0197

Bodies, identities and performances: reconfiguring the language of gender and schooling

Carrie Paechter

Goldsmiths, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Background

The enquiry seeks to address a tension within the language of gender and how it is used to describe children's behaviour in classrooms and playgrounds. On one side is the need to retain an understanding that the body is central to identity: it cannot be removed from the equation when considering how children 'do boy' or 'do girl'. On the other is the requirement that we retain a distinction between sex and gender: it is well established that conflating the two leads to an essentialism which is problematic both for researchers' interrogation of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and for supporting both genders in developing flexible understandings of who they can be. Associated with this are questions of power/knowledge and how particular gendered ways of being are legitimated, allowed to dominate, or marginalised in school settings.

Francis (2008) points out that much of the behaviour typically described as conforming to 'subordinate masculinities' could more simply be described as 'feminine', and this is conversely true of much non-conformist female behaviour, such as that ascribed to tomboys (Paechter & Clark 2007). However, because of the power imbalance between hegemonic masculinities and all other gender identities/performances, non-conformist masculinities are frequently regarded by both researchers and children as forms of 'failed masculinity', whereas non-conformist femininities are not seen as 'failed femininity'. However, such masculine performances from girls do not allow them to mobilise power to the extent that is possible for boys exhibiting similar behaviour.

In order to address this tension and the related power/knowledge issues we need to interrogate the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987; 1995; 2002) and how it is used in the literature on gender and schooling. Connell herself has done some very useful work in rethinking the concept and considering what of it remains useful for theoretical and empirical analysis (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). However, there remains a fundamental problem: the way in which the concept is set up makes it impossible to have a hegemonic femininity. This leaves femininity in all its forms as an inescapable Other to masculinity. While this does in many ways reflect prevailing power/knowledge relations, it remains open to question whether this is either necessary or useful, particularly for our understanding of boys and girls in schools.

Research Questions

The focus of the enquiry is the language with which educational researchers describe schoolchildren and their gendered behaviour, particularly those children whose behaviour does not conform to prevailing gender norms.

In my previous work (Paechter 2007), I have used the concept of a community of practice as a way to analyse how gender is understood in particular social contexts. However, while useful as an analytical tool, this conceptualisation, like the concept of hegemonic masculinity, brings with it a danger of focusing mainly on dominant masculinities and the femininities that function as Other to these. Thorne (1993) talks of the tendency among anthropologists to focus on what 'big men do': in this paper I consider how we can separate understandings of children's masculinities from 'what the dominant boys do' and, concomitantly, separate children's femininities from being simply the Other of that. The question becomes, then, how, when we describe gender relations in classrooms, do we break away from an analysis which, even when it focuses on girls, does so through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. How do we prevent our conceptualisations of the behaviour and identities of the majority of pupils being strongly associated with and influenced by the behaviour of a particular group of dominant boys?

In the paper I will therefore address the following questions:

1. What are the problems with the ways in which we currently understand gender and gendered behaviour in classrooms?
2. To what extent are these problems to do with language and how children's gendered behaviour and bodies are described?
3. How can we develop a language about sex and gender which is both useful for researchers and liberating for young people, and which takes both bodies and performances into account while retaining an awareness of power relations?
4. What might the requirements be for such a language?

Methods

For the theoretical framework and the mapping of ideas involved, see above and below. The empirical aspects of this paper are drawn from an ESRC-funded study into tomboy identities. This involved fieldwork by a full-time research fellow in two contrasting primary schools over two school years (when the children were in Years 5 and 6). Research methods used were: observation of classrooms and playgrounds; focus group and individual interviews with children, staff and parents; and a questionnaire. Data was analysed using hand-coding around salient themes which arose from both observational and interview data.

Frame

The theoretical framing of this paper includes work on gender theory, particular the writings of Butler (1990; 1993; 2004) on gender as performance and Connell's (1987; 1995; 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) work on hegemonic masculinity. This is combined with research on gender and the body both generally and with respect to children and schooling (Birke 1999; Grosz 1994; Jackson 2006; Kehily 2001; Nespor 2000; Paechter 2006; Renold 2005; Shilling 2005; Turner 2008; Young 2005). Because of the centrality of power to relational understandings of gender, both within school settings and in wider society, a Foucaultian approach to power/knowledge is also used in the analysis.

Research findings

It is anticipated that the contribution to knowledge arising from this paper will be in the form of theoretical insights into how we understand gender and gendered behaviour in children, as well as tools for analysing empirical studies.