

# *Expressions of gender: an analysis of pupils' gendered discourse styles in small group classroom discussions*



*Discourse & Society*  
 Copyright © 2003  
 SAGE Publications  
 (London, Thousand Oaks,  
 CA and New Delhi)  
 www.sagepublications.com  
 Vol 14(2): 115–132  
 [0957-9265  
 (200303) 14:2:  
 115–132; 029853]

JULIA DAVIES

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

**ABSTRACT.** This article presents data collected from small discussion groups in English classrooms. The research contributes to debates about boys' relative under-achievement in comparison with that of girls, examining the processes of pupils' learning through talk-related activities. Using discourse analysis techniques, the ways in which pupils signal gender allegiances are explored. It is shown how the girls tended to use a linguistic style in which their engagement with the topic was congruent with their relationship with each other, thus enhancing a co-operative climate for learning. Boys' discourse styles tended to be more dislocated; the discourse of learning conflicted with expressions of heterosexual masculinity. Aspects of the boys' discussions constructed definitions of gender which were obstructive to learning, in a manner likely to impact upon examination results, but more importantly sustaining gendered inequity.

**KEY WORDS:** *discourse analysis, educational achievement, gender*

## *Introduction*

This article presents aspects of data taken from a project (Davies, 1999) enquiring into the relationship among talk, gender and learning. The work contributes to debates about the apparent under-achievement of boys (Clark and Millard, 1998; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997; Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED], 1998; Woodhead, 1996) and resurrects unresolved issues raised in the 1980s about girls' position in schools (Arnot and Weiner, 1987; Mahony, 1985). Moreover, this investigation adds to the increasing body of research into language and gender (Cameron, 1985; Coates, 1996; Lakoff, 1975). The relationship between talk and learning has been well demonstrated (Barnes et al., 1969; Department of Education and Science [DES], 1975; Vygotsky, 1962) thus rendering research into spoken language and achievement

pertinent. Moreover, pupils are commonly required, in UK schools at least, to work in discussion groups in order to share ideas, investigate problems, debate issues and so on. Thus, this research has broad cross-curricular ramifications.

### *Gender and education in the 1980s*

During the 1980s sociological education research demonstrated how girls' schooldays often saw them placed at a disadvantage relative to boys (Mahony, 1985; Spender and Sarah, 1980; Swann, 1992). For example, the work identified the disproportionate amount of teacher attention enjoyed by boys in comparison with girls (Spender and Sarah, 1980; Swann and Graddol, 1988) and highlighted boys' domination of classroom discourse (Spender and Sarah, 1980).

Mahony (1985: 70) also reported on male monopoly of linguistic and geographical space, arguing

The construction of male identity and in particular the social construction of male sexuality is crucial in the maintenance of male power and it is this which we have witnessed in the mixed sex classroom.

Yet she noted also, how non-macho boys fall victim to male power – a theme I have found significant in my own research.

The National Curriculum for England and Wales (DES, 1989) was introduced in the 1980s, comprising statutory orders and non-statutory teaching guidance. The guidance warned, 'There are considerable differences between the sexes in typical speech styles, which carry implications for assessment' (DES, 1989: 11.14). The comments reflected the deterministic nature of popular gender and linguistics research of the decade (Spender, 1980), seeing girls as needy, quiet and passive (DES, 1989: 11.14).

### *Gender and education in the 1990s*

In contrast, more recent publications urge attention to boys' needs (Basic Skills Agency, 1997; Frater, 1997; Millard and Walsh, 2001; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998).

With the focus of the academic lens now turned towards boys, the casual observer could be forgiven for being reminded of Monty Python sketches of competing suffering. The scenario has been characterized as a 'pro-girl versus pro-boy shoot out' (Connell, 1996: 207).

Debate, in the UK at least, has been high profile (DfEE, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). 'The phenomenon of boys underachievement' seems to have dominated educational discussion in the 1990s (Younger et al., 1999: 327) and seems set to continue with urges and polemic from a government intently focusing on statistics concerning measurable achievement (Mahony, 1998). Figures showing girls' accelerating dominance over boys in examination results have been used to identify the demise of boys' progress (DfEE, 1997).

Intended to render transparent the achievements (or otherwise) of pupils, the examination results presented in gendered sets offer a simplistic view obfuscating a more complex picture. The statistics provide a partial perspective ignoring ethnicity and class for example (OFSTED, 1998) and certainly do not reflect the full picture of either gender's social position in schools. Surely neither gender has drastically changed its behaviour as implied by the alternating descriptions across the decades. Different types of data have been presented to mourn the circumstances of first one, then the other, gender. As OFSTED (1998: 26) remarked,

Gender differences . . . for educational performance is not self-evident. There is little research that directly links classroom interaction with academic outcomes. In view of the current interest in the effectiveness of different teaching methods and different forms of classroom organisation, this could be a fruitful area for future research.

Research needs to continue if we are to address the processes which maintain inequity and this project is intended to contribute to such a body of work, synthesizing arguments about socialization, language and educational achievement.

