thought it was pretty cool but the girls really liked it because it was colourful, it was pretty, that really got the girls' attention, it was creative, artistic which tends to be more of a girl thing and when we had some balancing thing experiment in science the girls sort of disengaged with that because it didn't serve any useful purpose for them, for boys, they were interested in what moved...

According to Kylie, girls' interest in the experiment is limited to its appeal to the female's supposed natural inclination for creativity while boys consequently possess a naturally scientific and inquiring and therefore, rational mind. This is reinforced with her comment later that boys have "*determination to keep working at the same thing. I don't think girls will stick at things as well as boys when they are challenged but the boys need to be intrigued or engaged.*" The essentialist discourses mobilised by Kylie and David reflect a Western tradition which associates masculinity and femininity with other binaries such as active/passive, scientific/creative, rational/emotional, protector/nurturer. Unfortunately, the valued first term in the binaries marginalises the second term and therefore, those traditionally associated with the feminine, for example, girls' interests are considered frivolous, "*... all the important things*".

Essentialist discourses of sexual difference reduce male and female strengths and interests to binary oppositions, which then inform the pre-service teachers' concept of student engagement. 'Engagement' is a peculiarly contemporary principle in educational theory and policy and has more recently been associated as a particularly male need

(House of Representatives, 2002). For Ben, engagement signifies a gendered pedagogy that caters to the essential differences between males and females:

Ben: But I believe, and I've said it before, that again getting back to that engagement, I don't think they are bad kids, they're not bad kids, they can be reshaped and moulded but it's getting them back to engage. I've seen in some lectures they look at us in a maths lecture and say, 'What's the circumference of a circle?' and then they say on the flip side another way of doing the same lesson is, 'Okay, we've got a motorbike wheel' and just by changing the content and not necessarily getting straight to the circumference but going over a bunch of other stuff, maybe drawing a motorbike or something like that, just getting them interested in the topic and getting them to think about it....

Ben acknowledges the constructive potential of education, however, it is working with the pre-given mould, conceptualised as an essentially gendered nature awaiting the 'right' input. Ben's suggestion of using the traditionally masculine domain of motorbikes or motor-biking to engage boys in maths' activities reflects the conservative discourses of engagement prevalent in the boys' debate. These reterritorialise 'engagement' to signify gender-specific strategies informed by commonsense understandings of sexual difference and therefore reinforce hegemonic constructions of masculinity. This is particularly concerning as the university's lecturer reinforces these commonsense beliefs, highlighting the role of university education in problematically proliferating these assumptions. Essentialist discourses of sexual difference also inform Kylie's understanding of effective pedagogy:

Kylie: At the moment Diabolos, which is two pieces of wooden sticks and string and a plastic egg cup looking thing that runs along them, that is really cool and it's wicked and sick, and to be able to whack it, slip it, catch it and jump over it and all sorts of things at the moment they are just wild over it - they think that's really, really cool. And the positive side to that is its exercise, it's coordination, it's time all that sort of thing...

Kylie's strategy for engagement appeals to boys' putative natural inclination for physical activity in opposition to the passive feminine. The above responses reveal the oppositional understanding of sexual difference within essentialist discourses whereby what is appropriately masculine does not occupy what is appropriately feminine: masculinity is defined by what is not feminine.

Although no respondents could elaborate extensively on how sexual regimes are maintained through such oppositions, Janet does comment on the policing of masculinity through normalising discourses of sexuality in relation to her son:

Janet: My ten year old son still has his babies, he's got his babies and they sleep in his bed next to him, I mean, that's not normal amongst his friends who have a dad in their life, and my son doesn't have dad in his life... and I've said to the school, he's going to get bullied for that sort of behaviour... this is the sort of behaviour I think is normal, I think it's great to teach boys to care for their baby dolls.

Janet identifies that nurturing, evident in her son's care for his dolls, is not socially considered an appropriately masculine attribute and therefore subject to regulation via the normalizing judgments of his peers and hegemonic discourses of sexuality. Janet, however, does not use her knowledge of the policing of sexuality to interpret the behaviours and practices of boys in school or their performance and instead advocates for more male role models.

Jackie occasionally recognises the role of schools and peer culture in the construction of masculinity, yet she normalises this process:

Question: What other problems do boys face?

Jackie: Possibly how they relate to each other as they are getting into their older years and how they perceive each other and boys, although I am generalising, can be quite competitive and so can girls, but I think there is a period where boys go through at school where they are really trying to figure out that level of competitiveness, I think more so than girls. Or girls approach it in a different way possibly.

Question: How do you think boys approach competitiveness?

Jackie: I think in younger years they do it in a real physical sense and they do it in the playground and they do it when they are figuring out how to play football together and that kind of sets the ground rules for how they deal with each other in the classroom and how they relate to each other in the classroom.

Question: How do they relate?

Jackie: They pick on each other quite a lot... in that kind of 'mate-ish' sort of way.

Jackie suggests that training of the male body through physical activity and competitiveness is crucial for boys to "*figure out*" their identities and their relationships in the classroom, however, 'figuring out' is a particularly passive term for describing the active process of constructing powerful modes of sexual subjectivity. Jackie deploys an essentialist discourse of masculinity, which naturalises boys' competitiveness, their rough physical activity, their put-downs and the establishment of a 'pecking order'. However, there is no consideration on what terms the pecking order is established, such as a hierarchy of masculinities which valorises and marginalizes particular modes of being male. In fact, describing the rough behaviour as "*mate-ish*" signifies an assumption of a normalised Australian-male behaviour based on physical harassment, a 'code' of behaviour amongst boys and men that also signifies alliance with a national ethic. Kylie also recognises the importance of establishing one's status in their homosocial groups:

Kylie: ...with their peer pressure and understanding how, you know, 'My dad's got this' and 'My dad's got that' you know, this kind of bartering between them which is all a part of being male. And trying to impress people who find their way in the pack.

Kylie's use of the word, 'pack' suggests a socio-biological discourse of man's natural proclivity to establish one's superior status within a group, without attribution to the social construction of masculinity.

Jackie critically engaged with the dominant construction of sexual difference. Currently completing her teaching experience in a local primary school, she recalled a lesson she observed of her supervising teacher:

Jackie: I am just thinking in terms of the teacher I am with now because she's doing Italian so she has done themes for each term- she did fashion in term two but she's doing sports in term four so that, for the boys, she is assuming the boys will be more interested in sport than fashion so therefore she's including both. So from her perspective she is trying to balance it out for the students on gender terms but I am just wondering if she's not making big assumptions about whether boys are interested in sport and girls in fashion...

As discussed in the previous chapter, the opportunity to formulate responses to questions in an open-ended structure possibly intervenes in those taken for granted or commonplace notions that inform the participants' understandings of the issues. For Jackie the interview process stimulated a critical engagement with her thinking as she often reflected on her responses and continued to make qualifications on her comments. For example, she continues after the above comment:

Jackie: But she has made choices in her programme based on gender. But in being aware of the fact that she didn't want to leave the boys out in a sense. So

in the other two terms she has done directions and getting around but something kind of generic and not really gender related. You can see me thinking through things while I am trying to talk.

This first section has established the conservative discourses of sexual difference that are deployed by all of the participants to varying degrees when discussing male and female students. These discourses construct males and females within a limited binary logic that defines their differences against each other, without recognition of a multiplicity of differences within and between the sexes. The belief in the naturalness of sexual difference of various attributes and capacities of males and females is testimony to the limited problematisation of the sexual order by the participants, although some do show a critical understanding of the influence of sexuality in the lives of individuals. The next section will describe one salient theme raised by the participants, that of the need for more male teachers.

