

**Science and Mathematics Education Centre**

**Masculinities as Peer Discourses: Identities, School Cultures and  
the Resistance to Power**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except when due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: .....

Date: .....

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines peer influences on the development of masculinities for a group of boys attending a secondary school. A small male peer group in a selected school setting was studied over a three - year period, with an emphasis on extensive observation and interview. The study suggests that students actively engage in resistance as a way to claim power and prove masculinities, and thus identities, in the school setting, often resulting in poor educational outcomes for individual boys. The thesis proposes that discourses of masculinities are central to the creation of identities for young adolescent males, and shape the way they present as learners in the school environment. These discourses are informed and governed by peers and the need for individuals to find belonging within the peer milieu. Central to such discourses is the theme of power.

Focused on gender as being socially constructed, and humans perceived to be self - determining and moulded through interactions with others, this study is strongly influenced by the ideas of John Dewey (1910, 1966), Charles Taylor (1989, 1994) and Michael Foucault (1971, 1977, 1978, 1981). It uses a framework based on three central themes - identity, power, and peer relationships, to shape and provide focus to the inquiry. In so doing, it seeks to find a “third space”, a place where meanings become “fused” and “new horizons” emerge.

The presentation is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the nature, research design and setting of the study. The second uses dialogue of the varying voices I brought to the research to explore the central themes of the framework. The third section draws the three themes together to examine the subjects’ understanding of masculinities and how this influences their identities as learners, as well as how they perceive possible futures.

The final section summarises the major findings and examines emerging possibilities that focus on hope for change, suggesting that by allowing students agency and voice there are opportunities for rich, open and authentic dialogue between educators and students. Through ongoing critical inquiry and analysis of gender and gender

relations there is the possibility of new ways of being (Davies, 1997) resulting in improved learning outcomes for both boys and girls.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of my mother, Anne Elizabeth, who taught me as a young child to always reach for rainbows.

Here is another rainbow I've managed to reach, mother bird. The colours are just perfect from here!

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His act being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.  
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail  
Unwillingly to school.”**

**William Shakespeare, *As you like It*  
Act II, Scene VII**

## Introduction

In undertaking this study it was my intention to gain insight into the world of the young male peer group in order to examine discourses of masculinities, and the way in which power and resistance impact on attitudes to school and learning. My initial motivation was as a teacher interested in the “boys’ debate” which, in recent years, has placed boys as under achieving at school (Buckingham, 2000, 2004; Morris & Blunkett, 1996; *The Education of Boys*, 2000; *Boys: Getting it right, Report on the inquiry into the education of boys*, 2002; Trent & Slade, 2001). My experiences as a senior secondary teacher working with “at risk” students, most of whom were boys, propelled me towards an investigation to monitor a small male peer group over a three - year period in a state high school. The aim of the study was to use a framework placing identity, power and peer relations at the centre of analysis, as a way of coming to know better how the sample group performed masculinities within the school environment. By allowing these students to have a voice, and using a variety of writing styles including narrative and dialogue, the reader is encouraged to query personal positionings regarding gender and the power relations this evokes (Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2005).

As the reader, I encourage you to come to know the subjects, in this case the students of the study, the physical and cultural environment of the school, and the researcher. In this thesis the reader will be invited to enter dialogue, to question, to criticise and to reflect, just as I have done by creating a multitude of voices that provide new ways of thinking and perceiving. It is hoped that those who involve themselves in this study, including those that take up this paper and read, question and reflect, may develop new ways of understanding that will impact on their practices as educators.

The intention of this research is to deepen understandings of how boys negotiate discourses of masculinities within the school setting, that are descriptive, exploratory and questioning (Charmez, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It is the personal inquiry of understanding by the researcher, and the journey of seven adolescent boys selected for the study. As Janesick (2000) suggests “qualitative researchers have open minds, not empty minds. They formulate questions to guide their studies, but those questions are under constant revision and are continually taking new shapes” (p. 384). This inquiry is continually being shaped and re - modelled through ongoing

questioning. It is a weaving of past, present, and future. It is about making connections and exploring discourses around issues of masculinities, power, and identity. It is a lens, a way of seeing the interconnection of these phenomena. The research will enter into a collaborative search for meaning with the participants, to allow them to have a voice, to feel empowered and to explore their constructions of reality (Hartman, 1992) in the hope that it will deepen understandings of educators, in the ways masculinities are shaped and have impact within schools.

### **The journey of a concerned educator**

As a senior school teacher, my interest in the “boy’s debate” has been ongoing since the early 1990s. Working as the co - ordinator of Student Support over a number of years in a busy inner - city state college catering for fifteen to nineteen year olds, my attention was drawn to the many boys who were disengaged and disenchanted with school and life in general. My main aim in this role was to try to keep students “on track” and at school, in order to improve life outcomes. Approximately 90% of the students I worked with during the five years I held this position were boys who were considered to be “at risk”. At risk of dropping out of the schooling system; engaged in a high level of at risk behaviour, including alcohol and drug abuse; as well as being involved in dangerous physical activity, including crime. They often lacked motivation towards schooling, and were disengaged from learning within the classroom. Many were school refusers and when at school they were disruptive and inhibited others from learning. In addition, they displayed poor literacy and little academic achievement, and the majority did not have structured goals or a sense of hope for the future. Consequently, many were failing at school with little prospect of further education or employment opportunities. Over the years, I have asked myself the following questions:

- What is important to these students?
- What do they value?
- How can we engage and motivate such students?
- What future outcomes do these students see for themselves?

This was my personal experience in my counseling role, but I had no firm evidence or understanding as to why this was happening. Concurrently, educators throughout the world, including Australia, were voicing the same concerns, particularly towards the late 90's. Bleach (1998b), for example states:

...boys often appear more concerned with preserving an image of reluctant involvement or disengagement. For many, it is not acceptable for them to be seen to be interested in, or stimulated by, academic work. This ties in with 'goal theory' research findings that boys may use effort minimising strategies as a way of maintaining high perceptions of ability or concealing low ability... (p. 13)

Reflecting upon my experiences of working with boys whom I considered to be disengaged from school and learning, I came to believe that in some ways the students understandings and displays of masculinities were impacting on their attitudes towards learning, that masculinities do impact in the classroom through attitudes, beliefs and values towards learning, and that for many boys this has long-term consequences. My research journey was to embark on a search for a deeper understanding of gender, and more importantly, masculinities.

My interest lies in understanding the cultural meanings of the study group and the social practices they engage in that give meaning to their lives. I accept that the peer group plays a pivotal role in identity formation of the individual, and social relationships, in this instance the peer group, not only influence the individual, but help to define, nurture and reaffirm discourses of masculinities.

For the purposes of this thesis a definition of the term "discourses" was used to shape and provide boundaries to the study. Ball (1990b) defines the term "discourses" in a clear and succinct way, stating "discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationship, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations" (p. 2). Throughout this thesis I will attempt to describe and share with the reader the discourses these boys are immersed in concerning masculinities.

**“Some of the learning doesn’t pay off. It’s a waste of time”  
The “boys’ debate”**

At the time of establishing this study in 2003, widespread media attention was being focused on the issue of boys’ education. In 2003, Jack was an articulate 13 year old boy, at the commencement of the study he shared his insight into the ongoing attention paid to the issues of boys’ education.

**Jack:** School, I think of all the teachers, detentions, some of the other students. Students hate uniform. I don’t see a need for it. Some of the learning doesn’t pay off. It’s a waste of time. Say for instance you’re in Grade 7 and it’s compulsory to do French. You hate it. You’re never gonna' go to France or use it. If school wasn’t compulsory, only those that have a brain would come.

Jack’s statement is testimony to the feelings and attitudes that many boys have towards school: school is “boring”; they find no value in current curriculum content. Consequently, they appear to be disengaged or reluctant to learn; becoming recalcitrant and disruptive, hindering others learning. There is a definite feeling of having little or no voice at school (Mills, 2001). These concerns are echoed throughout the Western world (Arnot et al., 1998; Bray et al., 1997; Francis, 2000; Gorard et al., 1999; Martino, 1997a, 1997b; Morris & Blunkett, 1996; Noble et al., 2001; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996; Teese et al., 1995; Warrington & Younger, 1997). Conclusive research indicates that currently there are poorer learning outcomes for boys. Boys are not reaching full potential at school and this has implications for life choices and future lifestyle. The National Inquiry into *The Education of Boys* states “...boys consistently have poorer outcomes against national literacy standards than do girls. Fewer boys achieve the benchmarks, and more boys group at the lowest levels in literacy tests.” (*The Education of Boys*, 2000, p. 3). Research also indicates a lower retention rate for boys in the higher years of education (*Boys: getting it right*, 2002). The earlier inquiry reinforced that “boys are less likely to finish school, boys study a narrower range of subjects, boys average Year 12 scores are lower than those for girls and appear to be declining, and fewer boys go on to higher education.” (*The Education of Boys*, 2000, p. 3)

More recently, the Standing Committee on Education and Training presented a comprehensive report to the Australian House of Representatives. *Boys: getting it right* (2002) argues that “the fact that boys are generally not achieving as well as girls across the curriculum from early literacy to senior secondary school is a growing concern to many parents and teachers. The impact of under - achievement on the boys themselves and on the broader society are such that the issues must be addressed” (p. 1).

The United Kingdom instigated the first major government investigation in the topic, when it issued a paper *Boys will be boys? Closing the Gender Gap* (Morris & Blunkett, 1996). This paper focused particularly on working class boys having unequal chances in education. In 1993, the Department of Education of the United Kingdom started to address the issue of poor reading amongst boys through the study *Boys and English*.

Australia has undertaken a multitude of state and federal research projects and discussion papers over the past decade. Some of the most notable inquiries include the O’Doherty report - *Inquiry into boys’ education* (1994), the submission to the House of Representatives entitled *The Education of Boys* (2000), and Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School* commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, as well as the most recent federally funded inquiry *Boys: getting it right*, (2002), which makes a number of recommendations regarding changes to the education system in order to address issues of imbalance and underachievement amongst boys. The study, *Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention: The Perceptions of Adolescent Males* (Trent & Slade, 2001) has played a pivotal role in informing interested parties of the problems and needs of Australian boys today.

It suggests that most parties involved in the debate agree that there is a current crisis of some proportion surrounding the education of boys. Many boys feel alienated from schools and society in general (Askew & Ross, 1989; Buckingham, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Pollack, 1999). This alienation manifests itself at school as poor participation and attendance (Buckingham, 2004; West, 1999; Collins et al.,

2000; *The Education of Boys*, 2000). Statistics continue to suggest that boys are often failing academically (Collins et al., 2000; *The Education of Boys*, 2000; Trent & Slade, 2001; *Boys: getting it right*, 2002).

An increasing number of academics, educators and officials declare that the poor outcomes for boys at school have enormous repercussions for society. Buckingham's 2000 study, *Boy Troubles*, into juvenile crime, suicide and failure at school suggests that these issues have enormous implications for Australia in terms of emotional and financial costs. *Boys: getting it right* (2002) also discusses the social outcomes and costs to society, indicating that there is a "crisis" where boys and men are at a higher risk of "...depression and mental illness, attempted and completed suicide, self - harm, drug and alcohol abuse, motor vehicle deaths and injuries, juvenile crime and detention, violent crime and adult rates of imprisonment...on many of these measures men are not doing well" (p. 37).

Some prominent individuals have talked in terms of boys being in "crisis" and that the focus of this "crisis" is the issue of masculinities (Biddulph, 1994, 2003; Bly, 1990, Pollack, 1999). Many specialists have theorised as to why the crisis of boy's underachievement at school has arisen in modern times. Arguments explore such areas as the feminisation of teaching (Schnack & Neutzling, 1990), the absence of fathers in the home (Biddulph, 2003; Bly, 1989; Buckingham, 2000, 2004; Jordan, 1995), the rise of a modern deconstructed culture where there are no formal rites of passage (Biddulph, 1994; Bly, 1990, 1998), the re - organisation of the curriculum (Bleach, 1998a; Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Kimmel, 1994) and assessment procedures which favour female learning (Bleach, 1998a; Buckingham, 2004; Pollack, 1998).

In the past decade extensive financial and human resources has been directed towards improving the educational outcomes of boys in Australia. Since 2000, approximately eight million dollars has been directed towards this cause (Nelson, 2004), and the implementation of federally funded programs such as 'Success for Boys' (Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006) seeks to support disadvantaged and "at risk" boys and improve their engagement and motivation towards school, thus enhancing learning outcomes.

At a state level, education departments have attempted to address the issue of boys' underachievement through the development of equity and mission statements. Strategies have been developed in an attempt to ensure equity for all students, with a strong focus on improving results for boys. Schools trial new programs with varying levels of success. The emphasis of these programs appears to be on methods to improve the educational outcomes of boys, rather than tackling deeper issues of gender, and in particular, the examination of masculinities. Despite considerable human and economic resources being focused on the area of boys' education, the most recent federally funded report, *Boys: getting it right*, (2002), suggests that the problems are ongoing and little improvement has been made over the past decade. In the opening chapters, the following evidence is given outlining:

...the differentials in the educational achievement of boys and girls:

- Nationally, girls' results in Year 3 and Year 5 Literacy Benchmark tests are up to five percentage points higher than boys;
- The Year 12 retention rate for girls is between 11 and 12 percentage points higher than boys;
- Girls' average levels of achievement in a majority of subjects assessed at senior secondary level are higher than the gap in the total has been widening, for example the difference between the aggregate NSW Tertiary Entrance Score for girls and boys widened from 0.6 to 19 percentage points between 1981 and 1996; and
- Over 56 percent of students in higher education are women.

*(Boys: getting it right, 2002. p. 1)*

Recent research has indicated that the extensive coverage of male underachievement at schools has been fuelled by widespread media coverage and has created a discourse that pitches boys as the "new victims" or the "new disadvantaged" (Benjamin, 2001; Lingard, 2003; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino et al., 2004; Martino & Pallotto -Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2003; Mills & Lingard, 1997). Such

discourses are not constructive, and are generalisations that group all boys together as those who are not achieving (Martino et al., 2004), and yet we know that many boys do well at school (Epstein et al., 1998; Frank et al., 2003). As Martin (2002) advocates:

What must also be recognised is that variation between boys can be large and that dealing with boys as an homogenous group ignores the fact that differences amongst boys can be large...our student body is becoming increasingly heterogenous and to enhance educational outcomes of all students requires an ability to effectively teach to this diversity.

(pp. 20 - 21)

I believe it is more important to ask “which boys are disadvantaged at school” in keeping with the findings of Benjamin (2001), Collins et al., (2000), Keddie, (2005), Lingard, (2003) and Teese et al., (1995). Gill (2005) asserts that “a more useful understanding of the problem is that the situations of girls and boys are interconnected and must be understood as part of the wider gender order which produces particular types of femininities and masculinities” (p. 120). By exploring the types of boys who are not connecting and engaging with learning in schools, we begin to address how we might improve learning outcomes, not only for these individuals, but for all students who are affected by their disengagement. Addressing the issue of those boys who are disengaged will lead to improvements in girls’ education as well.

The issues surrounding boys’ education are complex. It is important to acknowledge that the issues are perceived and addressed differently by various parties and dependent on the theoretical and political agendas the individuals bring to the issue.

### **Research focus and questions**

Janesick (2000) suggests that:

Qualitative research design begins with a question, or at least an intellectual curiosity if not a passion for a particular topic. Of course, a qualitative researcher designs a study with real individuals in mind, and

with the intent of living in that social setting over time. The qualitative researcher studies a social setting to understand the meaning of participants' lives in the participants' own terms. (p. 382)

The key objective of this study is to gain further understanding of the world of the male peer group and to explore the interconnectedness of identity, power and social relationships, and the impact of this on discourses of masculinities within the school setting.

The focus of the study refers to a collective understanding of masculinities, as defined by culture and maintained by the institutions within society (Beynon, 2002; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1996, 2000; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kenway, 1995; Kimmel, 1987, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Nilan, 2000; Renold 2001; Warren, 1997). Masculinities may be understood as "... not as a biological entity that exists prior to society; rather, masculinities are ways that societies interpret and employ male bodies" (Connell, 1995, p. 21). Gender identity is never stable: it is fluid (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997); contradictory (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Segal, 1990); continually being rehearsed, redefined and negotiated (Martino, 1999). Gender identity is a performance (Butler, 1990; Cornwell & Lindisfarne, 1994a; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Kenway, 1995; Nayak & Kehily, 1996) that is never mastered while always being staged. In many ways gender identity is in constant crisis, as different times and contexts bring new challenges and experiences (Beynon, 2002).

The themes of identity, power, and peer relationships became apparent through preliminary analysis of early raw data and thus formed the framework for further investigation, closer questioning and the final writing of this report. Specifically, this study will investigate the following research question:

*In what ways are masculinities constructed in the school setting?*

A number of sub questions will be addressed through the research. These include:

*What impact do the discourses of masculinities play in identity formation?*

*How are discourses of masculinities informed, mediated and governed by the male peer group?*

*How are power and resistance employed as strategies in response to learning?*

In approaching this study of the construction and expression of masculinities in a particular setting and moment of time I have developed a “theoretical framework” (Taylor, 1989) which focuses on the three chosen themes – identity, power, and peer relations.

Smith (2002), a scholar of Taylor’s ideas, suggests that:

A theoretical framework provides the concepts through which a phenomenon is first identified and then explained accordingly to the dimensions of society picked out as the most important causal variable...a framework identifies something to be better explained and provides the resources for explaining it. Inevitably, a framework prioritises certain kinds of functional relation while leaving others aside.  
(p. 126)

A framework provides focus, and in this thesis a way to scrutinise how identities, power and peer relationships inform discourses of masculinities.

Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994a) affirm, “if notions of masculinity, like the notion of gender itself, are fluid and situational, we must consider the various ways people understand masculinity in a particular setting” (p. 3). If I can reach, connect with and gain insight into a small male peer group and thus come to a deepened understanding of the role masculinities play within the classroom, then I will be changed as an educator. If I can bring life to this journey through the written word then others may reflect on their understandings and practices as educators. As Warnke (2002) claims that:

If we have to act, we have to understand, in some better or worse way, who and where we are and who and where we want to be. From the beginning then, we are involved in the practical task of deciphering the story or stories of which we are part so that we know how to go on. (p. 79)

As teachers it is imperative to understand the stories of our students. This study is an attempt to understand some of the stories of a sample group representative of students whom we encounter in our work as teachers.

As a female researcher undertaking a study of masculinities it might be suggested that the study participants would be reluctant to share insights with one who does not share the same discourses because of gender barriers, however, this may also have some advantages. As a female it could be that I am non - threatening as I am “an outsider looking in”. I do not share or presume to share the discourses surrounding what it means to be male. As Warren (1988) suggests, maybe I will be in a position of being seen as harmless, even invisible, by the subjects. While I bring the experience of being a woman to this research, I also bring a multitude of other identities: a parent, a learner, a teacher, a counsellor, and researcher; each impinging on how I will develop relationships with the boys and how I will interpret their worlds.

This research project works from the premise that masculinities are socially constructed (Beynon, 2002; Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 1996, 2000; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kenway, 1995; Kimmel, 1987, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Nilan, 2000; Renold 2001; Warren, 1997), and that discourses are shared and practised within the school setting (Connell, 1996; Mac an Ghail, 1996). This impacts on how individuals engage in learning.

The ability to be context specific where the focus has been placed in understanding the impact of the physical and social environment on the individual and the group in a specific school setting has been imperative to the design of the project. Parry (1997) clearly points out “although the research is located at the level of the school, it understands classroom interactions are both informed by the wider contexts in which it is embedded” (p. 225). This study also accepts that factors such as ethnicity,

socio-economic status, disability and sexuality are significant in how masculinities are constructed and performed (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Connolly, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Mangan & Walvin, 1987; McMahon, 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Reay, 2001). Time, however, does not permit a digression into such debates on ethnicity and socio-economic background in this investigation.

It is a naturalist inquiry which is holistic and inductive (Cohen & Manion, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Wiersma, 2000). I have employed Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criteria for judging qualitative research, which is based on *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. Further attention will be paid to each of these criteria in Chapter 2.

Several limitations to this study are evident and acknowledged. Only one school setting is investigated and consequently, the researcher must ensure that generalisations need to be made with care. Secondly, the size of the selected sample for investigation is small and may limit the results of the study. Thirdly, qualitative research design relies heavily on the perceptions, understandings and skills of the researcher. Finally, qualitative research data collection methods including interviews and questionnaires, can be limited by the knowledge of terminology and wording, the delivery and competence of the interviewer, as well as the candour of the subjects.

This thesis consists of four sections. The first section, introduces and outlines the nature of the study, examines the research design in detail and provides extensive background of the setting of the study. The next section comprises three chapters which use dialogue to explore themes of identity, power and peer relationships. The third section comprises two chapters that investigate the boys' discourses of masculinities and their attitudes towards schooling and possible futures. This section builds on the interconnected themes presented earlier surrounding identity, power, and peer relations, and uses these as a lens to view masculinities, schooling and possible futures. The final section of this work is a summary of all findings resulting from this study, and ways to move forward, and appendices.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Research Design**

**“He reads much;  
He is a great observer, and he looks  
Quite through the deeds of men.”**

**William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*  
Act I, Scene II**

## **Howard**

*I'm sitting here not doin' much, looking out the window. I suppose I do that a fair bit really. I like looking out the window, watching the trees. I just get caught up not doin' much. It's not that I mean to do nothing. I just can't help it. I suppose that's why I'm in the lowest Maths class, with all the retards. I don't like Maths, I never have. I suppose that's why I don't enjoy it. I'm not really good at it, but I don't really care either. If you asked me whether I could do it or not I'd have to say I can. It's just sometimes I just can't be bothered. In fact, lately I can't be bothered with school at all. I don't know why, it's just how it is.*

*Sometimes I just can't be bothered getting out of bed. Mum goes off to work and my sisters go to school and I just can't be bothered. By that time the bus has gone and I know I'm going to be late. I think I'll go tomorrow instead. I know I should go, but I just can't be bothered. In fact, I'm not that bad at school. I'm not what you would call dumb. I don't mind creative writing and if I put my mind to it I could do all the other things. I just can't see how it's important, even though I know it should be. I don't mind being at home by myself. I just watch telly and DVDs. Half the time mum doesn't know I haven't been at school. I know I have to make more an effort. I know I should.*

*Back to Maths, I'm still sitting here and now the teacher is asking me a question. I know the answer, but I say I don't. I don't know why I do that, I just do. I'm still looking out the window and I haven't finished half of page 62 yet. I'll be in trouble again. Teachers are always saying that I never finish my work. If you don't finish it you generally don't have to hand it in I suppose.*

*I sit by myself in Maths. I like it that way. My friends are in the other Maths class, but I don't care. I don't mind being by myself. I like doin' my own work, by myself, going at my own pace. I really don't mind being by myself. It's quieter. I can look out the window. I don't get bothered. Don't get me wrong, I like being with my mates. I see them at break times and we hang around together, just talking and muckin' around. But I like being myself. I always have.*

*I'm trying to concentrate. These exercises are pretty easy. Too easy. I'm way behind. Even the retards have nearly finished. There's no way I'm gonna get them all done before the end of the lesson. I try, but somehow things outside the window like the ground man, doing the mowing is more interesting. I can't wait for the bell to go. I wish it would.*

## Introduction

Classrooms are social spaces where structures of relationships and interactions are continually evolving (Guitierrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995). For learning to improve for students we need to penetrate and come to understand their worlds. As Guitierrez et al. (1995) argue we need to develop a “third space to describe how these spaces might intersect, and, thus, create the potential for more authentic interaction...” (p. 446) between students and teachers to improve learning outcomes.

My aim is to find a “third space” between the students and myself, a space where the participants feel valued, safe and willing to share their narratives. I hope to gain insight into their own interpretations - their interpretations of who they are, where they stand within their culture, what their futures are and what they are gaining from and hope to gain from schooling.

Smith (2002) explored the idea of “third space” and suggested that “to reach an understanding, one must first learn how to interpret the agents as agents interpret themselves...one cannot hope to understand the agents in an unfamiliar culture without taking into account the ways in which their emotions, values, aspirations and common practices are shaped by their language” (p. 129). It was necessary to build a relationship with the study participants over an extensive period of time, one built on trust that would allow my transition into their world. Through my interactions with the participants I was also encouraging them to enter my world.

As Wexler (1992) writes “the participants speak and I record and selectively represent their voices” (p. 2). While I am representing the stories of the participants, and endeavouring to do so with the highest regard, it must be remembered that these are the narratives that I hear and interpret, as a person who brings gender, age, identity, class and ethnicity to shape my inquiry, and the ways in which I observe and interpret (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003; Denzin, 1997). Like Wexler (1992), I wish to:

...compose my account with an open mind and a revisionary attitude, abetted by a good set of records and transcripts and a well-tuned memory. But I ‘take license’. I select, condense, juxtapose, underline,

and, worst of all, I recontextualise living worlds into an analytical social language. Still I am not the cold-blooded instrument of error-free objective knowledge machine that mirrors social reality; but, an historical, social analytic composer, and what follows is neither Truth or Fiction, but a composition. (p. 2)

Thus the researcher becomes the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, a human instrument (Janesick, 2000; Merriam, 1988). Qualitative research places the researcher as an interpreter, a composer involved in an interdependent relationship. Patton (1980) has suggested that it is this interdependent relationship between the researcher and the study participants that “gives naturalistic inquiry its perspective” (p.192). The relationship between the researcher and the subjects is imperative and shapes the “third space” of the research. It is a venture of mutual exploration (Davies, 1993). Both Gadamer (1990) and Taylor (1989) draw attention to the need for openness. Warnke (2002) describes this thus “we neither instrumentalise the other nor claim to speak for him or her but are rather open to the other, as someone who has his or her own autonomous position and claims” (p. 93). The relationship becomes dialogic. Smith (2002) suggested that an openness with “...one another is at the same time to put oneself in question, it is also to make oneself vulnerable to an unflattering contrast, and that is not easy to do so” (p. 136).

Undertaking this research, I am forced to take risks, regularly question my ways of thinking, to come to new understandings, while at all times focus attention on the perceptions of the participants (Lancy, 1993; Wiersma, 2000). Wiersma (2000) maintains “...these perceptions are to be captured in order to obtain an accurate “measure” of reality. “Meaning” is perceived or experienced by those being studied, it is not imposed by the researcher” (p. 198). My motivation as a researcher is to provide as honest an account of the interpretations and understandings of the study participants as far as is possible (Merriam, 1988; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Tierney’s (1992) unpublished paper, cited in Munro (1996) suggests the “...task of the researcher is not to discover the ‘true’ interpretation for none exists, instead the challenge is to uncover the multiple voices in society that have been silenced” (p. 436). It is the voices of boys who are disaffected and disengaged at school, those

who see little value in education and those who are often “at risk” of not reaching their full potential that I am resolved to try and hear. These are the constructions of reality I am interested in exploring, where there are multiple realities. As Merriam (1988) states, this type of study “is exploratory, inductive and emphasises process rather than ends” (p. 17). The reader is invited to share in this exploration, to come to understand the “cultural knowledge” (Grant & Sleeter, 1986) of this group of participants, the themes surrounding identity, power and peer relations, and how all this informs their understandings of what it means to be male in a school environment.

In my observation of living experiences I am immediately drawn to the concept of the researcher as a “bricoleur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b), someone who weaves tapestries, or, in another art form, creates a colourful painting with a myriad of colours, textures and perspective, the aim always being to focus on specific detail in light of the complexity of the situation. The researcher as “bricoleur” is about feeling connected and utilising intellectual tools and strategies at your disposal to make sense of what you are trying to understand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b). Coming from a strong Performing Arts background, it was imperative for me as a researcher to find some research methodology that placed value on the researcher’s personal experience, where sensory expression, feeling, intuition and self are valued in coming to know the other (Ellis & Bochner, 2003).

My research approach moves from a position where self and study participants are understood to be intertwined. This suggests that we come to know ourselves through reflection, through writing from various points of view, by encouraging us to develop multiple voices. Richardson (2003) proposes that “nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of scientific writing on our consciousness, as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche: Writing is validated as a method of knowing” (p. 509). Writing becomes a way of inquiring and a way of knowing (Charmez, 2000; Hodder, 2003, Richardson, 2003). Charmez (2000) states, that writing invites “the reader into a story imparting its mood through linguistic style and narrative exposition” (p. 527). Through the written word I invite the reader to explore the relationships I have with the subjects. As would any good researcher, I aim to evoke the audience to a sensory level, where feelings are stimulated and questions raised

through the various narratives told. For the reader it should be a sensory and emotional experience. As Ellis and Bochner (2003) suggest:

Evocative stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response. They long to be used rather than analysed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversations rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts. (pp. 217-8)

Seven participants of this research project were “purposefully selected” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 284; Merriam, 1988, p. 48) from a public school in Tasmania to take part in this research. They were tracked over a three year period from Grade 8 to Grade 10. I conducted approximately 100 hours of observation and interview with study participants by making regular visits to the school and shadowing them as they went about their daily school lives.

It was my intention to use a multitude of data collection methods by embedding myself within the social context of the school and the culture of the students who were chosen as the focus of this study. Data were collected through the ongoing personal journal of the researcher and field notes taken of observation of lessons and other activities the participants took part in. Individual interviews were conducted with each of the boys that ranged from scaled questions and use of survey tools to semi - structured interviews that used photographic images as stimulants to discussion. Focus groups and subsequent transcript analysis, reflective writing by the participants, as well as informal discussions with teachers, and ongoing professional reading all helped shape my inquiry over time. The multitude of data methodologies prompted a layering affect where rich description elicited a range of voices and extensive narratives allowed depth and complexity. Originally, I had thought of using triangulation (Cohen & Manion, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b; Stake, 2000) to help validate my work through the use of observation, interview and analysis of formal school documentation would be most suitable. However, the plethora of methodologies I have used have transcended this and I have moved to a position of crystallization (Richardson, 2003) where the phenomena studied cannot

be presupposed to be viewed from a small selection of viewpoints. Like a crystal, which is multi - faced, and which captures and reflects light through prisms countless ways, we can only begin to understand deeply when we are open to viewing the many aspects of the research context (Richardson, 2003).

As a researcher, I was faced with data rich with interpretive possibilities, but how would I give life to this and shape it to allow the reader to really come to know the people of this project - me as a researcher, teacher, parent, observer; the subjects and their many identities, with contradictions, and masculinities; and the essence of the social context - the school, with its overt and hidden cultures? For me, writing was a way of inquiring, a way of knowing (Richardson, 2003). It was important that as the researcher I gave insight to the reader of the process of coming to know this research context and its subjects. For this purpose, I have used narrative and dialogue in various chapters of the thesis to give voice to the many identities of the researcher and the subjects being studied. An example from Howard heads this chapter.

In the middle chapters of this thesis, the reader will be introduced to various voices. These are created as dialogues, dialogues that reveal the private discussion that took place within me, and the dialogues with the student participants. Bruner (1993) describes the technique of using a narrator in research writing to place the author within the text and to create transparency to the work. This narrator may be presented “directly as a character or through multiple characters or one character may speak in many voices, or the writer might come in and then go out of the text” (p. 6). In this study, the reader will come to know the voices of the various identities I bring to this research project: the researcher; the experienced and concerned teacher; and the critic who brings knowledge, life experience and questions as a way of prompting the researcher to think more deeply. All of these identities are the embodiments of the voices that have arisen within me as a researcher and through the use of dialogue I am allowing these voices to be heard through their dialogue with each other. It is a dynamic and fluid narrative the reader is encouraged to share. This style of writing illustrates the multiple identities, and thus the contradictions and conflict I have experienced as an individual in my search for meaningful interpretation of the participants, the issues and the multiple discourses that have evolved as part of this study. By demonstrating the crisis of identities I have

experienced as part of this research, I am attempting to evoke within the reader an understanding of the contradictions and struggles the participants are experiencing in juggling the variety of identities they are formulating for themselves.

The reader is also encouraged to hear the voices of the subjects. The language used by the study participants is often confronting and could be considered offensive to others, but has been retained for the purpose of this thesis, therefore offering a true representation of how they interacted with each other and with me. As the researcher, I have chosen to distinguish each of the seven subjects as two selves, firstly the voices of the study participants themselves which are designated by the pseudonym the boys have constructed and detail the real experiences, dialogue and observations that have been made through data collection methods. For this purpose, when the researcher chooses to draw upon these episodes, the boys will be referred to by their pseudonym in bold lettering and the voices are authentic. At other times, I have chosen to use narrative voices. Using ongoing observation and knowledge of the individual participants these reconstructed narratives are my interpretation of how the participants may respond and are formatted in italics. Towards the conclusion of the study, the participants were invited to read, reflect and make any changes to the reconstructed narratives I had created. The responses to these narratives, was very positive and the process of participant review helped corroborate these narrative works. Thus, these reconstructed narratives might be considered “negotiated interpretations” (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000).

### **Sample selection**

As already outlined in the introductory chapter participants were “purposefully selected” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 284; Merriam, 1988, p. 48) for this project. This method of sampling allows researchers to handpick participants who are considered to be “information - rich cases” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 285). Through consultation with the Tasmanian Department of Education and Arts in 2002, permission was sought to approach a particular school to ascertain if there was an interest in that school taking part in. The school proposed was a Grade 7 to 10 co - educational state school, with a long history and was experiencing a process of transformation due to declining student numbers and changes in teaching staff after an extensive period of stable leadership throughout the 1990s. After successfully completing Applications for

Research with the Tasmanian Department of Education and Arts, Tasmania, and an Ethics Applications with the Curtin University, permission was granted to approach the school to explore how the project might be accommodated within the setting of the school. Initial discussions were held with the Principal and Grade 8 Supervisor in 2003. A small group of boys was also identified as suitable candidates to take part in the study.

The Principal described the selected subjects as, “a pack of lion cubs”, and stated “individually these kids are not too bad, quite capable even, it’s just the influence of the peers is so strong”. Consequently, as a group, they were considered challenging for teachers to manage, and at any one time a number of them could be “in trouble”. They were often disciplined by the Grade Supervisor, Assistant Principal or Principal for some violation of school rules. Teaching staff had classified these male students as “difficult to manage”. As a social system, schools actively sort students into categories of “success” or “failure” through the curriculum by sorting students academically (Connell, 2000; Nilan, 1995).

Nilan (1995) argues that “in the first place, a school operates as a meritocracy. Schools are involved in a sorting and sifting process which inevitably positions culturally privileged students above the rest and lays the ground for a stratified labour force” (p. 44). Schools organise students according to their ability, which helps to define their position in society later in life through further education, occupations and financial standing. Connell (2000) affirms these ideas when he states:

...masculinity is organised, on the large scale, around social power. Social power in terms of access to higher education, entry to professions, command of communication, is being delivered by the school system to boys who are academic ‘successes’. The reaction of the ‘failed’ is likely to be a claim to other sources of power, even other definitions of masculinity. Sporting prowess, physical aggression, or sexual conquest may do. (p. 137)

For a variety of reasons these boys were considered to be failing academically and, possibly, their way of coping was to adopt a high level of physicality, violence and aggression as alternative forms of power. I was keen to witness this for myself and question the boys themselves to explore reasons for this resistance. Through discussion with the Principal it was suggested that I track two of the Grade 8 classes, of which all the subjects were members, and then, after a period of time, invite these boys to be part of the study.

### **Consent**

The selected students voluntarily participated in this research project and were initially involved in discussions that explained the purposes of this study, risks involved, level of commitment and a description of likely activities in which they would be involved. A letter was formulated to the parents of the invited participants outlining the research project. Written consent from parents and invited participants was obtained (Appendix 1). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Prior to seeking the written consent of the boys and their parents, information was shared with the staff of the school by a briefing to all teaching staff. Teachers were encouraged to contact the Principal or Grade 8 Supervisor if they had any concerns about the project, particularly the observation of lessons. No objections were forthcoming. Further to this, an article was written for the weekly school newsletter in early 2003 informing all parents and students of the school about the nature of the project and that, if any parent had concerns, they could contact the Principal. Once again, no objections were made. In undertaking observations and interviews, the researcher always sought the permission of the teacher before entering classrooms for observation and liaised with teachers as to when subjects could be interviewed in an attempt to minimise disruption to classroom activity and individual learning.

The identity of the school, participants, staff and parents are protected throughout this thesis with the continuing use of consistent pseudonyms. The participating school and others involved in the study were given the opportunity to be acknowledged or not in the final report.

After a two week period of observation in 2003, a number of male students were short listed to take part in the research. I met briefly with nine boys outlining the intentions of the research. Letters and consent forms were sent home to parents to consider. Of the nine students approached, two declined to take part in the study. One of these students wished to take part in the study; however, his father was not keen for him to do so. The other student had recently come to the high school, and was displaying a poor attendance pattern which was indicative of his past school experiences. By early 2004, this student was not attending school at all.

Initially, the boys seemed reticent to return forms and commit to the research project. The Grade 8 Supervisor informed me that parents had signed the forms, which had been returned by the due date, but some of the students had not signed them. What follows is a constructed narrative that explores the issue of reluctant involvement by the student participants at the commencement of the study.

**Jamie:** *I don't know about this, sounds like a load of crap to me.  
What does she want?*

**Blair:** *Fuck knows. I don't reckon I'm gunna do it.*

**Jack:** *Why not?*

**Blair:** *I might, don't know. Might get us out of class?*

**Jack:** *Could be alright. Might be interesting. Wonder what she  
wants to know?*

**Mick:** *Why do you think we've been picked?*

**Jack:** *Don't know!*

**Jamie:** *Maybe she's trying to collect stuff and report it back to the  
principal.*

**Jack:** *Nah, remember she said that whatever you say is  
confidential.*

**Mick:** *Remember, she said she had to get permission from  
somewhere and that this is research. She'd get into trouble if  
she let's people know who we are.*

**Jamie:** *I still don't know about it all.*

**Howard:** *Are you going to do it? (to Jack and Mick)*

**Jack:** *Don't know. Could be something different.*

**Mick:** *I'm the same, don't know.*

**Stewart:** *My dad said I could if I wanted. Thought it might be a waste of time though.*

**Jack:** *My mum and dad said it might be alright. I don't know yet.*

A second meeting was held with the seven boys who had displayed some interest and I gave them an opportunity to ask questions. I explained issues surrounding ethics I had to adhere to and the importance of confidentiality. It was evident that it was Jack's decision to be involved in the study that influenced the others to engage in the study. The boys obviously had some further conversation about the project amongst themselves and an agreement was made within the group to take part. Within a period of two days all consent forms were completed and returned by the seven subjects. Here, we already see evidence of the power of the influence of peers within this group.

Of the seven subjects, six continued for the three year duration of the study, despite being told they could choose to resign from the study at any time. The other boy - Jamie was happy to continue, but relocated to Queensland with his family at the end of 2003 for a period of sixteen months. In the final three months of the study Jamie returned to the school, realigned himself with many of the boys involved in this peer group. However, he did not take part in the research project at this time.

### **Role of the researcher**

Walker (1988) advocates that it is important "...to avoid role confusion, and to prevent any labelling of the researcher which creates cultural distance from the subjects by establishing, as clearly as possible, which role you occupy, is paramount from the outset" (p. 17). As a researcher I embody multiple identities, which I believe is illustrated in the many voices outlined earlier in this thesis. During my visits to the school, I assumed a range of identities on each occasion as determined by the perceptions of others with whom I was interacting (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003; Blackwood, 1995). In my consultations with the seniors with the school I was seen as a researcher, at other times a fellow professional and, as my relationship with the staff developed, at times as a colleague, who shared their concerns and daily practices. In my relationship with the subjects to begin with I

was possibly someone to be wary of, but over time I consider I worked hard at developing an identity of researcher - someone who was interested in their perspectives, ideas, thoughts, beliefs, someone who tried hard not to pass judgment, someone who had a sense of humour, someone who showed compassion and understanding. But on other occasions I may have been perceived by the subjects as friend, counsellor, teacher, mediator, and adult, depending on the situation and the dynamic process of interaction. Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2003) describe the role of the researcher as one where he /she negotiates a “situational identity” (p. 124).