### *Data collection and analysis*

During the late 1990s I taped 14-year-old pupils involved in several speaking and listening activities during their English lessons. Six classes (182 pupils) from three different comprehensive schools in the north of England were involved. The pupils were organized in both single and mixed sex settings so that a comparison could be made of the way group gender composition, as well as tasks, affected pupils' discussion work. The recordings were made during 'ordinary' lessons using unobtrusive equipment; the usual classroom teacher was present throughout. Whilst some of the transcriptions might suggest to many readers that the pupils were 'out of control', the classrooms all retained an orderly, unexceptional atmosphere. The extracts below were taken mainly from discussions of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*; a few further examples show pupils in a task involving them exchanging memories about earlier schooldays, whilst another was a role-play of teachers tackling a bullying problem.

A combination of mixed and single sex groups tackled each task. To achieve this arrangement, each pupil selected a partner, while the class teacher organized pairs to create four-person groups. Thus, pupils could work 'securely' with friends, whilst also meeting the challenge of articulating ideas to lesser known others. Owing to pupils' tendency to work in single sex groups (Davies, 1999), intervention was required to organize mixed sex groupings to allow comparative analysis. For the purposes of this article, examples are taken solely from single sex groups. Transcript conventions are explained in the Appendix.

Using Discourse Analysis techniques, the research considers whether discussions fulfilled the tasks set and whether there was variation according to gender. Dangers in such analysis include the temptation to over-generalize, to designate a linguistic feature as 'typical' of one gender and make rash

conclusions regarding their signification. Although patterns were sought, the use of an intransigent framework was avoided. The precedent of progress has been made by other linguists (Coates, 1996; Eckert and McConnell Ginet, 1995; Eggins and Slade, 1997; Goodwin, 1998) and their findings and methods informed this work. Moreover the research is contextualized within current sociological debate (Connell, 1996), with awareness that the extent to which individuals lead gendered lives is varied. It has been demonstrated that there is an element of choice as to how far individuals perform gender in particular circumstances (Coates, 1996; Eckert and McConnell Ginet, 1995; Goodwin, 1998). Certainly, many of my subjects demonstrated variety in their performances, changing according to linguistic context (field, mode and tenor).

The data I gathered were complex: specifically the gendered variety of linguistic patterns, how tasks and group composition affected behaviour. Here, however, space permits representation of only a sample. In this article I focus on showing how:

- Girls demonstrated and cemented their social loyalties via discussion work, challenging neither their membership of 'female culture' nor the work process, referred to as *polyphony* (Coates, 1996);
- Boys' demonstrations of their social loyalties severely challenges the work process and inhibits learning (referred to as *cacophony*);
- Boys' use of sexist language and stereotypes is rarely challenged by other boys – potentially harming themselves as well as girls;
- Boys tend to invoke the use of emblems from popular culture in order to avoid self-revelation.

In the discussions of the data below, lengthier examples of girls' discussions are given because of the way in which the points itemized earlier emerged more clearly in longer extracts for girls than in the more concise way the boys' language illustrated the contrasting features. Excerpts selected for this article concentrate on exemplifying ways in which pupils communicated gendered allegiances through their discussions.

### *Being friends: The girls' discussions*

The girls in my sample consistently produced friendly talk, comfortably fulfilling both social and educational work. The co-operative style required to achieve the tasks was easily accommodated by the girls and ran along congruent lines with their manner of forming friendships. Coates (1996) has already described the way in which talk forms the basis of women's friendships; building on her findings and analysis techniques, I have observed how well 'friendship talk' suits the learning process (Vygotsky, 1962). The unanimity of purpose characteristic of the girls' discussions supported the development of a group identity in which similarities among individuals were emphasized whilst, conversely, differences were relegated. The process by which this was achieved was performed implicitly

through engagement styles. Coates (1996) uses the musical term 'polyphony' to describe the way in which discourse structure demonstrates, even enacts, harmonious relationships.

The all-girls groups did not express their gender in explicit ways nor did they articulate particular requirements for indeed, such membership was never questioned. The stated goals of the work, to collaborate and negotiate through tentative exchanges of opinion, ideas and memories, represented no obstacle to the development of personal friendship goals. Gender allegiances were expressed in subtle ways; they were not foregrounded. The girls worked in a supportive climate in which they could experiment with words and struggle with ideas together. Their discussions showed that learning is facilitated in an environment in which participants share a sense of purpose and social goals could be achieved through academic agenda.

In many tasks, girls devoted time to storytelling. As Maybin (1997: 48) says, this technique allows a:

revisiting . . . (of) issues in different stories and exchanges from different perspectives. Thus the recursive and iterative process of collaborative meaning-making between children is carried on at three inter-related levels: through the dialogues they reconstruct within stories, through the conversational exchanges from which the stories emerge and through the 'long conversations' across space and time.

In my observations, girls comfortably narrated anecdotes, confidently using a range of strategies to enliven them. The tales seemed familiar and well-rehearsed with pupils re-framing themes to suit different tasks.