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## Male teachers

The conservative discourse for the recruitment of more male teachers resonated with all of the participants. All participants mobilised a conservative discourse of the feminisation of schooling, however, they could not clearly articulate its effects on boys or education generally. In addition, four participants connected the need for male teachers to the broader concern for masculinity in society; for example, four participants deployed the ‘poor boys’ discourse (Epstein et al., 1998) that attributes boys’ apparent poor behaviour and underachievement to feminised single parent families, which produces a role-identity



crisis. It is important to remember that the call for male role models is a salient strategy of the masculinity repair regime and heavily critiqued by poststructuralists for its reliance on sex role socialisation theory (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). In this theory of identity formation, boys will learn how to become ‘respectable men’ from the influence of other males, however, this is a simplistic and rationalist account of a complex process teeming with contradictions and power/knowledge relations.

Janet, a single mum with a 10-year-old son, feels her son needs the influence of a male as she and the teacher are particularly caring for her son:

Janet: ...the female teachers he’s had so far have been more motherly, have cuddled, have taught but, they’re like, ‘Look, we’re there for you Jack. We love you, Jack We think you’re beautiful’. He’s taking little flowers into them all the time, he’s quite a sensitive little boy... And they’ve just adored him and he’s really thrived and achieved because he has felt this in a loved environment, or whatever, and I would have hoped the male teacher would have been a bit more distanced and ‘Okay, you’re here to learn. This is what you do. No, I don’t care that you bring me in flowers, this is what you need to do’.

Even though Jack has thrived with the nurturing of his previous female teachers, Janet is adamant that he needs a male role model, presumably because sensitivity is not coextensive with dominant constructions of masculinity. However, Janet experiences tension raising her boy when a male friend mobilises a populist psycho-social discourse on male development to suggest that her boy will be damaged without a strong male influence. When her friend tells her she “*molly-coddles that kid*”, she was angry and felt

the need to defend her parenting choices. After reading a newspaper article after the incident she quoted the research to him: “...*molly-coddled boys in their first two years of life by their mother turn out to be well-rounded adult men – ‘See, I told you I was doing the right thing.’*” The raising of boys in mother-only households intensifies scrutiny of female parenting and the need to raise the right kind of boys, and while Janet implicitly acknowledges this, essentialist discourses of sexual difference remain powerfully present in structuring her belief that boys need male role models.

Kylie, also a single mother with a 10 year-old son describes how the female teachers “*butter*” the children up with “*mishy-mushy-ness*” and fears her own munificent affection for her son is a hindrance to his rites to manhood:

Kylie: We tend to molly-coddle them a bit too much and a mother probably tends to want to hang on to them and hug them that little bit longer because they are nice and soft and cuddly and they make great cups of tea and they always want to come in and say, ‘Good morning, mum’ in the morning to you and ‘Can I please sleep in your bed tonight, mum?’ at ten years-old, but at the same time I am pushing and saying he goes to cadets so they are all boys and men and he’s involved with, that he spends time with dad and he has a male teacher... and I’ll push for a male teacher. I do try to push in the male [influence because] he gets a lot of femaleness.

Without recognising the multiplicity of attributes within both sexes, Kylie essentialises masculinity in opposition to femininity where being “*soft*” and “*cuddly*” and supposedly sensitive are not desirable masculine qualities and therefore she insists her son attend

cadets and has a male teacher to masculinise him, to produce binarized sexual difference (*hard* and *distant?*). This discourse of masculinity assumes an essential maleness resides in the male body awaiting discovery and that it is ‘men’s business’ to teach young boys. Kylie, therefore, does not value female teachers in this respect because they have been too gentle and soft on her child and “*he needs more of a macho input*”. She even comments, “... *women can’t fulfil that need, and I feel quite passionate about that.*” Therefore, the question of male teachers is a question of male role models for the production of particular type of males. Janet and Kylie concede they desire male role models for their sons yet they display ambivalence regarding what it means to be a man:

Kylie: In all this changing and trying to bring children up in being polite, courteous and respectful etc, I think it’s good and encouraging boys to be better communicators and understand softness and gentleness and how to be gentlemen, not yell and scream and lose their tempers and abuse etc, I think that’s very important. But, it’s also important that they still be boys – we can’t dilute it enough because we are converting them to becoming something else that is not male or female...

Kylie’s language reveals the tension between what is appropriately male and non-male behaviour: being polite, courteous and respectful are civilising and feminine qualities that boys need but not enough that their masculine essence is suppressed. Throughout the interview it appears Kylie’s concern for boys is their civilising behaviours and not to do with their anti-social, oppressive or aggressive behaviours. Her investment in traditional sexual relations produces a fear that “*boys are being asked to be more like girls*” and subsequently we could end up with those outside of the current sexual binary, possibly

deviants. Performing outside the hegemonic regimes of practice of sexuality instantaneously constitutes those bodies as deviant or, worst, unintelligible (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004). The policing of masculinity through the lens of compulsory heterosexuality and its enunciations of ‘gay’, ‘queer’ or ‘faggot’ ensures the disciplining of appropriately masculine bodies/subjects who are located on the ‘right’ side of the normal/abnormal dichotomy. Interestingly, while Kylie describes female teachers as being “*too soft and too gentle*” and her son needs more of a macho input, when asked what she has to offer as a female teacher says: “*Being a woman and mother that genuine caring-ness and understanding of the difficulty of growing up.*” Kylie’s investment in her own feminine subjectivity is not considered antithetical to the boys she has just described who apparently require the opposite. Rather than a potential available to all humans, the ability to care and nurture are particularly female domains. Kylie’s dichotomous construction of maleness and femaleness subsequently excludes these attributes as legitimately male and reinscribes narrow stereotypes on these bodies.

Ben too is adamant that male teachers are important as role models for boys and being a role model means being unequivocally masculine:

Ben: ...if they can get a mentor or someone they look up to who is also perceived by them to be masculine, very masculine, everything, and then he can slowly start addressing some of these issues... if you can get a kid to listen and take that in, it’s a positive step. I think that, particularly from a guy who is masculine and big and strong, I think a lot of his character traits and stuff like that that he exhibits are learned and if you can learn some other ones from someone that he considers to be a strong male mentor and he respects. Whereas

he may be very hesitant to take on some of those character traits if someone not so strong or perceived so strong by him or that he doesn't respect, if someone like that were to give him those traits he probably wouldn't take them on board as much as he would from maybe one of his sporting heroes, or maybe someone he really looks up to as big and strong. And that's what I am saying, a half-assed male example is no good at all, it needs to be the full package, who understands, that looks right...

Ben homogenizes the problem with some boys as a problem for all boys and attributes this to a lack of role models. In fact, where hegemonic constructions of masculinity are perceived to be anti-academic and anti-authority, Ben's description in the interview of receiving little respect in a school in which he completed his teacher experience may be the result of performances of hegemonic masculinity. Ben, however, deploys a rational, liberal humanist subject which is an open vessel with an essential masculinity waiting to be filled with correct knowledge to perform the correct behaviour. The repetition of the words 'strong' five times, 'masculine' three and 'big' twice gives an indication to what are considered the necessary male attributes, even if they do sound one dimensional and simply centred on physicality. He is adamant that boys will not respect a non-masculine male but this does not come under critique in his logic, as it is taken for granted that some males are positioned lower on the social hierarchy of masculinity (Connell, 1995). In addition, when considering what his strengths are as a male teacher, Ben responds:

Ben: I think a lot of experience... I've had a very diverse work life, everything from driving 4 wheel drive tour coaches to flying aeroplanes and all kinds of

stuff and all kinds of interesting stuff, 4 wheel driving, camping and all that kind of stuff... I think that strength of character...