I was conscious of the way I looked and projected myself to the young subjects. “Dressing down” (Fontana, 1977; Thompson, 1985) from more formal attire and adopting a more casual appearance was a deliberate attempt to find some common ground with the pupils. I tried to be as inconspicuous in the school environment as possible, moving in and out of classes before and after students started lessons or when classes were dismissed, ensuring my presence did not draw attention. In my relationship with the subjects and “significant others” (Mead, 1963), such as the teachers at the school, I cast myself as a “learner” eager to gain insight and understanding (Wax, 1960).

A female undertaking an investigation into masculinities may be perceived as bringing difficulties due to the boundaries of gender, however, past prominent female researchers working in the same area suggest that these differences can be addressed. Kaufman (1997) found “that boys want a chance to talk about their lives” and are more likely to do so if researchers create “a safe, confidential and encouraging place” (p. 16). I was keen to build a climate of trust, a safe space where the subjects would be encouraged to openly express values, experiences and feelings.

### **Data collection**

Using a multitude of methods to collect data secures depth in research work. It adds rigor, breadth and encourages complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fine et al., 2000). If we return to the metaphor of the crystal, we see this study and the subjects and their relationships with each other and the environment they are placed in, the school, as a crystal with a considerable numbers of faces. The crystal can be viewed

from a variety of angles. Its appearance varies depending on where your perspective as a viewer is and through which lens you view the crystal (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The employment of multiple data collection methods helps to reproduce the object, in this case, the phenomenon of the subjects and their world so that it can be viewed from all sides (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) allowing the establishment of internal validity. By using a range of dissimilar methods of data collection, Denzin (1970) proposes that “the rationale for this strategy is that the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another, and, by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies” (p. 308).

### **Observation and field notes**

For the purposes of this study over 100 hours of observation of the participants was made over a three year period allowing me to record what I saw as it was happening, to record behaviour, reflect on it and provide new perspectives (Merriam, 1988). Observations over considerable time allows the same phenomena to be repeatedly viewed adding to the claim of high internal validity (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). As Wiersma (2000) suggests research observation should be “...comprehensive, that is, continuing and total” (p. 248).

Like any process of data collection, observation needs to be practised and disciplined (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1980). My previous studies in counselling and teaching have equipped me with extensive opportunities for developing observation skills. I was very conscious that observations need be focused to pay attention to varying degrees on the setting, participants, activities, and interactions. Attention should also be focused on the frequency and duration of various events, activities and behaviours, as well as factors such as symbolic meanings that may happen through language, dress and non - verbal communication (Merriam, 1988). At other times, observation may place emphasis on what does not happen or take place, such as body language and the silences and pauses that occur in interaction (Patton, 1980).

Research indicates that initial observations are paramount to capture major themes that may shape the inquiry (Adler & Adler, 1994). The colours, images, textures, smells and sounds of the people and environment of the school provided me with a wealth of sensory experiences. The first entries of my field notes are rich in

description. As outlined in the following chapter, I placed particular importance on describing the setting of the school. My initial period of observation was spent in becoming familiar with both the formal and hidden culture of the school, from the structured programs, organisation and physical structure of the school to the students and their culture. Much of my first observations were “site specific” (Grant & Sleeter, 1986) and spent roaming around the school to gain insight into the power regimes that existed (Thorne, 1993). Initially, I visited the school once or twice per week for relatively short visits, usually two hours, at a time, across a range of settings, including classrooms, playgrounds, and excursions, gaining access to students in what Thorne (1993) terms, everyday “naturalistic settings”.

Wolcott’s (1988) claims that the researcher chooses to play the role when observing subjects of “active participant”, “privileged observer” or “limited observer” (p. 194). My role shifted at various times from “privileged observer” to “active participant” depending on the circumstances of my observation. When observing more formal classes I would operate as a “privileged observer”, viewing from a distance. On other occasions such as excursions and in practical subjects such as Art or Drama I became an “active participant”, engaging in activities with the subjects (Cohen & Manion, 1992; Wolcott, 1988). My intention was to get an inside perspective (Walker, 1988) by actively seeking membership to the school life and peer structure of this group of boys (Angrosino & Mays de Perez; 2003). As the project progressed, my attention in observation became more “person specific” (Grant and Sleeter, 1986), and more focused and selective (Werner & Schoeple, 1987).

The field notes I created were extensive with the completion of five journals of recordings and extensive computerised notes of each interview held with each of the participants, summaries of all findings on each series of interviews and close to 100 pages of completed transcript from two focus groups which concentrated on the relationship I have with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). When recording observations I placed particular emphasis on dates, groupings and timing of events, activities and behaviours. Field notes included verbal descriptions of the setting, activities, subjects and “significant others”, direct quotations of the subjects and my observations at the time (Merriam, 1988).

## Interviews

Interviewing provides opportunities for the researcher to discover what cannot be observed from participants (Patton, 1980), particularly “feelings, thoughts and intentions” (p. 196). While observation relies on the skill of the researcher to record and analyse what is seen, there is an increase in the number of variables when interviewing subjects.

Silverman (2003) suggest interviews are “linguistically mediated data” (p. 342). They are narratives in which individuals describe and give accounts of their worlds. Consequently, considerable time was spent in planning the structure of interviews. Working with my supervisor and reading on interview techniques as part of my literature review, effort was placed in designing interview questions and stimuli that would engage the participants with the intention of drawing new insights. Over the duration of the study I completed five semi - structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) with each of the boys who completed the study. Merriam (1988) suggests that less structured interviews “...assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 73) and by providing opportunities for the participants to elaborate allows the researcher to understand better the perspective of their world (Patton, 1980). In this case, it permitted a structure that was flexible, allowing the researcher to move to areas of investigation as they became more prominent.

At various times, I used two “key informants” (Fontana & Frey, 2003) from the group of subjects, Jack and Mick, to trial questions before undertaking interviews with the remaining participants. Both these boys readily acted as guides and informants and gave insight into the group, its structure, and even sometimes concern about their mates.

The style of semi - structured interviews allowed me to use a variety of question styles and stimuli to promote discussion with each of the boys. My initial interviews focused on the demographic background and school experiences of the boys (see Appendix 2). Patton’s (1980) typology of interview questions helped shape my structure of interviews. As my relationship developed with the boys I explored opinions, values, feelings and knowledge of various topics. The second interview (see Appendix 3) used scaled questions (Cohen & Manion, 1992) to explore how the

boys made choices about school subjects, while the third interview (see Appendix 4) focused on friendship patterns by prompting discussion by asking the subjects to complete open ended statements (Cohen & Manion, 1992).

As part of the fourth interview (See Appendix 5), which focused on masculinities, I chose to use a range of photographic images of males placed in various contexts such as a loving parent, supportive football team player and providing comfort to another male, to arouse discussion into how the boys' construct discourses surrounding masculinities. Keddie (2000) used a similar method, by using media images "to further analyse the collective values of the boys" (p. 7) to discuss images of gender and masculinity amongst a group of male adolescents. In this study, the photographic images were used in individual interviews with each of the subjects, with some further discussion as part of a focus group as a result of the discussions and ideas that arose from the individual interviews.

I want to share with you what I believe was a pertinent moment of the research. After the fourth interview, where the subjects had examined the picture of different males in various activities and occupations, with Jack, one of the informants, I sensed that he was reluctant to conclude and leave the interview, despite it being recess time. The following dialogue took place:

**Researcher:** Everything okay? You're not keen to go back to class?

**Jack:** Yeah, I'm okay. I'd just like to sit and think if that's okay.

**Researcher:** No problems, take your time.

**Jack:** That stuff we talked about, it's all just sinking in.

**Researcher:** Mmmm....we don't really get an opportunity to talk about what it means to be male or female.

**Jack:** No, not really. (*Silence, student sits deep in thought, head down. Researcher completes interview notes. After a period of approx 3 minutes, student stands up*)

**Jack:** See ya then.

**Researcher:** Thanks Jack, that was really good today. I'll see you.

**Jack:** Yeah, thanks.

Here, there is easiness in discussion. Jack easily occupied the space and he took time to reflect on what has been discussed. His need for reflection time suggests that some kind of deep connection of learning was happening for him, something that he had not thought of or considered before. He willingly gave up his vital break time, the time to be with peers in order to reflect.

In many ways, taking part in this research may have been the first opportunity these young male adolescents had to reflect on their understandings of masculinities. As the researcher I was continually mindful of the impact the research was having on the subjects themselves. In planning, developing, undertaking and recording data collection and how I project their thoughts, understandings and their identities in this thesis, I attempted to keep this at the forefront of my mind.

The last semi - structured interview (Appendix 6) asked the boys to discuss the concept of the future and what vision and aspirations they had for their future. During the interview each boy was also asked to complete a small writing task to allow deeper reflection.

In addition to the five semi - structured interviews completed with each of the participants, I conducted a number of individual interviews with various members of the group at different times. By interviewing selected individuals and asking them questions about various observations I had made in classes, the students were able to validate and give further insight or correct assumptions I had made and recorded as part of my field notes. These individual interviews added to the range of multiple data collection sources and aided the process of internal validation (Cohen & Manion, 1992; Merriam, 1988). On a number of occasions I asked more than one of the subjects about the behaviour I had noticed in particular classes, allowing me to compare responses. It also afforded me an opportunity to trial questions, particularly with the informants of the group. In these instances, once again, I tended to adopt a semi - structured style of interviewing, with a number of key questions, but depending on the pupil's response I would digress or elaborate on particular questions.

Coming to know the school environment over time, I made every effort to become familiar with all teaching staff by frequenting the main staffroom at break times, and, when organising interviews with the participants, I endeavoured to ask the teacher some time prior to the arranged lesson to see if their absence would impact on any organised class activity. I asked the student if he was happy to leave the task he was doing when withdrawing him from class. At times, a number of the subjects stated they would prefer not to leave a particular subject or project they were working on. Bob did not like missing Art, and Stewart preferred not to miss Physical Education. I tried to work around the participant's daily schedules and interests to ensure their learning was not affected, that withdrawal from classes was done so that it did not draw particular attention to these boys and that the participants were happy to take part in interviews.

Overall, the boys showed little resistance to being interviewed. On entering particular classes they would often ask "Is it my turn today?" or "Am I coming today?" In early 2004, while observing a woodwork class and informally chatting with a couple of the boys while they worked on the computers about their current woodwork projects, Mick asked "So what are we doing today?" in front of other class members and Blair responded with "It should be my turn. I haven't had a go for a while." These requests to be interviewed demonstrated that they felt safe and respected, while at times feeling challenged by the questions and dialogue that took place during the interviews.

For each of the five semi - structured interviews, I used a pro - forma question sheet with space for the participant's responses. Sitting beside the research subject, I recorded all responses by hand, encouraging correction and checking transcripts as they were completed. I would read back or paraphrase what had been stated during interviews and I would be readily corrected if it was wrong or incorrectly emphasised. I believe that this openness with the subjects prompted them to feel that their narratives were correctly recorded and authenticated.

For informal conversations held with teaching staff I recorded notes following discussions and the two focus groups I held with the participants were audio recorded and later transcribed.

### **Focus groups**

Merton et al. (1956) developed the term “focus group”, which Fontana and Frey (2003) describe as “... apply to a situation in which the researcher/interviewer asks very specific questions about a topic after having completed considerable research” (p. 71). I chose to use two focus groups (Appendix 7) with the participants which were held later in the research and were the accumulation of many questions and topics I had already asked and explored with the boys individually. Madriz (2003) suggests “the focus group is collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multi -vocality of participant’s attitudes, experiences and beliefs” (p. 364).

The use of focus groups allowed me to witness human interaction, collective testimonies and the interchange of power and resistance amongst the group of participants. The data derived from the two focus groups is cumulative and rich. Respondents were stimulated by the discussion, and the use of the group structure let the participants recall ideas, thoughts and events they may have otherwise have not disclosed (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The use of focus groups allowed me to see at firsthand the power of the peer group and the way this governed and mediated discourses surrounding masculinities. As my research progressed, my understanding of these discourses suggested that understandings of power interceded discourses of masculinities.

To facilitate focus groups the researcher is called upon to have a high level of skill to assist and run successful group interviews. As Merton et al. (1956) suggest the interviewer must ensure that individuals do not dominate discussion, that more introverted or difficult respondents have input, and that responses from all participants are obtained to ensure superior treatment of topics. In successfully managing focus groups the researcher, becomes a moderator or mediator, conscious of the group dynamics at play and confident in using a variety of techniques to manage the group. The strategy and skills of the researcher need to be twofold, facilitating questions and collecting data, but also managing the various voices of the group.

My research skills were really tested in running the focus groups, particularly the second focus group. It was very noticeable that the dynamics of each focus group were different because of the mixture of participants. Blair's presence in the second focus group really altered the mood and interactions of the milieu. Blair's low level use of disruptive behaviour was a significant display of how resistance strategies are used to claim personal power, the subject of further detail in Chapter Five.

### **Documentation**

As well as the use of observation and interview, I chose to use a range of documents such as the school prospectus, school plan, school newsletters, student work and standardised achievement tests, as well as written feedback from participants regarding their involvement in the study. Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that the use of this type of data "lends contextual richness and helps to ground inquiry in the milieu of the writer" (p. 234).

Much of the documentation used are public documents that provided insight into the recorded culture of the school - the philosophy, the structure of learning activities and personnel, the history, and the day to day activities students and staff were involved in. Some early discussion with the Grade 8 Supervisor about individual's scores in standardised tests for numeracy and literacy provided some insight into academic abilities. Further personal written documents I used included written feedback from the participants at the conclusion of the study and during interview five when students were asked to complete written responses to some questions. As my relationship with the boys developed, some chose to share work with me. Bob often liked to show me his Art folio and this led to informal discussion about his interest in Art, and techniques he was developing. Jack and Mick, at times, shared written responses they were compiling in response to an English unit they were doing on *Romeo and Juliet*.

### **Personal journal writing**

As already outlined, personal journal writing played a significant role in shaping this inquiry and through the seven journals I completed, I spent considerable time reflecting and questioning ideas, thoughts and various philosophies. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) state, that with teachers they worked with "in their journals they

weave together their accounts of the private and professional, capturing fragments of experience in attempts to sort themselves out” (p. 421). The journals I created over time feel like a rich carpet of colour, they blend my personal life and identities with the concerns and issues I raise as a professional - as a teacher, as a researcher, as one who is concerned with education. Ideas are woven into the pattern, threads of colour seem to be lost and then they reappear again with more clarity and more vibrance. Journals are a potent means to give accounts of understanding and experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

### **Reconstructed narratives**

Readers have already come to experience one of seven reconstructed narratives created to give insight into each of the boys who took part in this study. At the beginning of this chapter the reconstructed narrative illustrates a boy who is bored and underachieving at school. As already outlined these reconstructed narratives evolved from many of the discussions and observations I made. I spent considerable time writing and editing these narratives and each of the subjects was invited to read, and make any changes to the writing towards the end of the study. The participants authenticated these works and as Fine et al. (2000) suggest they become “negotiated interpretations”. These reconstructed narratives are placed at the start of each chapter. At first glance it would appear that each of these stand in isolation, however, their inclusion will become apparent as the reader progresses.

### **Literature review**

In developing the style of this thesis I have chosen to weave the extensive literature review through the body of the work. Extensive reading has been undertaken over the course of the research in the areas of philosophy, research methods, educational trends, identity, gender and power. Regular discussions with my supervisor directed my reading and shaped the inquiry. The ideas of Foucault (1971, 1977, 1978, 1981), Frankl (1969, 1992), and Taylor (1994, 2002) provided insight into key themes of identity, power and resistance, and were continually used as core references to shape further reading and discussion. In drawing these theoretical frameworks together I am mindful that there are distinct epistemological disparities between the theories and I use these theories with caution. The intention is to use these ideas at various points throughout chapters, to richly explore the themes that are pertinent to the

chapter. I understand it is difficult to draw these differing theories together and it is not my intention to do so. Instead, they sit as separate lenses focusing on the differing themes of each chapter

The extensive works of Connell (1987, 1989, 1990, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002), Keddie (2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006), Kenway (1990, 1995), Mac an Ghail (1988, 1994, 1996), Martino (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000), and Nilan (1995, 2000) have provided insight and understanding in the area of gender, particularly masculinities, in the school environment. As well as the wide range of literature consulted, throughout the duration of this study, many hours were spent consulting literature on research design. The work of Denzin (1970, 1995, 1997) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2003a, 2003b) were used as key resources in shaping this inquiry, collecting and analysing data and the way in which this has been presented to the reader as a thesis. The range of literature used has been thought provoking and stimulating, and has pushed me as a researcher beyond my comfort zone.

### **Ethical issues and participant ownership**

Stake (2000) suggests “Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p. 447). In utilising a model of research where the researcher becomes the central catalyst for data collection and analysis (Janesick, 2000; Merriam, 1988; Wexler, 1992), trust and rapport are imperative to build effective relationships with participants allowing the accumulation of data that might be rich with possibilities. When the researcher places emphasis on building strong relationships with study participants, this raises a number of ethical issues.

For these subjects, being a participant in this research project became a major aspect of their school lives. In many ways, it allowed the participants to develop identity within the school population, and something that they shared as a group. They became “the boys doing research”. By the end of 2003, a number of teachers within the school had disclosed to me that the subjects had responded in a positive way to being selected to take part in the project. The Grade 8 Supervisor stated “they like being part of it, in some ways they are kind of proud that they have been selected. They think they’re doing something that’s important.” At the conclusion of the

study, I asked each of the boys to complete written feedback about the research project. All of the boys stated they would take part in the same study or similar again, Jack stated “for sure”. Bob stated that as a result of the study he has gained “more freedom to speak my mind”, while Jack affirmed “I’ve got a more realistic view of school. It’s felt good to be part of something”, even Blair maintained “it has been rather cool”. As the researcher, this is currently the most positive feedback I have had about the project.

After spending considerable time in building a relationship with my subjects, and becoming in many ways a part of the culture of the school, I was mindful of the need for closure for the six participants, the wider school community and myself. Janesick (2000) comments that “the researcher must decide when to actually leave the field setting, often an emotional and traumatic event because of the close rapport developed during the course of the study” (p. 388). Through a process of “easing out of the setting” (Janesick, 2000) I was able to terminate the relationships with the subjects and the school. Towards the end of 2004 I continually reminded them that the project was coming to a conclusion and outlined the sequence of events leading to the final write up and their involvement in that process. I encouraged the boys to create their own pseudonym for the final thesis to promote a sense of personal ownership in the work, and during 2005 I made a number of visits to the school to check transcripts with the boys individually. Through a process of reducing visitations and interviews in the final year of the study I hoped to diminish possible feelings of separation the subjects may have felt due to the intensity and meaning they had fostered as being part of the study.

The school and the study participants had become an important part of my life too and this process of slow withdrawal was important for me, as much as it was for the boys of the research piece.

### **Data analysis and quality criteria**

There were three aspects to the groundwork for this thesis. The data collected was extensive and needed both careful management and analysis, which happened simultaneously. A diverse and vast literature review helped shape my inquiry.

Personal journal writing over five years allowed synthesis of ideas and ways of planning how data would be analysed.

A constant comparative method of analysis was helpful to cross - reference new with old data in making contrasts, identify reoccurring themes and gaining insight into the participant's world and discourses (Leedy, 1993). In analysing interviews and observations I often looked for common themes and through writing summaries of individual interviews and making associations across the group of subjects I was able to draw clusters of meanings (Leedy, 1993). It became evident early in the study that the theme of power was influential in the boys' meanings of masculinities. As a result, power became a central focus of the work.

### **Research approach**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) make a relevant point when they state that “the interpretive bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and by those people of the setting” (p. 6). Undertaking research in a school setting in many ways draws upon the whole school community. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, a ripple effect is created across the surface of the water. While the focus of this study is coming to understand the school lives of these boys, it is also about understanding them in the context of the setting which involves a multitude of variables. As Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest:

If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them with information in the form in which they usually experience it. They will be able, both tacitly and propositionally, to derive naturalistic generalizations that will prove to be useful extensions of their understandings. (p. 36)

The research approach used allows questions to be raised, and new opportunities to be explored. I wanted to widen understandings, rather than narrow them, provoking possibilities (Donmoyer, 2000). As Donmoyer (2000) suggests “... case study research might be used to expand and enrich the repertoire of social constructions

available to practitioners and others; it may help, in other words, in the forming of questions rather than in finding of answers” (pp. 51-52).

The ways in which the study is conceptualised, and how the data is collected and analysed, adds weight to its usefulness and worthiness as a research project. For this reason I have used Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) criteria for judging qualitative research as the means to design and implement this project. By asking the participants to legitimise and judge the credibility of the results provides *credibility* to this research. Participants had the opportunity to check transcripts, re - constructed narratives and final statements for completeness and accuracy on an ongoing basis. *Transferability* can only be achieved by thoroughly describing the context, as well as the assumptions made that are pivotal to the research. Similarly, *dependability* is determined by my ability to account for the changing context in which the research occurs by describing the changes in setting and how this affected the participants individually and as a group, as well as the impact this had on me as a researcher. The personal journals I have kept for the duration of the study provide insights, and thorough reporting on the research process and strengthens the *transferability* and *dependability* of this study. *Confirmability* is achieved when the researcher can document the procedures employed to check and interpret the data. This chapter is evidence of this.

Gall et al. (1996) further suggest that a well built *chain of evidence*, including research question, methodology, data reflection and analysis strengthens validity. Leedy (1993) reiterates “if readers can follow the researcher’s reasoning, they can determine whether the conclusions offered are logical or not” (p. 169). In addition, Gall et al. (1996) suggest that *long - term involvement* increases the reliability of the study. Following the participants over a three - year time frame has certainly allowed me to come to know them, as well as the climate and essence of the school.

Emphasis has been placed on internal validity (Cohen & Manion, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b; Merriam, 1988; Wiersma, 2000) with participants checking transcripts of interviews, field notes of observations, re - constructed narratives and extracts from the final report to authenticate the study. Internal validation also encapsulates a need for the researcher to be transparent in her work. The reader

should feel that he knows the researcher and what is brought to the study - personal assumptions, worldview values and theoretical assumptions that shape the study allowing credibility.

This project is a cumulative project that has in some ways been influenced by the strong relationship I have developed with my supervisor and peers, and the ongoing dialogues that have transpired about this project. Through regular meetings with my supervisor and a number of colleagues I was able to explore concepts and ideas. Many of the discussions about identity, power and resistance, and masculinities became the underlying structure for inquiry.

### **Writing as inquiry**

This research project relies heavily on writing that is reflective and encompassing as a way of coming to know. Richardson (2003) describes writing as a “dynamic, creative process” (p. 501), “a method of discovery” (p. 502). The writing becomes a method of the inquiry. Through ongoing writing I have come to question, reflect, review and synthesis understandings. As Richardson (2003) states, writing becomes:

A way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the social world, writing is not just a mopping up activity at the end of the research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”- a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship with it. Form and content are inseparable. (p. 499)

By using different methods of writing, particularly the use of a conversational style in the middle chapters, I have encouraged the reader to be part of the experience and enter a personal relationship with me as the researcher (Hodder, 2003). Brown (1991) utilised four separate voices in her work *Mama Lola* to blend the personal and professional insights she brought to the study. Richardson (2003) suggests such a style “can reconstruct the “sense” of the event from multiple “as lived” perspectives; it can allow all the conflicting “voices” to be heard, relieving the researcher of having to be judge and arbiter” (p. 516). It points to the multiple identities I bring to

the research and provides a lived experience for the reader of conflicts and contests within oneself. It attempts to provide the reader with some insight into how the subjects are experiencing multiple identities as they shape themselves as males. The writing is intended to be meaningful and evocative in heightening senses and emotions, to prompt a deeper thinking and questioning of its reader (Hodder, 2003). As Denzin (1995) claims, “the modernist observer - writer then mediates those voices and assembles them into a text that re - orders reality according to a particular interpretive logic” (p. 7). My role as a researcher is to give life to these voices, to bring them together, to engage the reader in hearing the patterns and meanings that have been silenced.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Setting**

**“We are not ourselves when nature, being oppress’d, commands the mind to  
suffer with the body”**

**William Shakespeare, *King Lear*  
Act II, Scene IV**

**“They say best men are moulded out of faults”**

**William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*  
Act V, Scene I**

## **Blair**

*Fuck Maths. Fuck him. Fuck this school. Dead set this place stinks. I hate it. I hate coming here. It's a waste of time. It's boring, especially Maths and he is such a prick. Dead set, I could smash him. I just don't like him; he just goes off so easily. He thinks he's such a hero. He's always trying to be smart, you mouth back and then you get in trouble. Fuckin' relocated or sent down to the Principal's office for doin' nothing wrong. He won't even show you how to do it, doesn't explain it, just says get on with it. What a fuckin' prick. I'll give him a razz, wind the bastard up. Fuck him. See how he likes it.*

*I'll just sit here and do nothing. Now he's havin' a go at me because I'm talkin' to Jamie. So what! I'm tapping away with me ruler and pens, see how he likes that. He's havin' a go at me. Well you prick if you showed me I'd be able to do it, wouldn't I. This is so boring. Jamie and I are talkin' and now he's put me name on the board and staring at me, waitin' for me to react. I'm doin' no work, cause I don't know how to do it. I'll just keep talking. Go on put me name on the board again, I don't care. See I told you he would. Two strikes now, do you see me worried, I couldn't give a fuck. The sooner I get relocated out of here the better. You can suspend me if you like. Means I get a holiday away from this fuckin' place. Have a better time down at the house, smoke a bit of dope and hang out with the boys. Fuckin' better than this shithole.*

*Now the prick's asking me to move. Alright you fuckhead, I'm moving. Watch this you prick, I'll just flick Alice's books as I walk by. That got a razz out of her. The other boys are laughing. Fuck him and fuck her. That got him, he's fully cranked now, yelling. His face is going red and the others are watching. I couldn't give a shit. I'm pleased to be out of this place. The Principal's office is better than this shitbox any way. Fuck the bastard, if I slam the door that'll wind him up a bit more. Fuck him! I'd rather be suspended anyway, it's only fuckin' Maths anyway.*

## **Introduction**

Mac an Ghail (1996) suggests schools "... are significant cultural sites that actively produce and reproduce a range of differentiated, hierarchically ordered heterosexual masculinities and femininities that are made available for students collectively to negotiate and inhabit within peer group sexual subcultures" (p. 195). It is important to consider the setting of the school the study participants attend as significant in shaping this inquiry. By describing this setting in detail I intend to place the reader within the school, to experience its physicality, its people and its infrastructure as I have as a researcher, and as one who has come to know and see at play, both the overt and hidden culture which influenced the discourses that give meaning to masculinities.

Gender boundaries are continually played out in the school arena. Mac an Ghail (1996) describes these as "the interrelated material, social and discursive practices of the staffroom, classroom and playground micro - cultures" (p. 195). This study is concerned with understanding masculinities, the meaning elicited from the word "masculinities" and the relationship notion of masculinities and how this impacts on learning in the classroom environment. Contextually, it is important to understand the gender regimes that are established and practised in the school (Arnot, 1984; Connell, 1996; Nilan, 1995; Skeggs, 1991).

My study has been strongly influenced by those who work from the premise that gender is constructed within social institutions (Beynon, 2002; Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 1996, 2000; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kenway, 1995; Kimmel, 1987, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Nilan, 2000; Renold 2001; Warren, 1997), and that schools take an active role in the formation of masculinities and reinforcing the gender dichotomy (Alloway, 1995; Connell, 1996; Nilan, 1995). Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) state that "the school as an institution, with its historically reproduced rules, routines, expectations, relationships and rewards, and its deployment of artefacts, resources and space, actively shapes what happens within it, for all of its inhabitants. Gender is pervasively and powerfully implicated in this shaping" (p. 114). Consequently, this chapter draws attention to the gender regimes played out which affect, shape and reinforce masculinities. As Clark (1993) argues:

Boys and girls are, in a very real sense, 'learning to be' in the school setting. The collective identities which they produce and take on are a real part of their emerging social identities. These social identities, however, are in no way 'pure' and themselves compromise practices and attitudes which are used to enact and enforce an unequal distribution of power in society. (p. 30)

To understand the gender regime of the school, examination of the power relations that exist is vital. Here I draw on the work of Foucault who developed a framework of power, sexuality and discourse. Kelly (1992) summarised Foucault's framework, thus as:

[Foucault] takes power as a central theme and suggests that sexuality is best understood as a potential that develops in relation to varying combinations of social definition, regulation, organisation and categorisation. In his view beings make sense of their behaviour and that of others through discourses: socially produced forms of knowledge which define and organise experience and which always embody power. (p. 26)

Power becomes a central dynamic in the school culture and gives focus to how one might examine the links between masculinities and schooling (Kessler et al., 1985; Mac an Ghail, 1996; Skeggs, 1991). As a researcher, I was interested in what features of the school contributed to the dynamic of power.

In summarising the reasons for including such a chapter, I am suggesting that by better understanding the structures and routines established by the school, we gain insight into those that enlighten the formation of masculinities amongst its students. Additionally, this approach accepts Connell's (1996) suggestion that "...the school as the setting in which other agencies are in play, especially the agency of the pupils themselves" (p. 212). Denborough (1996) declares "schools are astonishing institutions and producers of meanings and identities. They are fields of power through which individuals make their way and are in process themselves" (p. 1).

In placing the school as the central focus of this study, I have done so with care and some trepidation. Through ongoing consultation with the study participants and personnel of the school I have aimed to protect the right for anonymity for all involved and the school itself. Accordingly, I have made every effort to alter particulars or eliminate details that might identify individuals or the school. As I have proceeded in this study, particularly in writing this chapter, I have asked myself “Does this identify the school? Does this identify the person?”. I have made every effort to disguise the facts in order to protect the school and its people.

### **The chosen school**

Mercury High School is a state co - educational high school located in a busy residential and business - driven community in Tasmania. One of the oldest state secondary schools in Tasmania, opened in 1951 to meet the needs of a growing residential area. In the 1960s, it was transformed into a high school with “...fine traditions of scholarship, sporting excellence and community service” (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2002, p. 7).

Over the years, Mercury High School has secured funding for new works and extensions to buildings. These works have generally coincided with increases in student numbers and changes in curriculum needs. The high school operates as a number of separate older buildings with an outside corridor to allow easy access between buildings. Students move to specialised areas in different buildings for instruction throughout the day.

Gender regimes within a school are to do with power relations, which include the patterns of dominance, including supervision and authority (Connell, 1996, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Connell (1996) argues “a familiar and important pattern is the association of masculinity, and the concentration of men in supervisory positions in school systems” (p. 213). The school’s history suggests that males have maintained power within the school for a considerable time and that the traditions established have been based on male values, interests, ways of behaving and relating, particularly in the area of sport and competition. Two past male Principals held extensive assignments at the school and have made a significant impact on the culture and traditions of the school. While these are traditions within the school, they

are relevant to the participants in the present because they inform and play a part in the discourses of masculinities that these boys share when participating in school. At the establishment of this research, the school was appointed its first female Principal

Over the past decade, the school has prided itself on forging strong links with the local community and in 2000 entered a partnership agreement with the State Government and local city council "...that will facilitate a new direction as a modern Twenty First Century Community School" (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2002, p. 8). These innovations are aimed at providing a new direction for the school. This partnership agreement and the programs that describes, "...provide our students with enhanced learning opportunities in technology, enterprise and the arts. Our students will also gain socially through a range of opportunities to be involved in their community" (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2002, p. 8).

In recent years, the school has experienced a declining student population. During this time the school has seen the opportunity to utilise the existing community links to capitalise on talents, skills and expertise that already exist within the wider community. The study participants were involved in learning experiences that moved beyond the school environment, working alongside artists and skilled tradespeople who acted as mentors and as community "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Currently, Mercury High School has an enrolment of approximately 250 students serviced by twenty - four teachers and fifteen support staff. There is an even gender balance of students. The school shares the services of a guidance officer, a social worker and support teachers with other schools in the area.

### **Traditions of the past and present initiatives**

The school's motto, 'QUISQUE PRO OMNIBUS', translated as "each for all", is mentioned in the Mercury High School Prospectus, features in the emblem that adorns official correspondence, and can be found on the various items of the school uniform. The motto's inclusion of the word "each" sets the individual apart, and in many ways separated, while paradoxically suggesting that the individual should consider his fellow man and strive towards the same goals. The motto advocates an

image of brotherhood where the individual sacrifices his own personal goals to work towards protecting and maintaining the shared values and purposes of the group. The motto is a relic from the past, a tradition that embraces what Connell (2000) would suggest is part of the “symbolization” that play a vital part in communicating “...the symbolic presentation of gender” (p. 26). While little attention is paid directly to the motto, its presence on the official correspondence and uniform of the school is a continual reminder of past traditions.

Of late times, greater attention is paid to the school’s Mission Statement by teaching staff, which is:

To create a caring, supportive and challenging educational environment reflective of the needs of all community members and in which there is genuine sharing of the responsibility for educational provision among all community members. (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2002, p. 1)

The majority of Tasmanian schools have moved towards the development of mission statements that aim to encapsulate the spirit of the school. In the instance of Mercury High School, it is clear that the school wishes to provide a strong focus on inclusion and community. By involving the whole community in the “...sharing of the responsibility for educational provision...” Mercury High School aspires to involve parents and other community members, as well as teaching staff, to meet educational needs.

Students at Mercury High School wear a prescribed uniform. The style and fashion of the uniform has changed considerably over time. Like many other Tasmanian state schools, the uniform is relaxed in style, is cost effective for parents, as well as practical and accepted by parents and students. The uniform generally consists of grey trousers, a coloured polo top and rugby top in the school colours.

In undertaking early observations it became apparent that students continually looked for ways to reject the “symbolization” (Connell, 1996, 2000) of the uniform code that clearly defined males from females, and restricted movement and behaviour. The girls opted to wear trousers, rejecting the uniform dress. Additionally, the students

found ways to modify the uniform to create an individualised identity through the adoption of particular hairstyles and the wearing of jewellery, make up, shoes and cap. This was frowned upon by school authorities. Research indicates that modifying uniform is a strategy students use to resist the authority and structure of schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Paechter, 2006a).

The provision of a school uniform creates a clear division between students and teachers and becomes a focal point for power relations and resistance to be played out (Connell, 1996). In this instance, teachers are defined from the student body by wearing individual dress, as well as being given the authority to chastise and discipline students in ways they see fit if they violate the uniform code. Moreover, students are continually reminded that teachers maintain the power, authority and control in the school setting.

### **Students who attend Mercury High School**

Students who attend Mercury High School generally come from five feeder primary schools, all situated within a ten kilometre radius of the school. A considerable number of students with disabilities choose to study at Mercury, due to its strong tradition as an inclusive school.

Students who attend the school generally come from a low to middle socio-economic background with parents involved in non - professional work. A significant number of parents are unemployed or are involved in unpaid work. This school situation is not unusual in that one in every five children in Australia live in a single parent family, with 90% of those cases being with the mother as the prime carer (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

### **Mercury High School - The priorities**

All Tasmanian state schools are now required to enter into and reflect on a Partnership Agreement, which highlights the school's main objectives in providing for educational needs. As part of the Annual Report, schools are asked to reflect upon their programs and priorities, as well as providing qualitative and quantitative

data that measure outcomes. This process provides an opportunity for schools to consider practices and programs in order to modify or establish new goals.

Mercury High School's Annual Report 2002 is an accurate and realistic account of the current school situation. It focuses on seven areas: literacy; numeracy; quality of teaching; leaderships; professional development; equity and meeting school - community needs and expectations. At the time of this report the participants of my study were in their first year of high school. Following is a selection of relevant points taken from the school's Annual Report 2002 that will give the reader insight into the school's programs, personnel and students:

- Approximately 82% of Grade 8 students found to be reading "average or better" in November 2002 as measured by the PAT Reading Comprehension Test.
- 92% of all Grade 8 students in 2002 when assessed with the PAT Reading Comprehension Test had an average Stanine of 4.7 in November 2002. Girls were assessed at an average Stanine of 5.5, while boys were assessed on average at 4.2.
- 48% of those completing Grade 10 in 2002 received an award in one of the top two neighbouring syllabuses in TCE (Tasmanian Certificate of Education) Mathematics.
- State - wide Grade 7 testing results showed that 80% of students going into Grade 8 at the end of 2002 achieved "at or above average" overall numeracy levels.
- In 2002, 38% of teachers perceived the quality of teaching to be high.
- The student survey in 2002 stated that 50% of all students enjoyed being and working at school enjoying the school curriculum.

- Daily absentee rates in 2002 as follows:

**Table 1**

Grade	All Students	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
7	8.83%	5.74%
8	14.01%	24.52%
9	17.07%	22.22%
10	17.25%	19.33%

- In 2002 the percentage of students suspended more than once increases from Grade 7 (Males 4%, Females 0%) to Grade 10 (Males 19%, Females 8%), as does the average number of days suspended from Grade 7 (Males 2.8 days, Females 2 days) to Grade 10 (Males 4.25 days, Females 3.25 days)
- The retention rate for students moving from high school to college was 81.6% for all students in 2002, which was higher than the state average of 74.5%.
- 80% of parents surveyed from the 2002 Annual Report agreed that Mercury High School provided a safe and secure environment for their children
- 79% of parents expressed moderate or stronger satisfaction with their child's education at the school.
- In 2002, 37% of Grade 6 students in Mercury's feeder primary school elected to make the transition to Mercury High for their secondary schooling.

## Daily school practices

Mercury High School operates on a five - day timetable where pupils study eight subjects at any one time. The school is broken into a Middle School (Grades 7 and 8) and a Senior School (Grades 9 and 10). Like many other state schools in Tasmania, Mercury High School had adopted the model of Middle Schooling in order to ease the transition from primary to high school (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Kellough, 1999, *Boys: getting it right, 2002*). This allows students to spend the majority of their time with a smaller number of teachers and in their own home room. Morning sessions are considered to be key learning times and when the core subjects of English, Mathematics, Science and SOSE are delivered.

In a normal week, Middle School students undertake fifteen lessons of core subjects (which includes English and SOSE) equating to ten hours, five lessons of Mathematics, which is streamed to three different ability levels, four lessons of Science, four lessons of Health and Physical Education, four lessons of Information Technology and then four lessons of two other subjects that rotate each term. These include subjects like Art, Craft and Design, Speech and Drama, Music, LOTE (Languages Other Than English), Computing Studies, Food and Textiles and Design Technology. Students are given a one term taster of each of these subjects in order to gauge their interest, and in Grade 9 students select four of these subjects to specialise in over the next two years.

The school has developed innovative programs in order to engage students in practical, community based learning. In the 2002 Prospectus, the school claims “Our school is a leader in the state in the provision of learning experiences outside the traditional classroom” (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2002, p. 17). Students involved in Child Studies operated a playgroup for the local community, Design Technology students worked with two Artisans in Residence to build commercial items including boats and other items like breadboards. Art, Craft and Design students worked with the Tasmanian Potters Society during my time at the school. In 2004, the school was identifying students “at risk”, who were mostly boys, and withdrawing them from traditional subjects to plan, prepare and develop a community garden within the school grounds. In addition, a number of students were

involved in the Real Learning, Real Futures Project that involved students from other high schools being involved in practical learning and experiences, such as aquaculture or robotics.

### **Transition periods**

Each day is divided into seven lessons starting at 8:40 and finishing at 2.55. Generally, lessons are the duration of forty minutes. Due to the nature of the school layout, students are often required to travel some distance from one building to another for a particular subject. During each of the lessons, a warning bell indicates to students that they need to move promptly to their next class. Most of this transitional movement was unsupervised and allowed much of the hidden culture of students to emerge.