Personal stories allow speakers to construct versions of themselves to entertain, and display linguistic expertise. Tellers not only shape versions of experiences past, they hold centre stage in constructing versions of themselves (Eggs and Slade, 1997; Hardy, 1975). Because of the predominance of story telling in the girls' groups, I show later a detailed example. Here girls supported others in taking centre stage, often also participating in the joint narration of events which they re-lived and reconstructed in order to develop their understanding of each other and the themes presented.

---

7. Rosa Right can I just say when I went to St. Mary's/you know/down the bottom/first day I were about -/I don't know how big I were/I were about six/no I were about five/I came and I had my red wellies on/ cos it were raining/had my rain coat on and I had my (glovies) on right/ and my mum walked me into school/and she walked me into class and saw my teacher and I saw Lou/and I thought/oh she looks nice/You know when they say ah does anyone want to look after Rosa for the day and show her round?/

---

8. Lou Yeah/

---

9. Rosa Lou put HER hand up/and I sat next to her/and we were painting/

---

10. Lou Yeah/

11. Rosa We were doing finger painting and I grabbed all this paint and I just threw it at Ali and we started having a paint fight and I thought it was really funny because I'd made a new FRIEND/
12. All <laughter>/
13. Rosa my first day of school/Ali. I've just told em about first day at school when me and you had a paint fight/you were my first friend/there is one about friendship for you/anyone else?/
14. All <laughter>
15. Rosa Right come on Jan/you've got to have something to say./
16. Jan I'm thinking/
17. Rosa now when Jan was a supermodel she learnt a very valuable lesson right/ she will not forget her FRIENDS/cos you see we were all poor and she was rich/
18. Jan Thankfully then we sat down and talked about it and I realised my friends were more important/
19. Bel And she gave us all a million quid/<laughs>/
20. Jan Well. not really a million/but I gave them all some money/and now I don't do modelling anymore so I'm poor./like THEM/
21. All <laughing>/

Here, Rosa took centre stage re-counting a memory of her early schooldays; exemplifying what she regarded as a positive experience – meeting and making friends. Beginning with a move which ostensibly sought permission from the others to tell the story, 'can I just say', this interrogative was nevertheless treated as a statement of intent by the rest of the group, as no-one offered an affirmative, nor did Rosa pause for their reply.

The story is well-constructed, beginning with a description of the setting, 'St. Mary's . . . down the bottom', followed by a narration of a main action (having a paint fight), and a resolution (making friends), which demonstrated a message about friendship. Rosa's description invited her listeners to appreciate the cuteness of a young child in 'rainy day uniform' using the vocabulary of the child, 'wellies', to facilitate empathy. The use of direct speech similarly recreated the naïveté of a nursery age child, 'oh she looks nice', and she then reminded her audience of the universality of the event, 'You know when they say. . .'. Through a focus on the particular, Rosa required the others to generalize and consider the haphazard and often bizarre circumstances of making friends. Via a description of her personal, somewhat quirky way of making an allegiance, she invited listeners to reflect on the universal aspects of nursery school life. Her story concentrated mainly, however, on the depiction of herself as a child and in this way she viewed her younger self from new adult eyes. The identity of Rosa is offered both as a nursery child and as a reflective teenager, cementing her relationship with

the others but also making a general point. In this way Rosa was able to make her story relevant to the topic under discussion and to generate a feeling of concord.

The rest of the group offered support to Rosa as she told her story, with unobtrusive minimal responses from Lou at staves 8 and 10, 'yeah' and appreciative laughter on staves 12 and 14. Moreover, Rosa sought to involve her listeners, through direct addresses, 'you know when they say. . .?' and later on stave thirteen 'Ali. I've just told 'em about . . .'. The use of the vocative 'Ali' at this point as well as the inclusion of Ali in her story promoted a sense of inclusion for the group.

Rosa reiterated the message of her story 'there is one about friendship for you' summarizing relevance of her contribution, thus signalling her intention to remain on task, having managed also to celebrate her friendship with one of the group members. She invited others to speak at this point then specifically named Jan at two points on staves 15 and 17, providing her not only with a story line ('when Jan was a supermodel she learned a very valuable lesson'), but validating the story too. Rosa dominated the discussion in this way, managing the interaction, using vocatives to select a speaker and choosing the topic. Nevertheless, her leadership was not challenged nor did it seek to prohibit contributions but provided opportunities for interaction.

Jan took up the story which Rosa suggested, linking her opening phrase at stave 18 to Rosa's opening on stave seventeen. Thus, the use of the adverbial 'thankfully' allowed a seamless continuation of Rosa's narrative and this reinforced the agreement Rosa solicited in her suggestion. In this way, the girls demonstrated their solidarity through not just the semantic content of their utterances, but through the use of coherent grammatical structures.