According to Ben, it is desirable to train the male body through traditionally male physical activities such as four-wheel driving and flying aeroplanes; what amounts to a production of essentialist sexual differences. This discourse homogenises the multiplicity of differences amongst boys. Interestingly, while advocating masculine male role models for boys, Ben has not found that in his own life as his role model was his aunty and David's "*biggest*" role model was his mother yet this contradiction does not register given the powerful social forces defining the limits of the debate. Implicitly acknowledging the hegemonic construction of masculinity, David feels competitive sportsmen should not be role models for boys because of the negative attitudes and behaviours it can generate. Instead, he advocates people who are "*down to earth*" and "*level-headed*" and even those who challenge sexual norms:

David: Perhaps a little boy who is growing up is not quite sure what a male is meant to be and that's why they act out aggressively because they think they are being manly. I would like to show them something different to this tough act. You can still be friendly and calm.

While all participants advocated more male teachers, there were reservations similar to David's cautiousness. Jackie, for example, is suspicious of the populist discourse of more male teachers, linking such a call to the displacement of parental subjectivities onto teachers, who must perform the roles of a transformed family structure:

Jackie: There should be an equal balance of role models in school but I do disagree that people think that it is good to have female primary school teachers as another mother. I disagree with that. I think teachers should be teachers...

To this extent, such a policy or imposition reflects a neoliberal governmentality, that is, the governance of the soul through professional discourses and practices rather than simply a practice to engage boys in schooling. Moreover, Janet's experience of a male teacher as role model serves as a cautionary tale for those people who insist on male teachers for their sons. Male teachers do not necessarily equate to better outcomes:

Janet: When we came down from Mt Magnet Jack went back to his school from the beginning of this year and I got into touch with a lot of my friends whose kids are the same age, I said, 'Jack's coming back. What's the go with the teachers?' Because there is usually 3 or 4 teachers and you try and get the one you want, 'Oh, there's a male teacher this year teaching grade 5s, we've all got into that class, see if Jack can get into there'. And we went, 'Yah', because we had all females up to there. Brilliant female teachers –absolutely couldn't fault them. We put all these boys in with the male teacher solely because he was male - he's worse than any of the females. They have all lost enthusiasm... they have no respect. And it's really disappointing for all of us because we all thought this is going to be the saviour. So, where we have thought that just based on gender and I've just said to mum in the last week, you know, what a shame that we all thought so highly of this teacher [because he was male] and how disappointing this has been and really this year I don't think they have achieved as much as they have in the last four.

Janet's enthusiasm for male teachers signifies the incursion of recuperative masculinity politics in education, especially the invocation of '*saviour*', signifying the enormous costs of not addressing the issues and the monumental importance placed on hegemonic masculinity in the public domain. The public discourse on this matter has been interpreted within the feminist/pro-feminist literature as a re-masculinizing of schools and boys after decades of perceived feminisation. Education and the supposed poor achievement and behaviour of boys is seen as a result of the misfit between schooling, teaching and boys. The literature, however, shows that schools are places where masculinity is produced and if anything masculinity and the sexual relations must be interrogated. The participants were clear, however, that boys' experiences of schooling were not positive and feminism was a major cause. A conservative discourse speaks through Kylie, for example, when she asserts feminism is robbing masculinity from the boys, however, masculinity is conceived in an essentialist 'boys will be boys' discourse:

Question: What has been the impact of feminism on boys?

Kylie: I think we are less tolerant with boys. I think we have a higher expectation and forget that boys will be boys and get into trouble and become nuisances, will be disruptive, will be loud, will forget their homework, will draw on everything and vandalise most things, and be more interested in the latest cool cars and latest magazine about the latest toy... I believe we have actually robbed the boys, the heart out of the boys... from a Christian perspective you just have to pray for them boys because they're going to get into mischief...



Kylie's belief implies an acceptance of hegemonic forms of masculinity and the necessity for a male repair agenda (Skelton, 2001) to address what has been stolen from the boys – even though she does not articulate what the problem with boys is and what has been “robbed”. Based on a simplistic sex role socialisation theory, much of the conservative discourse calls for more male interaction with boys so they can learn to be men. Kylie, for example, not only advocates for more male teachers, but insists her son goes to Scouts and reminisces of a traditional family-work structure where sons can interact with their fathers:

Kylie: ...I am a firm believer of more Boys' Scouts, more male interaction and my understanding is as the years have past by the guys used to go into their fathers' business or work in the fields, etcetera, and now they are not getting enough male-male time and there [is] a lot of single families, a lot more women taking the children and having them, like in my case, and not enough time with their dads because their dads are so busy, working away, doing other things, busy with their own lives and the boys get left behind and it's very sad. I think we are really robbing the next generations of it all.

Kylie does not articulate what ‘it all’ is, however, it may be the interaction of males and the social processes that produce the right kind of boy. Ben mobilises a similar discourse:

Ben: Things like scouts and stuff like that, Cubs and Scouts, I disagree with, I think they are boys' activities and need to be kept boys' activities. I very much disagree that girls can come into them. They were always a world-wide

brotherhood of scouts and it wasn't like secret men's business or any crap like that, it was just that they went out as boys and learnt a bunch of life skills that they could take into scouts and venturers and when I see girls running around in their uniforms I can't help but think don't they have girl guides, don't they have brownies, were they not good enough, why do they have to come into the fray with cubs?

Although Ben is quick to assert boys-only clubs weren't 'secret men's business', he is inimical to feminism for the equal opportunities afforded to females to join male-dominated clubs, reflected in the question, "*Were they not good enough?*". This suggests his fear over its disruption of the proper masculinizing of boys, a process embedded in an unproblematised notion of masculinity. The deterritorialisation of traditional masculinity through feminism, equal opportunities and single parent families are common threads of conservative discourses of gender and education, all evident in the respondent's comment.

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## The competitive individual and economics

The effects of changes within the social and economic strata are reduced for many participants to feminism's putative ascendancy. Janet argues that the changes in the presumptive 'roles' of men and women in society have produced an 'identity crisis' for men between these supposedly conflicting roles:

Janet: ...it's that conflict of we as mothers are trying to teach our boys to be sensitive new age men, you know, to be good husbands and well-rounded

citizens in the community but they've also got to be breadwinners in that family if they decide to have children, like my oldest child was saying 'I am not having babies till I am forty, I am just not doing it, I just don't want to, cause I don't know how I am going to balance parenthood with having to raise, have the pressure of being the sole breadwinner to my wife while she's looking after the children, I don't know how I am going to do it, so she's not going to have babies for twenty years'. ...I think it's really conflicting in as far as I have done male orientated jobs but I believe that a root of community problems is that women are in the work-force in a very deep seated way – I believe that's led to a lot of problems – so it's very conflicting [Janet's attitude to feminism]...I think that in my parent's generation and certainly my grandparent's generation we all knew where our place was. Like, women knew their place and men had to be the breadwinners and there was probably a lot more pressure on the men but the pressure on men in different ways now... a lot different ways.

Janet's 'generational discourse' associates tradition with stability, including traditional sexual relations. Social change provokes a discourse of 'conflicting roles' which functions to victimise men and assumes that being a father and being a breadwinner are mutually exclusive. According to Janet, there has always been a trade-off for men to exclude themselves from the family for work yet now that is becoming difficult with transformed sexual relations. However, when Janet elaborates on her eldest son's opinion, what is more at issue appears to be the demands of the economy. In other words, being an enterprising individual within the competitive economy makes being "*good husbands and well-rounded citizens*" impossible because the choices available to boys are circumscribed by an economy which demands new relationships to work, more work,

and financial commitments that require double income. Pertinently, the transformed economy is silenced in the ‘conflicting roles’ discourse, a process of smoothing (Bogard, 2000) which connects feminism more tightly with the negative effects of economic and social reform: the ‘root of the problems’ is feminism because women have entered the labour market and the subsequent changing roles ascribed to males and females. Janet connects this idea with *‘knowing one’s place’*, which reads as a need to re-traditionalise male and female roles. Perhaps Janet is “*conflicted*” with her opinion on feminism because she has located blame for the problem with feminism and not the neoliberal economy, which is dissociated from social change among the participants.