These transition periods between classes were an example of the setting of the school where students were the agents at play. The students were very active agents in their own gender construction and these times with little teacher supervision allow students the freedom to play, rehearse and construct gender (French, 1999). It was during these times, that the power relations of students were played out. Patterns of dominance, control and harassment amongst students became evident. Connell (1996) argues “the peer groups, not individuals, are the bearers of gender definitions” (p. 220) and at a later date he (2000) explains that “the peer milieu has its own gender order, distinct though not fixed” (p. 161). It was here that students made the rules, the gender regimes were clearly defined by the students using a masculine/feminine dichotomy (Davies, 1989).

Students gave the impression that they felt they were unsupervised and could use this transition time to interact and delay movement to their next class. During these times, I noticed a more active and sometimes physical level of interaction, particularly amongst the majority of the boys; however, there were a number of girls who were just as physical, noisy and aggressive. The quieter and more studious pupils tended to move at the front of the group, while those considered more popular or less studious delayed their movement as much as possible.

The transitional periods were often a time when harassment of students would happen. Moreover, this was a way for the boys to define and establish hierarchies amongst their peers. Those at the top of the hierarchy tended to display hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Warren, 1997) where displays of toughness, confrontation and a high level of physicality were displayed. The boys at the top of the male hierarchy mostly used verbal abuse - usually swearing and derogatory comments to establish their position. The participants often were both the subjects of giving and receiving this abuse. This was invariably delivered loudly for all or the majority of the group to hear. Students generally laughed or ignored the behaviour. The victim of the harassment usually ignored the behaviour, or would retort with further insult. At no point did I witness this behavior being reported to a teacher, even in situations where a high level of physical abuse, including punching, slapping and kicking, was carried out on an individual.

The observations made of these transitional periods were in direct contrast to the classroom environment that was controlled or dominated by the presence of teachers. The students retained power in transitional periods and as agents they influenced, controlled and mediated discourses of gender and contesting power relations. They engaged in discourses where understandings of masculinities/femininities were being tested and explored in order to find their place in the gender order, where hegemonic masculinities (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Warren, 1997) dominated the hierarchy of masculinities and where females, and those males who displayed feminine qualities were considered subordinate and worthy recipients of bullying (Jackson, 1998). Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) state that “all boys are aware of certain forms of policing and surveillance driving institutionalised regimes of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and form of moral regulation in schools which reinscribe conventional dualistic gender classifications” (p. 26).

It was noticeable that these transition periods were also a time for many of the students and some of the subjects to display interest in the opposite sex. A number of popular girls were often escorted to class through teasing, bantering, and flirting

by the boys. Physical contact exchanges would be made. Connell (1996) makes reference to this masculine/feminine dichotomy which is displayed and acted as a heterosexual “romance” pattern of gender relations that “dominates student life” (p. 219) and is highlighted in Holland and Eisenhart’s study (1990). Students define their gender through interaction with the opposite sex. For the boys involved in this study it appeared that flirting, teasing, physical contact and bantering were ways to establish their masculinities through displays of power (Skeggs, 1991; Skelton, 1997).

One cannot come to understand masculinities in isolation. They need to be examined in their relation to femininities, as practices of gender relations (Connell, 2000; Jordan, 1995; Thorne, 1989). It became apparent that masculinities and femininities were as opposites and often contradictory. Masculinities were clearly at work, being defined and acted out in opposition to all that appeared to be feminine by the subjects of this study. Further attention will be to this topic in Chapter 7.

Co - educational schools have long been considered settings where it is easy to highlight the differences between males and females. Differences in gender are alluded to by “symbolic oppositions” (Connell, 2000, p.157) embedded in the social structures of the schools. It is through the routines and expectations that differences between the genders are highlighted. The impact of practices such as uniform requirements, separate toilet and changing facilities, ways of addressing students, selection of texts and resources, competitions that place girls against boys in classroom activities actively organise students by gender and establish discourses, where male/female are seen in opposition to each other (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Skeggs 1991). Connell (2000) suggests “co-educational schools, then, typically operate with an informal but powerful ideology of gender difference, and do put pressure on boys to conform to it” (p. 157).

### **School houses and sporting interests**

Sporting traditions at Mercury High School continue to play an integral part in the way students participate and how they are organised in the school. During their time

at school, students are allocated to one of four house groups. The establishment of a school house system first used in the mid 1950s, immediately allows a discourse that promotes competition and rivalry.

Mercury High has a tradition of being a strong sports - based school and has performed well at Inter - High carnivals for swimming and athletics. Over the decades, the school has also had a strong involvement in local sporting competitions in football, cricket, hockey, netball and softball. Connell (2000) describes sport as one of the vortexes which promotes a gender order and helps to define and aid masculine performances. He argues that sport “blends power, symbolism and emotion in a particularly potent combination” (p. 159), and in most cases reinforces hegemonic masculinities where athleticism, domination, and winning are most honoured (Messner, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1994).

Although involvement in local and school organised sport by state school students has declined over the past two decades, sporting activities continued to be a major focus within the school. Annual school athletics and swimming carnivals, Inter - High athletics and swimming carnivals and awards such as the sportsman and sportswoman of the year continued to attract a high level of attention and prestige amongst the student body.

In the first two months I was at Mercury High School, I noticed a heightened anticipation and excitement, particularly amongst the boys, in classes I observed. This happened over a period of two weeks and was the result of the impending school athletics carnival, and then the Inter - High athletics carnival that followed in the following week. The school oval had lanes marked out around the perimeter, and Physical Education lessons were devoted to practice in athletics. During class and transitional periods much of the conversation amongst the subjects was about who would be the strongest athletic contenders in the grade, as well as discussion as to what events students were going to enter. The study participants readily spoke about the importance of, and their involvement in, sporting competition.

Competition is a central aspect in their discourses of masculinities which we will come to examine in subsequent chapters.

### **School discipline and security**

Epstein and Johnson (1998) claim:

Pupil and teacher cultures are centrally formed in these relations of power and are strongly influenced by the fact that there are few teachers and many students - and in the classroom usually one teacher and thirty or more students. It is partly for this reason that, in teacher cultures, issues of surveillance and control are often overriding. Pupil cultures, on the other hand, often hinge upon the blocking and undermining of teacher's disciplinary powers and of those identities which the school recognises and rewards. (p. 113)

The discipline and management of students becomes a central mechanism within schools.

Mercury High School has spent considerable time in creating a Charter of Responsibilities and Rights to maintain order, and promote staff and student wellbeing and safety. The use of a Charter of Responsibilities and Rights in schools often follows the ideas of William Glasser and his concept of Choice/ Theory (Glasser, 1990, 1993, 1998) to outline clearly expectations of behaviours and consequences if students choose to break the rules. As Glasser (1990) argues "the only rules that work in schools (or any place else) are those that are accepted by the people they govern, and the only reason people accept a rule is because they believe it is more to their benefit than to the detriment to do so" (p. 191). *Boys: getting it right* (2002) suggests that "such methods are based on the principle of students taking greater responsibility for their own behaviour and for making decisions about their behaviour which result in either positive or negative consequences" (p. 146).

The Charter of Responsibilities and Rights is a major focus of the school. The purpose of Mercury High School's Charter of Responsibilities and Rights is described thus:

This will promote a safe and happy learning environment. At Mercury, we encourage students to consider the choices that are available to them with each learning experience and to accept responsibility for their actions and behaviours. A maturing self discipline is our goal for all students. (Mercury High School Prospectus, 2006)

The use of discipline immediately places teachers in power and students in subservient positions (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). For the purposes of this study, I believe it is imperative to understand how the school and teachers used discipline as a way of maintaining power.

Working closely with the Grade 8 Supervisor I was aware that during the first three months of my time in the school there were participants in the research group who were suspended for such things as verbal threats towards teachers, and in one case a verbal threat of violence towards someone in their own immediate peer group. In another case, one of the study participants was externally suspended for fighting at lunch time

The subjects of this study would often engage in "protest masculinity" (Connell, 1996; Martino, 1999), where confrontation of authority was highly acclaimed amongst the peer network. Individuals openly defying teacher commands would be supported from the sidelines by mates, with the intention to test boundaries, and to resist the power imposed by teachers and authorities.

Mercury High School has developed an extensive behaviour management plan outlining consequential actions for those students who display anti - social behaviour. Teachers are trained to be consistent in their approach. The levels range

from minor off - task behaviour where teachers respond with low key responses, usually by reminding students of the rule they have broken and redirecting them to task, to level five which were the most serious of offences, and included any threats or acts of aggression or harassment towards fellow students or staff, serious vandalism, or the smoking and possession of illegal substances. Such behaviours were treated seriously and result in an immediate internal or external suspension for the culprit.

While students were actively encouraged to take ownership of their own behaviour this was juxtaposed with the teacher having the power to determine the disciplinary action when a student failed to make what was considered to be an appropriate choice. Teachers were placed in positions of authority where they were encouraged to control student behaviour through power and dominance.

As an observer, it became apparent that the participants of this study were often moved to an isolation desk within the classroom, relocated to another class, placed on daily report, internally suspended or, in some cases, externally suspended from attending school all together.

Over the duration of the research period it became evident that the school was moving towards increased security with the buildings and grounds. In 2004, teachers and staff adopted wearing identification badges indicating who they were and their status within the school. Subsequently, we see another measure of “symbolization” (Connell, 1996, 2000) that helps to establish the power regime within the school and defines teachers’ status. In the same year the main doors from the office area to the central part of the school were operated through a security system in which visitors were buzzed in or out of the school. The study participants often spoke about these increased security measures and further attention will be drawn to this later in this thesis. As Darling - Hammond (1997) allege “authoritarian systems that rely on heavily-handed sanctions ultimately increase the level of student alienation and misbehaviour reducing possibilities for addressing problems constructively” (p. 138). The move by Mercury High School to increase surveillance and develop a

conservative and strict outline of sanctions for misbehaviour was alienating students further by creating divisions in power, status and authority, and furthermore inviting student resistance.

### **Conclusion**

To the observer, Mercury High School appeared to have a clearly defined gender regime where masculinities and femininities were placed in opposition to each other. As well as an official school culture explored in this chapter, there was a hidden culture where students were actively engaged as agents within the site of the school setting. Students owned and operated this system with little adult intervention. At times, the two social systems operated simultaneously in the school. In the hidden culture of the school, the students have their own gender order where they were engaged in exploring, experimenting and finding their individual gender position within this social structure. This was often contradictory, confusing and fluid, requiring the individual to layer emotions, understandings and needs in order to survive within the school system, and amongst their peers.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Identity**

**“Men at some time are masters of their fates.  
The fault, dear Brutus is not in our stars, but in ourselves  
that we are underlings”**

**William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar***

**Act I, Scene II**

## **Jack**

*If I had to describe myself I'd say I'm okay looking, not doing too bad at school, got heaps of friends, girls and boys. I'm fun. Some of my friends would say I'm wacky. That's what Jane would say any way. I'm working as a casual at Coles, doing night fill. So now I've got money which burns a hole in my pocket. Buying music, clothes and spending it on my motorbike. I'm pretty much my own person. If I wanna do something, I just go and do it. Like I do French, because I'm good with languages. I speak German as well. My mum tells me I'm good at languages. Me mates have stirred me about doing French, but I don't really care what they say, as long as it gets me somewhere in life. I don't wanna be sitting on my butt all day long while I go and collect the dole once a week, I wanna be out working earnin' money. That's what's possible. Your career's most important.*

*I reckon in Grade 10 I'll be a bit more serious about school because that's when you hit the real world. I know my teachers would be happier if I worked a bit harder, so I could reach my "potential". My French teacher would be happy if I put in a bit more. I don't know, I wanna do well, but I just like hangin' with my friends and havin' fun. Being part of a group, having fun, being together.*

*I've thought about maybe going to Uni to study languages, maybe be a translator or possibly starting my own business, would be a good way to make some money. My dad says it's not what you know, it's who you know. That's true I reckon, but I suppose you've got also work hard to get there. Dad and mum are keen for me to do well at school. Sometimes, I probably don't work hard enough. But you gotta be happy with your life as well. You gotta have fun, with your mates, but also not worry about what they think sometimes. Sometimes you've got to do your own thing, like me and studying French. You gotta get the balance right, be with your friends, but do okay at school. I'm still working on the balance thing, haven't mastered it yet. Sometimes I just get caught up talking and not getting much work done. The teachers think I'm slack, but you gotta remember that friends are important and it's about having fun.*

*I definitely wanna be someone, go somewhere, do something with my life. See the world. My parents would be happy with that. I'm looking forward to going to College, do a bit of music and continue my drummin', study German and French and*

*try and get to Uni. That's probably when I will start to do a bit of work, try a bit harder. I like who I am and I'm doing okay. I'm pretty happy with life. Just cruisin'!*

## Introduction

Individuals have multiple identities that are the result of interactions in a given place and time, which change from one context to another (Gee, 2001). As Hall (1996) claims:

... identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not the 'who we are' or 'where we come from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (p. 4)

Identities are projected towards the future. This view accepts that identity is the product of community and is best understood by our participation and interaction with one another (Butler, 1990; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Gutierrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995). Hall (1996) further reiterates that:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power... (p. 4)

The study participants were able, at times, to clearly outline the various identities they played, including son, brother, student, boyfriend, friend, AFL supporter, team member of various sports and interests, music fan, as well as a variety of others detailed later in this chapter. These identities are the product of relationships with others and involve power relations. The boys were able to detail how each of these identities differed from each other. As individuals each plays a multitude of social identities, and each of these is layered with discourses of masculinities. West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that "what this means is that our identificatory displays will provide an ever available resource for doing gender under an infinitely diverse set of circumstances" (p. 139).

Gender, and thus, masculinities are fluid, contradictory and fragile where individuals are forced to deal with boundaries that are forever changing (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Nilan, 2000; Segal, 1990; Warren, 1997). This state of flux requires the individual to continually work at defining who he/she is as male or female. Nilan (2000) describes this as “a process of endless ‘becoming’” (p. 3), while Connell (2000) refers to the construction of masculinities as a “gender project” (p. 28) which Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) describe as “involving the making and remaking of identity and meaning” (p. 119). Personal definitions of self are always evolving, never fully achieved or completed (Hall, 1996; Smith, 2002). Gender is embedded in all identities individuals display. West and Zimmerman (1987) state that “individuals have many social identities that may be donned or shed, muted or made more salient, depending on the situation...But we are always women or men - unless we shift into another sex category” (p. 139). The data derived from this study, which results from the narratives and voices of the boys, suggests that gender is the essence of who they are, the central component of each of the identities they play. Clark (1993) found in her analysis of young people that “gender has become central to children’s sense of who they are in the world and what they might be” (p. 91). When I asked the participants in this study “How is masculinity a part of who you are?” Jack stated “it’s who I am. I’m a male all of the time. I might be a student, son, a drummer in my band at different times, but I’m always being male wherever I go”.

Individuals negotiate, sustain and balance the varied identities they play (Gee, 2001; Taylor, 1989). Nayak and Kehily (1996) describe identities as “performance based”. Individuals have to work at continually rehearsing, refining and remodeling identities. Westwood (1990) makes a powerful comment when she claims “...shifting identities are not just free floating; they are positioned within histories, cultures, language, community, and class” (p. 57). The multiple identities an individual unfolds are interconnected and interrelated to each other in intricate ways like a woven pattern (Gee, 2001). This pattern is influenced by language through discourse and dialogue, traditions, rules and norms, as the person acts and relates to others in a given time, place and context. As the individual interacts in a variety of contexts, he is forced to judge himself and ask how he stands morally or in relation to good (Gadamer, 1990; Taylor, 1989).

A scaffold for understanding these ideas is the work of existentialist philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor's work is heavily influenced by the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer, who place emphasis on the individual's experience and self as the basis for understanding human existence (Smith, 2002). Taylor's background in history, politics, philosophy and economics makes his writing and ideas rich in meaning. It is his interest in the development of the modern identity and the relation to moral goods, and their sources, that is salutary in coming to understand identity (Taylor, 1989).

Taylor (1989) stresses the importance of "moral space" where the "self is inseparable from existing in the space of moral issues to do with identity and how one ought to be. It is being able to find one's standpoint in this space, being able to occupy, to be a perspective in it" (p. 112). Gee (2001) describes this as "...the reference points provided by the frameworks of qualitative contrast, not fixed in space" (p. 97).

Identities may be considered to be the product of the individual, and yet they are formulated in interaction with others. Identity cannot be achieved in isolation (Gee, 2001). As Taylor (1994) states, identity is achieved when we "negotiate it through dialogue partly overt, partly internal with others. My identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others" (p. 34). Vincente Arcilla (1995) suggests that "our self - understanding depends on dialogue with others who teach us the terms by which that self could be recognised. Thus our willingness to entrust ourselves, our very recognisability to ourselves, to these particular others and their language, makes them significant indeed" (p. 164). For these boys, the audience of their peers is crucial in determining their male identities.

Identity formation requires continual recognition from others, and as we move to a "postmodern" world where individuals are encouraged to choose and shape their own identities, rather than the I - Identities that have an institutional basis imposed on individuals in pre - modern society, peoples are forced to see identity "...as a life "project", rather than accept a set of positions determined by "outside" forces." (Gee, 2001, p. 112). Individuals seek continual recognition from "significant others" to help to legitimise and solidify identities.

In pursuing the idea of identity as a living “project” (Gee, 2001, p. 112), the term “project” (Connell, 1995; Gee, 2001) implies to work towards the future, to plan, trial and review, to add element and understanding, a process that is unfolding. Davies (1993) claims that “...it is possible to see human subjects not as fixed but constantly in process, being constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices they have access to in their daily lives” (p. 11). For me it implies a sense of “quest” to develop, know and understand oneself, to position oneself within, what Taylor (1989) suggests is, the “moral space”. Subsequently, the individual is forced to reflect on his/her position within a given context, to question values, thoughts, behaviours and feelings in order to find meaning in life. Connell (1987) advocates that “humans project themselves into their future by their choices, by the way they negate and transcend the circumstances that are given to them to start with. The person is constructed, as a ‘project’ of realizing oneself in a particular way” (p. 211). Individuals are forced to judge themselves in the “moral space”.

This “moral space” becomes the framework from which one comes to know oneself. Taylor (1989) argues that the “framework incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions. To think, feel, judge within such a framework is to function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us” (p. 19). I wish to draw attention to how individuals are forced to look towards the future, always embodying a sense of “I am not yet self”. For my study participants, there is a feeling of incompleteness in the present, while there is a belief that they will feel fulfilled and complete in the future. Through my interviews it was evident that there was a strong sense of the boys moving towards a future, a focus on who they will become and what they might do and achieve in their lives, a sense that their identity formation was a journey, yet not completed. In the reconstructed narrative by Jack at the beginning of this chapter, an emphasis is placed on who he will become, a focus on career, and that in Year 10 his approach to learning will become more focused “because that’s when you hit the real world”. Jack talks of becoming somebody - a person with goals, a person who will achieve. Like the other boys of this study, Jack has dreams and is absorbed in a process of becoming.

It is at this point I invite the reader to become involved in a dialogue of voices. These voices are the main identities I bring to the research - the teacher, the researcher and the critic. They represent the many ideas, questions and insights that I grappled with as I was immersed in the process of analysis and interpretation of the data collected. As the various identities discuss, question and come to understand, the reader is encouraged to be part of this process of crystallization, to deepen understandings surrounding the boys' discourses of masculinity and the links to identity, power and peer relations, as well as experience part of the inner turmoil and crisis of identity individuals are faced with as they function and operate within discourses of understanding.

### **“Pictures of people”**

**Researcher:** Erickson (1965) was a pioneer in the theory of identity. In the 1940s and 1950s he popularised the notion that identity was core to an individual's personality. Taylor (1989) argues that individuals embody a “core identity” that binds more homogenously across contexts. It is the ethical self or the strong values that stand as the core of an individual's identities.

The values that underpin our lives are the moral beliefs that allow us to live and be encompassed in community. It is our sense of morality and the way in which we respect others (Taylor, 1989). The way we choose to live, the choices we make, as Frankl (1992) suggests that “man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives into conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self-determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment” (p. 133). The choices these boys make will determine whom they will become.

**Critic:** It appears that you are justifying the premise you work from, that of man being a self determining entity, and it is through the choices that he makes that he determines who he is and what he will be.

**Researcher:** Viktor Frankl was a doctor interested in psychiatry (1905 - 1997), who drew on his personal experiences of being a prisoner of war in Nazi death camps. His work focuses on man's ability to experience suffering and the “will to find

meaning” (Frankl, 1969, 1992). There is a similarity here with Taylor’s (1989) idea which is man’s ability to find meaning and worth in his life. Man is propelled to find some meaning in his life. (Smith, 2002). It is man’s ability to reflect and determine those things that are important to him that allows a sense of purpose. We may consider humans always have freedom, a freedom to find meaning in their lives, despite times of great suffering (Frankl, 1992). Freedom is something that I did explore with the study participants, and in our discussions about power this will become more evident.

**Critic:** I am interested in how you find connections between the works of Frankl and Taylor and how this is implicated with your work with these boys.

**Researcher:** Smith (2002) expanded that “the most fundamental feature of the self is that things matter to it. The self is first and foremost a being with concerns. If my desires and purposes mean nothing to me, I suffer a loss of self in this sense” (p. 96). As the researcher my intention was to come to know the concerns of the study participants, those things that matter and impact on their lives, those things that give them direction and a sense of purpose.

**Critic:** You have made little mention of the importance of language and shared discourses that provide the individual with meaning (Connell, 2000; Foucault, 1977, 1981; Gadamer, 1990; Taylor, 1989) The ability to express oneself and to be understood aids in the rehearsal and interaction of identities, does it not?

**Researcher:** The ability to express oneself through language is crucial in coming to know self and being able to define and articulate personal values, particularly those things that are and are not important to the individual. Taylor (1989) defines this as “to answer for oneself is to know where one stands, what one wants to answer” (p. 29). As we will see, some of study participants use language as an effective tool to express themselves, while others struggle to know and express themselves. The life “project” (Connell, 1995; Gee, 2001) that we discussed earlier is a process of reflection and a way of coming to know oneself through rehearsal, improvisation and play.

The project for these participants is twofold in that they are undertaking a journey to define a multitude of identities that are created through lenses of masculinities. They are also trying to find meaning in their lives through exploration of values, morals and ethics that underpin the foundation of their identities.

Taylor (1989) continues to argue that it is the drive for a worthwhile life, a life that has meaning and value, those things that we take a stand for, that allows individuals to develop an inner self. It requires the individual to develop a self - understanding by placing himself within the moral space and, over time, developing the ability to synthesise past, present and the future. Taylor (1989) concludes: “only by placing my self understanding in a story of ‘maturation and regressions, overcoming and defeats’ -that is to say in a narrative which articulates direction - can I make sense of myself as ‘a being that grows and becomes’ ( p. 98).

**Critic:** Your discussion leads to a dialogue about the temporality of the living experience.

**Researcher:** Our stories or narratives are determined by the history we are encompassed in, and is often a history created and is the understanding of others (Gadamer, 1990; Warnke, 2002). We are propelled to move forward, but it is the way we understand the past and anticipate the future that allows us to understand our present situation in the hermeneutic circle of temporality (Warnke, 2002). Warnke (2002) eloquently summarises this idea by stating:

Hence, not only are we always deciphering the story or stories of which we are part so that we know how to go on, but also we are always already in the process of going on. To this extent, our understanding of these stories is an understanding from the middle of an ongoing narrative. We have to reflect on and understand ourselves in the middle of continuing to live and act as we have already understood ourselves. (p. 80)

**Researcher:** To understand who we are, where we have come from and where we are going we do so from a continual transitory position (Gadamer, 1990; Grondin, 2002; Warnke, 2002).

**Critic:** What impact does this have on the identities your participants have created for themselves?

**Researcher:** In coming to know self we ask ourselves: who am I? This question places the individual in the present. Taylor (1989) argues that “my identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame of horizon within which I can determine from case to case what is good, valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand” (p. 27).

**Critic:** In many ways this quote supports your claim that understanding the contexts of these participants - their school, their friendships with one another are vital in understanding the “frame of horizon” which helps determine who they are. I am wondering how the participants defined identity. I am assuming there was some discussion with them that explored this concept.

**Researcher:** In the first focus group held in October 2004 when the boys were in Grade 9, I asked the boys the following question:

**Researcher:** How much is masculinity a part of who you are? Your identity? Big or small part?

**Mick, Bob:** Yeah. (In unison)

**Researcher:** Yeah?

**Mick:** Yes, you’re either known as this or that.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Bob:** Like...um...

**Mick:** Stewart, if you...when I think Stewart, you know, he is active...um...I don’t know.

**Researcher:** So...so what you are telling me the way...

**Bob:** Pictures of people

**Researcher:** Pictures of people?

**Bob:** Like Jack. I see him. I picture him driving around in a car.

**Stewart:** Or working underneath it.

**Bob:** Neil, I see him trying to do this shit on his skateboard and falling over...

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Okay. So when you actually...um...have this picture of someone, is that what you would consider to be their identity?

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Mick:** I would say so.

**Researcher:** Okay. So identity is the way you know a person.

**Stewart, Bob:** Yeah. (In unison)

**Bob:** Neil, when you look at his room you know who he is. He's got like all his skateboard stuff like ten hundred skateboard and magazines, all the games, his skateboard...

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Bob:** He spends like twenty dollars on his deck.

**Researcher:** So that's his focus, that's how you perceive him, that's part of his identity.

**Bob:** Yeah.

**Mick:** I picture him as funny.

**Jack:** Yeah, he can be fun.

**Bob:** It's like...it's like his dad, he gets most of his jokes off his dad, his dad is the funniest person ever.

**Researcher:** Okay. So do you have like a set identity as well? Is that how a person really is? So you kind of say okay he is kind of a funny person, that's your kind of common idea of him?

**Stewart:** When you get to know them, then you get this picture of them.

**Critic:** The students are referring to Taylor's (1989) "frame of horizon" (p.29) through the associations and identifications the individual makes with others which establish identities.

**Researcher:** It is the perceptions the boys have of each other, Jack as the driver of cars, Stewart as physically active and Neil as the skateboarder and humourous one, that formulate identities for each amongst the group of peers. Mick's comment "Yes, you are either known as this or that" alludes to the perceptions of others in the development of identities and Bob confirms this with his description of these perceptions as "Pictures of people". Like photographic images, it appears that the participants see these images as being fixed in time and space, and yet there are multiple and varying ways of seeing individuals even amongst the group. Neil is described as a "skateboarder" by Bob and Stewart, while Mick sees him as "funny". Bob also confirms that Neil is funny and that it is his association with his father, who also has a strong sense of humour, which relates the frame of horizon for Neil's perceived identity as the humorous one. The perceptions of peers play a vital role in determining the identities of individuals. The discussions held with the boys suggest there was a definite need to become somebody, to establish some identity that would be recognised by others. I am most stimulated by prominent sociologist Philip Wexler and his social analysis of education in America in the 1990's.

**Teacher:** Wexler's (1992) *Becoming somebody: toward a social psychology of school* has provided some insight for many educationalists by examining relationships between teachers and students, and how young people formulate ideas surrounding their place in the world. In many ways, your research is trying to uncover how these study participants perceive their place in the world of school as males.

**Researcher:** I am particularly inspired by one comment Wexler (1992) claims, when he states:

...students are trying to 'become somebody'. They want to be somebody, a real and presentable self, anchored in verifying eyes of friends whom they come to school to meet. While they are aware of a

life after education, in the occupational world of work, and in varying degrees acknowledge interest and attention to the learning of school subjects, their central and defining activity in school is to, establish at least the image of an identity. 'Becoming somebody' is action in 'the public sphere', and this is what life at high school is all about. (p. 155)

**Researcher:** This quote encapsulates what school life is like for the participants of this study. The main motivation for them is to find their place, their identities within their peer group and to have these identities recognised by "significant others".

**Critic:** That while the perceptions of the peer group are important in how they observe those within their group, it is the recognition of the peer group which also helps individuals construct identities.

**Researcher:** Yes, and as Wexler's comments allude, there is a strong sense that these study participants are in a process of rehearsal in preparation for the real identities that they will adopt in adulthood as "occupations". There was a difficulty in projecting towards the future and what they might be like, what they might accomplish and who they might become, yet, there was a strong sense that they would become completed people, and in particular "real men" in the future. The future was regarded as highly important by the boys, something that they were striving towards, but it also embodied a sense of uncertainty and the unknown.

**Critic:** Your reconstructed narrative of Jack amplifies this. At this point he is "just cruising", however, there are hints of dreams and ambitions. Future career pathways seem to be important for Jack, "as long as it gets me somewhere in life."

**Researcher:** Jack gives the impression that his life to this point has been a rehearsal for the real project of adulthood. Life beyond Grade 10 is seen as "the real world", and as he becomes increasingly closer to adulthood there is a need to work harder and "reach my full potential" in order to formulate a "career" to "be someone, go somewhere, do something with my life."

## **“People just like him”**

**Researcher:** If we argue that individuals hold a core identity and, also that an individual embodies a multitude of identities that are developed over time in response to a variety of contexts, then Gee’s (2001) model of four perspectives of identity is a useful tool as a way of analysing identity, and, in particular, how masculinities impact on identities, and the relationships with social interaction and power relations for the purposes of this study.

Gee comes from a linguistics background in the 1970s. He uses discourse analysis as a method of research and has become increasingly interested in the inter - relatedness of social, cultural, cognitive and political characteristics of language. His work strongly features in education and in more recent years he has focused on learning and literacy in video and computer games. Gee (2001) argues that we refer to individuals “...as a certain ‘kind of person’ or even as several different ‘kinds’ at once” (p. 99). For instance, Blair might be the rebellious student, the obedient son, the class clown, the druggie, the cool friend, the “at risk” kid, the Essendon supporter, gang member, boyfriend, as well as many others. Each of these identities is something that is recognised by others and results from different discourses or shared meanings. The identities are also dependent on where Blair is at a particular time, place and with whom he is interacting. These are not part of Blair’s “internal states”, but rather a result of his performances in interaction with others (Gee, 2001).

**Critic:** If your preference is to use Gee’s theory of identities as a model, I am interested in your reasons for selecting such a model.

**Researcher:** Gee (2001) has developed four ways to view identity that are interconnected and ways in which we can “...formulate questions about how identity is functioning for a specific person (child or adult) in a given context or across a set of different contexts” (p. 101). This view of identity is useful for the purposes of this study in understanding the participants’ perceptions of what it means to be masculine and how this impacts on each of the boy’s identities. It also provides a model to examine the variety of identities within the school structure and the institutional authorisation of power through rules, traditions, norms and practices.

Gee (2001) describes N - Identities (the nature perspective) as those parts of identity that an individual has no control over. The source of power is nature, but meaning is created by a shared understanding and recognition by others. Howard's big physical structure (height, heavy bone structure and weight) is an example of this. Howard has an identity as the "giant" due to his overwhelming size, something that he physically cannot control. It is an ascribed position, something that he has not actively sought or created.

**Critic:** Does Howard perceive this aspect of his identity as an imposition?

**Researcher:** Yes, as an identity that has been imposed on him and something he feels powerless and self conscious about. Let's return to Gee's work and the second perspective which is the institutional perspective (I - Identities) and refers to the positions an individual holds as a result of the power determined by a set of institutional authorities (Gee, 2001). Gee (2001) describes thus "the process through which this power works is authorisation; that is, laws, rules, traditions, or principles of various sorts allow the authorities to "author" the position of professor of education and to "author" its occupants in terms of holding rights and responsibilities that go with the position" (p. 102). For the majority of people, who fulfill these I - Identities, the positions are sought. For others however, these positions might be imposed, which raises a whole variety of ways in which the individual might resist the I - Identity. The boys of this study have the I - Identity of "student" imposed on them, while adults are granted authority to "author" the position of teacher.

**Teacher:** Subsequently, teachers are given power through traditions, rules and guiding principles, thus creating an immediate unequal power structure between parties.

**Researcher:** In a later chapter, the theme of power will be addressed in detail. This chapter will outline the ways in which the boys resist the imposed identity of student through a variety of resistance tactics, which often result in them being labelled as "difficult" and "disengaged".

The third perspective is the discursive perspective (D - Identities) and refers to what we deem the individual traits, or those qualities that make up an individual's personality. We tend to regard these as being something with which an individual can be born. An individual, however, might also develop these over time as characteristics that others recognise in the individual. It is through dialogue and discourse with other people that these identities are created (Gee, 2001). Jack has developed over time, an identity as "the charmer", actively sought through dress, speech patterns, use of gesture and facial expressions, humour, displays of feelings through interaction with others. Observing Jack, it was evident when he would adopt this identity, often trying to charm female students, as well as on occasions, female teachers. At times during interview situations, I felt that the use of facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, humour and display of values and feelings were manifestations of the overall charm that was intended for me.

**Teacher:** We all have one of those in our schools, "the charmer", usually the Grade 10 boy who has a trail of girls in his wake, a male who has perfected the art of drawing female interest and getting away with doing very little school work.

**Critic:** I am interested to know whether Jack was aware of this identity and his explanations for it.

**Researcher:** While Jack has actively created this identity, he was often unaware that he was displaying this identity in a given place or time, and could not detail how he had created this identity, however, Jack's identity as "the charmer" was often recognised and commented on by his peers and teachers. Particular teachers have described him as "a charming boy", "gorgeous, smart and knows it", while some of the female students described him as "kind", "caring" and "cute". Even the other boys in the group described him as "popular", "a good friend" and "cool". To be regarded as "cool" was a claim of honour by the boys and, in this instance, refers to Jack's ability to be calm, level headed, funny and physically attractive, ensuring a high status at school with teachers and peers.

Some of the participants alluded to the fact that Jack was intellectually bright, and was able to balance his academic achievement with being part of the "cool" group.

Here is an extract of a conversation held with Bob which reflects his feelings towards Jack.

**Researcher:** Tell me about a male student you admire?

**Bob:** I don't know. I suppose it might be Jack?

**Researcher:** What is it that you admire about him?

**Bob:** He is kinda' cool. He is pretty good at drumming and he does okay with his school work.

**Researcher:** So he does all right at school.

**Bob:** Yep. He's just a bit of an individual. He doesn't really care what others think about him. He does what he wants to do and he gets away with it.

**Researcher:** What do you mean he gets away with it?

**Bob:** It's his personality. People just like him.

**Researcher:** What do they like about him?

**Bob:** He's funny. I suppose he's confident. The girls like him. The teachers like him. He just gets away with things. Wouldn't be bad to be like that.

**Researcher:** Bob distinguishes that it is Jack's identity as "the charmer" that allows him to "get away with things" that others might not. Jack is a likeable character and it is his charm that endears him to others.

**Critic:** It appears that Jack's charm is one of the strong characteristics that others were attracted to and an identity the other boys in the group aspire to. What is interesting from this extract is that Bob even alludes to the fact that Jack is able to set himself apart from his friends.

**Researcher:** Coming to know Jack over the three years, it was evident that he was well aware of his strengths and weaknesses. He believed he was good at languages, and this was supported by his parents who encouraged him to pursue study in this area. Jack often spoke about the "flack" he got from his friends in studying French and yet would answer with such comments as "I don't really care as long as it gets me somewhere in life". Jack appeared confident and self assured, even arrogant at

times. He was articulate and welcomed conversation and interaction. These are qualities that most likely contributed to his perceived identity as “the charmer”. This identity was an important aspect of his masculinity.

The final identity type of Gee’s model (2001) is affinity perspective (A - Identities) and links the individual to an “affinity group” where an individual shares an identity as a member of a group which is constituted by “allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices...” (p. 104). It is through participation or sharing that an individual ascribes to this identity (Gee, 2001).

In the initial interview in Grade 8 the study participants were asked about their particular personal interests. Each of them cited a strong interest in AFL football and gave details of a particular team they followed. Most of the participants had an A - Identity as an “Essendon supporter” or one of the other teams within the AFL. In subsequent interviews, it was clear that the boys aligned themselves to particular affinity groups linked to these AFL teams through watching the televised matches, or attending games when going interstate or alternatively when these teams visited Tasmania to play games, or on promotional tours. The subjects also detailed links to the affinity group through the internet by visiting particular football sites, and visiting cyber chat - rooms to talk with other fans.

**Critic:** I would be interested to know whether these A - Identities as AFL supporters were an important part of the interaction between the boys and whether this in some ways became a collective identity amongst the group.

**Researcher:** During the third interview held in August 2004, the participants were asked about friendship amongst their male peer group, and in particular, what they discussed as a group. Football featured highly. The boys detailed how much of their shared interaction was spent discussing AFL football, and this was clearly evident in my observation of them over time. The subjects would actively engage in conversations which demonstrated a shared discourse and dialect focusing on the game where sportsmanship, football skill and performance were highlighted.

**Teacher:** In my experiences Monday mornings are always a difficult time to focus students on learning tasks. Much of the conversation, particularly amongst the boys, is about which AFL teams won on the weekend.

**Researcher:** Each of the study participants had an identity as a particular “AFL team supporter” and lively debate would ensue when defending the performance of their team. Here, was evidence of the “allegiance to” the affinity group. In addition, these are also instances of D - Identities of the boys, each acquiring the status of “Essendon supporter” or “Hawks supporter” amongst their immediate peer group, something that they have aspired to and have created within the peer group. Many researchers have found that it is shared discourses around the topic of sport that provide a unique and exclusive way for the boys to interact and define membership to the peer group (Coleman, 1961; Connell, 2000; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Messner, 1987, 1992, 1994; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977).

At this point, I want to mention that the language shared by the participants focused on analysing a particular team or player’s physicality, ball skill, toughness and risk taking within a particular game. Here, the boys defined the best players as being those who were physically tough, strong team players and those who featured highly in the game, usually by kicking the most goals. The boys defined many of these players as key role models and those they looked to as “masculine”. Subsequently, we see evidence here of the boy’s shared discourses around the concept of acceptable masculinity.

Against this backdrop, a number of the boys mentioned Jamie as “mad” about his AFL football team, and in interviews Jamie detailed his desire to play football at a senior level, aspiring to the AFL as a possible career choice. Here is an extract from an early interview held with Jamie in November 2003 when he was in Grade 8 that focused on gaining insight into interests and ambitions for the future.

**Researcher:** Jamie, I am interested that you mentioned you like playing football. Is that something you are good at?  
Football?

**Jamie:** Yeah, I’m not bad.

**Researcher:** I don't know a great deal about footy. Maybe you could explain to me what you are good at. That might help me.

**Jamie:** Well, I'm pretty quick. I'm small, but I'm quick.

**Researcher:** I imagine that is a real asset in this game.

**Jamie:** Yeah, you have to be quick, get in there, get the ball and get out.

**Researcher:** What do you mean get in there?

**Jamie:** You have to be prepared to go in hard. Not be scared. Not give a shit. I just get in there. I don't care if I get hurt. I just want the ball.

**Researcher:** Okay...

**Jamie:** I can handle the ball too.

**Researcher:** Handle the ball?

**Jamie:** Ball skills. I'm okay at that too.

**Researcher:** So let me get this right. You are not bad at footy because you are quick on your feet, you are pretty tough and you can handle the ball pretty well. Sounds like you are pretty skilled.

**Jamie:** I s'pose.

**Researcher:** Jamie is able to define characteristics that make him a useful and worthwhile player in the game of Australian Rules football. The other boys of the study also detailed Jamie's skill as a talented footballer, thus creating an identity for him as a talented "sportsman". Here, we see how the identification with the affinity group as an "AFL team supporter" has transcribed into a D - Identity as a talented "sportsman" with a further desire to become an "AFL player".

Five of the six boys interviewed articulated an A - Identity as a "football supporter". Jack was the only exception. Jack was able to articulate that football was something that the boys discussed regularly and he was able to take part in dialogue when they chose to talk about AFL football. Yet Jack did not stipulate a particular team he followed and was quick to add that he did not "go in for it as much as the others".