The somewhat heavy handed moral of Jan's story, that friendship is more important than money, was drawn out through the dramatic contrast provided by Rosa in stave 17, 'we were all poor and she was rich'. This stated the underlying moral that friendship for this group is based on commonalties, so that the sharing of riches and a demotion back to the group's communal poverty allowed an esprit de corps based on similarity, 'so I'm poor like THEM'. In this way the group made a unified statement about their friendship, fully exemplified through the language of this text, that affinity is gained through concord – both in terms of values and in linguistic cohesion.

It is not just through the telling of stories that interlocutors collaboratively create texts. There are other ways of linking exchanges, offering mutual support, and expressing personal allegiance. In many of the discussion groups the pupils were able to share meanings and develop ideas using cohesive strategies which expressed a concerted effort, built on each others' contributions and afforded opportunities to learn together in a united way.

For example, in discussions of a Tennyson ballad (*The Lady of Shalott*) pupils were not required to offer a personal account of themselves. They needed to concentrate on the text, extracting information from it, deconstructing some of the meanings and to formulate opinions, nevertheless they did refer to personal

details, albeit in a relevant way. It was again particularly the girls' groups which produced highly cohesive texts in which great attention was given to the poetry while relationships were simultaneously managed through the work.

Female discussants often even used similar intonation patterns and voice pitch to each other. Initial transcription of the texts was often tricky because pupils often spoke as if one voice. The high level of grammatical concord in the discourse allowed pupils to jointly construct a text which passed seamlessly from speaker to speaker. Thus, the value of individual contributions seemed less emphasized than the enterprise of jointly deconstructing the poetry and seeking consensus.

In this next example, for instance, the girls accumulated layer upon layer of adjectival and adverbial phrases to produce a verbal representation of the scene depicted in the ballad:

- 
11. Cath Well it's got lots of long fields/it's like countryside/  
-----
12. Julie Peaceful place/  
-----
13. Lisa Ermm (.)/  
-----
14. Julie It's got lots of flowers and (.)/  
-----
15. Katie Crops/  
-----
16. Julie | It's got (.) barley (.) and thyme (.)=  
Lisa | Lots of fields and rivers/  
-----
17. Emma Big countryside/  
-----
18. Lisa It's got a river=  
-----
19. Julie It's got wildlife/  
-----
20. Emma Very idealistic=  
-----
21. Julie Yes/  
-----
22. Emma Like in a fairy tale/  
-----
23. Lisa Picturesque/  
-----
24. Julie The mood is like peaceful and silent and nice and relaxing/  
-----
25. Emma Calm/  
-----
26. Lisa Lazy. laid back/  
-----
27. Julie Yes/  
-----
28. Emma It seems (.) as if (.) <laughs> it's just got the (.) scenery (.)/  
-----
29. Julie There's no like (.) towns springing up everywhere/  
-----
30. Lisa It's just fields and sky <sing song voice>/  
-----
31. Julie The same thing for every where (.) for ever and ever/  
-----
32. Lisa The picture that is created is just like (.)/  
-----



33. Emma Fields that go on for ever and meet the horizon so it just looks like it's meeting the sky?/

34. Julie Yeah/

35. Cath It's a very peaceful picture/

36. Julie Yeah (./)

The discourse is poetic in its accumulation of descriptive lexicon, borrowing from the genre of idyllic romanticism. Pupils' vocabulary collocated with each other's across turns, responding in a sympathetic way to the tone of the poem as well as in keeping with each other's use of language. The pupils' syntax matched with each other's, such as in staves 11, 16, 18 and 19 there is repetition of 'It's got . . . + noun phrase'. In addition, the pupils' repetition of 'it's *just* + adverbial' on staves 28, 30 and 33 allowed them to jointly express the unobtrusive mood of the landscape. Moreover the minimal responses used at staves 21, 27, 34 and 36 emphasized a uniform approach. Lisa's use of a singsong intonation at staff 30 encapsulated the relaxed air of the whole group which seemed to be influenced by their total absorption with the poetry itself. Where there was overlap, there was no sense of competition to speak, more an enthusiasm to add to the chorus of an increasing catalogue of epithets in what became a verbal collage.

The pupils working in such collaborative groups attempted to elaborate fully on their answers to questions, seeking to satisfy all aspects of a problem and allowing input from everyone in each question. Responding to the question 'What is the Lady of Shalott weaving?' for example, these girls developed their answer fully in the following way:

220. Liz Well er/what is The Lady of Shalott weaving?/

221. Kit Er a cloak?/

222. Jo She's weaving a magic web/

223. Sal She's weaving her feelings into a fabric-/

224. Kit	By night and day a magic	web with colours gay=/
Liz		She's weaving a magic web/

225. Jo Yeah with lots of colours/

226. Liz What clues are there that The Lady of Shalott is tired of being isolated in the tower?/

227. Sal We've done that one/

228. Kit Yeah/

229. Liz Right/

230. Jo So she's weaving a magic web with colours gay/

231. Liz And it's like weaving her feelings into it/

232. Kit It's her way of expressing her feelings/

233. Liz Yeah it's a way of expressing something/

234. Sal There isn't a way of expressing in words/her way is through colour/

Beginning with an initial literal interpretation, Sal viewed the web as a metaphor and suggests that the Lady of Shalott 'is weaving her feelings into a fabric'. This idea was deconstructed by both Liz and Kit, so that Sal was able to conclude:

234. Sal There isn't a way of expressing in words/her way is through colour/

This process of working on each other's words and phrases in jointly articulated responses to questions exemplifies the real jewels of active learning through talk. All participants freely played with ideas here, evaluating their own and other people's contributions in a secure context finally gaining a deeper understanding of the poetry. The pupils had helped each other to learn.