Mobilising a generational discourse similar to Kylie, twenty-seven-year old David argues that the expectations placed on males by females is to blame for men’s putative problems. He says:

David: ...and how to behave, early on in the past decades, women were attracted to be who were the protectors, who were strong and could provide a good income and now they want a man who is sensitive and understanding which is the total opposite to how men have been bred for centuries and it is difficult for guys to know where they stand.

Feminism is the focus of David’s ire because it has supposedly reformed traditional sexual identities, which are defined through a biological determinist discourse that constrains male subjectivity to evolutionary processes (“*bred for centuries*”) that have imbued males with strength and power and thus the role as “*protectors*” and providers. The reformation of identities disadvantage males by undermining these roles thus

creating 'role' confusion. Furthermore, David perceives feminism as yielding opportunities for women at the expense of men, which compels him to follow the rigid molar line (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of school-work-family in his life:

David: I feel that my choices in life have been different from my female friends. A lot of my female friends have worked, some of them got half way through a degree and left and worked and gone to the UK and 'nannied' or have gotten jobs over there where I feel I have to stay here and build up a nest or a bower, like a bower bird and get a degree and plan ahead, where they don't have to do that so much, and this is my personal belief that they can then come back, marry a man and he will have the foundations to begin a life together type of thing and I realise that's a little bit...

Question: Do you need to follow that path, though?

Rather than return to previous generational patterns, David believes expectations for males have not moved forward as it has for females, enacting a liberal discourse of choice (that is delimited) to explain this disadvantage and which is apparently the solution. He also enacts a 'competing victims' discourse which silences consideration of the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995) accruing for males because of structural advantages and assumes all males share his experiences, while all females experience success. While it is definitely beneficial to consider the complexity of social relations that do socially and economically marginalise some men and many women, an adversarial rhetoric directed against feminism, which coheres an ostensible mens' interest, leaves the indomitable neoliberal economy unchallenged.

David: My belief is that, even now as far as we have come, women have the life chances they have the choice to do the job that is satisfying personally but may not be as satisfying financially. Where a lot of guys, and I am speaking for myself, I chose a job that wasn't as satisfying personally but paid well. I did an apprenticeship as a mechanic, went up to the mines, earned huge money but it was hard, horrible back breaking work, terrible temperatures, I hated it, absolutely hated the fumes, everything. So I've changed my mind that I am actually going to do a job that I feel a lot of personal satisfaction [teacher].

Especially in comparison to girls whose career options are falsely perceived as unrestricted, David feels his chances are particularly limited, evident in two areas: pursuing work rather than other interests because of the imperative for males to buy a house and prepare for a family; and, in the choices of work available to men. This imbalance is a consequence of feminism rather than in relation to broader economic changes, such that he hopes that boys will be given "*the freedom to make the same sort of decision females can make now in employment.*" Moreover, to demonstrate the supposed discriminatory nature of feminism, David recalls a negative experience with a female teacher in high school who directed him into vocational instead of tertiary study. This adversarial logic, however, silences the powerful influence of sexual norms in constructing appropriately male career paths and occupations, which the teacher was possibly enacting.

Utilising the discourse of 'conflicting roles', Kylie, a single parent with an 10-year-old, believes feminism victimises masculinity and males. Feminism has challenged the

dominant configurations of sex, which has resulted in the devaluation of attributes of traditional masculinity while the feminist-inspired gender equity movement has supposedly marginalised male-male interactions in boys only clubs, like the Boys' Scouts. As mentioned earlier, she laments the fact that boys no longer work in their fathers' businesses or work in the fields and that many men prioritise their work before family relationships, subsequently reducing the interaction of boys and their fathers while increasing the interaction of sons and mothers. For Kylie, this constitutes the disadvantaged boy assemblage. Interestingly, whereas David argues that the traditional link between males and occupations is prohibitive, Kylie believes that traditional occupational and familial pathways in our culture will improve boys' lives. Ben also charges feminism with restricting male-male interaction and therefore impacting on 'male identity formation', however, he situates this within larger economic changes:

Ben: If you can imagine a timeline from there to the last 40,000 years to present day, if you look at a timeline at what we valued as culturally important to the last 300 years when we've pursued the all mighty dollar, you look at the spin-off effects from that, we have nearly screwed the world up, we are basically sucking all the natural resources dry, we don't spend anytime with each other, our culture's being lost, single parent families I mean the culture is a TV and a mother, and that is a real shame whereas culturally I know from the Serbian side, if there is a kid stepping out of line an uncle will come in, take the kid away, have a bit of a chat to him, another relative will come in and it's all very nurtured. But just in the last, sort of, you know how we're structured we just pursue the dollar, it's crazy, where's the love? Where's the time? And that focus has just been lost and you see as a result a lot of these kids don't see their

parents, don't interact... If you do spend time with your kids you're not always going to get rewards and accolades as a lot of men want when they get their ego boosted, and pats on the back you changed a nappy and well done you went down the park and all that kind of stuff, but if you don't spend time it will come back to bite you in the worst possible way...

Ben identifies how economic imperatives have impacted on the efficacy of the traditional family structure as people pursue wealth and material goods to the detriment of interaction with their children. However, he constructs single-parent families within a deficit model and explains social change problematically as a consequence of the choice of an avaricious pursuit of the "*almighty dollar*" of individuals. Ben's discourse of 'corruption' is reinforced by his mobilisation of a discourse of 'lost culture', which desires a return to traditions of a mythic past, a golden age which will revalue the extended family as an effective family structure for raising children and proper men. Similarly, David recognizes that parental subjectivities are transforming and he situates this within a discourse of choice:

David: I think family has a lot to do with it, I think the double income has a lot to do with their learning... I don't think you have the same sort of support from the parents – they are both working, they get home, they're both tired. I think if there was one parent, and I am not saying it should be the wife, just one parent, perhaps the one that earns the least, should stay home...

Unlike Ben, David's perspective does not recall a romanticised recent past but the formation of neoliberal subjectivity through neoliberal capitalism; that is, the reformation



of individual conduct within economic interests. However, believing that individuals have the choice to extract themselves from employment without serious consequences means David does not realise that the demands of a growing national economy along with the financial commitments of those in the ‘mortgage belt’ often limit the available choices for individuals to spend more time with their family. Neoliberal discourses of choice largely silence critiques of structural relations constituting social positioning of individuals and the understanding of processes of neoliberal subjectification.

The five participants produce an assemblage of ideas to explain that social changes have impacted negatively on boys’ achievement and behaviour. While Ben and David critique the working priority of parents as a part of lifestyle choices, they do not acknowledge that the changing demands of the economy necessitate this from others. Moreover, feminism’s putative liberalisation of the labour market for women is seen as a substantive problem for families and boys. Pertinently, this discourse of social change pays parsimonious attention to transformations of labour markets and workplaces ensuing from neoliberal capitalism, including marketisation, allowing participants to link social changes, student behaviour and achievement to feminism.

Jackie rejects the ‘conflicting roles’ discourse to explain boys’ supposed problems and views the growth of the neoliberal enterprising individual subject as affecting males and females equally in society and education:

Jackie: I think there is a bit more equality, and a bit more individuality, you know, people are thinking of living their lives singularly instead of as couples... So I think boys feel individual pressure more now rather than having to think

about what they are going to have to do with the education they have received for someone else, not just themselves. I don't know if people expect anything different of boys than they do of girls now. I mean, because people are expected to make their own way.

