

Pupils' sexual and gender identities

1 Double standards

A double standard exists when we apply one set of moral standards to one group but a different set to another group. In the case of gender identity, Sue Lees (1993) identifies a double standard of sexual morality in which boys boast about their own sexual exploits, but call a girl a 'slag' if she doesn't have a steady boyfriend or if she dresses and speaks in a certain way. Sexual conquest is approved of and given

We have seen how socialisation into a gender identity strongly influences pupils' achievements and their subject preferences. Here we examine some of the different ways in which pupils' experiences in school help to construct and reinforce their gender and sexual identities. These experiences may all contribute to reinforcing what Bob Connell (1995) calls 'hegemonic masculinity' and the dominance of heterosexual masculinity and the subordination of female and gay identities.

4 Gendered career opportunities

An important reason for differences in subject choice is the fact that employment is highly gendered: jobs tend to be sex-typed as 'men's' or 'women's'. Women's jobs often involve work similar to that performed by housewives, such as childcare and nursing. Women are concentrated in a narrow

The same may be true of some science subjects, especially in mixed schools. For example, as the Institute of Physics found, "There is something about doing physics as a girl in a mixed setting that is particularly off-putting." Peer pressure is a powerful influence on gender identity and how pupils see themselves in relation to particular subjects. In mixed schools, peers police one another's subject choices so that girls and boys adopt an appropriate gender identity, with girls pressured to avoid subjects such as physics. By contrast, an absence of peer pressure from the opposite sex may explain why girls in single-sex schools are more likely to choose traditional boys' subjects. The absence of boys may mean there is less pressure on girls to conform to restrictive stereotypes of what subjects they can study.

Similarly, a study of American college students by Alison Dewar (1990) found that male students would call girls 'lesbian' or 'butch' if they appeared to be interested in sport. Similarly, a study of American college students by Alison Dewar (1990) found that male students would call girls 'sporty' have to cope with an image that contradicts the conventional female stereotype. This may explain why girls are more likely than boys to opt out of sport. Carrie Paechter (1998) found that because pupils see sport as mainly within the male gender domain, girls who are 'sporty' have to cope with an image that contradicts the conventional female stereotype. This may explain why girls are more likely than boys to opt out of sport. Subject choice can be influenced by peer pressure. Other boys and girls may apply pressure to an individual if they disapprove of his or her choice. For example, boys tend to opt out of music and dance because such activities fall outside their gender domain and so are likely to attract a negative response from peers.

3 Gender identity and peer pressure

range of occupations. Over half of all women's employment falls within only four categories: clerical, secretarial, personal services and occupations such as cleaning. This sex-typing of occupations affects boys' and girls' ideas about what kinds of job are possible or acceptable. Thus for example, if boys get the message that nursery nurses are female, they will be less likely to opt for a course in childcare. This also helps to explain why vocational courses are much more gender-specific than academic courses, since vocational studies are by definition more closely linked to students' career plans.

Gender, vocational choice and class

There is a social class dimension to choice of vocational course. Working-class pupils in particular may make decisions about vocational courses that are based on a traditional sense of gender identity. For example, most of the working-class girls studied by Carol Fuller (2011) had ambitions to go into jobs such as child care or hair and beauty. This reflected their working-class habitus – their sense of what is a realistic expectation for 'people like us'. These ambitions may arise out of work experience placements, which are often gendered and classed. For example, Fuller found that placements in feminine, working-class jobs such as nursery nursing and retail work were overwhelmingly the norm for the girls in her study. Fuller concludes that the school was implicitly steering girls towards certain types of job – and hence certain types of vocational course – through the work experience placements it offered them.

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Gender and subject choice

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Investigating how schooling reinforces gender identities

achievers'. By contrast, middle-class 'real Englishmen' projected an image of 'effortless achievement' – of succeeding without trying (though in some cases actually working hard 'on the quiet'). Interestingly, Redman and Mac an Ghaill (1997) found that the dominant definition of masculine identity changes from that of the macho lads in the lower school to that of the real Englishmen in the sixth form. This represents a shift away from a working-class definition based on toughness to a middle-class one based on intellectual ability. This reflects the more middle-class composition and atmosphere of the sixth form.

- The issue of how schooling reinforces gender identities has certain important **research characteristics** – particular features that may make it easy or difficult to investigate. For example:
- The gender of the researcher is likely to play a particularly important part. Male pupils and even male teachers may 'play up to' or patronise a female researcher, while female pupils may feel intimidated by a male researcher.
 - Some cases of gender identity reinforcement, such as verbal abuse, are explicit, direct and easy to identify and investigate. Others are more subtle and indirect, leaving them open to different interpretations.
 - Some head teachers and governors may feel that researching this issue could lead to increased gender stereotyping by drawing attention to it. As a result, they may refuse the researcher access.
 - Peer group pressure is an important part of the process of reinforcing gender identities. This creates difficulties for the researcher, who will have to find ways to uncover individual variations in attitudes within the peer group.
 - Those involved in the process of reinforcing gender identities may not be aware of what they are doing, so there may be little point in a researcher asking them about the issue.
- 1 What other research characteristics of how schooling reinforces gender identities can you think of? You could consider issues of access, gender stereotyping etc particular to investigating this topic.
- 2 Using the research characteristics listed above and any others you can think of, identify two strengths and two limitations of using **unstructured interviews** to investigate how schooling reinforces gender identities. You can read more about unstructured interviews on pages 127–34.