### *Proving machismo: The boys' discussions*

Many boys' perpetual attention to matters concerning membership of the 'male culture' required them to repeatedly define that culture and demonstrate their worthiness to belong. The discourse of work and the ways in which the boys expressed their gender allegiances were not compatible. Boys frequently had to choose whether to be accepted by their peer group and join in 'macho discourse' or to work hard and become ostracized and have their behaviour and language derided. Where these competing discourses of masculinity and academia collided, I refer to this as 'cacophony' emphasizing the converse way in which these discussions operate to polyphonous discourse (Coates, 1996).

Many groups, both male and female, began their discussions by addressing the tape recorder directly, perhaps introducing themselves by name, by identifying the gender of the group, or as here, by declaring a role for themselves:

177. Bob Hello it's me again/I'm in control/

178. Rick Yep/big gay/<laughs>

In every all-male group the term 'gay' was used frequently in a negative and gratuitous manner to defame other boys and to regulate group membership. Here, as typically, the use of the term did not denote homosexuality, but was used to disempower Bob. The designation 'gay' was never explicitly challenged; only through 'appropriate' behaviour could heterosexual conformity be proved. The term was also used to suggest homosexual tendencies:

61. Sim You seen my bird?/

62. Bob Morris has got a bi-ird/ <chanting/singing>(.)

63. Sim And Bobby hasn't/  
 64. Bob She's a right ugly get/(.)I haven't and I'm proud/  
 65. Sim Yeah/because you are a gay bastard aren't you?/

In this example of off-task discussion, Sim referred to his girlfriend using proprietorial 'my' and denigrating language 'bird'. His question (stave 61) contained an assertion, reminding the group that he had a girlfriend. Bob answered the implicit assertion with a taunting intonation, thus undermining the status associated with coupling. Sim's retort that Bob had no girlfriend (so no associated kudos) was denigrated by Bob's answer to Sim's initial question in which he used slang to insult the girl and by implication, Sim. He reasserted his single status as superior 'I haven't and I'm proud'. Yet Sim concluded that not only was Ant 'gay', but also a 'bastard', playing the trump card in this particular game.

This was a venture of power fought on grounds where not only was it important to be sexually active, but also where girls were treated as mere ancillaries to the reputation being sought. Sim's status depended not only upon his possession of a girlfriend, but also upon her attractiveness. The signification of such associations is made clear here, that sexual credibility is based partly upon the marketability of the girl. The above exchanges show how boys use talk to socially engineer, to police each others' behaviour and to establish a pecking order of masculinity. It has all been off-task social work. Additionally pupils frequently empowered themselves at the expense of others, at times also alluding to great sexual appetite and an easy knowledge of acts which would repulse others (Davies, 1998). Their discourse placed them as perpetrators of sexual acts on passive subjects as seen in this next example:

154. Bob Right then(.) /We've got to think of lessons that we think we'd like/  
 155. Sim <laughs>  
 156. Ant Art and Design/  
 157. Bob SEX/  
 158. Rick Yeah  
 159. Bob Let's have sex sex sex sex sex/  
 160. Rick /practical sex  
 161. Bob Practicals on sex education <each word enunciated very clearly in R.P.>  
 162. Rick What if you just -/ what if you just stuck it in %her arsehole%?/  
 163. Bob <laughs>

The talk was saturated with references to sex, and through repeated references the boys impressed upon their peers their apparently irrepressible sexual urges. In

this construction, girls were passive recipients of male sexual appetite at the mercy of the competence or otherwise of their impulses. The undercurrent of aggression was also manifest in behaviour towards each other in many of the discussions. In this way, the speakers used language which humiliated individual boys but all girls in general.

In announcing the gender of their group these boys emphasized that masculinity is an attribute to be earned rather than an assumed biological certainty. The precariousness of masculinity was emphasized through the declaration of the group's gender:

40. Jim Oh and by the way/this is an all boys group/OK?

41. Andy <laughs>/

42. Pierre It's a little bit late for that/

Jim | \_\_\_\_\_ Most of us are boys<laughs>

43. Kirk | We're close anyway <laughs>/

Analysis of this group's work provides a number of examples in which Pierre was singled out as not possessing all the attributes required by 'real boys'. Life membership is not guaranteed; boys need continually to demonstrate that they deserve to be part of the male group. This same group demonstrated the positive value of maleness and the fragility of its attribution, for example at moments of conflict.