Moreover, Jackie expatiates the changes in attitude to education brought about by neoliberalism and the constitution of education as an individual's investment for greater purchase in the labour market:

Jackie: I think that now it means people who are considered to be conservative are achievement based and they are looking at the achievements of their children and not the content, they are not interested in the content of their children's learning but more so the achievement base for career prospects and to be members of society. I consider those conservative values in a sense.

Question: What are non-conservative values?

Jackie: That you are more interested in your child's engagement with subject matter and that they are happy in what they are doing and they are enjoying their education and not necessarily as focussed on where that education may take them in the future.

Jackie speaks of the influence on education of the neoliberal discourse of outcomes, achievements and performance and its constitution of the 'competitive individual' subject, a mechanism of advanced capitalism's proliferation (Peters, 1996). This has

reformed notions of education as a liberal right to one of legitimate subjectification of economy participants. This is coextensive with making them “*members of society*”, learning how to become responsible citizens within neoliberal capitalism (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1996). While Jackie is critical of conservative values that she associates with achievement and choice in education, Jackie has an uneasy relationship with neoliberal discourse because she mobilises a gender-blind, individualist rhetoric when discussing addressing the needs of boys and girls:

Jackie: I think different students need different teaching strategies but I wouldn't say that was gender related.

Effectively, Jackie eschews a targeted approach to addressing needs of groups of students, including a deconstructive approach to issues related to sexuality in education out of fear of using stereotypes of gender to identify and address the issues, as has been done in the boys' debate. However, the 'addressing individual needs' discourse is more aligned with the neoliberal competitive individual subject rather than a social justice rhetoric, thus greatly marginalizing considerations of group disadvantage and encouraging the 'gender blind' conservative tendencies prominent in society and education.

A conservative assemblage constitutes the participants' construction of equity issues. David mobilises a 'competing victims discourse' to gender equity, believing feminism's putative success in raising female achievement has now disadvantaged boys. The conservative interests informing the Gender Equity Framework (MCEETYA, 1997) also assumed female disadvantage had been overcome, and subsequent modifications to

equity policies of the early 1990s assume males and females are equally but differently disadvantaged. This theme is mobilized by the participants who foreground the liberal feminist notions of access and choice. According to David equity is about equal chances for males and females apparently regardless of what males and females bring to those chances as a result of their social positioning. Similarly, Janet believes gender equity means both genders have equal opportunity to outcomes however she does not elaborate on what this entails. Ailwood (2003) argues that the gender equity policy reflects a struggle over the definitions of gender, and in these responses notions of the social construction of gender are reduced to roles and expectations, which significantly ignore the broader structural relations constituting sexual relations. For example, according to Kylie opportunity of access to jobs and subject choice beyond the traditional sexual binary encapsulate equity while Jackie draws upon a liberal feminist notion of equity to define it as about getting women into positions of power, so as to contribute to the decision making of the population. For all participants, there is a general absence of a ‘which girls? which boys?’ approach to gender equity, although Janet does allude to broader social relations when she discusses “*value-adding*” to the lives of those from lower socio-economic areas. Ben alludes to the competitive world of neoliberalism to make sense of equity:

Question: What does gender equity mean to you?

Ben: Equity is not about ‘he got more than me’ it’s about if you can imagine a playing field regardless of gender, it is playing field at which someone is ready to learn... So equity to me, regardless of gender, is about getting up to that level and whatever is required to get up to that level and that may mean that Sally

gets more resources than Johnny to get her up to that level because Johnny doesn't need them. It's not about everybody gets five of these and everybody gets ten of these, its about whatever is needed for everyone to step up to the same plate and bring them up to the same stage of learning and being able to learn.

Ben's metaphor of the level playing field infers life as a game or competition played by individuals, a reterritorialisation of equity issues within a neoliberal discourse of competition, aligned with the enterprising, competitive individual in the marketplace who must be responsible for maximising their life within the 'normal' frames of the culture. Group disadvantage is absent in his discussion of equity and individual need.

In the following chapter I analyse and synthesise the participants' responses by linking them to the social, political and economic forces constituting the current conservative assemblage largely defining the boys' debate in the public domain.

## 5 Discussion & conclusion

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*It would be good to dynamize thinking, to think of a text, whether book, paper, film, painting, or building, as a thief in the night. Furtive, clandestine, and always complex, it steals ideas from all around, from its own milieu and history, better still, from its outside, and disseminates them elsewhere... A text is not the repository of knowledges or truths, the site for the storage of information... so much as a process of scattering thought, scrambling terms, concepts, and practices, forging linkages, becoming a form of action.*

(Grosz, 1995, 125-126)

This study involved interviewing five pre-service teachers on the issue of boys' education. As the boys' debate has received significant attention in the media and policy domains, generally mobilised around conservative social and political discourses, I have thus far identified the various discourses informing the participants' perspectives, offering a somewhat cursory analysis. Paying attention to the discourses mobilised by the participants, attention has been drawn to the power/knowledge relations that structure and legitimise particular ways of seeing and being in the world, while marginalizing others. Of particular concern were the influences of sexual difference and neoliberalism, two powerful forces constituting and sustaining various aspects of the 'what about the boys?' debate. I have drawn attention to the limitations of the naturalised view of the binary construction of sexuality that dominates commonsense understandings of boys, girls and schooling. I have also identified the impact of neoliberal capitalism on the lives of young people and subjective attributes it makes available. In this concluding chapter I analyse

the participants' responses in light of the broader conservative tendencies shaping social relations and the discursive alliances that mitigate in favour of conservative constructions of the boys' debate and the limitations these effect. In doing so the participants' responses reveal the nature of conservative discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism constituting perspectives on boys' education, and which I argue constitute the conservative assemblage. Moreover, as discussed earlier, I deploy the Deleuzian/corporeal feminist conception of the body to explore how power/knowledge produces certain kinds of bodies and powers in the everyday lives of people.

While Jackie astutely identifies that the media and political hype have exaggerated the perception that boys as a group experience greater problems than girls, the other four participants contrarily supported the polemic. This articulation of male underachievement in education is made possible by a presupposition of male disadvantage constituted through a powerful assemblage of conservative discourses constituting the current cultural context. Furthermore, the apparent identity crisis and anxiety experienced by males presupposed in the 'conflicting roles' discourse articulated by all of the participants at some stage in the interviews attributes blame to the transformed sexual ideologies precipitated by the feminist movement. The five participants identify that 'role confusion' is augmented by transformed labour markets and altered work patterns of males and females, as well as the transformation of the traditional family structure that has reduced the role of fathers in boys' lives. The significance afforded to these are varying, however, there is a consensus that reclaiming men's masculinity is a solution to the 'problem'. The responses signify that the participants are largely informed by conservative discourses of boys' education, not surprising considering its predominance in the media and politics, however, in leaving the feminist/profeminist discourses untouched the participants

uncritically accept a set of problematic assumptions. One assumption of the conservative discourse is the patterns of male underachievement and female achievement represented in the media, which overlook a consideration of ‘which boys’ and ‘which girls’ are failing through an examination of social relations beyond sex. Furthermore, in not critically engaging with the social construction of sexuality more thoughtfully, the participants were unaware of the patriarchal dividend accruing for many males as a result of their structural advantage in society, as well as the problematic constructions of normative masculinity that often imbue social power while also mitigating against academic success. To grasp its significance to the boys’ debate, I will now discuss the powerful essentialist discourses of sexual difference informing the participants’ perception of males and females.