**Teacher:** Interesting in that, once again, we see that Jack stands apart from the group!

**Researcher:** Gee's (2001) model is a useful analytical tool in examining how and why the boys have created particular identities. The various identities they display are complex and often contradictory (Beynon, 2002). MacInnes (1998) makes this same point when he states "any empirical individual's identity is always complex and contradictory, rather than can be defined by any list of qualities, no matter how comprehensive or carefully defined" (p. 15). I can provide glimpses of these identities, by describing qualities and characteristics of the boys, but one must be mindful that these are only representations of the subjects (Beynon, 2002).

**Critic:** What you are suggesting to is that you wish for your readers to accept that the identities you describe of each of the boys are your perceptions, and like the crystal you mentioned earlier, there are multiple identities and much that lies below the surface of each of the participants. We can possibly never truly know each and every one of the identities they have adopted. We can only come to begin to know.

### **“BMX riding is wicked”**

**Researcher:** After an initial period of six weeks, I interviewed each boy to gain insights into who they were, their interests, family background, previous school experiences, friendship circle and attitudes towards school in November 2003. Hall (1996) argues:

Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' can be constructed. (pp. 4-5)

It is how the subjects perceive themselves and how these perceptions are shaped by their discursive frameworks with others, and the ways these understandings are

shaped by what it means to be male that gives insight into the identities they have created.

**Teacher:** I would be interested to know a little more about the boys' family background.

**Researcher:** Each of the boys was able to detail their family history. Four of the seven boys lived with both parents. The three remaining lived in sole parent families, two with their mothers and one with their father. Three of the boys were the eldest, two were middle children, one the youngest and Jack was an only child.

Examining interests and hobbies was a starting point in coming to know some of the identities they embodied. They were able to detail a range of activities they enjoyed doing or being involved in. As already mentioned, AFL was a prominent interest and A - Identity of the subjects (Gee, 2001). Other interests cited by them included, "mucking around with friends" which was conveyed by most of the boys, watching television, DVDs and videos, and using technology such as internet, chat rooms and play station. Further interests included skateboarding, BMX racing, dirt bikes, playing the drums, and shooting and cricket (for one of the boys). Later interviews, suggested that the participants had A - Identities as a result of their interests in these particular areas of endeavour.

**Critic:** As a reader, I am keen for you to explore the link between the identities you ascribe to your subjects, and the relationship this has with masculinities.

**Researcher:** Let's focus on Mick and his interest in BMX riding. Mick is a keen BMX rider, who takes part in local racing competitions. Much of his spare time is spent accessing the internet to find out about world class BMX riders, reading magazines and wearing branded riding apparel on and off the racing track. Connell (1996) would suggest that this is another example of the "symbolization". Mick is fashioning an identity for himself as a "BMX rider" through dress and image. Paechter (2006a) suggests the body as a dressed and decorated object is thus used by children, in school and out, as an indicator of gender and (therefore, in their constructions) of behaviour" (p. 131).

What was interesting was this was something that was a shared discourse within his family, simultaneously creating a D - Identity for Mick. Mick who lives in a sole parent family communicated on a number of occasions how his mother supported his love of BMX racing and that she had made a number of sacrifices in order for him to be “kitted out” with the latest bike and racing apparel. The following extract from an interview with Mick held in early 2004 when he was in Grade 9 demonstrates how his identity as a BMX rider has been supported by his mother.

**Researcher:** Tell me a bit more about your interest in BMX riding. I imagine that can be pretty expensive from what you are saying.

**Mick:** Yeah, my mum helps me out a fair bit. She pays for all my gear. My bike, my clothes. She pays for me to get “kitted out”.

**Researcher:** So your mum really supports your interest in BMX riding?

**Mick:** Definitely, sure. She likes it. She comes to all the races, watches me.

**Researcher:** I get the feeling that BMX riding is an important part of who you are, part of your identity.

**Mick:** Suppose so...for sure...

**Researcher:** And your mum really supports this?

**Mick:** Yeah, she’s sacrificed a lot, so I can do it.

**Researcher:** Mmmm.

**Researcher:** This illustrates the role of “significant others” who actively engage and encourage the formation of identity through discourse. Mick’s mother’s commitment of resources, time and effort reinforce his D - Identity (Gee, 2001) as a BMX rider.

**Critic:** I acknowledge that you have drawn a connection here about the importance of “significant others” in identity formation, however, how does Mick’s interest in BMX riding inform his perceptions of what it means to be male?

**Researcher:** Over time Mick also shared that his identity as a “BMX rider” was a way of connecting and interacting with his father, whom he saw on a fortnightly basis. Like Mick’s mother, it appeared that his father actively supported his identity as “BMX rider” by attending race meetings.

**Critic:** Did you ever have a discussion about what attracted to him to BMX riding and how this contributed to his understanding of masculinities?

**Researcher:** In the first focus group held in October 2004 I spent considerable time discussing with the subjects characteristics of male role models. Each participant in turn described a person they admired and gave details as to qualities they admired of these persons. Mick gave details of a prominent international motor cross rider who “does wicked freestyle tricks”. Throughout the discussion the study participants articulated qualities they admired such as persistence, risk taking, physical strength and bravery. Below is an extract from this focus group that details Mick’s thoughts surrounding risk taking.

**Researcher:** Determination is a characteristic that is really strong in males you admire.

**Bob, Stewart:** Yeah, well...

**Researcher:** Is that something you are moving towards? Is that something that you wish you have and want to work towards?

**Mick:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Does it have anything to do with other sides of the personality...um...the mental strength, you know, like using their brain to...you know to do a job like that? Physically they have to be strong.

**Mick:** They don’t bloody think first.

**Researcher:** They do?

**Mick:** Nah, they just do it!

**Researcher:** They don’t think first.

*Critic:* Your illustration does give your readers some indication of qualities the boys admire, however, how does this transfer into Mick's development of his identity as a "BMX rider"?

*Researcher:* Well, at a later date I asked Mick the following:

**Researcher:** What is it about BMX riding that you are attracted to?

**Mick:** It's just wicked. You have to get over your fears.

**Researcher:** What do you mean get over your fears? Can you explain that a bit more for me?

**Mick:** Well, you have these jumps and you kinda look at them thinking how are you going to do that. But you just have to go for it and not worry about it. You have to be mentally tough, as well being physical.

**Researcher:** Do you think that says a lot about you as a person?

**Mick:** Yes, heaps.

**Researcher:** What does that say about you as a male?

**Mick:** Mmm... don't know... That I can be tough when I want to be. I don't let things beat me.

*Critic:* Mick's identity as a BMX rider is shaped and inspired by images of role models that he considers are mentally and physically resilient, overcome obstacles and show little fear. This transpires into a discursive framework that Mick demonstrates his masculinity as being tough when needed.

*Researcher:* In many ways he describes this as the ability to overcome obstacles through persistence and determination. He has to win, he cannot "let things beat me". The qualities of endurance, mental fortitude and physical strength underpin the discourses the boys share surrounding masculinities, and thus inform and are present in many of the identities they play. We will come to explore these understandings later in more detail.

## **“Go to college or get a job”**

**Teacher:** Upon reflection it appears that the study participants have considered identity to be enmeshed in the present. Did they consider possible futures and identities that may develop as a result? If we accept your earlier concepts of identities being a life “project” or quest (Taylor, 1989) then individuals are drawn to look towards the future. How did your subjects look towards the future, and what identities did they perceive for themselves over time?

**Researcher:** Most of the participants could articulate possible futures by immediately focusing on further education and career choices. Some of them, were referred to by teachers within the school as lacking direction and having no sense of future, all the boys demonstrated some understanding and plan for their futures. As we live in the present and cannot know the outcomes of the future we can only begin to imagine and explore “possible futures”. Here, I talk in the plural, stating the many ways to be in the future as individuals choose various pathways.

In early interviews with each of the participants, they were asked about possible goals for the future. Their quick responses to the question were evidence that the boys were projecting towards a future, which was primarily based on D - Identities that they wished to ascribe to, identities that required the individual to take ownership and strive towards them. There was a strong sense that these future identities required the individual to seek further education in order to acquire them. Some obviously had a stronger sense of future than others.

**Critic:** Am I correct in believing that the study participants were making the distinction that their “possible futures” were dominated by occupations, and that further education was seen as a necessary step in securing these identities?

**Researcher:** Yes, each of them focused on occupations and six of the seven boy’s defined college as the next step in their future. These responses raised a number of questions, including how the discourse of future is concerned with career, rather than other life pursuits. None of the boys mentioned life goals, such as raising a family, acquiring particular resources, developing personal skills or testing aptitudes or capabilities.

**Critic:** Is this an indication of the role masculinities play in shaping their ideas of the future, and is it that their identities will be determined by career only?

**Researcher:** Most of these boys the purpose of school was preparation for possible careers, and the projection of careers was a way of defining possible futures, and thus identities to aspire to. Research indicates that boys see the purpose of school as being preparation for the future (Arnot, 1984; Martin, 2002). At the age of 14, the boys had already determined possible future identities that would have enormous repercussions for their socio - economic position within society.

In Grade 8, Jack alluded to the prospect of a university education which would result in a I - Identity, where he would likely be granted particular authorisation as a result of the traditions instilled as part of university qualifications. This could possibly result in increased financial outcomes and status defining an advantaged position for him.

**Critic:** As academics we take this authorisation and legitimacy of power instilled upon us for granted and are often unaware of the effect it has on our relations with others. I would like you to return to your study participants and provide your readers with more insight into the importance of possible careers and what this stated about their understandings around masculinities.

**Researcher:** The boys often spoke about the future and possible careers, particularly as they moved closer to the end of Grade 10, when students were urged by their teachers and parents to consider their futures. During the first focus group held in October 2004 the subjects entered a discussion about the advantages of being male. They spoke about the ability to secure employment and getting “better jobs” than females, and that careers gave males the opportunities to provide for those they felt responsible for, including partners and children. In the following extract, Bob, Stewart and Mick describe being a provider as an important future identity the boys envisaged for themselves.

**Mick:** Provide. Provide for your family.

**Researcher:** What does provide for your family mean?

**Bob:** Like you are the one getting a job...

**Stewart:** Yeah, givin' them money.

**Bob:** ...paying the bills.

**Researcher:** So it's money, basically. Provide...providing money for your family?

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** The boys shared understanding that providing for future families places them in positions of power. Benjamin (2001) found a similar discourse amongst the 10 -12 year old boys she studied in the United Kingdom, described as a "hunter/provider" discourse. Similar to this study, she found:

In their interviews, the boys talked about acquiring a wife and children and providing for them materially. These seem to operate as inherent components of masculinity for them. Within this discourse, the boys projected future roles for themselves as earners of a 'family wage' through which they would be able to support a wife and children. (p. 44)

The discourse shared by the participants of this research is focused on striving for a better life, which they understand is achieved through career and economic stability, one that will bring status and power. The identity of the provider is defined by the participants as economically contributing to the family unit by "givin' them money" and "paying the bills". This suggests that through economic means they will maintain power within the families they envisage themselves having in the future.

**Critic:** In many ways your subjects see career identities as a means in establishing further identities, such as provider, partner and parent. They project towards a future and that they will become complete when they become men. There also is a sense that these discourses are strongly tied to masculinity. I will be interested in reading more about your subjects' understandings of power.

**Researcher:** Davies (1993) found in her study of primary school children that they "talked about themselves as becoming particular kinds of persons" (p. 27) and that

they believed they had agency through the choices that they made. Similarly in this study, the boys believe they have choices in determining who they will become.

### **“Football’s one thing I won’t give up”**

**Researcher:** While the participants could describe A - Identities, those identities created by links to affinity groups, they could not express D - Identities or those more personalised due to acquired personal traits, which are often determined by what an individual is confident or talented in, and the ability to reflect on this. One of the most challenging questions the boys faced as part of the first interview in November 2003, was to state what they were good at. This required the individual to know self and to be able to confidently discuss current identities. Each of the boys found this question extremely difficult to answer and needed time to reflect, or even further prompting.

**Critic:** To ask such a question demands the individual to have significant insight into their own person and one must remember that strengths and attributes may not significantly give insight into identity.

**Researcher:** As already stated, I do not presume to provide rounded and completed images of the participants’ identities: however, as a researcher I needed to encourage them to reflect and give personal insight into how they identified themselves. Asking them about their strengths was a starting point in coming to know them. Let me tell you about Stewart. After prompting and individual reflection time, the boys were generally able to offer some suggestions of things they were good at. The majority of them commented on sporting ability. Stewart was the most forthcoming and stated “I’m okay at football, cricket, shooting, driving vehicles and running”. Stewart has created D -Identities that focused on sporting or physical ability. Inside the period of the research, Stewart never described personality traits or intellectual abilities that would indicate D-Identities of this nature. He often referred to his dislike of school and study, and while he never alluded to the fact that he was a student of average or below average ability, it was evident that education held little value for him, possibly due to his ascribed D -Identity as a “poor learner”.

**Critic:** So how did Stewart view school? What meaning did it have for him?

**Researcher:** In an interview in July 2004, when asked about school, Stewart described it as “don’t like it, shit, shit hole”. School holds little worth for Stewart, he has created identities for himself that are removed from education and learning. As a consequence, Stewart looks for recognition from peers and teachers through his sporting identities. Observing interactions with peers, Stewart would continually initiate conversations focusing on sport, but more importantly his latest sporting achievement. When I collected Stewart from classes in order to embark on interviews, he would launch into graphic descriptions of his latest football match, injuries sustained and highlights of his performance. He was also quick to mention what the coach or others said about his latest physical feats on the field.

**Teacher:** It appears that Stewart actively seeks recognition to consolidate his identity as “talented sportsman”. Have you considered that Stewart’s focus on sporting ability may be a way of deflecting attention away from his identity as “poor learner”?

**Researcher:** Yes, this could be a distinct possibility, however, what transcends this, is that Stewart’s sporting talent and abilities are closely tied to his understanding of masculinity and a way of seeing himself as a male. Stewart often gave graphic descriptions of injuries sustained as a result of sporting achievements. In one instance, Stewart described being “knocked out” and refusing stitches after he received a substantial cut to the top of the head, as a result of someone’s teeth cutting through to his scalp in a football tackle. Stewart prided himself on characteristics of toughness, enduring physical pain and refusing medical intervention. These traits helped to define his masculinity. Later we will come to a discussion about the links between sport and masculinities.

### **“Don’t know, how about you ask Boney”**

**Researcher:** Of all the study participants of the group, Blair is the student who was considered most “at risk” by the school authorities. In this instance, I am referring to the student as being “at risk” of underachieving at school or dropping out of schooling altogether. Teaching staff also considered him to be “at risk” of potential

drug use and involvement in juvenile crime. Some teachers made comments like “not much of a future for a kid like that”.

**Teacher:** Are these claims by Blair’s teachers justified? What was your experience of the pupil and what does this say about identities that are being formulated for Blair?

**Researcher:** Over the three years of the research project, Blair became further disengaged from school and learning. He missed considerable numbers of days from school through truancy, but also due to suspension received as a result of violating school rules. By the June 2005, Blair had withdrawn from school all together.

**Critic:** We have heard about the importance of peers in helping to formulate and recognise identities in individuals amongst the group. What was the boys’ response to Blair’s identity as the “at risk” student?

**Researcher:** A number of the boys in the study disclosed their concern for Blair, particularly his excessive drug use and non - attendance at school. In August 2004, at the conclusion of a semi - formal interview with Mick the following conversation took place:

**Researcher:** Have you seen much of Blair lately?

**Mick:** We’re worried about him. (Referring to peer group) He doesn’t care any more. Hardly ever comes to school, stays at home. His parents tell him to come, but he doesn’t listen.

**Researcher:** Is he still using dope?

**Mick:** Yeah, he’s always stoned. He’s worried because he’s coughing up black shit, but he can’t get off it. He sits at home all day smoking cones.

**Researcher:** Do his parents know?

**Mick:** Yeah, they know he smokes. (silence, looks down) He’s got no future. (looks at researcher) We tell him that.

**Researcher:** Do you think the teachers know?

**Mick:** They've got no idea.

**Researcher:** Does he still get into trouble a lot when he is here?

**Mick:** Not really. He is always stoned. (silence) He's going down.

**Researcher:** This excerpt reveals a powerful moment. As the researcher this disclosed information places me in a privileged position with the subjects of the study. In the immediacy of this extract I felt that Mick was troubled by Blair's behaviour and that the disclosure of this information provided some relief for him and was made out of concern for his friend. He was disclosing that he felt his friend was "at risk", and that as a peer group they had tried to talk to Blair about his drug use. Secondly, this episode demonstrates the concern and strong bonds of friendship that exist between the participants. Thirdly, Blair's comment "He's got no future. We tell him that", illustrates that he and the other boys of the group consider the behaviour and values that Blair was displaying would not lead to positive outcomes for his future. Here, was a direct reference to the future. The revelation suggests that Mick, has a sense of future, and that for him and other members of the group drug use and truancy are not valued, particularly when it comes to education.

Smith (2002) might suggest that Blair could be an individual "without a horizon" which results in "a loss to say what is worth mattering" (p. 96), someone who is at a loss to say what is worthy in their lives, resulting in a lack of identity. Taylor (1989) affirms this as "not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense" (p. 18). Those who lack a spiritual sense suffer from meaninglessness (Taylor, 1989), often displayed a lack of purpose, low self esteem, and appearing empty of flat (Alexander, 1993; Frankl, 1969, 1992). Mick, through the previous transcript, has disclosed a discourse that suggests that Blair's excessive drug use was contributing to a life of meaninglessness, that had little purpose, which would limit future life outcomes. The term "going down" suggests that Mick judges Blair's situation as possibly even having tragic outcomes.

**Critic:** Did Blair have a self perception of himself? We have seen how some of the boys have been able to discuss particular identities for themselves. What identities did Blair express for himself?

**Researcher:** In the initial interview, Blair was the subject who appeared to be least able to express values and abilities, and did not appear to forecast images of a future. He found it particularly difficult to reveal anything when asked “What are you good at?” even when I prompted him further. When asked “How would you friends describe you?” each of the boys were able to articulate a range of personal qualities, except Blair, who suggested “don’t know, how about you ask Boney?” Through further interviewing and observation, it became apparent that Blair lacked a real sense of self, finding it extremely hard to self reflect.

If Blair has little concept of the future, then school holds little meaning for him. This often manifested itself as low self esteem, and in many classroom situations he presented as nonchalant, reckless and disengaged. Teachers continually referred to him as “a discipline problem” and “wasting his time”. He was often seen as a “trouble maker” and disruptive in classroom situations due to his active resistance through defying teacher authority, or by continual interruptions by asking questions of teachers or students sitting next to him. Blair would continually seek re-assurance over the simplest of tasks, and when this was not forthcoming he would sabotage lessons by disruption or rejecting the teacher’s authority.

**Critic:** Is it that Blair is fashioning an identity for himself as a “school refuser”, and if this is so, what does this say about his masculinity? What were your observations of this?

**Researcher:** It may be that Blair was not deliberately being rebellious or disruptive, but, because he was not confident or competent in completing academic tasks his disruptive classroom behaviour was a means of exercising power and expressing his resistance to the authority of the teacher.

The following field notes (Observation 6, November 2003) from an Information Technology lesson I observed when Blair was in Grade 8 demonstrate his resistance

within the classroom. During this lesson students were required to complete an individual learning task where they had to develop a table using Microsoft tools to play with design and layout. The teacher would instruct and demonstrate these tools throughout the lesson. She would often check student's comprehension by asking questions at the conclusion of each mini - lesson, paying particular attention to Blair and a couple of the other boys. During this one and a half hour lesson, Blair asked a total of eleven questions and the teacher re - directed him to task eight times, invariably offering encouragement and affirmation.

**Teacher:** You are suggesting that Blair dominated the teacher's attention for the majority of the lesson. Most teachers would deal with this type of behaviour in classrooms on a regular basis.

**Researcher:** Yes, this is so, however, one must ask why this is happening, what does it say about the power relations between teacher and student, and what impact this has on the construction of identities within the classroom? This is illustrated by the following field notes taken from Observation 6 in November 2003:

- 10:16** Blair on task at computer. Teacher walks by and states "Blair, posture thinking".  
Blair sits up, continues with work.
- 10:20** Blair looking around. Looks uneasy.
- 10:22** Blair's hand up, looking around room, making eye contact with another student. Teacher moves to him and re - directs him to task.
- 10:23** Blair's hand up. Teacher occupied.
- 10:24** Blair puts hand down, and looks at white board where instructions are written. Teacher makes eye contact with Blair and states "Come on Blair" (encouraging tone)  
Blair points at white board. Teacher nods (as if to instruct Blair to follow written instructions)
- 10:25** Blair still looking at board. Teacher states "Blair, what's the problem"? Walks towards him and directs him to task. Teacher moves to another student. Blair leaves

seat, and goes towards teacher's desk, where there is a written example of the work (as if he wants to check his work against the work sample the teacher has on her desk) when he returns to his desk, teacher went to him and re-directs him again.

**10:27.** Blair leaves seat again to check work sample on teacher's desk. Moves back to his seat. Makes direct eye contact with teacher, who, across the classroom, asks "What do I have to write? Teacher replies "Whatever you want". Blair sits in seat, looks at computer, then shifting in seat (appears unsettled), continue to look around the room and at other students work.

**10:30.** Blair puts hand up. Teacher goes towards him and makes some suggestions about his work. Teacher moves away.

**10:32** Blair puts hand up. Teacher went towards him, stating "Working Blair I'm not going to do all your thinking for you". Teacher examines his work and reassures him that it is fine.

**10:36** Blair puts his hand up. Teacher moves towards him. Teacher examines his work and states to class "That's a good idea that Blair had, putting important phone numbers on".

**Researcher:** The pattern described in the above transcript continues for the rest of the lesson. As an observer, it became apparent that Blair was quite capable of completing the task, he understood the instructions, but continually sought re - assurance from the teacher because he did not feel confident in completing the task. Blair experiences dis - orientation. His resistance is a reaction to feeling unsafe and insecure. He continually needs re - assurance, and he appears to lack the skills and language to make meaning in this situation. Blair is caught in time. He is bored and yet he cannot escape the moment he transpires in (Beistegui, 2005). Blair experiences an emptiness of self because he is caught in time and cannot escape himself. Beistegui (2005) explores the ideas of Heidegger on space and time, and suggests:

Are we not, each and every one of us, this temporal residue, this excess, that we are all try to cover over and disguise by keeping ourselves busy? When I am bored, there is nothing other than myself, and there is time, pure time as it were: time I can't turn into anything, time I can't put to work. There is just too much time, and there is myself, torn apart by the sole presence of time. I am alone with myself and time. (p. 69)

**Teacher:** This is a very different Blair to the one we saw earlier, the one that was described in your reconstructed narrative at the beginning of Chapter 3 who was slamming doors, swearing at teachers and being re - directed to the Assistant Principal for a period of time out. Here, we saw Blair as aggressive, cocky and confident.

**Critic:** So to summarise, we have a student who lacks the ability to articulate personal strengths and weaknesses. He is often in “trouble” at school due to violating school rules, and he chooses to not attend school often because he finds little meaning in what school has to offer him. One might ask what does Blair find meaning in?

**Researcher:** Blair finds it difficult to foresee a future; he finds it difficult to reflect on the past and so lives in the present. Taylor (1989) might argue that this subject has little understanding of the narratives that take place in his life, as “self - understanding inescapably occurs in time” (p. 97). How can we expect a student who is struggling to understand self and how he fits within the discourses and communities of society, to engage in learning for a future? There is little wonder that Blair gives school a rating of “3” and makes statements like “school is fucked”.

The reader will see that Blair's behaviour provoked strong identities. Many of these identities appear to be created for him, his identity as the “difficult student” being partly fashioned through the expectations of teachers and fellow students. Blair comes to find meaning in resistance and through violence. He finds power in the physical abuse of others, while testing his endurance, strength and mental fortitude to overcome fear of his opponent, establishing a masculine identity in the classroom and with his peers.

## Conclusion

Chapter 4 has placed emphasis on analysing Gee's perspectives of identity and how this translates into understanding the variety of identities the boys play. Identity is a process of becoming, something that is never mastered (Epstein & Johnston, 1994; Hall, 1996). The descriptions of the various identities of the participants outlined in this chapter, are mere glimpses that aim to give some insight into the many identities the study participants exhibit in the school environment. Wexler (1992) proposes "the main thing about schools is that they are one of the few *public* spaces in which people are engaged with each other in the interactional work of making *meaning*. These are places for making the CORE meaning, of self or identity among young people" (p. 155). School provides the study participants with an opportunity to find meaning and to develop identities. As Epstein and Johnston (1994) write "identity solidifies through action in the world in collaboration or tension with others and established social rituals" (p. 101). The identities the boys perform are shaped by discourses of masculinities.

As a result of interview and observation, it became clear that these identities are what Gee (2001) claims "...ultimately rooted in recognition processes tied to specific discourses" (p. 111). Wexler (1992) further claims "the battle for self takes place amongst students as well as between the student and the administration of the school. It is represented in the descriptions of the present and in the expectations for the future" (p. 83). The recognition of peers was paramount in the creation of the boys' identities, as was demonstrated by Blair's identity as "the charmer" and Stewart as "the sportsman".

The descriptions and inclusion of various extracts from conversations with the boys suggest that they do seek to find some meaning in their lives, and even Blair attempts to find meaning through resistance and the physical abuse of others. Finding and pursuing meaning may provide the individual with the possibility of power: power over oneself to master skills and mental fortitude, and power over others.

Another important distinction made is that the study group is strongly focused on the future and possible identities this may offer. These possible identities are strongly affiliated with the notion of career, and the earlier dialogue demonstrates the boys'

shared discourse of the importance of financially providing to support future families. This tells us much about how they see masculinity: that is, they perceive future careers will afford them opportunities to hold powerful positions in their forthcoming families by controlling finances.

The links between power and identity are also evident in the boys' demonstration of attempting to master self through overcoming fear, developing skills and setting goals. The lengthy descriptions of Stewart, Jamie and Mick show identities that are fashioned on mastering skills which bring recognition, reputation and position. Stewart talks of being a talented sportsman and proves himself to "significant others" by detailing injuries suffered, Jamie talks of being tough, quick and mastering the ball, while Mick admires the ability of overcoming fear to "just do it" in his dream to become a motor cross rider. The boys find power in conquering fear and mastering skills as a way of defining identities that affirm masculinities that demonstrate bravery and strength.

While Blair finds his identities in assuming power over others, in school it is often demonstrated as resistance towards teachers and learning, but amongst his peers it is demonstrated as maintaining control through a readiness and ability to fight and use physical force. His reputation as a fighter brings him power. In the next chapter, power becomes a central focus for analysis.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Power**

**“The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on”**

**William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part III*  
Act II, Scene II**

## **Bob**

*I love Art, I don't know why. It's just a cool subject. The teacher is pretty cool. You can do whatever you want. It's pretty relaxed and I feel I'm pretty good at it. I've been drawing since I was 6. It's my thing. I just like it. I draw all sorts of things, whatever kinda' comes to me. Cartoons, sketches, whatever comes into my head. It makes me feel good. I feel I'm good at it. It's my thing.*

*This has been a better year for me at school because I got to pick Art as one of my subjects. So I get to go to Art a couple of times a week. I really look forward to it. It's so wicked. We just go to Art and choose what we do, whatever we want. Wicked like, we never get into trouble. The teacher is pretty cool. He kinda' lets us have some of the control. Not like other teachers. He never puts our names on the board, which really pisses me off. Makes me feel like we can't be trusted. In Art, it's different. It's like he kinda' gives most of the power to us. I suppose he just treats us like adults. Talks to us, has fun with us. It takes a fair bit to make him angry. He's a great teacher. He shows us a whole lot of techniques for your drawing. He lets people do their own thing, but helps them along the way.*

*In Art, I usually sit with a couple of mates. We have a laugh and talk a bit. But we get our work done. At the moment we are working on charcoal sketches of pretty ordinary things. I did mine on a light bulb. It's alright. I'm getting' better at the contrast stuff. It's all pretty laid back. Sittin', talkin', doin' our work, and everyone's work is different. The room is often pretty quiet, no yellin' or carryin' on. I like it. I wish I could stay here most of the day.*

*Doin' Art is about me. I mean, I'm doin' it for me because I like it. At the end of the year I take all my work home and put it up in my room. My room is full of pictures and sketches. When people come into my room they always comment on it. Mum and Dad don't mind. They just let me go. I'm keen to keep going with Art and I hope I get better at it. That would be a bonus. When I go to College I'm definitely gonna study Art. It would be the most important subject for me by far. I hate missin' Art if I'm sick or we have an excursion or something. I'm just gonna keep workin' away at it and hopefully something will come of it.*

## **Introduction**

The second theme for investigation as part of this thesis is power. Bob outlines his perception of the subject of Art as presented in the reconstructed narrative at the start of this chapter. This narrative provides insight into his observations of the power relations between teacher and students. The teacher sets the tone of the class and Bob is granted some power and ownership, prompting a feeling of empowerment. Similarly, Bob is able to detail other subjects where teachers retain the balance of power prompting a feeling of disempowerment amongst the students. As a researcher, I want to hear the voices of the study participants exploring these understandings, the way power is enacted by them, within the peer milieu and within the school environment in interactions with fellow students, but, more importantly, with the authority figures of the school, including teachers and those in more senior roles such as the Assistant Principals and Principal.

This chapter seeks to explore how the study participants give meaning to the concept of power, what power means for them, who has power, how they exercise it and how this defines identities and ways in which it influences masculinities. The study participants are not only students who have power exercised on them in the school setting, but they are also powerful individuals who exercise power at various times (Ball, 1990a, 1990b; Connell, 1996). They perceive themselves as not being in positions of power, and yet, they can exercise power through resistance (Barbelet, 1985). Power can manifest itself as resistance to learning, and yet that resistance is often directed towards the teacher, who is exercising power.

This understanding of power as relational is influenced by the work of Foucault (1971, 1977, 1978, 1981) where power cannot be understood without resistance (Barbalet, 1985; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell & Dowsett, 1985; Munro, 1996; Smart, 1982). As already outlined, I have explained my interest in the work of philosophers Frankl (1969, 1992), Taylor (1994, 2002) and Nietzsche (Magnus & Higgins, 1996), and their ideas surrounding choice and freedom. Allied to this is the concept of power and that is where the work of Foucault (1971, 1977, 1978, 1981) is influential in this current study. In a transcribed interview, Foucault describes his position:

My role - and that is too emphatic a word - is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so - called evidence can be criticised and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people- that's the role of an intellectual. (Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988, p. 10)

Foucault's (1971, 1977, 1978, 1981) writings are extensive and cover many fields including society, politics, history and economics. Like Taylor (1994, 2002), many have considered the writings and ideas of Foucault to be too general. Foucault has justified his position by stating his "field is the history of thought" and he substantiates this by stating "the way people think is not adequately analysed by the universal categories of logic. Between social history and formal analyses of thought there is a path, a lane - maybe very narrow - which is the path of the historian of thought" (Martin et al., p. 9).

Foucault, and his contemporaries such as Connell (1993, 1995 1996, 2000), Kenway (1990, 1995), Mac an Ghail (1988, 1994, 1996), Munro (1996) and Walkerdine (1981,1990) suggest that power is embodied in all social connections and institutions, that it is not a possession, not something that can be held by an individual (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1981). Munro (1996) eloquently states that "power is dispersed like a web, with no beginning or end" (p. 434), while Walkerdine (1990) suggests "power is not a single possession, nor is it located in a unitary, static sense. Power is shifting and fragmentary, relating to positionings given in the apparatuses of regulation themselves" (p. 42).

Power is changeable and elusive. It encompasses our lives on a continual basis. The boys of this study are not only engaged in power relations which are unpredictable, they are concurrently trying to determine their gender image in dynamic and volatile social relations with others, forcing them to be continually alert and challenged. The individual is in a continual process of learning and becoming familiar with the practices of power within his own communities. Gutierrez et al. (1995) highlight this very point by suggesting that:

Power relations, produced, reproduced, and transformed in collaborative relationships, shape identity and consciousness as participants seek to become members of particular cultural and social spheres of communities of practice...power is not an added feature of relationships; it is an essential element of the construction of the self and how we understand the world. (p. 451)

Discourses of power inform and are part of the creation of the various identities played out and it is through this chapter the reader is invited to come to understand this process.

The discourses of power we undertake with others are instrumental in the formation of our various selves. We cannot separate power from identity and if our identities are shaped by our understandings and enactment of gender, then power, identity and masculinities are interconnected and need to be examined in their relationship with each other. Let us hear the dialogue of the boys to better understand how power and resistance impact in this research.

**“Because they have the power to bloody do what they want”**

*Critic:* I am interested in knowing whether the study participants have ever considered the inter - connectedness of the discourses of power and resistance with identity and masculinities. Can they give voice to what they mean by power? What images does the word “power” bring to them?

*Researcher:* As part of the second focus group held in December 2004 when the participants were in the final month of Grade 9, I asked them “What do you mean by power?” Here are their responses:

**Blair:** The teacher has it...power.

**Jack:** nah!

**Mick:** Yeah, the teacher has it.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by about power?

**Mick:** Yeah, the teacher has.

**Blair:** Yeah...

- Jack:** Like Mr X in his class, who's got the power there?
- Mick:** Yeah, Mr X. Who has got the power? Everything is all nice and quiet.
- Blair:** Who has got the power in MDT though?
- Jack:** You guys!
- Mick:** The teacher has the most power over everyone.
- Researcher:** Okay. So what do you mean by power then?
- Mick:** Because they have the power to bloody do what they want.

**Researcher:** The participants readily link the concept of power to the status of the teacher. The immediate response by Blair is to place the teacher in a position of power, thus intimating that students are in weaker positions as subjects.

**Teacher:** So do the pupils see the teacher as being in a position of power due to their expertise, or is it a response to the disciplinary power teachers can apply?

**Researcher:** Well, Mick agrees with Blair, and Jack elaborates by describing Mr X who Mick describes as keeping the class "nice and quiet". Power is understood as a way of controlling another individual's actions, one person having control, while others are in inferior positions. The boys imply that "the teacher has the most power over everyone." For the subjects, power is seen as a force, something that can be held, like a possession that is exerted by force or control over others. Those seen in positions of power are seen as having the ability to control other's behaviour. Mick stated "teachers have the power to make you do things you don't want to do, because if you don't then you get into trouble. They control us." Here, Mick makes a generalisation assuming that all teachers have coercive power because they have the ability to administer sanctions (French and Raven, 1960).

**Critic:** If you are working from the premise of Foucault's (1971, 1981) notion of power, then your description of the participants' understanding of power is contradictory. You mention that they see power as something that is possessed which is exercised over others, while Foucault would say that the participants exercise some power and are not the passive recipients they would have us believe.

**Researcher:** This is a contradiction within the boys' understanding of power! Their meaning also suggests a notion of the relational nature of power in which they are active agents that become subjects to the power the teacher demonstrates by becoming "nice and quiet". The participants intimate that it is the teacher's position, the position of granted authority, coupled with the role as bearer of knowledge that give him or her the "upper hand" in the classroom setting, and this allows them "...to bloody do what they want".

While the study participants see power as possessive, unaware of the power they possess. In Mick's response "Because they have the power to bloody do what they want" we see resistance. His voice was projected and firm, and he incites negativity with the term "bloody". He believes that teachers are given power to make students do whatever the teacher wants, forcing students to feelings of powerlessness.

**Critic:** And yet students actively work in opposition to these inferior positions through a process of resistance, adopting a variety of strategies to "gain more power".

**Researcher:** Students may express feelings of powerlessness, but being socially connected, being involved, gives them some power over the other party (Barbalet, 1985; Giddens, 1976). In this case, there is some power in their relationship with the teacher. We know that power relations are shared, but are often unbalanced (Barbalet, 1985; Cornwell and Lindisfarne, 1994b; Epstein and Johnston, 1998). Power can be sought and exercised through resistance (Barbalet, 1985; Kessler et al., 1985; Smart, 1982). As Barbalet (1985) indicates:

The efficacious nature of those subordinate to power is resistance. The influence of social relationships exerted by powerless agents derives precisely from their resistance to power. Resistance limits the effects of power and in doing so materially influences the 'conditions of reproduction of those social systems' in which those resisting power have subordinate positions. (p. 542)

Foucault (1978) advocated “where there is power, there is resistance” (pp. 95-96), and when we examine the power relations between these selected students and in the relationships with teachers and other authority figures, it appears that power and resistance are inseparable. Smart (1982) made a valuable comment in his discussion of resistance when he stated that:

Resistance therefore exists in bodies and souls, in individuals and in classes, but in diverse forms. It is not that resistance lies outside of power relations, rather it represents their limits...Very simply it seems where there is power there is always resistance, that is to say, resistances are always implicated in power relations. Power produces resistance.  
(p. 138)

Resistance takes many forms and is immersed in the transactional nature of power relations. It helps to define the limits of power and to shape further encounters, where all parties are changed as a result (Knight Abowitz, 2000). Resistance is probably the most available way pupils can claim power in the classroom.

***Critic:*** Do the boys realise that the ways they react in the classroom are acts of resistance and consequently acts of power?

***Researcher:*** Observing the study participants, it was evident that they employ a variety of resistance practices. They can clearly articulate strategies used to resist that allow them to continue with a counter school culture that demonstrates their rejection of the schooling system, while still remaining active as students. Later, we will explore these dialogues of understandings.

***Critic:*** Did the teachers see this as resistance to learning, but could it be something else? Is this resistance a struggle against the power institutionalised in the school setting, a way of challenging the knowledge discourses, discipline structures, as well as the authority of teachers and other figures?

***Researcher:*** Resistance is a way of communicating, a way of having a voice, of being heard, often misunderstood by teachers and perceived as defiance and

opposition. Some have suggested recently that educators need to move to a new positioning where resistance is distinguished as an opportunity for discussion and dialogue, a dialogue of new possibilities. Knight Abowitz (2000) argues resistance would be best understood “as an impetus of social and political transformation in a school, resistance communicates; that is, it is a means of signalling, generating, and building dialogue around particular power imbalances and inequalities” (p. 878).

### **“Yeah, they have power”**

*Researcher:* Let’s gain more insight into how the boys resist, and explore the connection this has with Connell’s (1996) concept of “protest masculinity”. The resistance to learning often exhibited which results in academic underachievement is not a resistance to learning, but more so a resistance to power, power displayed through the structure of knowledge, discipline structures and authority given to teachers. These subjects of the study have positioned themselves in opposition to the authority of school and through acts of resistance which are as Knight Abowitz (2000) declares “...performed with at least some degree of intentionality, by actors who are conscious of a public problem as they perceive and experience it, and who express their helplessness, despair or rage through oppositional behaviour” (p. 890). Resistance can be symbolically expressed through dress, language patterns and codes, gesture and the use of silence or can be expressed as action, which was often displayed by the participants through wasting time, “wagging” classes or physical intimidation.

Student subcultures are evident in the schooling system and while they play a vital role in the life of the student, they are also ways of developing counter school culture, and a way of exercising power against the official culture of the school. Shanks’ (1994) discussion of Everhart’s earlier study explores this very idea. Shanks, in his analysis of the study, states:

Although the administration and teachers controlled the school, the students coexisted with the school rules while developing their own social realities. They resisted but did not reject the system. Rejection would have gotten them into trouble and weakened their power to keep

their social system intact. A complex relationship existed between the students and the authority of this school. (p. 46)

Is this not another example of the students coexisting in a system where rules are made to be tested?

*Critic:* One should question why these students try to test the rules? What is it that the students are working against?