The earlier boys' examples arose from tasks requiring personal reflection on their schooldays. Such discussions saw boys persistently policing the talk, prohibiting 'female values' and embracing references to heterosexual prowess. Frequent diversions away from set tasks, with boys unable to combine gendered social goals with academic ones, were a strong characteristic of this task.

Concentration on literary work was sometimes more successful, but only if care was taken not to show too much absorption in the task. In the next extract, based on *The Lady of Shalott*, Pierre concentrated on answering the question about the colours mentioned in the ballad, spotting words and phrases as well as offering interpretative remarks. His enthusiasm was obvious, but the background of dissent led by Kirk clearly shows how resilient boys often need to be in order to work:

242. Andy What are we on?/

243. Pierre Part three/<high voice>

244. Kirk Ooooh/ <two tone high pitch in mockery of Pierre>

245. Pierre The sun dazzling through the leaves | like orange -/  
Kirk | Pierre Pierre

246. Pierre | **and things it's gorgeous/**  
Kirk | shut up/I'm not bothered/<high pitched mimicry>

247. Pierre And the yellow gold/  
 -----  
 248. Kirk You're just stupid you/  
 -----  
 249. Pierre And a GOLDEN GALAXY/erm/  
 -----  
 250. Kirk Shut up Pierre/  
 -----  
 -----  
 255. Andy Listen to him/Listen to him/oh God/  
 -----  
 256. Kirk **He'll shut up now cos he's gonna smell it!**  
 -----  
 257. Andy **Oh God!**/  
 -----  
 258. Kirk Oh | God  
 Pierre | **Like crystals like with all colours coming out of it!**  
 -----  
 259. Kirk See?/do you HAVE to speak like that and moving your hands about like  
 a queer?<laughs>/  
 -----

Pierre commented relevantly on this poem using sophisticated vocabulary to deconstruct the ballad. He relished the poetry using such words as 'dazzling', 'gorgeous', 'yellow gold' and 'golden galaxy'. His utterances became increasingly loud, moving to an effective simile 'like crystals with all colours coming out of it'. Throughout this episode he was harangued repeatedly by Kirk, and eventually Andy, being called 'stupid', 'queer' and told to 'shut up' and later a 'turnip' and 'bum-bandit'.

Pierre's resilience was remarkable and his persistence in the face of extreme provocation instigated more assertive tactics from Kirk. Having not managed to interrupt Pierre's thought processes, Kirk spoke about him rather than to him, 'He'll shut up now cos he's gonna smell it'. On three occasions in this group Kirk referred to smells as a basis for distraction. The repulsed reaction from Andy was not echoed by Jim or Pierre who conformed to conventions of silence about such matters as bodily functions. Through acknowledging Kirk's remarks, Andy implicated himself in the strategy to prevent Pierre's continuance. Pushed to the limit, Pierre moved on to the next question, having approached this one unilaterally. It might be argued that Pierre dominated the discussion in a way that would have been unacceptable in the girls' groups. However, in this context if he had not done so it would be hard to envisage any work being achieved at all by this group.

Even in better-motivated boys' groups, members typically used 'distancing tactics' when tasks required personal reflection or anecdotal exchange. In order for the learning process to run smoothly alongside social development, amicable relationships were mediated through alternative versions of reality drawn through stereotyped concepts presented by the mass media, for example. Successful discussions arose from tasks which specifically *required* pupils to reflect on popular culture or to demonstrate familiarity with technology. Good relations were usually sustained through humour and if this could be achieved via inter-textual references, then so much the better. In the example below pupils were

asked to role-play teachers tackling a bullying problem in their school. (Role-play has been argued to help boys 'save face' in expressing their own views; QCA, 1998.)

- 
67. Tom Right then./thirdly/
- 
68. Wes Video cameras/
- 
69. Tom A list of ideas which you have/
- 
70. Jon Err/Miss Jones is on camera/<laughs>
- 
71. Mat Suspect enters the room<laughs>
- 
72. Jon I'm now showing suspect item two five A<laughs>
- 
73. Mat D<laughs>
- 
74. Jon Do you recognise this pen?
- 

These boys subverted the teacher role-play and cleverly replaced it with their own ludic play. Pupils often sought opportunities to feed into the discourse an array of sketches which allowed them to display their familiarity with different genres and an ability to take on a range of voices. The above example evoked scenes from crime television with all four boys demonstrating they could enter into other spheres of life than that confined by domesticity and the institution of the school. Through appropriating this kind of language and using emblems from other networks, the boys were able to show through their familiarity with the language of the 'outside world' that they were part of it. The pupils seemed to stand 'at arms length' as it were, from each other and the topic, building relationships on shared understandings from without rather than within themselves. Other references included popular cartoon character impersonations, mention of satellite television sex channels, beer brands and football teams. These carefully chosen emblems were often used in competitive ways to accentuate familiarity with macho motifs; the wrong choices always attracted derision.