2 Verbal abuse

status by male peers and ignored by male teachers, but 'promiscuity' among girls attracts negative labels. Feminists see these double standards as an example of a patriarchal ideology that justifies male power and devalues women. Double standards can be seen as a form of social control that reinforces gender inequality by keeping females subordinate to males.

What Connell calls "a rich vocabulary of abuse" is one of the ways in which dominant gender and sexual identities are reinforced. For example, boys use name-calling to put girls down if they behave or dress in certain ways. Lees (1980) found that boys called girls 'slags' if they appeared to be sexually available – and 'drags' if they didn't.

Similarly, Paechter sees name-calling as helping to shape gender identity and maintain male power. The use of negative labels such as 'gay', 'queer' and 'lezzie' are ways in which pupils police each other's sexual identities.

For example, Andrew Parker (1996) found that boys were labelled gay simply for being friendly with girls or female teachers. Both Lees and Paechter note that these labels often bear no relation to pupils' actual sexual behaviour. Their function is simply to reinforce gender norms and identities.

3 The male gaze

There is also a visual aspect to the way pupils control each other's identities. Mac an Ghaill refers to this as the 'male gaze': the way male pupils and teachers look girls up and down, seeing them as sexual objects and making judgements about their appearance.

Mac an Ghaill sees the male gaze as a form of surveillance through which dominant heterosexual masculinity is reinforced and femininity devalued. It is one of the ways boys prove their masculinity to their friends and is often combined with constant telling and retelling of stories about sexual conquests. Boys who do not display their heterosexuality in this way run the risk of being labelled gay.

4 Male peer groups

Male peer groups also use verbal abuse to reinforce their definitions of masculinity. For example, as studies by Epstein and Willis show, boys in anti-school subcultures often accuse boys who want to do well at school of being gay or effeminate.

Similarly, Mairtin Mac an Ghaill's (1994) study of Parnell School examines how peer groups reproduce a range of different class-based masculine gender identities. For example, the working-class 'macho lads' were dismissive of other working-class boys who worked hard and aspired to middle-class careers, referring to them as the 'dickhead

5 Female peer groups: policing identity

As we have seen, Archer shows how working-class girls gain symbolic capital (status and popularity) from their female peers by performing a hyper-heterosexual feminine identity. This involves constructing a glamorous or 'sexy' Nike appearance using particular brands and styles. Female peers police this identity and girls risk making themselves unpopular and being called a 'tramp' if they fail to conform.

Jessica Ringrose's (2013) small-scale study of 13–14 year old working-class girls' peer groups in a South Wales school found that being popular was crucial to the girls' identity. As the girls made a transition from a girls' friendship culture into a heterosexual dating culture, they faced a tension between:

- An idealised feminine identity of showing loyalty to the female peer group, being non-competitive and getting along with everybody in the friendship culture.
- A sexualised identity that involved competing for boys in the dating culture.

Thus as Currie et al (2007) argue, while relationships with boys can confer symbolic capital, this is a high risk game. This is because girls are forced to perform a balancing act between these two identities:

- Girls who are too competitive and/or think themselves better than their peers risk 'slut shaming' – being labelled as sluts and excluded from the friendship culture.
- On the other hand, girls who don't compete for boyfriends may face 'frigid shaming' by the other girls. Shaming is thus a social control device by which schoolgirls police, regulate and discipline each other's identities.

'A'boffin' identity Girls who want to be successful educationally may feel the need to conform to the school's notion of the ideal feminine pupil identity. As Reay (2001) found, this involved the girls having to perform an asexual identity, presenting themselves as lacking any interest in boyfriends or popular fashion.

As a result, they risk being given the identity of 'boffin' and excluded by other girls (as well as boys). However, as Francis (2010) found, middle-class female boffins may respond in kind by defining other, working-class, girls as 'chavs'.

6 Teachers and discipline

Research shows that teachers also play a part in reinforcing dominant definitions of gender identity. Chris Haywood and Martin Mac an Ghaill (1996) found that male teachers told boys off for 'behaving like girls' and teased them when they gained lower marks in tests than girls. Teachers tended to ignore boys' verbal abuse of girls and even blamed girls for attracting it.

Sue Askew and Carol Ross (1988) show how male teachers' behaviour can subtly reinforce messages about gender. For example, male teachers often have a protective attitude towards female colleagues, coming into their classes to 'rescue' them by threatening pupils who are being disruptive. However, this reinforces the idea that women cannot cope alone.

Topic summary

Girls now do better than boys at all stages of education. Some explanations focus on external factors outside the education system – changes in the family, more employment opportunities for women, the impact of feminist ideas and changes in girls' ambitions.

Others focus on changes within education, such as the influence of feminist ideas via equal opportunities policies and challenges to stereotyping in the curriculum, more female teachers, coursework and exam league tables. There are gender differences in subject choice. Choices are influenced by early socialisation into gender identities, the image subjects have, peer pressure and career opportunities. Gender differences are more noticeable on vocational than on academic courses.

Education also reinforces gender and sexual identities and hierarchies e.g. through verbal abuse, peer groups, the male gaze, school discipline and double standards of sexual morality.