*Researcher:* Everhart's (1983) study serves to remind us that schools are political institutions that promote particular discourses, where knowledge and power are intertwined (Ball, 1990b; Foucault, 1971; Kenway, 1990). Schools organise students through controlling the time, physical space and activities pupils are engaged in (Marshall, 1990). As already highlighted, schools continually categorise students, which may later determine their economic and social status in life (Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Kenway, 1990). Ball (1990a) describes these "dividing practices" as "...central to organizational practices of education" (p. 4) through the division of subjects, ways of assessing and streaming students according to ability, the development of curriculum or forms of knowledge, as well as pedagogy in which teachers are rendered in positions of power due to authority given by the state, and knowledge, which they impart through teaching (Ball, 1994a; Connell, 1996, 2000; Foucault, 1977; Kenway, 1990; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997).

Kenway (1990) advocates that "dividing practices" are "those procedures which, through classification and categorisation distribute, contain, manipulate and control people. Such methods divide people from each other and within themselves, giving them an identity which is both social and personal" (p. 174). Teachers are granted positions of power where they undertake "dividing practices", while students are submitted to positions of inferiority in which are they placed in contest with each other. As Kenway (1990) states "the proposition is that knowledge and power are inseparable, that forms of power are imbued within knowledge and that forms of knowledge are permeated by power relations" (p. 173).

**Teacher:** As teachers we are considered experts, professionals and specialists of knowledge who, Kenway (1990) suggests, "...produce, promote and service 'regimes of truth'. We act as 'judges of normality' and endorse and benefit from the splintering of knowledge and the disempowerment of the unknowing" (p. 175). The discourses of knowledge presented to students are given as "truths". We might ask what is "truth"? What is "normal"? How do these boys create "normality"?

**Critic:** The knowledge teachers project in their positions as teachers automatically gives them power over students, does it not?

**Researcher:** Yes, it is the knowledge that teachers hold that in many ways permits and ensures the application of power (Smart, 1982). While knowledge is seen as a way of liberating individuals, it also can be considered a mode of regulation, discipline and surveillance (Foucault, 1981). Foucault describes this exercise of power as "power – knowledge" exercised in institutions that focus strongly on discipline (Foucault, 1981).

The knowledge forms that preside in schools can make students feel their own experiences are meaningless and of little importance (Knight Abowitz, 2000; McLaren, 1989). The knowledge delivered through pedagogy and curriculum often holds little relevance to their lives in the present. The participants are quick to understand that they need to study Maths and English for the future, but when they are focused so much on living for the present the future holds little relevance. Much of the knowledge imparted through various subjects holds little meaning for the boys situated and focused on the present.

**Critic:** Are you not returning to your earlier links with Taylor (1994, 2002) and Frankl (1969, 1992) and the human capacity to find meaning? If these boys find little meaning in the activities and study they are expected to undertake, then it would be realistic to assume that they may respond by being resistant.

**Researcher:** Let me give an example. At this point I would like to draw on Goffman's (1961) concept of "underlife" to describe the activities individuals create to detach themselves from the societal institutions they are involved in. The

“underlife” is a way of resisting power and through action can be displayed in two very different forms. For students like Howard, Goffman (1961) suggests they may adopt a “contained form” as part of the “underlife” as a way of resisting, where they assert their difference, while trying to appropriate “existing institutional structures without introducing pressure for radical change” (p.199). This, “contained form” is often presented as apathy, apathy towards school and educational tasks. Teachers talk about students who are “lazy, disengaged or unmotivated”. Howard is one of those students who is continually categorised as underachieving because he is considered “lazy” and lacking in motivation.

**Teacher:** When discussing Howard, we need to understand his capabilities to gain insight into why he is apathetic, and probably underachieving.

**Researcher:** In initial discussions with the Grade 8 Supervisor in 2003, Howard was described as “a real worry, a pretty bright kid, who just can’t be bothered.” Howard’s basic literacy and numeracy test results in Grade 7 indicated that he is a capable student, and yet Howard was streamed to the lowest strand of Maths and Science over his first three years at high school. Howard was described as a “classic underachiever”. One teacher claimed “he’s a pretty capable kid, who just won’t apply himself. No trouble really, but doesn’t do much”. These statements by teachers were reiterated to me on a number of occasions during the course of the research.

Like Blair towards the end of the study time frame, Howard increasingly displayed poor attendance patterns. He was reluctant to talk about the reasons for his absences often claiming he was sick, and yet in early 2005 he disclosed to me that he “just can’t be bothered getting out of bed”. In observing Howard in classes such as Maths, Science and SOSE, he was often disengaged from learning tasks, looking out the window, scribbling on his books or talking quietly to the person next to him.

**Critic:** What does this attitude tell us about how the participants, and in particular, how Howard chooses to exercise power?

**Researcher:** Howard claims power by demonstrating his resistance to the knowledge forms of this school through a “contained form”. He often failed to complete tasks by the expected time frame and one would, on first sight, consider him lazy and unmotivated. When directed by teachers to return to task he did so without opposition and he did not actively disrupt others from learning.

Howard disclosed that he did not see himself as a “dumb” or a “bad student”. During interviews he was animated when talking about school and disclosed how he enjoyed English, particularly in Grade 9 where he chose Creative Writing as one of his elective subjects. He articulated his reasons for choosing this subject, stating “I enjoy writing, and I’m not too bad at it. I feel pretty comfortable in that class. I’ve been with the teacher for a while now and it’s a small class, so that makes it better.” In Creative Writing, Howard was more animated and actively sought to complete work tasks, and yet, in other classes his work was often not completed, resulting in him being placed in the lowest strand of Maths and Science. The earlier statement about Creative Writing suggests that Howard felt more of an equal in the power relations between teacher and student in this class. He had worked with that teacher before and obviously felt valued. This coupled with his belief that he could adequately complete tasks required of him and being with fewer students added to his sense of personal worth and increased positioning of power. Consequently, we see a more active and engaged student in this subject.

**Critic:** Your discussion with, and observation of, Howard suggests that we see the same student operating in different ways. In English he finds meaning, feels valued and so exercises power through engagement in learning, while in other subjects such as Maths and Science we see a very different student, a student who finds no meaning or that the subject matter holds little relevance to his life. He chooses to exercise power by passive resistance by becoming disengaged and removed.

**Researcher:** Wexler (1992) found in his analysis of particular school environments in England, that:

Apathy is part of the depression of expectations and rationalising process of self regulation that enables responsible performance in salient spheres

of action...it is not the school which does not care about the students, but the students who do not care about the school. Apathy is the depressed self's defence against the social totality of the school. (p. 141)

For Howard, apathy is a way to voice his resistance to the knowledge that is foreign and alien to him. He actively disengages from learning tasks in Maths and Science because he feels inadequate and disillusioned. By looking out the window and scribbling on his pad he is actively choosing to take control, even at the expense of being seen as a failure.

### **“Fuck him”**

**Researcher:** Let's return to Goffman's (1961) second form of “underlife” which is displayed through actions that cause disruption “where the realistic intentions of the participants are to abandon the organisation or radically alter its structure” (p. 199). As already highlighted in the earlier reconstructed narrative and descriptions of field notes taken during the Information Technology lesson, Blair's ongoing display of confrontational and disruptive behaviour in the classroom is a resistance that is intended to change and alter the structure of the institution. Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) might suggest that Blair resorts to aggression and sometimes violent acts as a way of maintaining status and reputation, and as a means of self protection. Violence becomes a way to resist the authority structures of the school and a way to feel empowered (French, 1999). In doing so, he is exercising power and formulating identities.

**Critic:** We have come to know Blair well. We see him failing to achieve academically and we acknowledge that he claims modes of power, and thus other meanings of masculinity (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Epstein and Johnston, 1998). Can you give further evidence of these alternative modes of claiming power?

**Researcher:** As Connell (1996) suggests many boys who fail academically often defer to “protest masculinity” with the intention of defying authority, and as the participants state, “takes a lot of guts”, in which the “contest with authority can become a focus of excitement, labelling and the formation of masculine identities”

(p. 217). Those who fail to access power through education resort to obtaining it through avenues such as sport (Jackson, 2002; Martino, 1999) physical aggression and sexual activity and the prowess and prestige these bring (Connell, 1996; James, 1999).

Researchers indicate that boys control more of the space than girls in and outside the classroom (Thorne, 1989, 1993) and demand more of the teachers' time (Jordan, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998), often dominating not only the attention of the teacher, but also the interest of other students (Askew & Ross, 1989; Lees, 1993). This attention is dominated by certain boys being disruptive and "off task" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jordan, 1995). Those students who seek to gain power take action against the authority of the teacher by what Connell (1996) refers to as "taking up the offer" (p. 220), while establishing a style of masculinity which is highly regarded amongst their peers. Breaking the rules and resisting authority is a method to those boys like Blair, who lack the resources to achieve academically, and which are central to the exploration and formation of particular masculinities (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

**Critic:** Blair has created identities and masculinities fashioned on actively opposing authority. Peer recognition has been significant in the development of these aspects of identity, has it not?

**Researcher:** Yes, I want to illustrate possible reasons for Blair's resistance to learning, as detailed in the earlier reconstructed narrative at the beginning of Chapter 3. In this instance, Blair actively baited the teacher because "he won't even show you how to do it, doesn't explain it, just says get on with it". Blair is opposing the knowledge forms that are alien to him. Blair feels "locked out" of this learning because he does not understand the steps involved in dealing with the mathematical concepts. Blair may have been reacting to the "regimes of truth" that are presented to him because he failed to find meaning in them.

**Teacher:** Blair's resistance might be a response to the teacher's power not to instruct him in how to solve the problem.

**Researcher:** Witnessing this lesson early in the data collection process, it was obvious that Blair's behaviour is a direct response to being unable to complete the learning task asked of students. Blair had missed the lesson prior to this, and therefore, the fundamental steps in understanding how to solve the mathematical problems. Blair was tense before he entered the class and did ask for help on a number of occasions from the teacher. The teacher was busy responding to a variety of students and early in the lesson he responded to Blair by asking him to try to work it out himself. This was the impetus for Blair to amplify his resistance which continued throughout the remainder of the lesson through actively interrupting other members of the class, through repetitive low level disruption such as tapping his ruler and pen and talking, laughing and joking with his immediate peers. As the lesson progressed, Blair increased his oppositional action by physically intimidating and harassing another student and finally slamming the door as he was sent to the principal's office.

Blair could be considered the typical "anti-school male" (Mac an Ghaill, 1996) and through resistance articulates power and legitimises subordination to oppose the institution of school (Mac an Ghaill, 1996, Skeggs, 1991), whilst defining his status as a male and formulating a masculinity based on aggression (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert and Henderson (2003) in their study of *Boys performing English*, detail one of the subjects, Mark, who as a leader of a group of four boys described as the "bad boys" in a Year 10 English class, claims leadership amongst the group through "his capacity to violate the rules of respectful classroom interaction" (p. 357). The researchers further suggested that "the group, led by Mark, rarely paid attention or responded to teacher instruction but largely consumed their time with banter, games and frippery that appeared to bind them with the solidarity of group resistance" (p. 357).

**Critic:** Blair chooses active resistance in the public domain of the classroom to claim power. Earlier, you spent considerable effort exploring the importance of "significant others" in the formulation of identities, and thus masculinities. How are Blair's identities and masculinities consolidated by the audience watching these acts of resistance?

**Researcher:** Blair held a powerful position amongst his peer group, built on a reputation as “a mad fucker” who “just goes off”. Blair and his latest anti - social behaviour and risk - taking antics were often a keen topic for conversation amongst his immediate peer group, but also amongst the wider student body. Blair’s willingness to fight, to oppose authority and exercise power without fear of the consequences held him in high esteem amongst the students. Over a two - year period, Blair was often suspended from school for defying teachers’ orders, and physically and verbally intimidating teachers and students. When the boys spoke about Blair the conversations were tinted with feelings of admiration, but also a fear of him. They were in awe of his capacity to fight and the position of power this granted. This promoted him within the hierarchy of the peer group and will be examined in further detail in a later chapter.

**Critic:** We have seen Blair actively engage in resistance by opposing authority in an action mode, but we have also been witness to Blair seeking continual re - assurance for learning tasks. In your opinion was Blair’s resistance always action orientated?

**Researcher:** Yes, as the study progressed it became evident that Blair continued to resist by choosing to disengage himself totally from school by electing not to attend. After interviewing Blair in mid - 2004, it was clear that Blair’s poor attendance was much more than disengagement, but rather a conscious decision and action to claim control and power. Blair disclosed that he actively made a choice each morning as to whether he would attend school. The following transcript extract highlights this point:

**Researcher:** I noticed you haven’t been at school much lately.

**Blair:** Yeah, this is my second day back.

**Researcher:** I’m interested to know why you haven’t been attending school.

**Blair:** I get up of a morning and I decide whether I go or not. It depends really. I always come on half days because I’ve got Wood and P.E.

**Researcher:** So you come because you like those subjects.

**Blair:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Does that mean you don't come when you've got subjects you don't like, like Maths and English?

**Blair:** Yeah, Maths, hate Maths. Don't come.

**Researcher:** Blair articulates that he consciously makes a decision as to whether he will attend school in the morning depending on the subjects he has on that day.

**Teacher:** As already witnessed through your reconstructed narrative, Blair struggles in Maths. He most likely misses much of the instruction on basic mathematical concepts due to poor attendance and so when he returns to the class he is automatically positioned as failing.

**Researcher:** This promotes in itself a feeling of powerlessness in Blair and so he continues to voice his opposition through active resistance. For Blair non-attendance and being disruptive are ways of claiming power and exercising some control in his life, but it also propels him to feelings of failure and inferiority.

### **“No way! It's only a fuckin' hat”**

**Critic:** In your discussions of Blair we see that he chooses to use his body as a site of power (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Cornwell & Lindisfarne, 1994b) through intimidation, threats and physical violence, both in his relationships with fellow students and with teachers. There has been much research done in this area. What do you draw from this?

**Researcher:** In analysis of Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and punishment: the birth of the prison*, Cornwell and Lindisfarne (1994b) detail that:

For Foucault, bodies are sites of resistance and of power over others. He notes that the inscription of power on bodies is a direct, material process which functions through the disciplinary procedures and self-regulation of everyday life: work and rest, diet, dress and sexual mores. Such processes make bodies into particular kinds of bodies...There are no neutral or 'natural' anatomical bodies. Rather, historical and cultural

specificity is incarnated through individual, embodied agents who construct social narratives by acting on and reacting to others. (p. 37)

Here, the focus is on the human body as an instrument of power and through the interaction with others it is fashioned to continually respond in power relations with others.

Jamie had fashioned a masculinity that is concentrated on strong physicality, which helps to define his power within the social network to which he is connected. Jamie has created an image of masculinity that is shaped on appearing “big”. This is a symbolic representation in which Jamie adopts a strong physicality through exaggerated gestures, invasion of other’s personal space and adopting a tone of voice that could be considered by some as loud and arrogant. Nayak and Kehily (1996) describe this symbolic image that shapes masculinity as “expansive and competitive” (p. 218). Jamie’s behaviour is not only an expression of masculinity, but also a way of claiming power.

**Critic:** Is Jamie aware that he uses his body as an instrument of power?

**Researcher:** In a later example of the reconstructed narrative at the beginning of Chapter 3, which was the first observation of a class I made in the study, the reader will see how Jamie claims power within his own peer group, over female students and in his relationship with the teacher. Jamie also claimed power by modifying the school uniform by wearing a cap back to front and entering regular conflicts with teachers as a result of being sanctioned to remove the cap.

During a particular class I observed in October 2003, four of the study participants entered a Drama class wearing caps. These were not part of school uniform and obviously part of the “symbolization” that students had institutionalised as part of their own culture (Connell, 1996). Each wore an individual cap in a different colour, usually with some kind of skating, surf or sporting logo such as Nike. The wearing of hats in classes was prohibited. When asked to remove their hats by the teacher many of the students would respond with lethargy and disdain. Here we see the peer culture in conflict with the school’s overt culture and discourses surrounding what

was considered socially acceptable behaviour. In this instance, and on many further occasions, the wearing of caps inside classrooms became an issue that demanded much of the teacher's time.

**Teacher:** Your description is not uncommon in classrooms. It points to the power relations where the teacher aims to take control by requesting that students take off their caps.

**Researcher:** The participants of this study would respond with a variety of techniques including complying to the teacher's demand or displaying elements of "protest masculinity" (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000) such as contesting the teacher's authority by ignoring the request, delaying the removal of the cap, or open defiance, often resulting in further disciplinary action.

Jamie was the only one of his group who would wear his cap continually and wore it in a unique way, and that was back to front. Jamie would enter classrooms with his cap on, while the other boys would take them off. Teachers would request that he take it off, which he would do so, often stating under his breath "No way. It's only a fuckin' hat" however, as soon as the teacher moved away Jamie would return the cap to his head. This was a deliberate act of resistance in opposition to the teacher's orders, but also was a way of illustrating Jamie's power to "significant others", and thus marking his power within the group. The act of wearing the cap was not only a resistant act to authority. It helped to define identity and social standing with the network of peers.

**Critic:** What you are touching on how power is used within the peer group. Using the ideas of French and Raven (1960) we have seen, you have illustrated the use of coercive power, expert power, legitimate power in the classroom setting, and your descriptions of Blair and Jamie suggest that there is a referent power base amongst the peer group with some of the subjects admiring and expressing a desire to be more like these two boys (French & Raven, 1960). This places the boys in superior positions of power amongst their peers. I am sure your readers would like to hear more about the power structure amongst this peer group!

*Researcher:* We will return to this at a later point. I would like to demonstrate the collective resistance some of the subjects took part in to claim power within the wider school setting.

**“It’s a waste of time, don’t wanna train with them”**

*Researcher:* Connell (2000) advocates sport is one of the vortexes used by schools as a way to define gender regimes. With a strong sporting history, Mercury High School sport was an important vortex, part of both the overt and hidden culture of this school. Later, we will discuss sport in the formation of masculinities amongst the boys, however, at this point, I would like to bring your attention to the importance of sport as a way of demonstrating power, and in this instance how collective resistance is used to boycott a sporting event arranged by the school.

On a particular morning at the school I was privy to see collective power exercised by the Grade 9 male student body where Stewart was a key player. The school had been invited to choose members of the student body interested in Australian Rules Football to a training session with some of the Tassie Devils who represent Tasmania in the Victorian Football League. A number of male students had been selected to take part and upon arriving at the school I was to interview Stewart who was one of those selected.

During the interview Stewart informed me about the training session and how he was looking forward to taking part. As the morning progressed I had entered into a variety of Grade 9 classes to observe particular students who were part of the study. It became apparent that the training camp was a topic of interest amongst the student body. During the Woodwork class I had heard one student state to the teacher “it’s a waste of time, don’t wanna train with them. I have my own footy training”. As the first period progressed it was obvious that collectively the students selected to go were making a decision not to attend the session. By 9:20 am a PA announcement delivered by the Assistant Principal interrupted classes, stating “all boys selected for football training to report to the bus now”. Stewart and a number of the other boys selected made eye contact with each other, smiled and some openly laughed without moving towards the bus.

**Critic:** Why and what was it that these students were resisting? What had been the impetus for Stewart to change his mind, considering he appeared to be enthusiastic in your earlier interview?

**Researcher:** The selected students were voicing a resistance to the activity and through the statement made earlier by the boy in the Woodwork class we see that students were objecting to the activity being imposed on them, when many of them already attended football training sessions.

**Critic:** This experience de-valued the training the students were already doing with their own football teams!

**Researcher:** Possibly. The open display of resistance by the boys of smiling, laughing and continuing with classroom activity was possibly a statement being made to the school authorities and those that organised the official training session. Very few boys arrived to catch the bus and attend the training session.

By not attending students are not forced to enter the competition to demonstrate their skills and thus avoid feelings of failure and disappointment in oneself (Jackson, 2002). This withdrawal from competition becomes an ongoing theme for the study participants, particularly in their attitudes towards school and studies. In many ways, they choose to withdraw from competition, to save face, and protect the image of masculinity they have worked hard at creating. This will become more apparent as we progress in Chapter 7.

### **“Let the teachers think you are doing the work”**

**Researcher:** The following extract from the first focus group details the many ways the boys used “contained forms” (Goffman, 1961) to resist learning activities and how they share a common understanding amongst the group as to the intention of these actions.

**Researcher:** I notice that some of you can sit in class and appear to be learning like silent reading...

**Bob:** Like me, I just sit there flicking through the book.

**Researcher:** The teacher thinks you are learning and doing the work.

**Bob:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** But you're really sitting there not doing much. Sometimes you can even be writing stuff. But if I asked you after what was it that you have just written, what was it that you have just read...

**Bob:** I wouldn't have a clue.

**Researcher:** You wouldn't have a clue. Sometimes you might be chatting to the person or not doing much. So what kind of strategies do you use?

**Stewart :** Let the teachers think that you're doing work.

**Researcher:** This extract illustrates how the participants readily admit their resistance to learning by becoming disengaged from prescribed tasks such as reading or taking notes from the whiteboard, while often giving the appearance to the teacher that they are engaged and involved in the learning process.

**Critic:** Stewart's comment "let the teachers think that you're doing the work" is interesting. Earlier he advocated that teachers "have the power to do whatever they bloody want" and yet, here he states that it is the students that are in positions of power by deceiving the teacher with his statement "let the teachers think you are doing work".

**Researcher:** Students use whatever available means they have to demonstrate resistance, while staying within the boundaries of teacher expectations. Scott (1990) suggests:

Subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law. This requires an experimental spirit and the capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences and lapses available to them. It means somehow setting a course at the very perimeter of what the authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent. (pp. 86-7)

The appearance of doing work and, in fact, doing very little is exploiting the boundaries the teacher sets.

The boys continue their animated dialogue by describing a particular incident when students were supposed to be undertaking individual investigations in English on a particular topic using various software programs and the internet in the computer lab.

**Bob:** Like Stewart got up to the library yesterday where he was stuff arsing around on the computer playing pool and shit...

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Yeah.

**Bob:** and then Mrs W came, we just clicked it back and just typed whatever on his word document.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Stewart:** Then when she left he just clicked back on to the game.

**Researcher:** Okay. So when the teacher is in close proximity...

**Stewart:** (laughs)

**Researcher:** You switch back to your work.

**Bob:** Yeah. (Stewart continues to laugh)

**Researcher:** Um...so when the teacher is in close proximity basically you switch back to your work.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Do you actually signal each other? So if you could...you got a friend who is on the computer...

**Bob:** Stewie, he was having a turn playing pool. I said Mrs W is coming. He turned it back over.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Okay. So you actually...um...stick up for each other, basically...

**Stewart:** Yeah, Bob was away, Mr W was coming over, so I turned it back and started doing some work.

**Researcher:** It is not unusual for students to collectively resist the authority of the teacher by covering for each other. The third and final part of this transcript, details further strategies the boys adopted to resist learning and teachers in general.

**Researcher:** So what other things did you do, what other strategies did you use?

**Mick:** Waste about one and a half. Sometimes in English I just don't do very much at all. I have Blair and Jack sitting beside me and we start talking. The teacher doesn't make you do much.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** We just look at our books and talk.

**Researcher:** Okay. So you were...it's this appearance that you are doing the work, but you are not doing it.

**Mick:** You try to do it and then you get stuck on the conversation, and then you forget everything around and what is going on.

**Researcher:** Mick discloses a shared discourse amongst the peer group that demonstrates that the appearance of completing tasks or completing them with little effort is more important than the learning and understanding the task itself.

**Critic:** So students modify the rules to appear to be completing the work or alternatively do the work with little effort. Mick's statement "the teacher doesn't make you do much" is an interesting statement that gives some indication of how Mick perceives the power relations in the classroom. Can you elaborate on this for your reader?

**Researcher:** In this case, the teacher does not force them to complete the task, and this gives Mick and his "significant others" the justification to continue with their strategy of doing very little, but giving the appearance of reading by "...looking at our books". The subjects take great delight in deceiving authority, whether it was through covering for each other, or creating an illusion for the teacher. There was an element of humour in this game of deception played with the teacher.

The humour is tied to language patterns. Knight Abowitz (2000) claim “students use a variety of practices to position themselves against the administration and teachers, including the selective use of their native dialect to mystify and conceal meanings of their conversations” (p. 890).

*Teacher:* Students share language that is foreign to teachers, that provides hidden meaning and humour as the teacher is alien to these understandings.

*Researcher:* The ability to be humorous is highly regarded amongst the boys and promotes them often to a position of power, while defining their masculinity. We will come to explore this further in their relationships with each other and the way they define their identities within and beyond the classroom environment

### **“It’s like substitution. We stick up for each other”**

*Researcher:* Over the duration of 2004, I saw Jack, Blair and Mick in the same Home Group class, where silent reading was a weekly activity that students were expected to undertake as part of their studies. The three boys would sit together and display a variety of resistant strategies such as forgetting to bring their books to read, delaying the task of reading by claiming they had “forgotten which page they were up to” and talk and joke with each other, as well “play pranks” such as belching, farting, taking books from each other or tipping each other off the chairs they were rocking on. These oppositional behaviours were collectively exercised by the boys and were intended as humour to disrupt students from task, thus claiming power, as well as establishing masculine identities that clearly stated to others that they were not afraid of the consequences of their actions. Woods (1976) suggests “laughter can also be a reaction against authority and routine, a socially divisive and disturbing element made in the interests of the preservation of one group and the destruction of another” (p. 178).

The teacher would use a range of strategies and disciplinary measures by quietly re-directing individual subjects, moving towards the boys and tapping them on the shoulders or asking them about what they were reading. As their oppositional behaviour increased the teacher would move towards placing their names on the

board and warning them about the possibility of separating them or even detention. The teacher would do so in a respectful and firm manner. In October 2004, the boys were undertaking their usual resistance to silent reading and the following dialogue took place between the boys and the teacher.

**Mick:** (burps loudly)

**Teacher:** Mick, you already have a detention with me tomorrow, you wouldn't want it to be any longer would you?

**Mick:** If I don't turn up, does it turn into two lunchtimes?

**Blair, Jack:** (smiling and laughing)

**Teacher:** No, it turns into an after school detention.

**Mick:** What if I don't turn up?

**Teacher:** I'll think of something. I'll take you out to the Derwent and drop you over the edge. (Smiles and makes direct eye contact with Mick)

**Mick, Jack:** As if!

**Blair:** (quietly, head down) Fuckin' wouldn't have a boat anyway.

(students in class laugh loudly, including Mick and Jack. Students settle back to task, teacher continues to write notes on board).

**Researcher:** In this instance we see the power relations between teacher and student played out. Mick adopts an assertive and questioning tone, while still maintaining a respectful tone, while the teacher reacts with a sense of humour with his statement "I'll think of something. I'll take you out to the Derwent and drop you over the edge" with the intention of diffusing the level of confrontation. Blair's response was intended for all the class to hear, but was said quietly enough for the teacher not to see it as a direct challenge to his authority. Blair's use of humour promoted him to a position of power within the dynamics of this classroom. The students are unified against the teacher, by sharing the joke and laughing out aloud. Blair considered himself a winner in the battle of power in this class at this time.

**Critic:** Were you able to explore how the boys perceived the power relations in this class, and were they aware of the strategies they used to maintain power? Did they see themselves as powerful subjects?

**Researcher:** In a later interview I asked Mick about this episode. The following dialogue illustrates Mick's perceptions about the power relations within this class.

**Researcher:** I notice you guys really struggle with silent reading sometimes, like the other day.

**Mick:** Yeah, we come in from recess, all hyped up can't concentrate. We muck around and get into a bit of trouble, nothing serious though.

**Researcher:** What about Mr A?

**Mick:** Yeah, he's pretty cool. Students like him because he's fair, and gives you another chance.

**Researcher:** Like the other day?

**Mick:** Yeah. He just lets it go. He doesn't pick on anything. He looks at things from your point of view. Other teachers can't see that. So students try and test, and try and resist, especially Blair. It's like substitution. We stick up for each other.

**Researcher:** So what about power in Mr A's class? Who's got it?

**Mick:** Both, students and the teacher.

**Researcher:** Mick eloquently justifies why silent reading was an inappropriate task for him at that time in the schedule of daily activities. He also provides insight into how he perceives the power relations between the students and Mr A. The students in this class felt that they can have a joke and maybe get away with a little bit more because "he gives you another chance". Mick's questioning of the teacher and Blair's joke intended for the student body were done because they believed that Mr A would accept these displays in good faith. The students believed they were on an equal footing and held some power within this class environment.

**Critic:** Mick is certainly one of your key informants and he provides you and your readers with detailed insight. I am interested in his validation that in classes where teachers are perceived as retaining the balance of power "... students will try and test, try and resist, especially Blair. It's like substitution. We stick up for each other." What do you make of this?

**Researcher:** Here, we see Mick use the term "resist" to oppose the authority of the teacher. There was a discourse that suggested an understanding that opposition requires a collective response by the group in which they took turns to contest the teacher.

The more rigid the teaching style the more resistance students demonstrate (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Schultz, 2004). As Schultz (2004) suggests "in other words, in disciplinary contexts students generally understand they are dominated and respond in ways that contest this domination (whether or not they understand this as "resistance" (p. 17). In this case, one might suggest that the teacher does not have a rigid teaching style, and yet the students continued to test the authority of the teacher.

**Critic:** From the insights you have provided from Mick and your earlier reconstructed narrative of Bob, it seems that your participants are able to articulate how power relations are established in classrooms. I am sure your reader would like to gain more insights into how the boys see power operating in the school setting!

**Researcher:** As we will come to see in Chapter 8 that examines the boys' attitudes towards schooling, boys dislike many of the relationships they have with teachers because of the imbalance of power relations. Keddie and Churchill (2003) found in their study of Australian schoolboys, that:

Generally speaking, the boys reported most commonly that what they dislike most about their teachers is how the student-teacher relationship positions them with a lack of power and control over what happens in their school lives. The boys reported feeling unfairly treated by their teachers and in this regard their responses indicated dissatisfaction with being overpowered, controlled and positioned as inferior, in terms of

what they seem as teachers using their position of authority in ways that they disliked. (p. 7)

These study participants were able to clearly articulate the ongoing need to resist in classrooms as a way of exercising power and as a way of being heard.

### **“Suspension is a holiday away from hell”**

*Critic:* Up to this point, you have made little mention of the disciplinary measures the school uses. You spent considerable time in Chapter 3 describing the importance of the behaviour management strategies this school endorses and you gave details of Connell’s (1996) argument that discipline is one of the vortexes of power relations. As readers, we have also come to know that Blair is often suspended from school because of his violation of school rules. How did your subjects view these measures, and in what ways do they see these as demonstrations of power? What were their reactions?

*Researcher:* In discussions with the subjects, it became evident they saw the supreme power of the school lying within the hands of the principal. Jack explains “he can make you do what ever he wants you to do. He has the power to suspend or even expel you”. As already detailed Mercury High School was undertaking a review of its security measures and throughout the course of 2004 a number of new measures were introduced such as the lockable front doors to the school and the wearing of identification tags by all personnel. The boys readily instigated conversation around these topics on a regular basis with me, declaring their dislike for what they considered to be “piss poor” efforts.

Wexler (1992) found in his study of a range of United States schools that “school control and surveillance reinforces student suspicion that school shares wider social denigrations of their value” (p. 141). It appears the study participants were also resisting security and control measures installed at their school because they felt devalued. They saw these security efforts as “piss poor”. In the following extract from the second focus group held in November 2004, the participants talked about their response to being suspended:

**Researcher:** Okay. And that's basically telling me that the social side, having a group of friends is vital, what about punishment-detentions, time out, suspensions-are they...are these ways of making student feel powerless?

**Blair:** Some students. (Boys laughing)

**Researcher:** You are laughing.

**Mick:** Just make you furious.

**Jack:** Just makes it even worse, pissed off.

**Researcher:** Is that the intention though, to suspend you or make you have internal suspensions or whatever?

**Mick:** You feel like the teacher's picking on you.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** ...when you get one... a suspension.

**Blair:** I usually get put in internal.

**Mick:** You always are!

**Researcher:** But is that a way of making you feel powerless? Is that the aim of it?

**Jack:** That's what they are trying to do, but it doesn't.

**Researcher:** But it doesn't. Why...why it doesn't?

**Jack:** It makes you more furious and stuff, makes you get your back up.

**Blair:** Once you get pissed, you do exactly the same thing again.

**Researcher:** Okay. So has opposite effect is what you are saying...

**Blair:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** ...it actually wants you...makes you...

**Mick:** I don't really think that they realise that.

**Blair:** No, they haven't.

**Researcher:** In this discussion, the participants detailed how suspension had little effect as a discipline measure. They talked about feeling "furious" and "pissed off" and that if the intention of the measure was to make the students powerless by distancing them from the school environment through internal isolation or being sent home, then often it has the opposite effect because as Blair stated "once you get

pissed, you do exactly the same thing”. The boys continue to believe that they retain some power by continuing with the behaviour that was initially sanctioned.

**Critic:** For students like Blair, suspension most likely places him in a position of power because it gives him the opportunity to escape the very institution he has disregard for, allowing him to retain some control over his life.

**Researcher:** True, but for other students such as Mick, being suspended does bring feelings of alienation and powerlessness. Mick stands alone from the group on this matter. In the following extract taken from the first focus group we see the varying attitudes of the subjects towards being disciplined at school.

**Researcher:** Tell me about detentions and being suspended. Do you think these punishments work? Does it stop you from doing the wrong thing in class?

**Bob:** Detentions a bit, suspension is just like a holiday (Coughing).

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Stewart:** For me, suspension is just a holiday away from hell.

**Researcher:** Okay

**Bob:** She got to get us stayed at school now. (Laughing)

**Researcher:** No, no, I don't tell any of you that...

**Mick:** You feel down at the same time.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Stewart:** It's cool! (Coughing)

**Researcher:** Further to this discussion, the boys continued to talk about the effects of suspension and being expelled from school. Some of the participants recalled how their fathers had been expelled from school and that “it didn't affect them”. Bob went on to state how this made little impact on his father's life because “he's got a job that pays him 20 bucks per hour. We got a big arse house there, a flat downstairs where me and my brother live”.

The discourse shared by the boys suggests that challenging authority at a school level was an acceptable and appropriate way of behaving. Connell (1996) might suggest the majority of the subjects are willing to take “up the offer” demonstrating “protest masculinities”. They believe that the consequences of these sanctions have little effect on the current life and future life outcomes. As Bob suggests failing at school has not stopped his father acquiring employment and possessions such as big house and family.

*Critic:* Does it not also say a lot for how Bob perceives his role as a man, the ability to stand up to authority and still prove himself through acquiring material wealth, which relates to your earlier description of how the participants see future identities as men as being that of the “provider”?

*Researcher:* The discourses around masculinities which overlay the boys’ identities even become more pronounced when discussing what it means to be male. We will come to this later.

### **“Have you seen my new phone?”**

*Critic:* What about your experiences of resistance from your participants? You are also in a relationship with them that involves power, and thus resistance. The topics you have covered with them are often confronting and deal with discourses they may have never considered before. As a researcher you would expect to meet with some resistance at various times. Can you comment on this for your reader?

*Researcher:* Of course there was resistance by the subjects. As already outlined at the start of the study the boys selected initially showed resistance to taking part in the study by delaying the return of their consent forms. There were a further two acts of resistance worth noting. The first was the influence of Blair in the second focus group, where the dynamics of the group and dialogue completely changed. This is further discussed in Chapter 6 because it had some bearing on the dynamics of the group.

Subsequently, I would like to outline for the reader a further episode of resistance I experienced with one of the study participants, when I interviewing Stewart about his

resistance to completing tasks in English, which I highlighted earlier. Usually Stewart appeared to be very engaged and enthusiastic during interviews and focus groups. Stewart was very vocal and willingly answered all questions, while generally retaining focus. On this particular day, he continued to display enthusiasm and focus throughout the interview, but when I started to question him about the strategies he used in English lessons I had previously observed, he would often change the subject by talking about sport. Towards the end of this questioning he continued to play with his mobile phone, pulling it apart and tried to divert my attention to the phone by stating “have you seen my new phone?” as it lay in pieces in front of him. Stewart, obviously felt awkward talking about the strategies he undertook to do very little in class, and consequently was using another range of strategies to maintain power in his relationship with me. Each time I drew Stewart back to the topic of the English class he would counter - act with another diversion, such as prompting his phone to ring to show me his dial tone or dropping the small components of the phone on the floor.

**Critic:** Stewart did not want to disclose his reasons for non-attention and resistance in this particular subject. This may have been considered a breach of the code the rules of his peer group. The sharing of this type of information with an adult or someone in a superior position may be considered unfavourable by Stewart and his group?

**Researcher:** It could be, or was it that this was the first time he had considered that by resisting learning he was positioning himself as failing in this class? His only disclosure on this particular day surrounding the subject of resistance was “I try and look interested, but I’m not really. I just make out I’m interested”. What this episode demonstrates is that it is a poignant reminder that as a researcher, my relationship with the subjects is one of power, and something that I needed to be continually mindful of.

In this instance, I acknowledged that the questions were making Stewart uncomfortable and allowed him to return to class. While as a researcher, I did obtain data that verified my thoughts and perceptions, I felt it was important for Stewart to

retain control in the hope that in future interviews he would feel respected enough to forward the information himself.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, the reader has been given insight into the power relationships that are continually played out between students and the institution of the school. The power relations are continually shifting and re - constructing as a result of the resistance that is demonstrated through a variety of strategies that are individually and collectively demonstrated.

The participants' understanding of power is contradictory. Their discourse of understanding suggests that power is a possession which they believe they lack, and yet they choose to exercise power through resistance. In the school setting they believe teachers use power to control them. Their understanding of power is closely linked to the concept of control.

The knowledge forms promoted within schools often devalue the experiences of students and so they adopt ways to resist which may be “contained” or “action” orientated (Goffman, 1961). Consequently, Blair rejects these “regimes of truth” through active resistance and adopts alternative power to build masculine identities. We see the body as an important site for the exercising of power and resistance, as well as a way to establish masculinities that are “big” amongst the peer audience

The study participants have provided insight into collective resistance which tests the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable behaviour, as well as ways of claiming power in the classroom setting. As Barbalet (1985) suggests, that “resistance is reactive to the inchoativeness of power and imposes limitations upon it, then it can be expected that in social relationships power will attempt to counter or oppose resistance. In general discussion, then, it might be said that power will attempt to resist the limitations imposed on it” (p. 538). Resistance provides the opportunity for change. Knight Abowitz (2000), exploring the ideas of Giroux, suggests resistance is “an expressed hope for radical transformation of unjust societies” (p. 890). For most of these boys, resistance was a way of maintaining power over their situation, often while sustaining and exaggerating a masculine identity based on opposition and

defiance (Kessler et al., 1985; Willis, 1977). It allows them to maintain some control and helps to create a sense of worth, sometimes at the expense of appearing or becoming disengaged from learning.

Often these displays of resistance are not disillusionment with learning, rather they are a way of communicating feelings of alienation and worthlessness, as well as defining masculine identities in front of an audience of peers. Educators tend to perceive resistance by students as negative and a rejection of learning. Schultz (2004) suggests that “schools are generally not places where one is explicitly taught to contest institutions. The primary institution in most children’s lives is the school, and schools have little incentive to encourage their charges to resist them” (p. 20).

Educationalists need to see the value of resistance as a way of creating the possibility of finding a “third space”. Gutierrez et al. (1995) argue that “this potential for a third space salvages the classroom as a locus for social change... When a true dialogue between students and teacher occurs, rather than random associations between their scripts, a new transitional, less rigidly scripted space - the third space - is created” (p. 452). This is a very real possibility as we have seen in Bob’s description of Art classes. Bob feels a heightened sense of self worth. In an earlier interview he described the teacher’s style of teaching and management of students as “she kinda gives the power to us”. Observing this class students were actively engaged in learning, often involved in individual projects. The teacher met with little student resistance as a tranquil mood enveloped the classroom environment, as students went quietly and busily about their work. Students felt equal in their relationship with the teacher, thus eliminating any need for resistance or conflict. Here was evidence that the “third space” does exist and can be found in schools at times, a space where students are valued and respected. Resistance is a means of communication, and through reflective inquiry, can provide insight and be the first step in developing common goals in education that better meet the needs of all students (Knight Abowitz, 2000).