### *Conclusions*

The way in which the girls in this study repeatedly told stories together emphasized their sense of being one group, not only in the way they shared the telling, but through the ways in which they sought to mirror each other's experiences through those stories. The girls created a sense of unity through their language creating texts in which individuals formed learning allegiances. The maintenance of amicable relationships seemed to be crucial to the process of learning support and the discussions tended to possess a highly positive aspect and to contain a high number of cohesive devices in the language.

Pressure to conform was not visible, for membership of their groups could be developed through the work as the styles used to manage friendship and work ran along congruent lines. Although the girls gained strength through their group

solidarity, they nevertheless remained the often unconscious victims of boys' language. Although space does not allow me to present here moments of girls' conflict, or of their own sometimes sexist behaviour, it is worth noting nevertheless that they did occasionally accept the male construction of femininity in a manner which prevented them from developing their ideas freely.

The nature of the girls' harmonious scripts derived from the way in which pupils worked together on one theme, exploring possibilities by interweaving new ideas. Such discussions could be described as polyphonous (Coates, 1996: 133). However, where groups' discussions were less cohesive, a cacophonous, chaotic effect resulted. Here it was not possible to blend the work-related discourse with friendship or 'male bonding' discourses, because these did not run along congruent lines.

For the boys, difficulties presented by social constraints were at least as difficult to negotiate as the tasks themselves. The language the boys employed often restricted their freedom to experiment with words and ideas and they were highly reticent to challenge peer pressure. Where boys did experiment, they were sometimes able to enrich their work through intertextual references and humour, but this also had the potential to trivialize issues or to distract from the task. No pupils offered an alternative reading of 'gay', but boys usually adjusted their behaviour in order to avoid the term being directed at them. It was clear that the term represented a complex value system pervading the boys' attitudes to work, even when they were on task and interested.

It is often overlooked that many boys have problems conforming to a macho stereotype, often the butt of homophobic teasing and exclusion from the main group (Nayak and Kehily, 1996). As Connell (1996) has also witnessed, boys were often the victims of their own policing procedures. The vigilant monitoring of deviation from male heterosexual norms exerted great social pressure and this process made the work so much more difficult to negotiate for the boys than for the girls.

It is through verbally articulated displays of seeming homophobia, that the powerful boys in school often set the mood of an anti-school, anti-female culture. As my data demonstrate, boys frequently express both implicitly and explicitly, the view that conformity to educational expectations is feminine thus it is much less problematic for girls to conform to school expectations in this respect. Moreover, the ways in which boys are expected by their peers to behave is often counter to school expectations, requiring them to demonstrate very fine skills of dexterity in order to satisfy the conflicting pressures of their peers and the school. Girls' behaviour, however, gains approval not only from their peers, but also from the institution.

Some of the linguistic patterns I found in this data were very marked, with pressure from male peer groups enforcing social rules particularly strongly. Although girls in these examples remain the victims of the sexist language often employed by boys, the boys nevertheless win only a pyrrhic victory. In order to work towards equity in schools, commitment needs to be invested more broadly

than just in the purely academic arena. Practitioners might question the validity of discussion work in the light of the above data; however, careful structuring of talk task, of group composition and pedagogical style can produce positive discussions in which all pupils can fulfil academic goals without the intrusion of negative social 'noise' (Davies, 1999; QCA, 1998). It remains important that teachers note the impact of gendered group dynamics and that both they and their pupils collaborate to improve the chances of all pupils.

## REFERENCES

- Annot, M. and Weiner, G. (eds) (1987) *Gender and the Politics of Schooling*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Barnes, D., Britton, J. and Rosen, H. (eds) (1969) *Language the Learner and the School*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Basic Skills Agency (1997) *Our Quality Mark for Basic Skills in Secondary Schools*. London: Basic Skills Agency.
- Cameron, D. (1985) *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Clark, A. and Millard, E. (1998) *Gender in the Secondary Curriculum: Balancing the Books*. London: Routledge.
- Coates, J. (1996) *Women Talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Connell, R.W. (1996) 'Teaching the Boys', *Teachers College Record* 98(2): 206–35.
- Davies, J. (1998) 'Taking Risks or Playing Safe: Boys and Girls Talk in the Classroom', in A. Clark and E. Millard *Gender in the Secondary Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, J. (1999) 'Expressions of Gender', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, UK.
- Department of Education and Science (1975) *A Language for Life (The Bullock Report)*. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (1989) *English for Ages 5–16 [The Cox Report]*. London: HMSO.
- Department for Education and Employment (1997) *Excellence in Schools*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Employment (1998a) *Byers Outlines Co-ordinated Plan to Tackle Boys Underachievement – Byers DfEE Press Release 002/98*. London: DfEE.
- Department for Education and Employment (1998b) *Secondary Education Report – Good Progress But Must Do Better – Byers Press Release: 296.98*. London: DfEE.
- Department for Education and Employment (1998c) *Government Acts To Improve Boys' Performance – Morris DfEE Press Release 380/98*. London: DfEE.
- Eckert, P. and McConnell Ginet, S. (1995) 'Constructing Meaning, Constructing Selves: Snapshots of Language, Gender and Class from Belton High', in K. Hall and M. Bucholtz (eds) *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. London: Routledge.
- Eggins, S. and Slade, D. (1997) *Analysing Casual Conversation*. London: Cassell.
- Frater, G. (1997) *Improving Boys' Literacy*. London: Basic Skills Agency.
- Goodwin, M.H. (1998) 'Co-operation and Competition Across Girls' Play Activities', in J. Coates (ed.) *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hardy, B. (1975) *Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination*. London: University of London/Athlone Press.
- Lakov, R. (1975) *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Mahony, P. (1985) *Schools for the Boys*. London: Hutchinson.