Essentialist discourses of sexual difference were deployed by all of the participants, homogenising males and females by placing them in opposition to each other constrained within the logic of complementarity. Prevalent in conservative discourses of sexual difference, this is characterised in Kylie’s description of boys’ achievement in communication and writing as the “*complete reverse*” to girls. This discourse unfortunately proscribes genuine consideration of the heterogeneity within these groups by reducing incalculable difference into a unity and consequently reifying the fiction of a binary complement, quelling ambiguity and openness. Subsequently, hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity based on this essentialist schema pervade the pre-service teachers’ discourse and pedagogical practices. Males were, for example, often associated with activity, scientificity, roughness, competition, extroversion, and possessing poor communication skills. Subsequently, their curriculum choices were biased towards the sciences, sports and manual arts because these accessed their ‘natural’



disposition and interests. However, rather than signifying the need to broaden boys' capacities, these supposed 'natural' abilities were deployed by the participants as justification for a 'boy-friendly' curriculum and pedagogy, practices which valorise attributes and capacities of hegemonic masculinity. To engage boys the participants, for example, promoted hands-on activities, the use of texts and worksheets that appeal to boys' stereotypical interests believing drawing upon their strengths would alleviate the problems. These beliefs are informed by conservative discourses that infer an *a priori* law to people's sexes, and therefore assume schooling reflects rather than constitutes sex-normative subjectivities. In the light of research suggesting the detrimental effects of stereotyping boys and girls (Jones & Myhill, 2004b; Martino & Frank, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003), these strategies in producing particular male bodies by defining the limits of appropriate masculinity, run the risk of exacerbating the disengagement and disconnection of boys.

Essentialist discourses of sexual difference reduce the complex relation of power/knowledge regimes that constitute subjectivities through the body. Jackie, for example, normalises the rough play of boys on the sports' field and its translation in classroom relations. This ignores the way discourses of hegemonic masculinity valorise sporting prowess and bestow status on the strong and tough, while apportioning humiliation to the weak, or those that eschew sports for the creative arts, to use a crude example. Regimes of sexuality often operate through sporting activities to produce the regular alignment of bodies and body-parts that subsequently produce the male body and its capacities as a particular type. In this case the domination of other bodies through sport and 'play' represents the deployment of a powerful, hard, 'penetrative' and rough style of connection of their body and body-parts in relation to other bodies and objects,

such as sporting equipment. If we assume the connection of bodies constituting an assemblage is driven by the extension of the power of its parts, essentialist discourses such as these work to increase the power of the male body. In fact, David's normalising of boys' interests in manual arts and sports activities also represents how dominant discourses of sexuality legitimise the production of certain powerful capacities of the male body, analogous to Kylie's construction of boys' interests as active rather than passive, preferring the "*messiest*" and "*dirtiest*" activities or hands-on tasks. These activities require the regulation of particular male bodily capacities in a repertoire of actions that reinforce the values and capacities of hegemonic masculinity, such as physical strength, domination, speed, control of others, mastery of objects and emotional toughness. This inquiry draws attention to how the male body and its capacities are produced and normalized through the control and regulation of the connection of bodies and the role of discourses of sexuality in producing these alignments. Corresponding to these norms of masculinity, the connection of bodies in the above examples are neither sensual nor sensitive because an assemblage of discourses, including conservative discourses of sexuality control the connection of the "libidinally charged surface of bodies" (Grosz, 1995, 214). According to Gatens (2000), these 'regimes of truth' harness the potential becomings of bodies, body-parts and their alignments along molar segments of sexual difference, a mode of becoming associated with the attributes and capacities of hegemonic masculinity. The coagulation of these becomings produces the sexual subject.

The relationship between notions of femininity and masculinity are central to the 'assembling' of the male body and its capacities. As mentioned earlier essentialist notions of binary sexuality produces a boundary between the sexes, and Foucault's panopticon is a diagram of power particularly useful for analysing the production of sexual

subjectivities through this relationship (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). The self-fashioning of student masculinities is governed through the technologies of surveillance and self-regulation, conduits for the discursively produced normalising ‘regimes of truth’. The male body and its capacities are policed through regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, requiring exclusion of the feminine, and concomitantly the queer. The pedagogical practices advocated by Ben and Kylie represents this disciplinary process as they produce the alignment of body and body-parts within what is deemed appropriately masculine activity and interest, including the emotions and affects these generate in the body. Hence, Kylie argues that educators must engage boys by responding to their natural disposition: *“It definitely can’t be wussy, it’s got to be cool, and boy-appropriate. It also tends to be more of what is the current peer influence.”* Janet acknowledges the negative effect of peer culture when she says her son will be bullied for sleeping with his *“babies”* because it is considered sensitive, or feminine. The naturalized interests, desires and practices of boys in opposition to girls are produced through the policing mechanisms of peer culture that denigrate the feminine and characterizes one aspect of the essentialist discourses mobilized by the participants. Normalising regimes of sexuality circumscribe ‘feminine’ body alignments for boys and accordingly this regulation reflects the kind of attributes and transformations of male and female bodies tolerable in the culture.

The production of masculinity in boys is considered a cultural priority for the pre-service teachers. All participants spoke of the importance of male role models stating that male teachers were an important strategy schools should endorse. Informed by sex role socialisation theory, it is taken for granted by the participants that the role model operates along the lines of mimicking the idealized role of the father in the lives of boys, simplistically assuming the boys ‘take up’ the behaviours displayed by the male. In

addition, the male role models the participants discussed were unsurprisingly characterised by attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity despite acknowledgement by many of the participants in various instances that ‘masculine identity’ is less than clear, and indeed shifting. Two discourses of the role model were evident. Firstly, Ben and Kylie largely suppose a loss of masculine essence in which case the male role model fills the empty vessel with appropriate masculinity, averting the downward spiral of social degradation based on the emasculation of men. Ben, for example, was adamant that a “*half-assed male example is not good at all*” inferring they need to be big and strong to be useful and his experience in the masculine domains of car driving, flying aeroplanes and camping gave him purchase to be a role model. The other discourse was more so mobilized by David and Kylie in which the male role model was needed to overcome the confusion boys experience with the conflicting messages of being a man. In this case, David believes sportsmen and aggressive, rough males should not be role-models but people who can show boys a wider repertoire of being male. Despite the different notions of role models, because the role-model strategy begins with an essential notion of sex it focuses on the apparent identity of a body rather than what it can do, and as Grosz argues, this is a strategy of control: “In separating what a body is from what a body can do, an essence of sorts is produced, a consolidated nucleus of habits and expectations take over from experiments and innovations. Bodies are sedimented into fixed and repetitive relations...” (Grosz, 1995, 227). Within the context of a reformed sexual order and with the backlash against feminism the masculinizing of boys through role models resonates with conservative discourses, which normalise the modality of becoming possible for male and female bodies.

The role model discourses of the pre-service teachers assume that the heterosexual family structure ensures the acquisition of ‘normative sexual identities’ because males and females, who both raise children, have particular attributes and capacities crucial for ‘normal’ child development. While four of the participants acknowledge or assume that mothers and fathers must raise boys together, each sex has its own important input into the development of their child. According to Kylie boys need fathers more than ever because single mothers are taking the children and “*dads are so busy, working away doing things, busy with their own lives*” such that the absence of male influences may lead to a perversion of being neither male or female. Moreover, four of the participants assume the reformed familial structure means ‘father subjectivities’ should be legitimately transferred to those working with children who become the gatekeepers for regulating the becoming of boys. Because essentialist discourses of sexual difference infer heteronormativity through its demarcating of clear sexual boundaries, the use of males to guide boys through their ‘rites of passage’ reflects a regulatory function of structuring sexual difference and heterosexuality, analogous to the functioning of the traditional family through the control and individualizing of desire (Bogue, 1989). Furthermore, these role model discourses are sustained by problematic underlying assumptions of normative constructions of childhood and adolescent development, reflecting its connection with science within the conservative assemblage increasingly shaping social relations.