## **Chapter 6**

### **Peer Relations**

**“The band that seems to tie their friendship together will be  
the very strangler of their amity”**

**William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*  
Act II, Scene VI**

**“The law of friendship bids me to conceal”**

**William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*  
Act III, Scene I**

## **Mick**

*My friends are one of the most important things to me, beside my family and my girlfriend. School gives you time to be with your friends. That's the best thing about school, being with your mates. I know you've got to take school seriously, especially this year and next year in Grade 10, and I try and do that. You need to start thinking of the future, take it more seriously. School is work and you do have to do it to get some where. I try and do my best at school, but you have also got to live for now and have fun. Having fun is being with your friends.*

*My mates are pretty good. I've had the same couple of best mates for a couple of years now. We talk about all sorts of stuff - cars, motorbikes, footy, what we did on the weekend. We talk about women a fair bit, sex and stuff. That's what mates are for. We'd pretty much do anything for each other, a bit like family really.*

*We don't talk about some things though. That's just how it is between us. I'm pretty private really. If something's worrying me I generally keep it to myself. I wouldn't tell anyone, not even my mum. You just get over it by myself. It's tough. It takes a long time to get over things. I suppose it's just too hard to just get it out in the open. That's the kind of person I am. Your mates would give you a hard time. Makes it even worse. You have to really know a person before you can trust them. I've got lots of mates, but I'd only trust maybe one or two of them, and even then some things are just out of bounds. You just don't share that kind of stuff, like when you're breaking up from your girlfriend. Funny really, cause girls talk to each other about everything. Guys are different. We just don't do it, don't get it out. Its private stuff and you keep it to yourself. That's just how it is.*

*As guys you are known as either this or that - like Stewart he's a good footy player and Bob well he's just plain funny. I suppose I'm not bad at riding bikes. Talkin' about all that personal stuff might just burst the bubble and the way people see you. For now it's about having fun together, just being together. We may not be friends in the future. We'll probably all go our own ways, get jobs, go to college and do other things. Hopefully we'll stay friends. I know I'll stay friends with a couple of them no matter what happens. That's just how it is.*

## **Introduction**

Gadamer (1990) and Dewey (1910, 1966) have spoken at length of the importance of community in an individual's life. Alexander (1993) in his exploration of Dewey's ideas states that:

The idea of the community that emerges is one which through its imaginative, dynamic intelligence actively seek for conditions that fulfill the deep aesthetic needs of human beings to experience the world with meaning and value in an expressive, reflective and self-critical way. Our quest for community is also a quest to encounter others; we experience the meaning of world through each other... (p. 211)

For the young males of the study group, school is a quest to fit in, to be accepted by a group of mates, to share a culture, a common understanding, a way of acting, behaving and relating that creates a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, a sense of being male.

Alexander (1993) claims as a social animal man strives to find "...a sense of fulfilled meaning and value realised through action" (p. 207). It is through shared understandings and culture that people seek to define themselves as individuals. Alexander (1993) expands on Dewey's idea of culture as describing it as "...a web of highly flexible practices that allow us to enter imaginatively and actively into each other's lives" (p. 212), further continuing to argue:

The shape of one's individuality emerges through the appropriation of the culture, which is not merely an environment of coexistent others, but a world, a nexus of meanings and values embodied in a range of symbolically interpreted practices through which human beings can be meaningfully present to each other. A "world" is thus the interpretive horizon within which we encounter and realise our humanity in acts of expressive communication. (pp. 214-215)

Culture is living and transactionary (Alexander, 1997; Dewey, 1966; Gadamer, 1990). It requires inquiry and communication (Alexander, 1993; Dewey, 1966,

Gadamer, 1990), and the culture of this peer group is ever evident through shared discourses of understanding that are demonstrated through language, gestures, facial expressions, personal appearance and body. For some of the participants, like Blair and Howard, the peer group provides possibly the only real meaning in their lives, particularly in the world of school.

Peer relations provide a space, which is a haven, to explore and define identities and masculinities through interaction and discourses surrounding power and resistance. Mac an Ghail (1994) found:

...male peer group networks constituted the institutional infrastructure within which a range of social and sexual identities were negotiated and ritualistically projected. They were a key feature of the student micro culture, providing a material and symbolic safe space within which to develop social and discursive practices that served to validate and amplify their masculine reputations. (p. 53)

Since the 1950s, sociologists have stressed the significance of high schools, and more importantly peers as a major agent of socialisation (Coleman & Husen, 1985; Harris, 1998; Hickey & Keddie, 2004; Mills & Keddie, 2005; Peterson, 1996). As children move towards adolescence, reliance on parents decreases as they become socially, cognitively and physically independent. Adolescents move to an increased interest and conformity to peers and a dependency on the social network of a peer group (Berndt, 1979; Coleman, 1961, 1974; Coleman & Husen, 1985; Kupersmidt, 1996). As children move towards adolescence more time is spent with peers compared to time spent with parents and other adults (Csikzentmihalyi & Larson, 1974; Ryan, 2001). Ryan (2001) concludes that in adolescence “peer relationships during this period are viewed more intense, closer, and more influential than those formed during childhood” (p. 1136). As Hickey and Fitzclarence (2004) suggest “we have become increasingly convinced that peer group affiliations and commitments are often foremost in the decision making process of young people” (p. 52).

Much research has been undertaken in defining the “peer group” and developing an understanding of the structure of such groups. Ryan (2001) defines “peer group” as “... an individual’s small, relatively intimate group of peers who interact with each other on a regular basis” (p. 1137) with “peer groups or cliques are conceptualised as having 2 -12 members, with an average of 5 or 6 members” (p. 1137). While, Kindermann, McCollam and Gibson (1996) propose that peer groups are not exclusive and claims that “...peer contexts consist of multiple and overlapping groups of individuals. Students need to be regarded both as individuals and as contexts for the other individuals with whom they share networks...children’s affiliations may change quite rapidly and unexpectedly” (p. 285). In the context of this study, the relations between the boys were often changing and membership to the group was tenuous.

Past typologies have focused on studying male sub - cultures in and outside the school setting, concentrating on understanding masculinities in the context of social class and ethnicity. Cohen’s (1955) study in the 1950’s provided insight into delinquency and the sub - culture of the gang, while Mac an Ghail (1994) focused attention on the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity called the “Macho Lads” who rejected the values of school by acting tough and aggressively. Willis (1977) similarly focused attention on the counter -school culture of the working class lads, who openly challenged school authority. In Australia, Walker (1988) immersed himself in describing the male sub - cultures in a Sydney high school, in particular he described “...a culture of youthful self congratulatory “Aussie” masculinity, which highlighted standing up for oneself and one’s mates, against authority or anything else; physical, especially sporting, prowess; and daring or exciting escapades” (p. 3) In all these studies the interplay of ethnicity, gender and social class is examined in detail.

Less focus is placed on understanding the impact of social class and ethnicity; however, one must caution that these continue to play an important part in the definition of the peer group in any setting in this study. It assumes that these factors do play a major role in the shaping of peer groups, however, greater attention is placed on understanding the relationship between the peer group and power and resistance. As already stated, this study differs from previous typologies, in that

focus is placed on understanding the role of the peer group in defining and governing masculinities and how this might impact on an individual in the school setting. .

If we accept that masculinities are to be understood as a collective venture (Connell, 1995, 2000; Mac an Ghail, 1994), then Mac an Ghail (1994) makes useful comment and suggests we must examine “within which social and discursive practices are developed that served to validate and amplify their masculine reputations” (p. 53). Arnot (1984) stresses that “male youth cultures become critical elements in ‘policing’ the boundaries of masculinity” (p. 48). The data derived from this study, suggests that the discourses shared by the peer group helped individuals define their persona as male by practising and adopting the collective characteristics of the group, which were based on competition, action and camaraderie.

Thorne’s (1993) study of primary school at play clearly examines the play of “the boys’ world” where she describes boys forming “flocks, gangs, teams or groups of buddies” (p. 93). She describes male peer groups as large, public, hierarchical in nature with a strong focus on competition often through physical action (Thorne, 1993). Concurrently, Moreland (1989) found that “during adolescence, male - male relationships were characterised by competition and an action orientation” (p. 120).

Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) argue that “boys’ groups offer their members peer friendship, pleasure and pride, identity development, excitement and status, resources and goals. However, there is often a price to pay for both the individual and the group” (p. 121). Consequently, membership of a male peer group involves power relations where the individual is continually forced to enter contests and exhibit dominance performances to solidify his position and reputation within the group (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). It is the focus of how the peer group governs and mediates these performances and understandings, how power is distributed and exercised amongst the group and how this informs the participants’ understanding of masculinities that are the prime interest of this chapter.

### **“Trust, humour and football”**

*Critic:* You regularly have made mention throughout this thesis that it is the relations the participants have with each other that provide them with meaning in

their lives at school. One may assume that to provide this meaning there would be a considerable level of intimacy amongst the peer group, however, the reconstructed narrative by Mick at the beginning of this chapter illustrates that while friendship and having fun together is of high importance, the individual will protect himself from ridicule and loss of reputation amongst his peers.

**Researcher:** Yes, the study participants see friendship as being part of a group, belonging to an entity, however, they are aware that membership is tenuous and requires the individual to perform in an appropriate and accepted mode to ensure association. The individual must continually judge and assess what is appropriate to share with the group.

**Critic:** So what does friendship mean to these boys? What were their responses to the concept of friendship?

**Researcher:** Bob captured the quintessence of how the participants perceive friendship amongst the group, when he conveyed “it’s about trust, humour and football”. Membership is based on shared interests and the ability to trust each other. When asking about hobbies in the initial interview, each of the six participants stated “hanging around with friends”. Similarly in the same interview, when asked about “What are the best things about school?” all commented on “being with friends” and this was their initial response to the question. Further to this, the boys commented on break times at school, such as recess and lunch time as a positive aspect of school, a time when they could “hang with friends”.

To be socially accepted, to be part of a community of peers, to share a collective life is vital to these study participants. Alexander (1997) describes Gadamer’s concept of community as one:

...which resides upon a set of shared prejudices whereby the members can have a common world and engage in the continuous process of listening and speaking. To grow up means to begin to acquire those abilities for listening to the voices in the world of the community,

developing the “trained receptivity” in hearing what is truly said. (p. 330)

Dewey also stressed the importance of community in his work, explaining that humans have a basic need to be fulfilled, to find meaning, to connect with others (Alexander, 1997). Community provides belonging, and as already stated the community of this peer group provides a sense of belonging.

**Critic:** Can you provide your reader with more insight to how the participants find meaning in belonging to this peer group?

**Researcher:** As part of the second focus group conducted in November 2004, I asked the boys about the notion of belonging. The dialogue that took place focused on ownership and a relationship understanding of the term, emphasising the need for individuals to feel attached to a group. The following extract provides useful insight into how they perceive and place value on belonging.

**Researcher:** What about...um...when you belong to something, what...what does belonging to something mean?

**Mick:** You're there.

**Researcher:** Yep, you're there. Anything else? What about you, Jack?

**Jack:** It's yours.

**Researcher:** It's yours, yep.

**Mick:** You are part of it.

**Researcher:** Furthermore, when asked in what ways did the boys belong at school, the following responses were offered:

**Jack:** Good friends.

**Mick:** Yeah.

**Jack:** That's about it.

**Mick:** Social

**Researcher:** Yeah, social side. Okay. So you do feel like you connect to school in some ways, but it's more to the group of friends.

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Mick:** Yeah, friends is cool...

**Researcher:** The opening comments here were that the only positive attachment to school was "friends". The response by Jack was immediate and the other boys followed, expanding and providing more references to the importance of friends. Martin (2002) in his extensive study of Australian high school students found that overwhelmingly peers are described as the most important aspect of school life. Students gain their belonging at school through association with peers.

**Critic:** Jack also qualifies that friends provide really the only sense of belonging and that there are no other reasons for feeling attached to school, with his statement "that's about it".

**Researcher:** Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) also found in their interviews of Queensland primary and high school boys that friends played a key role in their enjoyment of school, that "the only positive feature was that school enabled you to meet your friends" (p. 133). It appears that educators underestimate the importance of the peer group in overall educational outcomes for boys. Extensive research indicates that being accepted and belonging to a peer group is more important to boys than it is to girls (*Boys: getting it right*, 2002; Browne and Fletcher, 1995).

**Critic:** Is it not that by being offered membership to a group, one is offered the possibility of some form of identity, which conveys possible meaning and purpose?

**Researcher:** In Willis' (1977) study - *Learning to labour*, he suggests that "the essence of being 'one of the lads' lies within the group. You cannot generate fun, atmosphere and a social identity by yourself. Joining the counter-school culture means joining a group, and enjoying it means being with a group" (p. 23). Comparatively, the study participants consolidate individual identities only through taking part in the peer group, which provides a social setting to practise, trial and

explore social skills. School is considered a social environment in which these subjects seek to find meaning and association with others. Their loyalty is not to the school and learning, but rather to their peers. Dweck (1996) terms these goals “peer-oriented”, ones that provide the impetus to continue to see some value in attending school. Dweck (1996) states “that students value social goals in schools more highly than they value learning orientated goals” (p. 182). Students wish to be socially liked and approved by others and aim to develop and sustain relationships (Dweck, 1996; Ford, 1996; Juvonen, 1996; Kupersmidt, 1996; Wentzel, 1996).

**Teacher:** So while the participants define school in terms of work, subjects, and teachers as outlined in earlier transcripts, they begrudgingly accept school for the opportunity to take part in their peer culture?

**Researcher:** Correct. Lees (1993) describes this as a “pro-school, anti-work” way of understanding how students view school. Four of the seven subjects in this study did not mind going to school, but often displayed feelings of alienation from the teaching process as demonstrated through their interview responses, however they continued to reiterate that it was being with friends that was the main reason for attending school each day.

Blair and Howard, who increasingly displayed poor attendance patterns over the duration of the study, both stipulated that seeing their friends was the main incentive for coming to school. Blair often described school both as “boring” with “strict teachers”, and an opportunity “to get to see friends of a daytime”. Blair referred to lunchtime as “the best thing about school ‘cause you get to see friends and be outside”, while Howard stated school was about “getting to see all your mates. It breaks up the day. Would be pretty boring at home, every day.” Howard makes the distinction that at school he belongs to a social network and that he looks forward to that contact. It provides some meaning to his life, while at home he feels bored and isolated.

In further interviews, Howard was able to articulate that “I don’t wanna go sometimes. There are subjects I don’t wanna do, but I go anyway... (pause) to see me mates”. Howard is motivated to attend school, not for educational reasons, but

for social goals, to find meaning in the milieu of his peer group. Smith (2002) in exploring the work of Charles Taylor, suggests that “individuals are dependent on a broader community of others not just for the conditions of their identity but for its content. That is to say, their sense of dignity or worth of their lives is bound up with their membership of some group” (p. 140). Howard is attached to this group of peers who provide his life with meaning. As Harris (1998) claims, “having, or not having a group to identify with could make all the difference to a kid, who isn’t sure what sort of person he is” (p. 277). Howard’s membership of the group is vital, and yet his peers are highly critical of elements of his behaviour that endanger his membership of that group. We will come to examine this further throughout the body of this chapter.

### **“Without a group you are nothing!”**

**Researcher:** The study participants often returned to discussions that focused on fears of being socially excluded. In initial individual interviews, many of them spoke about their fears of coming to high school, which focused on being alone, making new friends and being accepted by a peer group. In the second focus group the participants make the distinction that being socially isolated promotes feelings of powerlessness.

**Researcher:** When do students feel powerless and what does it feel like?

**Mick:** When you’re alone!

**Researcher:** So when you are socially isolated.

**Blair:** Someone like Justin.

**Jack:** But he doesn’t know it, he just doesn’t need others.

**Blair:** Yeah.

**Mick:** Exactly.

**Blair:** It stinks!

**Researcher:** He’s a student here, is he?

**Blair:** Yeah, he’s slow.

**Researcher:** Slow.

**Blair:** Yeah.

**Jack:** No, not slow. He is strange.

**Blair:** He acts...

**Researcher:** So would...would that be the worst thing to actually be socially isolated, like, not...have no...

**Blair:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** ...mates or friends.

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Mick:** I reckon!

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** I'd hate it.

**Researcher:** In this excerpt, Mick quickly explains that being socially detached from others equates to feelings of powerlessness. Blair provides the example of a student who they perceive is socially isolated and Blair's revelation "it stinks!" suggests that he shares an understanding of what it feels like to be an outcast from the group. Mick also suggests that being outside the group would be difficult for him when he states "I'd hate it". Coleman (1974) in his early studies concluded that the most widespread anxiety amongst 13 to 15 year age boys was rejection by peers.

**Teacher:** Evidence suggests any one rejected by peers suffers from low status and is often the target for bullying because there are few others to protect him (Head, 1999). Poor peer relationships are proven stressors for adolescents (Kupersmidt; 1996). Kupersmidt (1996) affirms that "rejected children have been found to be at heightened risk for a wide range of school-related problems including absenteeism, school dropout, low academic achievement, poor grades and grade retention" (p. 69).

**Researcher:** As part of the second focus group Mick and Jack affirm that the fear of being socially isolated from a group of peers would result in inferior status and a sense of meaninglessness. The following dialogue demonstrates the boys' fears:

**Researcher:** How important is it to belong to a group at school?

**Mick, Jack:** Pretty important. (*In unison*)

**Jack:** Without a group you are nothing. (*other boys make eye contact and nod in agreement*)

**Researcher:** Okay. Yep. You agree with it, Blair?

**Blair:** Mmm...

**Researcher:** The response by Jack, “without a group you are nothing” is a strong statement suggesting that without membership of a peer structure individuals lack status. At other points, Mick re - visited this theme in individual interviews, always stating strongly that to be part of the group was imperative, and without that support, life as a student was “lonely and pretty crap”. The establishment of the peer group utilises and attains power through excluding members (Head, 1999). Subsequently, male peer groups are fragile entities where membership is a matter of inclusion and exclusion, where power relations are continually played out, where status and reputation are imperative.

### **“Fuck off”**

**Researcher:** While the boys often appeared to be a cohesive group to the outside world, the structure of the group changed considerably over the study time. Membership was tentative and fluid. In the initial individual interviews with each of the subjects, the students were asked to list their top five friends in and outside school. Only three of the boys mentioned girls as friends. These included Jack, Stewart and Blair, the most confident and physically attractive boys in the research group. Each of these boys also talked about girlfriends on a regular basis in further interviews, particularly in the second year of the study. A number of the boys also mentioned older boys who were in a higher grade, and more importantly had left school. Fourteen of the total friends mentioned by the boys were older than the boys at the time of interview.

In mapping the peer group by looking for reciprocal matches of names (Kupersmidt, 1996; Ryan, 2001), there were two entwining circles of friends within this particular peer group. The first group consisted of Howard, Jamie, Stewart and Bob, the least confident study participants. At times, these boys were often socially awkward and immature, especially around girls. The second group included Blair and Jack who were socially more confident and involved in more risk - taking behaviours, such as sexual activity, attending parties, and involvement in alcohol and drug consumption. Mick was also a member of this second group and appeared to bridge the gap

between the two groups of peers. Of all the boys, his name was mentioned in the top five friends most frequently and across both groups.

Observing the participants in the classroom and the playground, it was obvious that all seven boys took part in the same social network. At recess and lunchtimes, they tended to frequent the same geographical spaces, near the canteen or on the football oval. All the participants of the study freely interacted with each other, however, there were some clear distinctions between the two entwining groups. Mick, Jack and Blair tended to “hang close” and looked for opportunities to sit together in particular classes, preferring to be together, often excluding other peer group members.

Over the three year period, the boys were asked about their friendship circle and top five friends on four occasions. Results suggest that the peer circle was ever shifting and changing over time. Stewart, Jack and more importantly Mick were names regularly mentioned and provided the scaffold of the peer group. Yet, other names came and went from the group. During the final individual interview with each of the subjects in 2005, all of the boys described a widened friendship circle with the inclusion of females listed as best friends.

*Critic:* The fluidity you describe may indicate that there are many factors that contribute to an elusive and changeable membership to this group.

*Researcher:* Gaining membership to the peer group and maintaining it are ongoing concerns for these subjects, and are only possible if the individual conforms to what Brown (2000) describes as the “group norms and displaying the ‘right attitudes’” (p. 90). Authority figures within the school were keen to separate the original friendship group in classes in order to minimise disruptive behaviour these boys exhibited when in the presence of each other. In 2004 and 2005 the study participants spent considerably less time with each other during class as they chose varying elective subjects.

The participants continued to use every available opportunity to cluster together, particularly during break times. Excessive physicality was a strong feature of their

interaction with each other and transposed itself beyond the sporting field. Their daily interaction was characterised by continual body contact through slapping, pushing, pinching, flicking and punching. Askew and Ross (1989) similarly found that:

There was considerable non-verbal, aggressive or physical communication among boys. 'Body language', such as stance or tone of voice, played a large part in interaction. Physicality was not only used as a means of intimidation between the boys, but also as a way of making social contact. (p. 36)

**Critic:** One might suggest that the strong physical contact amongst your subjects could be considered a way of finding intimacy with each other or alternatively, a way of exercising power!

**Researcher:** The strong physicality amongst males has been well documented. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) suggest that:

...rough and tumble play is a complex range of behaviours where boys are playing out various ways of relating to others. Some of these behaviours can quite easily be seen as experiments in domination, testing one's power and ability to catch, push, hit and ultimately hurt. In such an activity aggression is rewarded, the children are also establishing a pecking order of physical power. (p. 178)

In the social setting of this group, the ability to use one's body in an aggressive and physical manner in opposition to other members of the same group promoted the individual upwards in the peer ranking and helped to create an image of power and domination.

It was noticeable that while these participants were having fun playing football, the game was also taken rather seriously. If unfair play took place, a number of the boys would retaliate with a high level of verbal abuse. "fuck off" was a comment regularly delivered to a mate if his actions were considered unfair or where excessive

force was used. Comparatively, breakdowns in friendships amongst the group occurred when physicality was taken to extreme when play fighting. On a number of occasions, I had seen various members of the group try and flick Howard's cap from his head and then refuse to give it back. This angered Howard to the point where he would respond with verbal abuse and then distance himself from the group for the rest of the day. The other members of the group would laugh and call him a "sook".

**Critic:** Here we see that membership to the group is not absolute. As the structure of the peer group involves power relations, continual divisions appear!

**Researcher:** Yes, where alliances are made and broken, where the participants are continually struggling to maintain their position within the hierarchy of the group.

**Critic:** You mentioned earlier that Howard was often in a position of tentative membership in the group. Is it worth at this point, giving your reader some detail of how the group operates in judging Howard and how he manages this precarious positioning?

**Researcher:** Howard held a speculative position within the group, and at times, his peers considered him to be unworthy of membership. Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) describe students like Howard as "border dwellers" who are "...bordering the boundaries of several groups and playing with the identity markers of each" (p. 59). Howard appears to be moving in the circles of a variety of student peer groups and his position within this group is tentative. In the first focus group, Howard was absent. The other boys readily commented on Howard's inappropriate use of humour. Bob and Mick appeared to be the major opponents to Howard's use of humour:

**Bob:** Like Howard.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Bob:** He was mouthing to Mick down in the fields thinking he is big and tough. Mick went up to him and he was backing down.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Bob:** Like he's all mouth.

**Researcher:** So does Howard have the respect of other people or not?

**Stewart:** Not really.

**Mick:** Like he just comes out with jokes all the time.

**Stewart:** Like he can be really funny.

**Mick:** Yeah, like idiot.

**Bob:** Like Neil's something like that.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Okay, so a bit of a sense of humour...

**Bob:** He calls people like...(referring to Howard)

**Mick:** He's got a bad sense of humour.

**Researcher:** Okay, his sense of humour...

**Bob:** Is shit.

**Researcher:** His sense of humour gets him off side sometimes?

**Bob:** He calls people...

**Mick:** He tries to make people laugh.

**Bob:** He calls Neil fat, calls them fat. Say that to him and he says fuckin' faggot. Tries to eat you.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Researcher:** At this point, we see that membership to the group is highly volatile and not always guaranteed. In this case, Bob leads the charge in articulating his criticism of Howard. In his endeavour to "fit in" to the social network, Howard reverts to a use of humour that goes beyond what is acceptable to the group. Nayak and Kehily (1996) suggest that "if the performance of the individual does not conform to the stylistic criteria of the male peer group, the consequences in terms of power, identity and status may be undermined" (p. 218). Bob's quick response in reference to Howard's use of "humour" in labeling it "is shit" is a clear indication that Howard's humour does not fit the criteria to be part of this peer group. The other boys in the group agreed. In many ways, Howard's humour appeared to be alienating him from his peers.

**Critic:** What does this tell us about how power operates within the adolescent group?

**Researcher:** Identification with a peer group provides an individual with a means to obtain power through acceptance and establishment of a position within the hierarchy of the group (Keddie, 2001). Subsequently, group association establishes collective dominance and power, where individuals may lack the resources to dominate single-handedly (Lowe, 1998). In this instance, Bob exercises power because he has the support and backing of the peer group.

Knight Abowitz (2000) draws attention to the conflict that is inevitably linked to living within communities, when stating that “because community members do not dissolve into communities, because members are both individuals and members in important ways, difference and conflict are not only unavoidable, they are enriching to common life” (p. 901). In the following episode we see Jack battling with his position as an individual and as a member of his peer group. During a discussion about friendship patterns amongst the group, Jack readily disclosed that there had been a major rift amongst three key members in the group, which included himself, Blair and Mick in the second year of the study. The dispute had taken place over the purchase of a motorbike. Jack had bought the motorbike knowing that Mick was also interested in purchasing the bike. Jack believed he had a right to buy the motorbike because he “had the cash”, while Mick was “interested, but didn’t have the dough”. When he arrived at school the next day, one of the girls associated with the group had loudly abused him in front of others, stating “you bastard, you stabbed him in the back!” referring to his lack of loyalty to Mick.

**Critic:** Your example illustrates how collective power is exercised by the subjects and the “regimes of truth” by which the group of peers operates by. The behaviour Jack displayed was not considered normal and so he is ostracised. In this case, the boys utilise others who fall outside the group by passing judgment on Jack’s actions. He has been seen as disloyal and acting against the shared code of acceptable behaviour of the group. I am interested to know what impact this had, firstly on Jack and what strategies he used to manage this.

**Researcher:** When I questioned him to how this had directly affected his relationship with Mick and the other members of the group, Jack stated “it’s still tense with Mick and Blair won’t talk to me”. Here, we see that Jack is excluded

from the group through being socially isolated by various members refusing to interact with him. Further to this, I asked Jack how he would deal with this conflict, he stated “I’ll lay low, won’t get involved in it. It will settle down over time”.

**Teacher:** Jack believes that by avoiding open confrontation the matter will disappear over time.

**Researcher:** This strategy of “laying low” or avoidance of open confrontation was a theme shared by the majority of participants. When I asked the students what they would do if there was a conflict within their group of friends, the following responses were expressed:

**Bob:** Still hang around with both of them. Stay out of their business.

**Blair:** Stay out of it, nothing to do with me...if they were physically fighting I’d step in. Leave me out of it.

**Stewart:** Don’t go nowhere near it, stay as far away as possible. Don’t get involved.

**Mick:** Stay out of it, till things clear up, talk to one of them to see what’s going on.

**Researcher:** These clearly articulated responses suggest that the study participants see conflict within the group as something personal, something that should be resolved by the parties involved. Blair does qualify that if physical violence was an aspect of the conflict, he would readily step in to stop the fighting. Conflict is not something the boys openly discussed and they readily admitted to strategies they would use to avoid disputes within the group.

**Critic:** Are you suggesting that they would rather avoid conflict with each other because it may result in loss of status or power in the overall position within the group?

**Researcher:** Yes. Warrington, Younger and Williams (2000) argue that “boys withdraw from the competition, rather than be seen to fail” (p. 396). Comparatively,

within this study, conflict and competition within the group can often result in loss of power and subsequently loss of status in the public forum of the peer group. It was better to withdraw than be defeated.

### **“Everything, apart from being a wanna be”**

**Critic:** Your discussion so far suggests that there is a hierarchical structure within the group and amongst the student body, where power is unequally distributed. Can you expand on this further?

**Researcher:** The study participants clearly defined the various social groups that frequented the school. Each of the boys gave details of particular groups that appeared to fall into two major categories, that of the “cool kids” and that of the academic “dorks, spocks and geeks” and consequently defining the social hierarchy of the groups. When I asked the boys to describe to what social group he belonged, each of them stated to being on the outskirts of the “cool” group. Bob defined his position as being “everything, apart from being a wanna be”. Bob saw himself as being a part of each group, except those who tried too hard at being something that they were not. The boys freely spoke about the hierarchy of the social groups within the school, but were more reserved in their conversation about the possibility of a hierarchy amongst their own peer group. Head (1999) articulates that:

The existence of a hierarchy or hegemony in which the dominant boy, being either older or stronger than the others, can make the final decision allows the group to function more effectively. Without such a leader it disintegrates into an anarchy of competing voices...These qualities of competition and hierarchy seem to be totally pervasive. Boys constantly bicker, interrupting and challenging each other. (p. 35)

**Critic:** What leadership did you observe within this peer group? In what ways was power enacted by individuals to maintain leadership?

**Researcher:** There was evidence that the peer group did have a defined power structure with Mick and Blair often alternatively fulfilling the role of leader. Blair’s

ongoing absence from school, particularly in the second year of the study, provided increased opportunities for Mick to take over the leadership of the group. Jack also appeared to display leadership qualities amongst the group. On a number of occasions, I had witnessed him initiate decisions about what activities the group would take part in during break times. The other boys followed, not questioning his authority. Others followed in the hierarchy with Bob and Stewart being lower down the order, with Howard falling on the periphery of the group.

Lees (1993) suggests that it is a boy's sporting or fighting abilities that allows promotion within the hierarchy. She states further that "aggression is a central attribute of masculinity and in a culture where male status is dependent on superiority and dominance, fighting prowess is crucial to that status" (p. 227). This is further reiterated by Willis (1977) where he found that

It is the capacity to fight which settles the final pecking order. It is often not tested ability to fight which valorises status based usually and interestingly on other grounds: masculine presence, being from a famous family, being funny, being good at 'blagging, extensiveness of informal contacts. (p. 35)

In Willis' (1977) study he describes the "social meaning" of the violent culture of "the lads". He deduces that "it marks the last move in, and final validation of, the informal status system. It regulates a kind of 'honour'- displaces, distorted, whatever. The fight is when you are fully tested in the alternative culture" (p. 35).

**Critic:** Throughout this paper, you have regularly commented that Blair uses aggression and violence as a way of exercising power. In the setting of the peer group, did this promote him to a more powerful position?

**Researcher:** Yes, the participants implied Blair's connection with a local street gang added to his status within the peer group and the wider student culture within the school. Mick commented on Blair's rebellious and reckless behaviour a number of times. On one occasion, he stated "Blair doesn't care about school. He's got friends in the Mafia and he's always getting suspended from school for fighting. He just

doesn't back down", referring to his readiness to fight and defy the rules of the school. Like Willis' (1977) working class heroes, Blair's reputation and higher status within the group, was built on his ability and readiness to fight.

**Critic:** You are suggesting that reputation can promote an individual to a position of power. In many ways, it appears that fellow group members promote Blair to a position of power because they admire and respect his skills as a fighter, someone who will not "back down". There is also an implication in your descriptions that group members are also fearful of him. This in itself promotes a higher position of power.

**Researcher:** After an incident where Blair was suspended for fighting another student while on school property, dialogue between members of the study group suggested that Blair was considered dangerous and explosive. It was better to have Blair on side than not at all. Bob concluded "Blair he's a mad fucker, he just goes off". The conversations amongst the boys were tinted with admiration, but also fear of Blair. They were in awe of his capacity to fight and this was what established his power within the group.

**Teacher:** Did Blair see himself as the leader of the group?

**Researcher:** No, not at all and they did not openly express this either. Nevertheless, Blair's presence within the group certainly changed the dynamics of the group when they were together. This was particularly noticeable, in comparing the two focus groups. Blair was absent for the first focus group and in analysing the tape the subjects were more focused in responding to questions, and dialogue was shared. In the second focus group the mood was completely altered, the boys appeared to be heavily influenced by Blair's presence, who displayed low key signs of resistance with the intention of disrupting the group. These strategies included picking the skin from his fingers and flicking it at the other boys, farting and belching. He would readily respond to questions without prompting, but the other boys would respond to his behaviour by laughing, or commenting on his behaviour with "you're foul" or "you're sick". At times, these resistance strategies side tracked the dialogue and the boys would become distracted when responding to questions. On a number of

occasions I was forced to repeat questions as well as modifying questions and concluding the focus group earlier than expected. Keddie (2000) similarly found in her analysis of a subject called Adam:

It was his knowledge and behaviours that were valued by the group, and in this sense he was awarded privileges which impacted on the group's attitudes and behaviour. He was permitted to monopolise and interrupt the discussion with little resistance from the other boys. (p. 78)

Like Adam, Blair often dominated group situations with his peers because he is granted privileges by group members due to the status and reputation he has built.

*Critic:* One might suggest that his use of resistance strategies in this case was a way of defining his leadership and control within the group. There is a contradiction in the perception amongst the boys of how the group structures itself and its practices of leadership. You have mentioned that the boys do not determine a leader of the group, but we see Blair exercise power amongst the group and we hear of his reputation.

*Researcher:* This is intriguing. The participants even denied there was a hierarchical structure in their relations with each other, but as an observer it was obvious that there was a defined pecking order within the group. When asking about how decisions were made within the group each of the boys commented on the sense of unity and collective spirit present. Stewart mentioned the strong solidarity of the group when it came to making decisions by stating "I talk to them, we're all for one", while Jack suggested "Everyone, it's a chain reaction, no leader what so ever" and finally Blair himself said "Discuss it over, people can do their own thing." These interviews took place with each student individually, thus providing an opportunity for the participants to honestly reflect on the dynamics of their peer group without judgement or ridicule, and yet they continued to define the group structure as being one of shared and equal status amongst members. Even with further prompting, the boys were unwilling to recognise that there was a hierarchical nature to the group, and, for that matter, a leader amongst them.

*Critic:* This raises an interesting issue. One might consider this was an example of solidarity to an outsider, presenting an image of “one for all”. Solidarity is an interesting concept and worthy of further mention and investigation and reminds us of Mercury High’s motto “one for all”.

### **“We’re all as one!”**

*Researcher:* To the outside world the group appeared to have a definite sense of unity and cohesiveness. It is the solidarity in creating a strong sense of masculine unity to the outside world that defines boys’ peer groups (Henry, 1963; Lees, 1993). By showing solidarity to a group individuals can claim power and shared identity. In some classroom situations, the study participants would create a united front, particularly against teachers that they did not really like.

*Teacher:* This is not unusual, as teachers face this every day. You did focus on this earlier, giving us details of resistance strategies employed and practised by the group.

*Researcher:* Yes, these were examples of strategies used to resist, but there were also examples of students working together to claim power against teachers they did not particularly like. Often this was a pre - meditated plan to assert power through collectively working together. Witnessing a number of lessons of a certain subject over time, it was evident that Jamie, Jack and Blair’s behavior disintegrated as soon as they entered the classroom. The three boys would band together geographically every time, sitting in the same row of seats, as a way of developing a strong defense and front to the teacher. If one of the boys was reprimanded, then another would respond to their mate’s defense. The boys tried to outsmart the teacher, employing resistance strategies such as time wasting, interruption and low - key harassment within the group and towards other class members and the teacher. This included things such as teasing, bantering, inappropriate humour, taking other people’s possessions and often undetected physical contact.

In a later interview with all the participants selected for the study, I mentioned, “this class often seems like a war zone”. Jack stated “that’s exactly what it’s like”. The other boys were nodding and smiling in agreement. Like soldiers, they felt the need

to work together to protect their territory and move forward in their battle with the teacher.

*Critic:* So we know that this male group structure demands loyalty of its members and consequently, at times when power is questioned, they will show solidarity against outside forces. They perceive they belong to this entity, even if their positions are precarious and continually contested, but what is it that they believe they belong to?

### **“Hanging around in a big group”**

*Researcher:* When asked to respond to the open - ended statement “friendship amongst a group of boys is about?” the following responses were elicited:

- Jack:** Hanging around in a big group.  
**Blair:** Good blokes, having fun, something to do of a day.  
**Stewart:** Talking about stuff like cars, motorbikes, parties.  
**Mick:** Just going around and staying at their house, talking and shit.  
**Howard:** Having fun I guess.  
**Bob:** Trust, humour and football.

*Researcher:* Such statements suggest that being part of the group is imperative to these young people. They wish to belong to a group. Lyman (1989) found in his study of fraternity relationships that “men often speak of friendship as a group relationship, not a dyadic one and men’s friendships often grow from the experience of shared activities or risk, rather than from self - disclosed talk” (p. 170). Moreover, the boys pointed towards the main focus of their communication as being action - orientated, focusing on common interests such as football and motorbikes. Using Gee’s (2000) model for identity we have seen that six of the seven boys find A - Identities in their affiliation to AFL football teams. In the initial interview each of the seven boys listed football as a common hobby. Being an AFL supporter not only provides an identity, but also a shared interest amongst the group.

In the same interview, the subjects were asked the open - ended question, “mates talk about?” Mick suggested “footy, girls, whatever they did on the weekend, music, the

social stuff at school”, while Howard suggested “basically anything - music, footy, sport” and Bob stated “footy, TV”. Here again, we see that the boys’ talk is based on outside activity, things that they are spectators to in life. Boys, in their dialogue with immediate peers, talk about pursuits, plans and activities (Lees, 1993). Much of their conversation with each other focused on past events such as the latest AFL football match played, or other recent sporting events, as well as plans for the future such as which motorbike or car they wanted to buy, or what their plans were for the weekend. Overall, topics of conversation appeared to be removed from the boys’ personal lives. Cameron (1997) describes “men’s talk” as “...competitive, hierachically organised, centres on ‘impersonal’ topics and the exchange of information, and foregrounds speech genres such as joking, trading insults and sports statistics” (p. 47).

**Critic:** The type of relationship you are describing between the boys strikes me as very Australian, one of “mateship”. They share interests and demand loyalty of group members and yet there is a lack of intimacy with one another.

**Researcher:** Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) describe “mateship” as a discourse focused on loyalty, support and trust. They confirm that “mateship involves loyalty, sharing interests and activities that are dictated by what might be termed a heterosexual masculine camaraderie including drinking, smoking, taking drugs and a certain kind of ‘yobbo’ and ‘laddish’ behaviour” (p. 63). It appears that these study participants embrace the same, or a similar discourse, in the ways they relate to each other.