- Mahony, P. (1998) 'Girls Will be Girls and Boys Will be First', in D. Epstein, J. Elwood, V. Hey and J. Maw (eds) *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Maybin, J. (1997) 'Story Voices the Use of Reported Speech in 10–12 Year Olds "Spontaneous Narratives"', in L. Thompson (ed.) *Children Talking: The Development of Pragmatic Confidence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Millard, E. and Walsh, J. (2001) *Improving Writing at Key Stage 2 . . . Getting it Right for Girls and Boys*. Huddersfield: Kirklees Metropolitan Council Education Service.
- Nayak, A. and Kehily, M.J. (1996) 'Playing it Straight: Masculinities Homophobias and Schooling', *Journal of Gender Studies* 5(2): 211–30.
- Office for Standards in Education (Arnot, M., Gray, J., James, M. Rudduck, J. and Duveen, G.) (1998) *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance*. London: Stationery Office.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1998) *Can Do Better*. London: QCA.
- Spender, D. (1980) *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.
- Spender, D. and Sarah, E. (1980) *Learning to Lose: Sexism and Education*. London: The Women's Press.
- Swann, J. (1992) *Girls, Boys and Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Swann, J. and Graddol, D. (1988) 'Gender Inequalities in Classroom Talk', *English in Education Oracy Edition* 22(1): 48–65.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962) *Thought and Language*. London: MIT Press.
- Woodhead, C. (1996, 8 March) 'Boys Who Learn to be Losers', *The Guardian*.
- Younger, M., Warrington, M. and Williams, J. (1999) 'The Gender Gap and Classroom Interactions: Reality and Rhetoric?', *British Journal of Sociology* 20(3): 327–43.

## APPENDIX

*Transcription conventions*

<i>Description</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Example</i>
1. The end of a tone group or chunk of talk	/	And there were tears everywhere/yes there were tears everywhere/
2. An utterance which appears to be a question	?	But how do you know though?/
3. An incomplete word or utterance	-	As he walked in he built a-/
4. A short pause less than 0.5 of a second	.	What?/all their eyes there was a tear/.that's seven/
5. A longer pause	(.)	So you want something like (.) the monster (.) you've got that in the second part (.) the monster/
6. A broken line indicates the beginning of a stave and indicates that there is simultaneous speech if more than one speaker is included		*See later

7. Overlapping speech		*See below
8. The absence of any discernible gap between one utterance and the next	=	Kim: OK.er= Omar: Like on a rainy day?
9. There is doubt about the accuracy of the transcription	((word))	Hamilton had (strolled) DOWN/
10. It was not possible to ascertain what was said	((XX))	the gun of Hamilton had (XX) DOWN/
11. Additional information such as laughing, or a particular tone of voice	< >	<laughs>
12. Material that is referred to in brackets or in asterisks	<u>Under line</u>	<u>Yeah it is isn't it?</u> <laughs>
13. Words or morphemes uttered with emphasis	CAPITALS	Yeah/yeah that might not be TOO bad./run=/
14. Words spoken more loudly than most other utterances in the discussion	<b>Bold</b>	<b>Yeah but WHY would he?/Why's he feeling SORRY for himself?/</b>
15. Very quietly spoken words	%%	%Got the runs%/
16. Additional background information	**	*dramatises with actions*
17. Class Teacher	CT	
18. Researcher Julia Davies	JD	

Examples 6 and 7.

51	Kim	<u>Yeah</u> <laughs>/
52	Omar	I don't think you have a running gun actually/<laughs>
53	Kim Sue	What about him chasing after them?   with the gun/   With the shot gun?/
54	Omar	Yeah/yeah that might not be TOO bad./run=/ /

The transcription layout is based upon that devised by Jennifer Coates (1996).



JULIA DAVIES' work is based mainly in Initial Teacher Education at the University of Sheffield. Before moving into higher education she taught in UK schools for many years. She is interested in the relationship among gender, education and language, with the majority of her research being in this field. She is also very interested in teenage girls' use of the Internet and uses Discourse Analysis techniques to investigate websites, chat rooms and message boards. ADDRESS: School of Education, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA, UK. [email: j.a.davies@sheffield.ac.uk]