There are a number of apparent contradictions in the participants’ discussion relating to sexual difference. How these participants reconcile apparently contradictory ideas requires further research, however, the mix of current discourses on masculinity in the political and social spheres, the impact of discourses of equality through feminism and

discourses of sexual difference provide the basis for making sometimes contradictory judgments. Hence, although all of the participants could discuss supposedly natural sexual differences, these proved to be open-ended. For example, Kylie, who very strongly believed in essential differences between males and females recognises that while boys are not naturally inclined to the nurturing role of caring for a child, “*given the chance and once he’s had the opportunity to practice I think they’re fine at it.*” Unwittingly, naturalness can be overcome with practice, illustrating the performative nature of sexuality rather than its naturalness. For all of the participants including Kylie, rather than foreground the learned aspect to sexual difference, transgressing traditional boundaries signifies a blurring of an *a priori* male and female sexual binary, which produces an unresolvable tension. Janet demonstrates this tension when she argues in a response to a question on the impact of feminism that stereotypes and imposition of role models are constricting, even though she advocates male role models for boys including her own:

Janet: ...not all students are equal, you’re not putting role models on the children in our class, like my teachers did with us, girls did cooking, boys do tech [technical] drawing. [I] wouldn’t be putting role models or stereotype on children in my class, I would hope. I wouldn’t be saying, ‘You’re a boy you shouldn’t be crying’.

Interestingly, it is in response to questions on gender equity and feminism that participants mobilized these social constructionist accounts of sexuality, reflecting the enormous impact these have had on sexual relations. On the question of role-models, David and Ben who both advocate for male role models for boys acknowledge that

females were their role models in adolescence suggesting the role-model function might have less to do with sex than other qualities. Contrary to her position that boys need traditionally masculine teachers, Kylie suggested it was her personable, warm and caring nature that was a value she brought to the teaching of boys. An obvious cause of these contradictions is that essentialist discourses of sexual difference cannot define the limits of sex because bodies can push the limits of the boundaries of sex (Grosz, 1995), which places the body pivotally in any effort to rupture normalized essentialist notions.

The neoliberal capitalist machine is a significant influence on social relations, including the manufacture of a competitive individualist subjectivity imbedded in a culture of regulation and consumption and the reconstitution of the concept of equity. Neoliberal discourses are mobilized by all of the participants, deploying a language of choice, access and individualism to articulate education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, they were generally unaware of how neoliberal economics was reforming social relations and the signifying economy through which they articulate these relations. In fact, modern sexual relations and labour market transformations were generally construed as feminist gains rather than the outcome of economic influences. Janet and Kylie, for example, blame the trend of women in the workforce for problems for boys and men as does David, who believes females have greater opportunity to pursue careers and lifestyles they desire:

David: ...They [males] are no longer the sole provider, the hunter so to speak, a lot of the roles that were basically male roles are done by females...

Kylie: ... and my understanding is as the years have passed by the guys used to go into their father's business or work in the fields, etcetera, and now they are not getting enough male-male time...

Janet: I believe a root of community problems is that women are in the workforce in a very deep-seated way – I believe that's lead to a lot of problems.

The participants aim their fire squarely towards the feminist movement rather than neoliberal social and economic transformations, whose imperative for wealth generation requires more work to be done by more workers. Although Janet says she feels “*conflicted*” because she considers herself a feminist having battled sex discrimination by fighting to be employed as one of the first female drivers in the mines in Western Australia and Queensland, she blames feminism for shaking up traditional sexual relations that have resulted in increasing numbers of women entering the paid work force. Janet also concurs with David’s assertion that male life and work choices are circumscribed by female expectations on males, precipitating ‘role confusion’: on the one hand, men are expected by females to be caring and sensitive counter to their ‘breeding’ and, on the other hand, feminist gains have allowed women’s life and work choices to be broadened at the expense of males whose choices are delimited by the need for them to provide the financial foundations for the family. In these cases, changes that are largely a result of neoliberal economics are blamed on reformed sexual relations, which are attributed to feminism. The deployment of a ‘conflicting roles discourse’ means the social and subjective transformations these economic changes have generated have produced a male role confusion. It is possible to argue that as the emphasis in previous feminist efforts were directed towards increasing access for females in the workplace, sexual reformation has uncritically been attacked for producing changes in the labour market, work patterns and their undesirable social side effects. The point worth repeating is that within the context of feminist backlash this strategy of blaming sexual relations for changes in the labour market that have been largely driven by economic changes feeds into the territory of the capitalist machine by proliferating a fiction that silences its own



operations and effects. Interestingly, it was the participant who frequently mobilized a feminist discourse (Jackie) who identified that males and females must be equally competitive in forging successful careers and lives in a competitive economy, in which case neoliberalism was forging new sexual subjectivities and relations, not the reverse. Despite this, it is clear that the participants' responses reflect the alliance of neoliberal capitalism with conservative anti-feminist discourses.

The reformation of sexuality due to neoliberal economic demands is illustrated by research into the effects of changing economies. The downsizing and closures of mining industries (due to national and global economic demands) in communities that have relied on these industries for employment have altered the conventional working patterns of many working class males (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). As the domain of work has been traditionally significant for the production of masculine subjectivity, changes to established working patterns have produced in many circumstances hyper-masculine subjectivity, a response to their loss of power, status and security. In this case, neoliberal capitalism and discourses of sexuality are obviously brought into a machinic alliance that shapes social relations and subjectivity. It could be argued, therefore, that the mobilizing of conservative discourses of sexual difference and the commitment to remasculinize boys in the current debate reflects the rigidifying of the sexual binary due to the insecurity generated by neoliberal economic changes, especially as these two proliferate strong feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Unfortunately, in foregrounding the sexual subjectivities of boys and the reformation of sexual relations, participants do not discuss in depth the neoliberal reformation of subjectivity.

I have spent some time arguing that the participants eschew economic explanations for challenges faced by males and boys, even when these are patently linked to work patterns and labour markets. I have argued that the participants posit blame to feminism and reformed sexual relations for these economic changes and thus the challenges these have generated. I do not believe, however, that the participants do not recognise the importance of economics in changing social relations, including education, only that they either attribute blame elsewhere or they recognise blame can be attributed in many directions. Ben, for example, blames the competitive economic culture for making people pursue the almighty dollar at the expense of developing positive, connected relations with their families, yet he also blames feminism for generating ‘role confusion’. Kylie also believes work priorities limit family interactions, yet she also attributes *some* of these changes in work to the influence of feminism. Daniel who was critical of the transformation wrought by feminism draws attention to the alliance of discourses of masculinity and neoliberalism when discussing expectations on boys: *“You can’t have someone with the ability to be aggressive and kill and a champion killer on the stock-market or the killer on the battlefield and then also be sensitive and caring...”* The war motif of killing signifies the hegemonic notion of masculinity in this brave new world which, for Daniel, is placed into tension with progressive notions of sexual difference, reflecting a balancing act of competing discourses. However, as the public sphere is defined primarily as masculine because its structure, relations and practices have evolved with the assumption of male bodies (Gatens, 1996), to succeed in the competitive individualist world, hegemonic masculine attributes will locate you in material, economic, political flows of power, in which case being *“sensitive and caring”* (primarily considered attributes of the female body) are incompatible with social success.