Researchers who have studied male peer groups have often referred to a lack of intimacy, particularly the avoidance of expressing feelings with each other (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Sharpe, 1993; Lees, 1993; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Askew and Ross (1988) in their study of young male adolescent peer groups found that they:

...were unwilling to say things in front of each other which were personal or left them at all vulnerable. They were, and for the most part, guarded towards each other and their talk revolved around impersonal

subject matter....they were overwhelmingly unwilling to discuss their own behaviour, feelings or lives with each other. (p. 35)

While I found the boys in this study willingly discussed personal activities they were involved in, there was little focus in conversations about emotions. When I asked the boys individually to complete the statement “our group of friends never talk about?” the overwhelming response was issues that were personal, such as feelings and relationships, particularly concerning family or girlfriend issues. Blair, Stewart, Bob and Mick all mentioned that family issues were “out of bounds” as conversation topics amongst the group. As a general rule if something personal was troubling them, they would tend to keep it to themselves. Blair stated “I keep some things to myself” and Mick on a number of occasions stated that while he was having difficulties in his relationship with his girlfriend, this was something that was best left private, or that he might selectively choose a close peer to discuss the issue with, but only after careful consideration. The following transcript details his reasons:

**Researcher:** Mick, what do your group of friends never talk about?

**Mick:** Things they’re not interested in.

**Researcher:** Like?

**Mick:** Family stuff

**Researcher:** What do you mean?

**Mick:** Like if I was having a bad time at home, mum and me fighting. I wouldn’t tell any of them.

**Researcher:** By them, do you mean your mates?

**Mick:** (nods) I’d keep it to myself. Something I should keep to myself.

**Researcher:** What about if you were having problems with your girlfriend?

**Mick:** Depends. I might talk to one of my mates, only if my girlfriend would let me, but it really depends.

**Researcher:** Depends?

**Mick:** Depends on what it is. Might tell Jack or Blair. I’m closer to them. You can trust them.

**Researcher:** Mick gives insight into a discourse of understanding amongst the group that suggests that some issues are considered too personal to share with the group. Mick has internalised that there are limits to what is shared with friends. It is also interesting in that he indicates, in some instances, that he might selectively choose a friend on the basis of who he can trust to disclose personal concerns or worries surrounding his relationship with his girlfriend. In one of the later focus groups Mick revisited the same theme when discussing loyalty in male friendships:

**Researcher:** So you would be particular about something that is really important to you and whom you would tell it to, you have to be secure in that you know definitely that they are not going to tell anyone else, is that right?

**Mick:** Yeah, I wouldn't anyway.

**Stewart:** Yeah

**Researcher:** Okay. So that's something you would keep to yourself?

**Mick:** Yeah.

**Stewart:** More than likely.

**Mick:** Just get over it yourself.

**Researcher:** Here again, we see the boys' resolve to sort their problems out by themselves, that there is a reserve in sharing information that might expose emotions that could be considered a weakness, resulting in a loss of status amongst the group.

### **“You'd get bagged by your mates”**

**Critic:** It appears your study group share a discourse that devalues emotions and that such displays of feelings would result in the individual being vulnerable. Subsequently, their involvement with each other focuses on activities and plans, and diverts from the sharing of personal information that may expose what is considered to be weakness, which would result in an inferior positioning within the group. The participants fear a lack of power and status within their own grouping.

**Researcher:** Yes. Boys continually work towards maintaining membership to the group (Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003) and to express feelings and emotions to each other leaves them open to ridicule. As part of the group culture boys adopt a

system of continual ridicule and put downs towards other males, and even those within their own peer group, to establish a hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 1989; Jordan, 1995; Martino, 1999). “Giving crap” becomes part of the practices of relating to one another (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003). Askew and Ross (1989) in their study described a “continuous power play underlying most interactions between boys, an ongoing process of positioning and a continual seeking of status and prestige” (p. 34).

**Critic:** You have provided some demonstration of the competitive nature of the peer group under study, but can you give more insight into the competition amongst them?

**Researcher:** The competitive nature of this peer group was ever present. In most situations this manifested itself through the use of humour and put downs directed at all members of the group depending on the situation. The participants readily used insults towards one another on a daily basis and often as shared discourses amongst the group. There was a strong correlation between language denoting femininity and homosexuality and further attention will be paid to this in the chapter on masculinities.

During an interview, Howard illustrated the following point, “Usually if you like a girl, you’d get bagged by your mates”. The fear of being “bagged” by mates, which often involved insults, put downs and jokes with the intention of belittling an individual in front of peers, suggests that the boys are apprehensive about sharing emotions and personal issues that they experience. To be placed in such a position would leave one open to ridicule, which could further result in loss of status amongst the group.

**Critic:** We might conclude that the subjects are highly competitive with each other, continually seeking to maintain their position within the group, or seeking to move to a higher position of power in the group hierarchy. This results in a withdrawal from sharing personal thoughts and feelings with each other which may make them vulnerable to public ridicule. As a reader, I am interested in knowing what these participants do value in their relationships with another, and secondly, because they

lack confidence in sharing meaningful issues of a personal nature with each other, does this mean they lack intimacy with one another? You need to consider the term intimacy and what it means to be intimate with each other.

**Researcher:** Overwhelmingly, the male subjects spoke about the importance of loyalty, trust and confidentiality with each other and within the group. When asking them about the concept of loyalty the following dialogue took place:

**Researcher:** All of you stated that friends are pretty important and that loyalty is an important part of friendship. What do you mean when you talk about loyalty? What is it?

**Mick:** Like...you have to really know the person before you can trust.

**Researcher:** Okay. You have to know them, have to trust them...

**Mick:** Really know them, you know. (*Bob and Stewart nod in agreement*)

**Stewart:** Make sure they don't go squirting out to everyone.

**Bob:** Like, make sure they don't.

**Researcher:** Furthermore, when I asked them to finish the statement "A cool friend is?" five of the seven boys referred to the concept of trust. The following statements by the students illustrate this key theme:

**Jack:** Someone who will stick by you in any situation

**Stewart:** Someone you can trust, you can tell them stuff that you don't want no-one else to know, and they don't tell.

**Mick:** Someone you can trust and rely on...you get along, really well.

**Howard:** Trusts you, likes the same stuff as you...sense of humour.

**Bob:** One you can trust and funny.

**Critic:** Your study participants are suggesting that being able to trust one another is critical to the friendship, especially in being able to submit oneself to a position of being open with "the other". There is a correlation to the earlier discourse you

described of “mateship” here. The subjects highlight their need for trust and loyalty with each other. They desire openness with each other.

**Researcher:** Gadamer referred to this as “play”, which Alexander (1997) describes as “...the shared life of friends is marked by that freedom of open mutuality in the sharing of happiness...” (p. 338). Alexander (1997) expands on Aristotle’s notion of “insight or fellow feeling” (p. 338) described as “...he takes on the role of the friend” (p. 338), a world which could be described as a world of common meaning. As the boys allude, this world of common meaning can only be shared when there is a shared understanding of trust, confidentiality and support. It is often through physical appearance and attire and the use of humour these participants find meaning with each other. It is my intention to examine each of these aspects in the remainder of this chapter.

### **“Bring it on!”**

**Researcher:** As an observer it was clear that young males adopted and enforced a code of masculinity to define themselves as individuals and as a group, and as a way of excluding others. Boys find ways to mark difference from other peer groups (Harris, 1998). Archer and Yamashita (2003) found in their study of year 11 and 12 boys in an inner - city London school, that “the boys constructed embodied identities, expressed for example- through their speech, style and clothing. Accent and language appeared an important defining feature of Harkton masculinities” (p. 119).

Similarly, the subjects of this study adopted a code of dressing and acting that helped define the group and the individual’s position within the “cool” group. At times, the actions in defining the dress and code of behaving appeared to be deliberate measures taken by the boys, and yet at other times, it was as if this behaviour were unconsciously displayed. In other words, this code became a way of defining their membership to the peer group, and a way of establishing their own masculinity, while excluding others.

**Teacher:** Adolescents use a variety of strategies including modifying physical appearance and dress code to appear “cool”, engaging in a variety of behaviours that

may be valued within the group, such as smoking, drinking and drug use, as well as adopting similar interests, such as listening to the same music, as a way of gaining the acceptance of others (Berndt & Keefe, 1996; Juvonen, 1996).

**Researcher:** Past ethnographical studies of adolescent peer groups found a strong sense of commercialism in defining the images of these groups. Mac an Ghaill (1994) argued that “at the micro cultural level, student peer groups, clothes, haircuts, trainers, sports bags, bikes and video games were key signifiers that marked out gender and sexual status. Possession of these highly desired commodities served as an index of high-status masculinity...” (p. 106). Commercialism helps to define establishing images of masculinities. Willis (1977) found that “clothes, cigarettes and alcohol” (p. 17) held great importance to “the lads” of his study, and makes valuable comment on commercialism amongst peer groups:

We might note the importance the wider system of commercial youth culture has here in supplying a lexicography of style, with already connoted meanings, which can be adapted by ‘the lads’ to express their own more located meanings. Though much of this style, and the music associated with it, might be accurately described as arising from purely commercial drives and representing no authentic aspirations of its adherents, it should be recognised that the way in which it is taken up and used by the young can have an authenticity and directness of personal expression missing from its original commercial generation. (p. 17)

The code of dress endorsed by this group of participants could be considered to be commercially motivated. They chose to modify the wearing of certain clothes however, to suggest their own uniqueness, thus defining the group as an entity and those “others” as excluded, those that were the “dags” or “swots”.

As the subjects of this study had pointed out, the student body generally fell into two clearly defined groups, those that were “cool” and the “dags” or “swots”. The “cool” kids tended to modify their uniform by wearing it oversized, especially with trousers sitting on the hips, rather than the waist, resulting in the leg size being far too big.

At the commencement of the study the subjects wore trousers oversized, hems bunched around their ankles, reminiscent of hip - hop and rap artists of the time. These boys also wore their hair in the latest fashion, with hair cut short and the application of wax to spike the front of the hair. Many of them wore expensive runners that were often undone. In Grade 10 most of the participants wore very little of the official uniform on a daily basis, instead wearing designer surf and motor cross labelled apparel. The boys defined their masculinities and collective identity as a group, while resisting the authority of the school by choosing to wear very little of the prescribed uniform. This increasingly became a contest between the chosen study group and the school authorities as the study progressed.

**Teacher:** These participants are challenging authority while seeking the approval and acceptance of their peer group?

**Researcher:** Membership to the group was also defined through consistent nicknames that were insitutionalised by members of the group through ongoing use (Brown, 2000). Each of the students in this group had a nickname that was widely recognised by not only the members of the group, but also the wider student body. Akin to the use of nicknames, a shared language amongst the group helped to define membership, as well as excluding others from the shared communication of this cluster. Maltz and Borker (1982) clarify that in the social world of boys' language is used for three important reasons; to affirm dominance, to draw and preserve an audience and thirdly, to assert a powerful position in holding others' attention. Language, then, becomes a means to establish power.

This male peer group has a defined use of language which focuses on colloquialisms adopted from American films and music. The boys would often break into lines from recent films or recite song lyrics from popular youth culture. Much of this language was transposed into their daily conversations with each other and provided a way of interacting in classrooms that was detached from the official culture of the school. The boys could undertake lengthy conversations with each other during classroom activities, while teachers were often oblivious to the meanings of the shared discourses of the subjects.

**Critic:** We see in the transcripts and reconstructed narratives heavy use of particular descriptive words, such as “razz”, “wicked”, and “lush”. Your subjects used these terms in their every day speech patterns. Have you considered Gadamer’s ideas surrounding language as a dialogue?

**Researcher:** Gadamer (1989) stated that “the word is what one person speaks and another understands” (p. 95) and describes speech as the “event of understanding” (as cited in Alexander, 1997, p. 326). Alexander (1997) comments:

Though language itself transcends any individual or even group of individuals at given historical moment, there is implicit in the structure of understanding itself the dimensions of the speaker and listener; thus the event itself presents the possibility for the “fusion of horizons,” that moment of agreement which the act itself is telegraphically directed. (p. 326)

The subjects use a shared language to build fusion with each other, to share a horizon that excludes others, thus creating a shared identity. Gutierrez et al. (1995) have focused attention on the language of students as scripts that through repetition become patterned ways of “...being and doing in particular contexts” (p. 449). They comment that:

As members of a community interact within and across events, they construct normative patterns of life within a classroom. These scripts, characterised by particular social, spatial and language patterns, are resources that members use to interpret the activity of others and to guide their own participation. (p. 449)

As previously mentioned the patterns of speech adopted by the study participants relied on American colloquialisms adopted from popular culture became a normative pattern of speech and understanding for these boys. While this style of communication allowed them to share a collective identity, it also let them claim power in the classroom environment. Teachers’ inability to share these discourses

permitted the subjects to communicate freely without teacher intervention or comprehension of what was often being discussed.

**Teacher:** As a teacher, I am often locked out of the language world of my pupils. I am wondering if the reader has this same experience. Maybe you could illustrate this further.

**Researcher:** The following example is indicative of the type of normalising practices the participants shared in communicating with one another in the classroom environment. This occurrence took place early October 2003, when students were asked to move to one of the computer labs. Jamie, Jack and Blair stood behind their chairs at a row of computers. Jamie had placed his cap on back to front, as he moved from the original classroom to the computer lab. He continued to wear it, despite the teacher having earlier asked him to take it off. Standing at the computers and waiting for further instruction. Jamie and another boy broke into song. Blair broke wind loudly, standing on one side of Jamie. Jamie stated “is that all you’ve got, fart power?”. The boys laughed. The teacher looked in their direction. Other students watch, some smiled and also laughed. Jamie and Jack continued to recite lines from recent films. Each boy attempted to outdo the other by quickly responding with a relevant speech from a film. Two minutes later, Jamie initiated physical play with the boy on his right side, resulting in kicking, punching and pinching. This was done below desk level, while the teacher remained unaware. The boys were smiling and appeared to be enjoying the physical contact. At a further point, the teacher realised that a couple of the boys were wearing caps, including Jamie. The teacher stated “caps off”. The study participants were claiming power through resistance.

Jamie responded and took his cap off. A little later in the lesson, Jamie read the instructions on the computer screen in an affected and feminised voice. The boys in his row laughed and he continued with the behaviour. Jamie then yelled out “this is easy, this is fun, this is bull”. The teacher quickly moved to Jamie and directed him to task. Jack and Blair entered a fistfight, once again below desk level, so the teacher was unaware of what was happening. After a period of approximately five minutes, Jamie yelled out “I’ve done it”. Jamie began to sing a popular tune. The boys on his

right turned to him and stated “you can’t sing”. Jamie responded loudly, “bring it on”. The majority of the class looked in his direction.

**Critic:** We see the boys’ code of masculinity is acted out continually, a shared understanding that is focused on competition and even bravado. We see through the power of language, Jamie asserts dominance by establishing and holding that attention of group members and the wider student body.

**Researcher:** The boys readily rely on Americanisms and language to express themselves and Jamie’s statement “bring it on” is a popular invitation used in American action movies when heroes are about to face physical conflict. In this instance, Jamie is responding to the boy who has just stated that he can’t sing, and yes, Jamie’s statement claims power through dominance of students’ attention. These Americanisms appeared to be a natural way for the boys to interact and there was a shared understanding of what the individual meant when he recited lines from films or music. Also noticeable in this example, is the use of boasting, toilet humour and the excessive physicality between the subjects.

As already outlined earlier the boys expressed humour and “having fun” as an essential part of the bond between the cluster. Woods (1976) found that laughter was an “antidote to schooling” (p. 179), providing a way of escaping from the tediousness of learning. Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue that “humour plays a significant part of consolidating male peer group cultures ...offering a sphere for conveying masculine identities...” (p. 69) and “...that humour is a style utilised by young men to substantiate their heterosexual masculinities...through game-play, storytelling and the practice of insults” (p. 70).

Lyman (1989) studied the relationships between older sets of males, including forty - five fraternity men. He believed that the bonding they demonstrated was based on:

Joking relationships, in which men relate to each other by exchanging insults and jokes in order to create a feeling of solidarity that negotiates the latent tension and aggression they feel toward each another. The

humour of the joking relationships is generally sexual and aggressive, and frequently consists of sexist or racist jokes. (p. 167)

Observations of this group of boys suggest that this type of “joking relationship” was consistent. They continually used put downs between them which were considered funny amongst the set, and often resulted laughter at the expense of the embarrassment of one of the group members.

**Critic:** Put downs are another way of claiming power. By insulting someone, an individual promotes himself to a position of power, while discrediting another and making him subservient.

**Researcher:** Martino (1997a) states that “through the use of put downs in the form of ‘giving one another crap’, a pecking order is established within the peer group in which each boy’s masculinity is put to the test” (p. 40). Additionally, Davies (1993) makes powerful comment about teasing and putdowns as “better understood as the struggle of the group individually and collectively to achieve themselves as knowable individuals within a predictable knowable collective reality” (p. 19). During one of the focus groups the boys openly discussed the use of put downs and what was considered the worst insult, demonstrating the parameters of what was acceptable within the group:

**Researcher:** Okay. And is it a really insult, is it a really insult to be called gay?

**Mick:** Yeah, it is a really insult.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Is it the worst insult you can get?

**Stewart:** Nah

**Mick:** No.

**Researcher:** No, what would be the other ones?

**Bob:** Inbreed, faggot.

**Researcher:** So faggot.

**Stewart:** Faggot.

**Researcher:** Okay, inbreed. Anything else?

**Researcher:** As well as insults and putdowns, the boys had a wealth of jokes they shared. Howard appeared to revel in his role as “joke teller” and could recite an assortment of jokes at any point during conversations with the others. Much of the dialogue amongst the boys was littered with the latest jokes they had heard, and they readily shared these with other students outside the immediate peer group.

The use of pranks was another highly productive way for the participants to gain status within the group. Fine (1989) in his analysis of pre - adolescent male friendships found that “pranks represent an attempt by preadolescents to explore the boundaries of moral propriety. In their talk, pre - adolescents place a premium on daring behaviour as expressed through what they term “mischief” (p. 173). Jack, Mick and Blair often spoke of “pranks” they had undertaken at weekend parties, when under the influence of alcohol. Much of this behaviour involved taking risks and would be the topic of conversation for many days following, and would result in much mirth as the stories became more embellished as the rumours spread throughout the student body.

**Critic:** Are you suggesting that status is elevated not only within the group, but in the wider student body when one is to be considered funny, even when it means it is at the expense of humiliating friends?

**Researcher:** Humour was highly honoured within this group of peers as we have seen in the boys’ earlier descriptions of group members they admired and who were considered “funny”. Five of the six boys maintained a good sense of humour increased an individual’s popularity amongst peers.

**Critic:** Did any of your subjects perceive themselves as funny? Earlier you mentioned that some of the group took offence to Howard’s particular type of humour and that you believed that this may have been alienating him from the group? While they strive to be funny, there is also the danger that they may lose status if the humour is inappropriate!

**Researcher:** Many of them referred to personal traits of humour, when asked “How would your friends describe you?” in the initial interview. Jack described himself as “wacky”, Mick as “funny, good to get along with” and Howard believed his friends would see him as “funny, annoying sometimes”, which was a pretty accurate considering what the other boys had alluded to when discussing Howard’s inappropriate use of humour.

Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that “humour creates and consolidates heterosexual hierarchies in male peer groups through: regulation of self and others, enhancing reputations, disparaging reputations, demarcating those who belong from those who do not” (p. 83). In the following chapter, we will examine further how these pupils use humour to denounce all that is feminine, while establishing their masculinities in positions of power.

### **“It’s always about who is the best, about everything”**

**Researcher:** Much has been written about the competitive nature of male peer groups (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Cohen, 1955; Lindisfarne, 1994; Lyman, 1989; Martino, 1997a, 1999; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Messner, 1987, 1992, 1994; Pleck, 1989; Tiger, 1971; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977, 1990). Competition amongst the group often presents itself through physical competition in the form of athletic ability and physical toughness (Connell, 1995, 2000; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Messner, 1987, 1992, 1994; Pleck, 1989), allowing the individual to define status within the hierarchy of the group (Lees, 1993; Walker, 1988).

The subjects of this study were not only highly competitive with those who fell outside their immediate peer group, but also with their mates. This manifested itself continually through the play fighting that was an ongoing way of relating, any kind of sporting or physical task that demanded strength, speed, skill and flexibility, and even in the regular language patterns where individuals would boast and try and outdo one another with descriptions of achievements or possessions. This was a compelling feature of the group and the way they interacted with each other. The boys readily admitted contest was important feature in relating to each other. They were able to quickly identify what males were competitive about, but more

importantly, could express how they were competitive with friends. The following responses were enlightening:

- Bob:** Yeah, mucking around. Football, anything sporting. Even who's going to get their licence first. Whoever's got the latest game. Howard's competitive about The Simpsons.
- Jack:** Yeah, like games and stuff like that. Mick's competitive against me and our motorbikes. Boys are generally competitive about everything.
- Howard:** Yeah, mucking around, smart arse comments to each other, video games, CDs, movies you've seen. Sometimes we compete against each other in PE, like when doing the grip ball.
- Stewart:** Yeah, mostly everything. Like we talk about my dad's bike. Some of the others have got bigger bikes, but dad's turbo kicks in and it's better. Fighting. Sport. Money, and who earns the most. Bragging. Neil reckons he earns \$200 to \$300 per week. I can get \$550 at \$110 bucks per day when I work where my dad works.
- Blair:** Yeah, all different stuff, whatever we can think of at the time. Whose motorbike is better.

**Researcher:** These detailed descriptions suggest that the study participants are competitive about anything and everything. Competition is an essential part of interacting with each other. Mick's detailed response consolidated the ideas the others had previously expressed:

- Mick:** Lots of things. It's always about who is best, about everything. If you're good at something the other boys take notice. You get a higher position in the group. You don't want to be the last picked, you have to prove yourself. Things like Sony, anything to do with sport, women. Pretty competitive about our bikes...wicked...

who's got the better. Even jokes. Happens all the time, making people laugh, don't realise you are doing it, get a buzz and makes you want to do it again.

**Critic:** What about learning tasks? Are the participants competitive with each other in their studies?

**Researcher:** Mick gave some insight to this with his statement:

**Mick:** No way, we couldn't give a toss. Sometimes we talk about how bad our reports are. Sometimes, we make out they're badder than they actually are. It's cool if you get a bad report, not real bad.

**Researcher:** mmm...

**Mick:** Basically being friends is pretty much about competing.

**Researcher:** Subsequently, we see that all topics are worthy subjects for contest amongst the boys. While Mick readily admits that the boys are not competitive over school work, they take pleasure in comparing reports. Those who receive the worst reports are honoured with higher status. Mick's last comment "basically being friends is pretty much about competing" is pivotal in understanding how the ethic of competition and contest underpins the way the peer group operates and interacts.

On many occasions I witnessed firsthand the competitive ethos of the group at play. At times, this involved risk taking and was often intended to test the "guts", determination and physical strength of individuals. During a Woodwork class in 2003 a number of the subjects were using machinery that had a long steel tube. The cylinder was extremely hot and once the teacher left the workshop area, one of the boys announced "See how long you can put your hand on that for?" It was an open invitation to the boys surrounding to take part in a competition of endurance and mental and physical strength. A number of boys took part in the game, while Stewart and Howard continued to take turns in placing their hands on the hot tube and counting. Stewart made a number of attempts, determined to outdo the other boys in the group.

**Critic:** In your observations was the competition amongst your participants closely tied to physical strength and endurance, or were there other occasions?

**Researcher:** Competition amongst the study participants tended to be particularly heightened during Physical Education classes where they got to test their physical skills against each other. In October 2004, students were involved in preparation for their upcoming athletics carnival, by competing in 100 metre sprints to acquire an average that would be used to position themselves in the line - up for the carnival. The teacher allowed the students to run in pairs. Mick, Jack, Blair and Stewart readily sought every opportunity to run against each other. As the boys ran against each other, they would check the position of their rival and at the end of the race, each was keen to check his recorded time against the other. At times, they displayed signs of frustration with these recorded times. Jack was the most vocal, stating “that was bull crap!” and “fuckin’ oath”. Each time the boys ran against each other, the competition became more heated and they ran harder to improve times. Stewart continued to record the fastest times, and at one stage claimed “fuck, I’m good” as an open statement to the other boys.

**Teacher:** Stewart acknowledges the superior position his high level of physical skill allows him. He is a winner and he knows it!

**Researcher:** Benjamin (2001) similarly found in her interviews with boys that “for all the boys, the ‘winner’ indeed gained everything - money, acclaim, security - while the ‘loser’ was left with nothing” (p. 49). In his statement, Mick alludes to the importance of competition against mates “its always about who is the best, about everything. If you’re good at something the other boys take notice...”. For Mick and his group, being the best provides the individual with power and status within the peer structure, inviting respect from others. For the moment he can rest easy in knowing he is superior to his peers.

## **Conclusion**

In coming to better understand why so many boys are underachieving in classrooms throughout the Western world, research must focus on the social network of the peer group, and the influence this has on an individual's ability to engage in learning. Wentzel (1996) suggests that "there is a growing body of evidence, however, that a consideration of the social worlds of children should not be excluded from models of classroom motivation if we are to understand children's successes and failures at school" (p. 226). Wentzel (1996) goes further by stating that "moreover, social goals and behaviour are strong and consistent predictors of academic outcomes, and the social climate of the classroom appears to be a powerful motivator of academic as well as socially appropriate classroom behaviour" (p. 226).

For the study participants, peers play a pivotal role in the formulation of a collective identity, subsequently, the peer group setting provides them with an audience to explore and create individual male identities. These boys strive to belong to a group which has a hierarchical power structure, forcing the individual to continually maintain his position within the grouping. To belong has a cost, a cost that they must not leave themselves in a vulnerable position, a cost that involves not exposing personal things that matter, a cost of not sharing "soft" emotions.

There are juxtapositions in their understandings of how the group operates. They state there is no leader and yet we actively see a pecking order where higher positions are established and have influence over others. We see boys in contest with each other to secure positions of power within the group. There is competition, but they avoid confrontation with each other, particularly if it deals with personal issues which may result in loss of face and status.

The peer group often appears to outsiders as a strong unit which displays solidarity in beliefs and causes, and yet there is continual change in the group make up and times of discord when group members are displaced or loss of status. Their code of relating to each other and the outside world is based on competition and bravado. It defines who they are as individuals and as a group.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Masculinities**

**“O, what men dare do! what men may do! what men daily do, not knowing what they do!”**

**William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing***

**Act IV, Scene 1**

## **Jamie**

*Drama is such a bludge. Better than fuckin' Maths or English. Today we're workin' on plays and I'm in a group with a couple of mates. We're doin' our own thing and ours is about bashin' a guy. I'm the guy that gets bashed. Cool hey! The guy I play is such a batty boy, a poof. I'm wearin' one of those flat caps and prancing around the stage like a girl so the other guys can attack me. They think it's a bit funny the way I do it. Some of the girls in the other group are watching as well. "Smell the fish". Hey, that got a laugh out of the guys. Sharon makes out she's angry, trying to act all upset and everything. Fuckin' girl.*

*I like a joke, with me mates. I like makin' them laugh. I suppose it makes me feel good, part of the group. Their lookin' at me thinkin' I'm funny. I'm the man! Then it goes from there, we're on a roll, telling jokes, carrying on, muckin' 'round, being blokes. Just havin' fun, tryin' to outdo each other, a contest. Who can say the coolest joke or get away with the most. Then we start trying to grab each other's cap and then the biff starts. We start punchin'. That's when the real fun starts. I'm small, but I'm quick. I can hold my own. No bastards gonna take my cap.*

*Boys are just like that. We enjoy havin' a go at each other. I'm pretty good at it too. Stuff any one else. Fuck 'em. The girls watchin' think they are so cool. Fuckin' losers. So I tell Sharon "you ought to be in a mental asylum". I think the boys liked that one! She looks out the window. That got 'er. Fuck, here comes the teacher. That's an end to the fun. Now he wants to know what we are doin'. What you reckon you idiot. I'll just feed him some bullshit and he'll get over it. "It's in the play, where the victim gets hit by the thugs". He's taken the bait. But now he wants us to show another group our play. No fuckin' way. It's not ready. They might think its crap. We don't want them laughin' at us. We'll tell him they might steal our ideas. No fuckin' way are we showin' it. Fuck him! He could have left us alone, we were doin' okay without him, havin' a laugh, being mates. Fuck the poofster!*

## Introduction

This research has worked strongly from the premise that gender is socially constructed (Beynon, 2002; Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 1996, 2000; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kenway, 1995; Kimmel, 1987, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Nilan, 2000; Renold 2001; Warren, 1997) and that gender is central to the construction of identities (Connell, 1995; Morgan, 1992; Mac an Ghail, 1994, Paechter, 2006a). Thorne (1993) suggests gender "...is not something that one "is" or "has"; we continually create and recreate gender relations through social interaction and collective practices" (p. 38). We cannot begin to understand masculinity, unless we consider it in relation to femininity and the composite and interactional nature of gender relations (Johnson, 1997). Connell (2000) describes "masculinities as configurations of practice within gender relations..." (p. 29), practices that are shared and understood within societies.

Connell (2000) elaborates and confirms that "masculinities and femininities are actively constructed, not simply received. Society, school and the peer milieu make boys an offer of a place in the gender order; but boys determine how they take it up" (p. 162). The boys of this study are not passive recipients of masculinities, instead they are active agents making decisions about the masculinities they will employ, how they will project themselves as men and consequently their position within the gender order. Masculinities are integral parts of self. This process continually requires the individual to perform gender through negotiation and active construction (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Connell, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003). Morgan (1992) comments eloquently:

Do not consider masculinity a characteristic that one brings uniformly to each and every encounter...(rather) gender and masculinity may be understood as part of a presentation of self, something which is negotiated, implicitly or explicitly over a whole range of situations...in short, we should think of 'doing masculinities' rather than of 'being masculine'. (p. 46)

Masculinities might be considered performances (Butler, 1990; Cornwell & Lindisfarne, 1994; Johnson, 1997; Renold, 2001) that an actor rehearses, takes

direction, monitors and perfects in particular contexts or settings. Renold (2001) clearly articulates that:

From viewing gender as relational and multiple, more recent theories...have conceptualised gender not as something singularly possessed or something that 'is', but something continually created through a series of performances and repetitive acts that constitute the illusion of a 'proper', 'natural' or 'fixed' gender. (p. 373)

There are many ways to be male and female. Masculinities are fluid and diverse (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003; Nilan, 1995, 2000; Pattman, Frosh & Phoenix, 2005). Thus we talk of masculinities and ways of being male, rather than a singular discourse of masculinity. Connell (2000) claims that:

Diversity is not just a matter of difference between communities. Diversity also exists within a given setting. Within the one school or workplace, or ethnic group, there will be different ways of enacting manhood, different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using the male body. (p. 11)

Boys are faced with a multitude of possibilities of being male, requiring the individual to explore, play with and rehearse to perform gender. Through a process of trial and error the individual negotiates the discourses of masculinities that are presented and accessible within that culture. Butler (1990) describes this as "a re-enactment and a re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (p. 140). Masculinities are experienced and acquired through ritual where the individual reworks and reshapes performances in a particular context. They provide the framework for "gendered selves" (Renold, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Our "gendered selves" are shaped considerably by the perceptions of others (Halberstam, 1999; Paechter, 2006b). These masculinities are the framework of all identities established and recognised by an audience of "significant others", where power and resistance are continually interacting. These normalising practices are the "regimes of truth" that monitor and police sexuality in creating boundaries of what is

considered desirable masculinity. Subsequently, the individual continually self surveys and self regulates his performance of masculinity to ensure the style of manhood he displays is desired and “normal”. Robinson (2005) suggests that:

Individual boys, who are active agents in the construction of their own subjectivity, will locate themselves with certain discourses of masculinities, taking up these meanings and social relationships as their own. However, one’s subjective positioning is not fixed, but can discursively shift as individuals read their locations within relations of power, claiming or resisting discourses according to what they want to achieve. (p. 23)

This chapter explores the boys’ understanding of the masculinities they portray, and the ways in which they rehearse and refine these displays of gender.

### **The research tool**

In earlier chapters, focus has been placed on human need to actively and continually seek the experience of meaning (Dewey, 1966; Frankl, 1969, 1992; Gadamer, 1990; Taylor, 1989). Man is fully conscious in his need to find meaning, and that, as Alexander (1993) states, “...at each moment we are attuned to the world” (p.206). Smith (2002) makes valuable comment on how these study participants might reflect on their masculinising practices:

Human beings are ‘always already’ interpreting themselves....So there is meaning in human activity – namely, the experiential meaning it has for the agent. In the second place, we find it natural, prior to adopting a reflective stance, to distinguish between actions and the meanings they express. (p.122)

I was interested in exploring the meanings masculinities had for the participants, to encourage them to give voice to the meanings behind the actions or displays of their masculinities, to discover how the relationships of power and resistance informed these meanings of being male.

As a female researcher attempting to understanding masculinities I bring another outlook to the task. Recent study undertaken in the field of masculinities by female researchers such as Cornwell and Lindisfarne (1994), Epstein (1998), Epstein and Johnson (1994), Jordan (1995), Keddie (2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006), Kenway (1990, 1995), Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997), Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie (1997), Lindisfarne (1994) and Renold (2000, 2001, 2003) has contributed significantly to our understandings of masculinities. As already stipulated, it has only been my intention to work towards the “third space”, a space where my own discourses and those of the boys could meet, shared through a new language and dialogue. I did not always expect this space to be comfortable or to offer solutions. More so, this space is about “coming to know”, to be present to what has been silenced.

In undertaking this study I spent considerable time seeking a research tool that might encourage the boys to openly share their beliefs and understandings of what it meant to be male. After careful deliberation I decided to use a selection of photographic pictures of men in a variety of occupations and activities to rouse discussion on an individual basis with each participant (See Appendix 5). Eight pictures were chosen for comment. These pictures were considered a starting point for dialogue and featured males in a range of roles, including images of fathering, demonstrations of affection between males in a diversity of contexts, males in a variety of traditional and non traditional occupations and sporting activities, and boys involved in classroom activities. These photos were “gendered texts” (Davies, 1993) in which I invited the boys to share their gendered understandings of each image. Each of the photos was shown in the same sequence to each student, and they were asked to describe the contents of the picture and comment on their contextual nature in late 2004. Further to this, the boys were asked to project themselves into the picture and whether they considered this to be a possibility for them.

These pictures were a foundation for further questioning that encouraged the participants to talk about their experiences in growing up male, exploring their understandings of rules and how one learnt to be male, as well as reflecting on what they understood to be the meaning of masculinities.

In addition to the individual interviews with participants, I used the second focus group to direct some discussion around the issue of masculinities. This provided an opportunity to observe power relations amongst group members and how performances of masculinities were influenced by an audience of “significant others”. As the researcher, I was enthused by the bravery and candidness the boys displayed in sharing with me. The remainder of this chapter attempts to explore those understandings of masculinities and the connectedness this has with identity, power, and peers.

### **“It feels wrong to show affection”**

As part of the initial pictures shown to the subjects, much discussion was held around the topic of affection and displays of emotion between males. In the sequence of photographs I showed the boys there were two contrasting photos, Picture Three was of a middle aged man showing affection to another male by placing his arm around his shoulder and maintaining close physical contact. The male being comforted appears to be in a state of grief, with head down. Picture Four contrasted, with two men on the same AFL football team offering support to one another by placing arms around each other in a display of camaraderie and happiness.

All of the boys readily commented on the contextual nature of the photos accurately giving specific detail of the emotions attached to each picture. When asked whether they could project themselves into each of the photos, this prompted a dialogue about what was considered acceptable masculine behaviour in the two different settings. All the boys agreed that on the football field, affection between males was acceptable. Mick stated “they’ve just kicked a goal and they’re celebrating. They’re worn out, but happy. Everyone does it. I do it. You just tap someone on the back or bum and give them a bit of a hug. You do it because you are happy. It’s okay to do it.” He concludes that he has permission to display affection with his claim “it’s okay to do it” and that it is considered a common practice amongst males on the football field, “everyone does it.” All of the boys readily made statements about the affection demonstrated by the footballers as a way of celebrating the kicking of a goal or winning of the game.

The boys find meaning in the context of an awareness of audience. In this situation affection to other males is a celebration of achievement and joy. On the sporting field this practice is acceptable and practised regularly. It is part of a shared masculinised code of interacting in this situation.

As a talented sportsman Stewart in this extract reveals the importance of audience and the ritual of affection between males on the football field.

**Stewart:** It's a big win. Hitting each other on the back. If they were on your team, you'd be going "yeah, well done". Happy and adrenalin is pumping. You just go up and hug them. Everyone does it. They're on your team.

**Researcher:** But would you be called gay because that's what you guys have told me. Sometimes when you show affection you get called gay.

**Stewart:** Nah, its fine. Everyone is doing it, the whole team. Jumping 'round, slapping, huggin'. All the AFL footballers do it.

Here, the importance of role models is evident. Stewart readily condones affection between males in this context, justified by the fact that it is widely displayed and practised within the culture of AFL. The boys share a discourse that in the setting of particular sports, affection is practiced and an acceptable mode of displaying emotion and a level of intimacy with each other. Whitson (1990) comments on the bonding that occurs between male team members, he suggests that many have written about the "comradeship and intimacy that can develop as men come to depend upon one another in a shared quest" (p. 25). Messner (1990, 1992, 1994) has focused particular attention on the relationship between sport and masculinities. In his study of men he has found that their first experiences of sport are positive for boys and bring a level of intimacy with peers. Messner (1990) describes the account of a 32 year old male, who states "what I think sport did for me is to brought me into a kind of an instant family. By being on a Little League team, or even just playing with the kids in the neighbourhood, it brought what I really wanted, which was some kind of closeness" (p. 100). It appears the study participants accept this level of intimacy

and public physical affection with each other as long as it occurs on the sporting field.

In other contexts, the participants establish that affection between males leaves them open to ridicule and harassment where such displays could be misconstrued by the audience as signs of homosexuality or femininity, and accordingly are discouraged or not displayed. Thorne (1989) found that boys by Grade 4 had reduced physical contact and displays of affection towards each other. One might consider the need for physical contact amongst boys is possibly channeled increasingly towards more physical and violent means of maintaining human contact.

As already mentioned to in earlier chapters, boys create masculinities that are in opposition to all that is considered female (Arnot, 1984; Connell, 1995; Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994b; Fine, 1989; Johnson, 1997; Jordan, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino, 1999; Warren, 1997). Arnot (1984) argues that boys "...try and achieve manhood through a process of distancing women and femininity from themselves and maintaining a hierarchy of social superiority of masculinity by devaluing the female world" (p. 145). Thus, the subjects of this study consider affection to be a feminine trait. It is only in the context of the sporting field that affection between males is accepted and practised. Garfinkel (1989) reminds us that:

Behind the bear hugs of camaraderie, men seem to be holding each other at arm's length. They keep a safe distance - a buffer zone - between themselves and other men. This safe space is quite literally a *no man's land*, an emotional twilight zone few men appear to be willing to navigate. (p. 413)

In comparing Picture Four to Picture Three, all of the boys stated that in particular situations affection between males is unacceptable. Each of the subjects clearly voiced that the male offering affection to the other in Picture Three was an effort to comfort the man who appeared to be grieving, nevertheless, when asked if they could project themselves into this role, all of the boys stated clearly that this was not allowable. Pattman et al. (2006) similarly found in their study of 11 to 14 year old boys in twelve London schools, when they asked respondents about "how he would

feel if another boy showed him comfort and support for him, he was quick to condemn this as ‘gay’ or as not properly masculine” (p. 558). In this study, Stewart echoes comparable reasons for withdrawing from affection with other males:

**Stewart:** Someone’s hurt, probably mentally. The other guy is trying to talk to him and make him feel better.

**Researcher:** So what about you, would you do this if a mate was feeling down?

**Stewart:** I wouldn’t put my arm around. Nah. I don’t even do it to my cousins, even though we are close. My dad’s tried to hug me when I’ve been really stuffed, like when my uncle died. And I just shrug him off.

**Researcher:** So some men and guys don’t show affection to each other in certain situations.

**Stewart:** I’d probably talk to him. But I wouldn’t put my arm around him. He might think I’m gay. Other people could think that. I just wouldn’t do it. Other people might tease, other boys and girls who are around.