The competitive individual subject of the market place, therefore, shares capacities of the masculine subject in which case this alignment suggests the competitive individual develops with an assumption of the male body and its capacities and powers, such as power through domination, aggression, etc. Hegemonic discourses of masculinity are brought into a discursive alliance with neoliberal economic discourses; the sexual subjectivity of males must be aligned with the economically competitive subject and proliferated for its own ends. This is why it is important for neoliberalism to be considered more significantly in understanding the issues in boys' education. While Daniel characterises this as a problem of conflicting roles imposed on men because of the transformation of sexual relations of feminism, his ire might best be aimed at the demands of the public sphere for masculine capacities and powers associated with the growth of a competitive individual subject. The tension Daniel feels should not be considered exclusive to males but all bodies. If the assembling of bodies and subjectivities is largely driven by a logic of incorporation and extension of power, this potentially influences the development of a competitive feminine subjectivity, one that embodies traditionally masculine capacities and attributes in alignment with the female body. While Gatens (1996) argues Western cultures need to devalue the valorised attributes of the male body to produce new configuration of bodies and capacities, this most certainly would require a revaluation of the attributes and capacities associated with neoliberal capitalism and subsequently the transformation of capital and its effects on bodies and subjectivity.

Unable to discuss the operations of neoliberal capitalism in reforming subjectivities and social relations, the participants did not recognise that equity and social justice is increasingly informed by a discourse of neoliberalism and dominated by its competitive

individual subject. The nomenclature of individual needs, access and choice dominated the discussion on equity, social justice and pedagogical engagement, however, this discourse is tightly aligned to conservative political and social tendencies. In Australia gender equity policy has been recast within conservative interests, particular evident in the conservative constructions of sexuality (Ailwood, 2003). The participants of this inquiry mobilise neoliberal discourses of equity that constitute boys and girls as homogenous groups that are equally but differently disadvantaged, presuming equality within wider social-political-economic relations. This discursive space, driven by a free-willing, rational, individualist subject unencumbered by relations of power, reduces consideration of 'group disadvantage' as different orders of disadvantage based on 'race', ethnicity or sexuality are silenced. Defined predominantly as equality of participation within a language of access, the participants' liberal discourse of gender equity circumscribes discussion of equity to choice, access, opportunity, stereotypes and expectations. Moreover, the pre-service teachers' desire to respond to students' individual needs and learning styles potentially silences group disadvantage as a legitimate discourse of social justice and equity. In fact, the current dominant discourse of the reformed 'effective teacher' problematically constructs teaching as a technical process measurable in performance and outcomes. This often assumes a liberal humanist construction of students as individual, rational, free-willing and individual student failure is attributable to the teaching process and not broader social relations that may conspire to produce varying investments in schooling. These neoliberal discourses of equity are particularly conservative because they assume a liberal humanist notion of subjectivity and, consequently, delimit consideration of the heterogeneity of social relations that constitute subjectivity. This new equity discourse naturalises the 'responsible citizen' as a mode of subjectivity who must operate within established networks of power. This

includes the circuits of power that constitute normative sexual subjectivities, which for the participants are essentialist. This alliance ensures constraint in considering the powerful way discourses of sexuality work on the body to produce effects that are read as the immutable interior of one's being. Finally, these discourses reify the competitive individual culture as the truth of our times. Within education and policy domains, these assumptions operate as regulatory mechanisms for the production of sexed bodies according to sexual norms and extend the reach of our new economic culture by establishing the 'rules of engagement' for operating in this increasingly competitive world.

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## Final reflections

This research was generated by a concern over the increasing power of conservative tendencies shaping social relations. I aimed to explore the discourses informing the current context and the discursive alliances that intensify the power of these conservative forces. This inquiry argues that, within the context of feminist backlash, feminism is often attributed the blame for social change. It is possible that because liberal feminist energies were particularly directed towards broadening and expanding access for women to workplaces previously the domain of men, a discursive space has been opened up for criticising feminism and shifting sexual relations. In any case, these positions extend conservative forces. The insecurity generated by economic changes and re-inscription of subjectivity by the competitive individualist world is arguably producing a defence of masculinity. Making meaning of these changes in the world through the lens of sexual relations has resulted in a retreat to the security of rigid sexual boundaries and relations which circumscribe to a large extent engaging with the social construction of sexuality as

a way to address issues for boys in school and men more generally. Furthermore, in this competitive world whereby the consumer culture and neoliberal economic imperatives capture human becomings, bodily attributes of control, domination and aggression appear to be commonplace as individuals may endeavour to overcome their feelings of powerlessness and insecurity in a fast-changing world. Unfortunately, this is a double bind because some people like the participants appear to retreat into the *very cause* of their insecurity; that is, economic competition, rigid sexual boundaries and attributes of hegemonic masculinity and the competitive individual subject that values competition and disconnection, aggression and emotional detachment. However, rather than characterise these subjective movements as a defence against anxiety or fear, it is likely that currently the social strata constituted by assemblages of neoliberal capitalism and essentialist discourses of sexuality, along with a myriad of others, is making available opportunities for bodies to extend their subjective and bodily power. That is, rather than positioning males and boys as victims of transformed social relations, these changes along with the hegemonic discourses of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism, have provided the opportunity for their power to be experienced, consolidating and extended in new ways, and the boys' debate assemblage is one resource for effectuating this becoming. Subsequently, the boys' debate is an opportunity for proliferating the conservative assemblage (social, economic, moral, discursive) increasingly constituting our world.

Given the sample used to come to these conclusions, there are obvious implications for university teacher education courses. A focus on the role of sexuality in social reality must be explored for students to grasp how power/knowledge relations constitute and legitimate particular ways of seeing and being in the world, and consequently constraints

on transformations and becomings. Other researchers highlight the impact of dominant discourses of sexuality on teacher pedagogy and student experiences and these must be problematised and interrogated (Martino and Frank, 2006) to address the constraints on male and female subjectivities and how these are operationalised through the body. This interrogation may be a challenge when higher education is itself subject to the conservative assemblage of education markets, corporate managerialism and the devaluing of sociological approaches to education.

In line with my theoretical approach to this inquiry, let me state emphatically in this conclusion that this study is not merely an object of representation, although it does articulate partially 'what is'. As Grosz argues above, texts are creative and inventive, forging new linkages, connections and alignments of terms, knowledges and ideas. As an assemblage with its critical encounter with hegemonic conservative forces and feminist theories, this inquiry is primarily concerned with affirming the potential for things to be otherwise beyond the limits of social tolerances. My inquiry aims to transform not only how we think about ourselves, education, our world, but also our very being and I have deployed the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming' in this endeavour, particularly in my conceptualisation of subjectivity, sexual difference and the body (Colebrook, 2002; Grosz, 2004). This ontology of becoming affirms the constant machinic connectivity that constitutes the social and in this regard the potential for new alignments, new beginnings and mutations in a dynamic, experimental world that resists stasis and fixity. This embraces the potential to be otherwise, including overcoming subjectivism, or attributing a foundation or ground to *being* beyond the strategy of becoming by emphasising the subject as an effect of practice (Colebrook, 1999), something the participants could not do. I argue people need to resist the dissociation between neoliberal capitalism, social

changes and modern modes of sexuality. Furthermore, conceptions of sexual difference must be broadened although it should hardly be surprising that the reverse is happening for many. As the history of sexual difference, the stories our culture tells about ourselves and our world, the practices of our culture that form our traditions have largely been predicated on essentialist notions of sexual difference and unsettling this dominant narrative, this evolutionary development will unsettle the foundations of our knowledge, being and potential becoming. Without embracing this 'potential' through experimentation in our encounters with the world, we may reduce the possibility for new happenings, new becomings, mutations and the untimely that have thus far intervened to give life to the world.



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