In this extract we see Stewart’s reluctance to share intimate space, even with his father, who initiates contact in attempting to comfort his son in a time of grief. He self regulates his performance of masculinity. Stewart readily admit his awareness of audience, the “other people who might tease” if he shows affection, resulting in a loss of standing. Stewart admits his fear of being labelled gay. He suggests that his display of affection might be misconstrued as a signal of homosexuality by the individual he displays affection to or by the watching audience. Martino (1999) suggests that “in a Foucauldian sense, sexuality becomes a mechanism by which the limits of a desirable masculinity can be prescribed” (p. 245). To Stewart, and similarly the other boys involved in the project, it was imperative to project their masculinities as heterosexual.

### **“Someone will see and say you’re gay”**

Nayak and Kehily (1996) maintain that:

Heterosexuality, then, acts as the norm within schools and is the focal point around which other sexual behaviours are located. The source of its taken for grantedness, the fact that it goes unexplained, unchallenged and is assumed. This has the effect of seeing heterosexuality as natural, rather than socially conveyed through performance. (p. 224)

Researchers talk of “compulsory heterosexuality” in schools (Benjamin, 2001; Connell, 1987; Epstein, 1998; Epstein & Johnson 1994; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Renold, 2000, 2003; Rich, 1980). Renold (2003) claims that students feel pressure to display a “compulsory heterosexuality”, to be a “normal” boy one must present “a coherent and abiding heterosexual self” (p. 180). If heterosexuality is the uncontested norm within schools, it presides in both the formal and informal culture of the school. There is little questioning of this discourse amongst students (Benjamin, 2001; Epstein, 1998).

Students readily reprimand and punish other students who challenge the norm of heterosexuality and often become the victims of bullying and harassment. During my time at the school, I continually witnessed sex - based harassment that labelled students as “gay”. At times, students were teased and called a “poof”, a “batty boy” a “wuss” because of the clothes they wore on free dress days, which were considered “geekish”, or because of behaviours that were considered feminine, such as pitch of voice or the way they walked. Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) similarly found that many boys in Australian schools became targets for ridicule and harassment amongst other boys due to the way they walked. They comment that “they are either perceived to engage in practices associated with girls or as a result of bodily action, gestures, posturing and tone of voice were identified as gay” (p. 20).

In the discussions of these ideas we see the power of language. Words are used as a tool of power. To be labelled feminine or homosexual as identities, places individuals in subservient positions of power, while bullies are raised to positions of power. As Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) claim “boys negotiate, resist or surrender to what they believe to be a dichotomous and continuing choice - to be bullied or be the bully” (p. 47). “Significant others” are powerful audiences who

determine identities of persons and the position one takes up as either the bully or is the victim of bullying. In response to Picture Three, all of the six boys interviewed concluded that they would choose not to show affection towards their mate if their friend was upset and needed comforting. All of them displayed an awareness of audience with comments like “Someone will see and say you’re gay”. Bob was able to articulate clearly how the label of “gay” can damage the image of an individual’s masculinity and how he might be forced to prove his masculinity by fighting. This was Bob’s response to Picture Three:

- Bob:** A guy’s upset, someone’s died and his friend is comforting him.
- Researcher:** Would you show affection to a friend upset at school?
- Bob:** Nah (*Smiles, makes direct eye contact*)
- Researcher:** Why not?
- Bob:** Just feels weird.
- Researcher:** What do you mean, when you say it feels weird?
- Bob:** Don’t know, just doesn’t feel right.
- Researcher:** Would you show affection to your younger brother if he was hurt?
- Bob:** Yeah, for sure.
- Researcher:** Some of the other guys have said if their best friend was upset at school, they might want to put their arm around them...
- Bob:** Yeah
- Researcher:** But there’s something that holds them back...
- Bob:** Being called gay!
- Researcher:** So you stop showing affection because others might call you gay?
- Bob:** That’s about it!
- Researcher:** To be called gay, is that a real insult?
- Bob:** Yeah, definitely.
- Researcher:** What is it about being called gay that makes it so bad?
- Bob:** Probably be a big fight.
- Researcher:** You’d be prepared to fight?
- Bob:** Depends, but yes if they kept going on about it, calling me gay.

- Researcher:** So do you think some guys fight to prove they're not gay? So physical strength and toughness proves you're not gay?
- Bob:** Yeah, yeah, yeah!
- Researcher:** Who does the teasing? Calling you gay?
- Bob:** Wankers, people who think they are big and tough.
- Researcher:** Would your mates also be involved in this teasing?
- Bob:** Yeah, they'd take it seriously, that you're gay.
- Researcher:** So overall, guys don't show affection to each other because they might be considered gay?
- Bob:** Yeah, that's about it. Unless they're your relatives and then its okay to give them a hug.

Bob readily admits he feels uncomfortable with showing affection to other males, and, it is the fear of being labelled "gay" that discourages physical contact with them. As Nayak and Kehily (1996) proclaim "young men are encouraged to perform their gendered identities in particular ways to survive the prospect of homophobic abuse" (p. 216).

Bob often gives the perception of being "easy going", and yet here there is another unexpected projected identity, a person who readily admits that fighting would be one strategy to defend his masculinity as a heterosexual, and prove his toughness to others. In this example, we see the contradictory nature of masculinities at work, Bob suggests that affection between males is acceptable in certain contexts, and displays of affection are appropriate if they are relatives. At first Bob suggests the audience who pass judgement are "wankers, those that think they are big and tough" and yet he proceeds to describe how his immediate peers are often those that are standing as the judging audience. The power of the audience is intense. Peers control the levels of intimacy, and it is the fear of being tagged "gay" that is the highest insult. Kimmel (1994) comments on the impact of peer relations amongst males, when he suggests that "as adolescents we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as 'feminine', as 'sissies'" (p. 132). The power of the peer audience controls individual displays of affection, and thus informs and shapes the masculinities displayed.

### **“Boys don’t cry”**

In observing the comparisons between Picture Three and Four, four of the six subjects acknowledged the incongruous nature surrounding the idea of affection between males. Jack readily admitted that he had shown affection to another boy when the boy had his bike stolen. Jack spoke about a conscious decision to comfort the other younger male because it was in private, and he agreed had the situation taken place in the school arena he would not have initiated physical contact with the other boy, even though he felt the situation justified it. At one point in discussing the picture, Jack stated “it’s weird I know. It’s okay in one situation, but not another. It all comes down to what other people think.”

Jack’s insight suggests that these boys may be continually reflecting on their practices from the perspective of “the other”, and consequently make adjustments to accommodate and sustain socially acceptable images of masculinities. Boys practice self surveillance and regulate their behaviour accordingly (Martino, 2000). Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) note “adolescent boys learn to police their masculinities within panopticonic regimes of self surveillance” (p. 5). The performances of masculinities are always in rehearsal, never mastered or accomplished. Nayak and Kehily (1996) affirm that “because masculinity is ‘structured though contradiction’ it is always unachievable, inevitably ungraspable, even incomplete” (p. 226). Jack is able to acknowledge that the contradictions make masculinities difficult to master.

The discussions surrounding affection between males prompted the study participants to talk about what was considered to be the rules surrounding masculinities. In the individual interviews I asked about these rules and how they learnt them, and what happens to those who break the rules. This gave further insight into power and its association to masculinities. Each of the boys described rules surrounding what was considered acceptable and non - acceptable behaviour as a male. This appeared to be a shared understanding amongst the group. They detailed the rules as “you don’t show affection to other blokes, except on the sporting field”; “dress ups and dolls are out of bounds for boys”; “you keep things to yourself”; and “boys don’t cry”. A study by Frank, Kehler, Lovell and Davidson (2003) disclosed comparable results. They maintain that “there are common and

fairly familiar themes underscoring what these young men knew and saw as appropriate masculine behaviour. From hidden feelings, to being non - communicative, these young men knew what it meant to make the masculine grade” (p. 126).

The participants of this study readily spoke about how these rules were learnt. Some of the boys recalled specific episodes in early school when they became aware that behaviours displayed were not appropriate ways of acting as a male and how they were ridiculed as a result. These memories were recalled with such vivid description suggesting them to be defining moments in the development of masculinities for those involved, and that through the responses of others, the boys learnt what was considered appropriate masculine performances.

The impact of starting school was a universal discussion point. The boys spoke about kindergarten and wanting to make friends. They participants clearly conveyed how they would learn through observation as to what was considered acceptable behaviour for a boy. These first memories were about the importance of social status amongst peers, and the significance of establishing masculinities, rather than curriculum or official learning experiences gained. In the first focus group, Bob describes how he readily looked for approval from the other boys in his kindergarten class and how he modified behaviour to adopt a “hyper - masculinity discourse” (Jefferson, 1996):

**Researcher:** So you think...and is it happening at an early age as well?  
Some of you also..., you know, you don't live with dads,  
okay, so dad may not be living in the household, so is the  
dad really important to learn to be a man?

**Bob:** Yeah

**Stewart:** Yeah. (In unison)

**Bob:** Like on my first day at kinder something like that, I was  
just watching all these...like...Rambo or something like  
that. I go to school thinkin' I was him. They'd laugh and  
then I would do it some more.

**Researcher:** Okay.

- Bob:** ...so, yeah, then we had to do all these pictures. I thought the stuff I was doing was wussy pictures, so I drew people getting their heads blown off.
- Researcher:** Okay, so is it...did you get (someone was coughing) lots of stuff from TV and films, something like that, images of male, what male should be like?
- Mick, Bob:** Yeah. (In unison)
- Researcher:** Okay.
- Mick:** Lots of stereotypes.
- Researcher:** Lots of stereotype stuff, yep.
- Bob:** And other boys laugh, and you keep going.

This dialogue suggests the importance of mass media images in informing masculinities. Bob claims he adopted a “Rambo” persona to perform and win approval of his peers in his first experiences of school. “Rambo” is a character of power, one who uses strength and force to overpower others. Davies (1993) in her studies of pre - school children found that “it seems that boys know before they have discovered how to harden their bodies, that their own (male) being is equated with a hardness essential to heroism” (p. 92).

These images of toughness and brutality were transferred to Bob’s drawings and he argues that it is the reinforcement of peer approval that prompted him to continue with these stereotyped images of masculinities. Jordan (1995) spent considerable time examining the fantasy play of young boys in early primary school. She describes a “‘cycle of practice’ in which resistance in the early school years becomes identified with the definition of masculinity little boys have picked up from the mass media and incorporated into their play” (p. 76). She proceeds to describe co - operative fantasy play amongst young boys that embodies a “warrior” discourse. Those boys who do not take up these narratives are excluded from play. Bob is able to reflect on the narratives that shaped his early experiences of masculinities. He discloses he was seeking approval and acceptance by his peers and that by adopting the “Rambo” persona he gains power through recognition of other boys.

Readily arguing that masculinities were learnt from watching older males through a process of observation and imitation, the study participants would rehearse and refine ways of acting out masculinities which were prompted by older males. They spoke about the importance of older boys and fathers in learning to be male. In recent years much has been written about the importance of fathers and older male role models (Biddulph, 1994, 2003; Bly, 1990, 1998; Browne & Fletcher, 1995; West, 1999). I do not wish to enter this extensive debate here, rather I wish to focus attention on the boys' understanding and perceptions of how they learn, practice and make decisions about the masculinities they portray. Mick stated "you look around and watch, copy other boys, older boys and your dad. You get out the footy and kick it". Blair argued "no one teaches you. As you get older you just hear and see and realise different things, like dolls are for girls. It's when you get teased, you learn from your mistakes. You don't do it again". The boys describe masculinities as a process of trial and error, and through physical activities with other boys and men, they gain insight into their own masculinities. Bob cites "its older people you learn from, like when I go to work with my dad. When he's home after work I sit down and watch the footy with him, spending time with my dad. It just happens. Watching the older boys, like when I went to the skate park for the first time. I watched them. I was scared, just watched, scared they were going to beat the crap out of me, then I got to know them and I followed along, did what they did." Bob readily admits the importance of just being with his dad as a time to learn and gain access to the rules of acceptable masculinities. Bob's response demonstrates the importance of power in social relations and the formulation of masculinities. He readily claims he looks to the older boys for guidance. They hold a higher status, something that Bob wishes for. He acknowledges by following the rules of behaving as a male he may be granted membership, and thus increased status. Bob admits his fear of the older boys, whom he looks to for guidance; however, his fear is permeated by a higher need to gain membership by following the rules to "fit in". In many ways he seeks power, which can be achieved by adopting certain discourses of masculinities.

**“Pretty much, people don't give you a choice. You're a “poofter”,  
“fairy”**

The study participants described the process of learning to be male as an ongoing; as Connell (1995) suggests, a “gender project” (p.28). Blair described this process as

one “that happens over time”, while Jack proposed it “just happens over time and the mistakes you make”. Jack went on to recall the embarrassment he felt in being forced to wear female shoes in Grade 6 due to the narrowness of his foot. He described how classmates teased him. A common theme expressed by the boys was that those who broke the rules that governed masculinities were labelled as “poofs, “fairies”, “fag” or “gay”. Mick argues “suppose you’d get teased, be called a “woman”. For the participants, these labels indicate inferior status, positions that have less power. Martino (1999) suggests that:

What is important to emphasise here is that gender and sexuality are operationalised through a set of discursive practices involving the process of learning to be a heterosexual male which is based on the avoidance of the ‘feminine’ and homosexuality. Those boys who do not measure up to what is considered to be appropriate manly behaviour are positioned as the ‘other’ and are situated outside the normative frames of reference for attributing desirable masculinity by certain boys. (p. 245)

For these young males, to be considered “gay” or “feminine” is the worst insult or identity one could encounter. They presume such an identity will bring powerlessness and lack of status. Jack readily admits “pretty much people don’t give you a choice. You’re a “poofster”, “fairy”. They tease you. They expect you to fulfill it and the label stays.” The power of the social audience can determine a boy’s status as a male, and it is the fear of being labelled that puts the boys in the position of continually working towards images of masculinities that devalue all that is considered feminine, including displays of emotion, closeness and physical contact.

In exploring the topic of masculinities, I asked the boys “what are the disadvantages of being male?” Each of the six boys when interviewed individually referred to the isolation they feel in not being able to display emotion or talk openly about feelings. To display emotions such as sadness was considered a weakness amongst the group. As a result, the boys suggested they tended to keep problems and worries to themselves. Bob claimed “you cope with it and keep it to yourself. Basically you just learn to deal with it.” Blair stated “you just bottle it up. We don’t talk about those kinda’ things much” and Jack reinforced this theme with his strong statement,

“you keep feelings inside. You just don’t talk to others about it”. They do acknowledge that there are disadvantages in this process of gender identity formation. The pressure to appear in control and masterful does not allow an individual to expose ambivalence or emotions such as sadness, anxiety or fear. Such emotions are concealed because they are seen as feminine.

In defining their masculinities, the study participants often displayed behaviours and attitudes towards others that could only be described as homophobic. Nayak and Kehily (1996) contend that:

Homophobic performances are part of the self-convincing rituals of masculinity young men engage in. The performance is as much for self as others, where heterosexual masculinities are constituted through action. The acts are not simply a momentary social performance for an external audience, but form a technique for styling a particular masculine self identity. (p. 225)

This often manifests itself through insults and put downs that promote the performing individual to an elevated status, while victimising others (Frank et al., 2003; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1996). As already detailed, the boys would offer insults to each other on a regular basis and the worst insult to inflict was to call someone a “faggot” or “poof”. Bob gave details of an episode amongst the group, where one of the boys “was mucking around, saying he might try doing child studies”. He goes on to state “me and Howard were stuffing around calling him a “batty boy”. Really got him going. Really going for it. Teasing the shit out of him. He was so pissed”. As Bob tells the story, he laughs heartily, recalling the anger this incited in the other boy. The use of abusive language that denotes femininity towards others within the peer group and those that stand outside the group, allows the individuals to gain solidarity with one another (Lees, 1993) and exercise collective power. As Keddie (2003) positions:

Masculine power hierarchies within and between peer groups are regulated and maintained through collective oppressive practice, within group behaviours, often having and exaggerated effect. The essence of

these oppressive behaviours is underpinned by a need for belonging, affiliation and place within the peer groups. Hierachy is characterized by boys' attempts to acquire power, mark prestige and validate or prove one's own way of being male. (pp. 83-84)

In this case collective power is exercised by the study participants, by demonstrating solidarity with each other and while choosing to exclude even their own group members in doing so, they claim power and define their masculinities.

### **“Something big, tough and strong”**

When asked to describe “masculinities” the boys described attributes of physical strength, toughness and being large. Howard described masculinity as “big. If you're big and strong, then you don't cry. Stewart used the word “muscular”, while Bob gave extensive detail, concluding “kind of a picture of a big weight lifter, someone tough and strong. Mostly male, real big and muscle, physical strength and well respected”. The subjects draw connections between physical strength and a sense of power which they believe brings respect and status.

The images of masculinities the boys identify with, strength, toughness and being larger than life itself, are gained not only through physical appearance but also status within their social world. Masculinity is about embodiment which brings admiration, respect, and power (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Connell, 2002, Paechter, 2006a, 2006b). Connell (1987) makes an important note about embodiment when he comments that “the body as used, the body I am, is a social body that has taken meaning rather than conferred them. My male body does not confer masculinity for me; it receives masculinity (or some fragment thereof) as its social definition” (p. 83). Other research has indicated that masculinity is often defined by boys as about being dominant, powerful and tough (Clark, 1993; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1998; Keddie, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino & Berrill, 2003), those characteristics that are often demonstrated through bodily action. Connell (1987) demonstrates this point further:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular physical skills and

the lack of others. The image of one's own body and the way it is presented to other people and, the way they respond to it. The way it operates at work and in 'sexual relations'. The physical sense of maleness grows through a personal history of social practice, a life history in society. (p. 84)

The sense of body and how it is received by others is imperative in how these boys understand themselves, who they are, and their masculinities. Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) affirm that "...physicality, muscularity and bodily deportment are implicated in broader socio - cultural regimes of normative heterosexual masculinity, thereby becoming major markers of boys' positions within hierarchies of masculinities at school" (p. 18).

Often the style of masculinity these boys displayed was based on "hegemony" (Connell, 1987 1996, 2000; Gramsci 1926-37; Kenway, 1990). Hegemonic masculinity has been discussed earlier and is eloquently described by Warren (1997) "... as a regime of truth, giving authority and legitimacy to certain truth claims or knowledge concerning maleness, consequently de - legitimising other definitions. Thus hegemonic masculinity and boys complicity with it, acts to normalize certain practices" (p. 211). Furthermore, Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) suggest that in this time of modern society "...hegemonic masculinity mobilises around physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self - reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality"(p. 121). The characteristics described in this statement are qualities to which these study participants aspire.

In a discussion about male role models during the first focus group, the boys' share their desire to claim certain attributes as their own. The conversation was animated and expressive. They readily listened to each other and took turns in describing the qualities of the individual they admire. There was a shared understanding amongst the boys and they eagerly finished each other's sentences, demonstrated a shared discourse of the qualities of manhood they admired and desired.

**Researcher:** So what are the characteristics of an acceptable male?

**Bob:** Either, he has kind of tattoos, he is not really bulky, but he's wicked doing tricks on a bike and that's what I want to do.

**Researcher:** Yeah, so who is that?

**Bob:** Rick Thorne. He falls over, gets straight back up.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** So he is physically tough.

**Bob:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Yeah! Anything else, that you would admire in that person?

**Bob:** Ah...

**Stewart:** Guts.

**Bob:** Oh, yes, just sense of humour, he just likes stuffing around, going after people kicking them in the back of the head and something, without them knowing, then riding off.

**Researcher:** Yeah.

**Bob:** Like crazy...

**Researcher:** So he is a bit crazy, a bit wild...

**Bob:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** ...gutsy...um...he's got a sense of humour, is that something that people admire...

**Bob:** Ah, I wouldn't like...to say...

**Mick.** Gutsy.

**Bob:** Like I wouldn't have a 90 year old man as my role model or whatever, he drinks his beers and goes around in his wheelchair, fall over and fall apart.

**Researcher:** Okay. So someone that is younger as well?

**Stewart:** Not a granddaddy.

**Researcher:** So he is a bit older than...how old would he be?

**Bob:** Age around 28, I suppose.

**Researcher:** Are there any other characteristics in that role model that you kind of admire?

- Bob:** Ah...
- Researcher:** Is this someone you know...
- Bob:** Yeah, yeah...
- Researcher:** So it's his strength, guts, and determination.
- Bob:** Yeah, like sports men on TV and stuff. He tries these tricks he's never tried before, falls over and gets back up, that's what I want to, shit like that.

Bob is animated and excited. He make direct reference to the attributes he admires in this role model - physical strength, the ability to overcome obstacles through persistence and determination which Mick describes as "gutsy", a sense fun which is considered "a bit crazy". Bob makes a direct comparison between himself and how he aspires to the masculinity portrayed and practiced by this role model, when he states "he tries these tricks he's never tried before, falls over and gets back up. That's what I want to do, shit like that." Here, Bob seeks a masculinity that is based on conquering his fears, mastering skills by undertaking adventurous and dangerous tricks through "guts and determination". Bob's descriptions suggest he seeks to exercise power in overcoming personal obstacles or challenges. He must display courage, as well as personal stamina and strength to overcome fear. In doing so, he becomes master of his self, he masters his body and subsequently believes that this may grant him respect, status and power by the watching audience. The boys believe these traits will help them become "somebody". There is a connection here with Wexler's (1992) idea of identity and the human drive to become somebody in "the public sphere" (p. 115), the continual awareness of the audience of "significant others".

For Stewart, Bob and Jamie the sporting arena was a place to become "somebody", a place to perform, a place to be male and to be powerful. These images and practices were shaped by sporting heroes they admired. Stewart gave detailed descriptions of his role model Jason McCartney, an AFL football who made a dramatic return to AFL football after being involved in the Bali Bombing:

- Researcher:** Okay. Yep. All right. What about you, Stewart? Who is your role model?

**Stewart:** Probably Jason McCartney.

**Researcher:** Okay, so a footballer.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Bob:** That's what I was going to say.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** So what...what is it that you would admire in him?

**Stewart:** It's just gutsy and determination, from the Bali bombing, just faced his last game.

**Researcher:** Yes. So he got through it basically.

**Stewart:** Set himself a certain time to get through.

**Researcher:** Yeah, yeah. Set certain goals and make an effort to overcome all the difficulties?

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Is he also...um...so it's the physical stuff...

**Stewart:** Yeah.

Like Bob, Stewart gives insight not only to the physical strength he aspires to, but also mental fortitude that requires the individual to conquer fears and overcome risks. It is about the power to master the body and the situation which brings a sense of achievement, but also possibly recognition from others.

The three boys who readily spoke about their role models demonstrated a strong interest in sporting heroes who were young, fit and in the prime of their life. Youthfulness was a key feature in their descriptions and as Bob's earlier extract suggests male role models should not be a "granddaddy". For these subjects, masculinities are youthful.

In earlier chapters, the subjects described the importance of the ability to fight and we saw how Blair's position within the hierarchy was elevated due to his proven fighting ability, his physical strength to overpower others. As Gagnon (1974) states:

Boys whose worlds are made up of both disorganised games and organised sport learn that physical strength is one of the measures of manhood. They see themselves as stronger as or weaker than the other

boys, more skilful or less skilful in physical pursuits...for most boys physical capability continues to be a powerful source of the sense of self and the sense of social position. (pp. 142-3)

The study participants repeatedly spoke about “toughness” in discussions about masculinities, in the role models and people they admired, and in the shared interactions that were part of their daily interactions with one another. For these boys “toughness” refers to the ability to physically dominate, however, their definition also refers to the mental aptitude to overcome fear and obstacles, as illustrated in earlier extracts. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) described “toughness as both a means to an end, in its contribution to school success and group popularity, but also an end in itself, as part of their developing masculinity” (p. 142).

As part of the focus group sessions conducted in 2004 I asked the participants about students they admired, and the concept of “toughness” once again came up. The boys describe a fellow student who they believed “...got some balls”. Here, we are reminded of the value boys place on physical and mental strength in defining their masculinities, and consequently their position as superior in the structure of student relationships.

**Mick:** Tom Smith is pretty cool. He can stand up to anyone that comes up to the school. He’s got some balls.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** They’d have to be doin’ somethin’ pretty wrong and then he’d fight them back.

**Researcher:** Okay, so he can stand up for himself, is that...

**Mick:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** So an acceptable kind of male role model at school a student would also be someone who...he can be physically tough as well?

**Mick:** Oh, he is not really...

**Stewart:** He is not really bulky.

**Researcher:** But he’s got guts.

**Bob:** Yeah, he wouldn’t back down.

**Stewart:** He wouldn't back down.

**Researcher:** The ability to stand up for yourself. Is that pretty important...

**Bob, Stewart:** Yes. (In unison)

The boys' admire Tom Smith's resilient and forthright attitude towards others which helps to elevate his status. Mick and Stewart are quick to add that it is not a large and "bulky" physicality that promotes this element of "toughness", more so, it is the boy's ability to stand up against opponents when the situation warranted it that helps to create Tom's position of power.

### **"Bigger, stronger, be able to kick a footy better"**

The sporting arena is a powerful site for identity formation, and thus the performance of masculinities (Brown, 2000; Connell, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2000; Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000; Messner 1990, 1992, 1994). With Mercury High School's extensive sporting history, sport was an integral part of both the overt and hidden culture of the school, and helped to define the gender regimes that existed (Connell, 2000). Sport was a vital way of proving masculinities: sport provides boys with immediate social rewards (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Messner, 1990, 1992, 1994) and close contact with other males - peers, coaches and fathers (Messner, 1992, 1994). Messner's (1987, 1990, 1992, 1994) extensive research in men, sport and masculinities has provided useful insights. He (1992) describes "...boys' experiences in sport constitute a "gendering process". That is, through participation in sport, boys and men learn that dominant cultural conceptions of what it means to be male" (p. 19). Those that are good at sport, such as Stewart, are granted a privileged position in which they are rewarded with a higher status amongst their peers (Skelton, 1997; Martino, 1999). Stewart's natural talents as a sportsman provided him with an elevated status not only with his peers, but also with particular teachers. Connell (1987) argues that:

The combination of force and skill that is involved in playing well at games like football, cricket and baseball, and which is central to highly individualised sports like surfing, becomes a strongly cathected aspect of

an adolescents boy's life...Prowess of this kind becomes a means of judging one's degree of masculinity" (p. 85)

Stewart's fashioned masculinity was underpinned by values one might consider as a team ethos. Stewart often talked about "playing hard", "getting out there and having a go" and "never settling for second best". Davies (1993) remarks that:

Sport is not just a symbolic signifier of male competence, but assists in the embodiment of hardness, particularly of external muscular hardness. In male sport there is the competitive pitting of brute force of one's body against the brute force of others, creating both a carapace for the self and a knowledge of one's own force and bodily competence. To win is to momentarily become the hero whose sureness of body can be taken for granted. (p. 95)

In all aspects of his social and sporting identities, Stewart embodied values of determination, playing fair and tough, and competing. As a result, teachers and students often saw him as a leader in sporting pursuits. He participated in all competitions. During my time at Mercury High, Stewart was often absent from normal curriculum activities due to a range of sporting involvements, such as representing the school in a junior development coaching clinic in football and representing Mercury High at inter - high athletics carnivals. He easily spoke about his extensive weekend activities in shooting, riding motorbikes and playing A grade football for a local country district team. As already described, he would cheerfully come to interviews and give detailed accounts of his latest injuries and his physical achievements as part of the game. Stewart uses his body as a tool to define masculinity.

Much has been written about the male body as a site of masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1990; Messner, 1987, 1992, 1994; Sabo, 1994; Watson, 1999; Whitson, 1990). Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2003) note, "the uses of the body are inextricably tied to fashioning and negotiating social practices of masculinity within a spaced construction by hierachical and often dichotomous social systems of identification" (p. 15). Connell (1995) comments that masculinities advance from men's bodies as

he argues that, “either the body drives and directs action...or the body sets limits to action” (p. 45). In the case of Stewart, he first and foremost sees, and proves, his masculinity in terms of sporting abilities and achievements, gaining status and respect from fellow students and teachers.

During one particular Physical Education class, the teacher chose two captains to select class members for each side to play a limited over cricket match. Stewart was selected as a captain and members from his direct peer group, including Howard and Jamie, proceeded to call out “pick me, pick me”. A number of students were picked by Stewart before Howard and Jamie were placed in opposing teams by the teacher. Stewart was promoted to a position of power, and he could exercise this by choosing who should be in his team, and whom he would exclude. For Stewart, it was more important to pick a winning team, those members with skill and commitment that would ensure winning at all costs, rather than choosing the team on the basis of loyalty to friends. As Messner (1992) suggests “winning it all” counts most” (p. 45) and Stewart was no exception.

Connell (2000) has focused attention on the elements of masculinities that drive men to embody a “will to win”. Connell (2000) describes this as “the will to win does not arise from personal ‘drive’ ...It is given to him by the social structure of the sporting competition. It is his meaning, as a champion” (p. 85). It is in the social world of interaction and dialogue, and in the sporting arena that boys develop “...masculinity as an aspect of social structure, not just a form of personal character” (p. 85). Furthermore, Benjamin (2001) found in her United Kingdom study of pre - adolescent boys that:

It seemed that the boys’ motivation for wanting to acquire the benefits of winning was to do with the possibilities for meaningful relationships and the power to control those relationships to which the status of winner would give them access. (p. 49).

For Stewart, winning at all costs is most important. He foresees that these performances of masculinities will bring him status and power, as they have done in the past, when he feels accomplished, a “somebody”!

One might ask how those not physically talented or skilled cope when so much of the development of masculinities is tested and practiced on the sporting field. Those that cannot win protect their masculinities by withdrawing from the competition, as failing results in feelings of shame and anxiety (Connell, 2000; Messner, 1987, 1992, 1994; West, 1999). For the study participants, withdrawal from the competition was a strategy they often adopted in order to protect their masculinities. Warrington et al. (2000) found in their three year study of schools in England that “despite the widespread evidence that competition is more effective as a motivational spur with boys than with other girls...boys withdrew from the competition rather than be seen to fail” (p. 396). Jackson (2002) suggests that some boys underachieve at school work because they cannot win the competition. There will be further discussion of this in the following chapter. At this point, I wish to focus on the participants’ responses to competition on the sporting field, as it provides further insight into the discourses of masculinities the subjects have fashioned for themselves.

In the second year of the study, I was privy to watch the students prepare for their upcoming school athletics carnival. On the day of the carnival only half of the school population attended school, and a small number of students took part in the competitive events. Of the six boys remaining in the study, only Stewart took part in running events. Bob, Jack and Blair were absent from school, admitting it was “a bit of a holiday”, Mick and Howard took part in the fun activities such as tug of war, and in addition, Howard was a competitor in the javelin and hammer throw, events in which he had previously represented the school and believed he had a strong chance of “taking out the comp”. The study participants readily disclosed in later individual interviews that they selectively made decisions about not taking part in the competition by taking the day off school or choosing events where the result “didn’t really matter”. When I asked “do you think boys are reluctant to enter races because they might not win?”. Howard argued “probably...I reckon. If you don’t feel you’re good at it, running that is, then you just don’t go in it. You don’t wanna come last.” For these boys being male means winning at all costs, and when these boys cannot win they withdraw from the competition. One might conclude they are resisting the images of masculinities they have created for themselves. They have contributed to a discourse of masculinity where “winning is best”; however, when faced with a

situation where they cannot win, they withdraw rather than be seen as a failure. They avoid the very process they have created.

### **“She just needs a bit more cock”**

I wish to draw attention to the Jamie’s reconstructed narrative at the beginning of this chapter. Here we see Jamie recount an episode during a Drama class where he uses sex - based harassment towards two girls to define his own masculinity. This episode was not unusual and throughout the duration of the study the boys often adopted sexist attitudes towards females, displayed through shared discourses of sex talk, which many would consider harassment. Woods (1984) draws attention to the earlier work of Tolson and describes boys:

looking down on the girls in the centre gave them an illusion of confidence. To put it another way, while the outward face of the sexist mode was characterised by confidence, brashness, fluency and ‘presence’ (the promise of power as Tolson puts it), the inward face was often the complete reverse. (p. 61)

The members of the study group were often brash, confident and insulting to others. They readily took part in sex - based harassment, particularly towards female students through the use of sexist jokes, put downs and innuendo. The participants regularly spoke about sex as a shared discourse, usually on a daily basis in their interactions with each other. Three of the boys were sexually active and quite promiscuous in their sexual activities with multiple partners in the second year of the study. The sexual activities of the boys often took place at parties on the weekends, and Monday mornings were a time when the boys competitively shared their stories about conquests and the nature of their sexual activities. Observations suggested that some of the boys saw sex as a field in which they could present themselves in a position of power and superiority, as the master (Sabo, 1994; Walker, 1988; Willis 1977; Woods, 1984). Denborough (1996) claims that:

If sex is upheld as a symbol of adulthood, and adulthood is seen to represent control over one’s own life and an end to constant domination, then it makes sense young people speak of and participate in sex in order

to make claims to adult identity. Sexuality comes to represent freedom.  
(p. 3)

During an Applied Technology class on a Monday morning in 2004, Mick, Blair and another boy withdrew from structured classroom activities to talk about Saturday night's party and what sexual encounters they had had. The boys continued to take great delight in giving detailed accounts of sexual acts accomplished and spoke about a number of the female pupils in a sexist and derogatory manner, while sniggering, smiling and recalling the events loud enough for other members of the class to hear. Renold (2000) describes these acts as "sexual storytelling" (p. 321), as one of "the overt ways in which boys formed their heterosexual identities" (p. 321).

In this situation there is power. The boys have a captivated audience of "significant others". They are able to send a message to their audience that they are "all male" and "heterosexual". A number of their female class mates, were obviously present at the party, and appeared to be embarrassed and offended by the conversation, but failed to object. Towards the end of the conversation, the "other boy" concluded the discussion with "she just needs a bit more cock", the boys laughed, sniggered and smiled, two girls turned away in embarrassment and a number of quieter male students working at their desks, smiled and then continued with their work. Robinson (2005) argues that:

The use of sex harassment ...is considered legitimate and expected means through which to express and reconfirm the public and private positions of hegemonic masculinity within a heterosexualised gender order. Sex harassment and violence become part of the performance of hegemonic masculinity that can cement gendered cultural bonds between those boys and men who take up this form of masculinity as their own, creating a sense of identity. (p. 20)

Mac an Ghail (1994) in his analysis of an ethnographic study of masculinities in a senior high school found that "...one of the main functions of the young men's sex talk was publicly to validate their masculinity to their friends. This collective peer identity affirmation often manifested itself in terms of highly ritualistic obsessive

discourses” (p. 92). He goes on to state “their sexual narratives carried the predictable misogynous boasting and exaggeration of past heterosexual conquests and male heroic fantasies, in which women were represented as passive objects of male sexual urges, needs and desires” (p. 92). These study participants are doing exactly this. Their re - accounts of sexual events place them as master, one who holds power over females, and, in so telling these stories, they are intending to re - affirm their masculine identities to their immediate male peers and to the wider listening audience. They are immediately rewarded by the attention they receive from the other boys, and the embarrassment they cause the female students who are present. They experience what it means to be powerful.

While it appears that sexual narratives are a regular way for the boys to interact, they were guarded in disclosing these conquests and narratives to me. My status as a female, or more likely that of an adult, may have prompted the boys to decline in sharing such narratives. On a number of occasions I heard snippets of dialogues between the boys, especially during lunch and recess time. They opted to change the conversations however, when they thought I was near. Based on the dialogues I was witness to, it was evident that for particular boys within the group one way of defining masculinities was as a sexualized being. The sexual narratives, whether they were real or otherwise, were a way of affirming their masculinities and establishing a position of power and superiority amongst the group of peers, and over female students. Sexual talk bought the approval of mates, and was a popular discourse that manifested itself not only through sex talk, but also sex - based harassment through unwanted touching and comments towards female students.

We have already seen how wittiness helps to consolidate membership within the peer group and that those who have a sense of humour are promoted within the group. Further to this, Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue that “...heterosexual masculinities are organised and regulated through humour...humour is frequently invoked to expose, police and create gender - sexual hierarchies within pupil cultures” (p. 70). Through sex - based harassment the boys were able to posture themselves as heterosexuals, thus helping to define their masculinities. Boys actively engage in harassment from an early age, but as they get older they practice harassment in more sophisticated and subtle ways (Blackmore et al., 1996; Brown, 2000).

While a number of the participants were socially confident with the opposite sex and readily engaged in sexual narratives as a way of defining a dominant discourse of power, and sexual activity as a way of defining their manhood, those boys who were less confident and practised in sexual matters, appeared to practise harassment towards female students which sexually objectifies them, and as a way of defining their gendered selves as heterosexual in the public domain of their peers (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Renold, 2000, 2003). Harassment and bullying, claims Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) “is an unnamed gender system built on the denigration and devaluation of the feminine” (p. 123).

The following observation was made late in 2003, when some members of the study group were in a transitional period moving from one class to another. On this occasion, Jamie placed his arm around a girl’s waist and whispered in her ear. His immediate peers, including Stewart and Howard, laughed as the girl physically retaliated by attacking Jamie and yelling at him “don’t call me a lesbian”. This assault resulted in Jamie being kicked to the ground and attacked with a range of verbal and physical abuse by the girl, who was obviously angered by his whispered comment insisting she was a homosexual. Jamie did not retaliate, and after the attack, he got up complaining about his injuries. Other students, including his immediate peers, laughed, and they continued to the next class.

One might consider that this situation did not place Jamie in a position of power. He became the victim of physical abuse at the hands of the girl. His peers laughed at him. If we see these discourses surrounding masculinities the subjects have established as being linked to power, then Jamie’s power was diminished.

Cockburn (1987) found that, in the context of the school environment, to call a fellow student a “lesbian” is a term of abuse, often demonstrated in classrooms and play areas as an insult. To call someone “lesbian” or “gay” contributes to a discourse where heterosexuality is seen as the norm of student culture (Cockburn, 1987; Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Mac an Ghail, 1996). By calling the girls lesbians Jamie draws attention to his own sexuality as heterosexual, thus affirming his masculinity. Mac an Ghail (1996) refers to these hegemonic displays in his study as:

What emerged as particularly salient was the way in which heterosexual male students were involved in a double relationship, of traducing the 'other', including women and gays (external relations), while at the same time expelling femininity and homosexuality from within themselves (internal relations). (p. 198)

By offering insult to this girl Jamie defines his sexuality, and thus masculinity to the audience, but also to himself. His invasion of the girl's personal space by placing his arm around her waist and whispering in her ear was uninvited, and yet symbolised to his friends his confidence in approaching females. He also demonstrates "guts" in his bravado to use insult in a public forum. He gains power and status by the reaction he causes from the girl. Renold (2003) found in her study of Grade 6 students boys who practiced sex - based harassment, were often boys "who were located lower down the heterosexual hierarchies" (p. 187). This type of behaviour towards female students was common practice for Jamie. He would often refer to girls as "lesbians". This was done when teachers' were in the classroom, but he selectively chose moments when teachers were engaged with other students or "out of range". The absence of teacher supervision allows students to take possession of the environment and practise their own culture (Dixon, 1997). It appears Jamie selectively chooses opportunities to victimise female students in the classroom. Robinson (2005) concludes in her extensive study of boys from secondary schools that:

Engaging in such gendered performances is part of the cultural script, which constitutes hegemonic masculinity, thus rendering the boys sexual harassment as an appropriate form of interaction with girls in their views. Sexual harassment becomes part of the embodiment of the performance of hegemonic masculinity through these everyday articulated acts and gestures, constituting boys' masculine identities in the process. (p. 27)

### **“Think, you'd think slut”**

Both through individual interviews and the first focus group, the study participants were prompted to think about the advantages of being male. All of the boys indicated that being male brought them a position of power and superiority. They

described how being male provided economic, social and physical opportunities than females. In an earlier chapter, focus was placed on the boys' understanding of provision for future families. It appears that they perceive it is their duty to make sacrifices and provide economically for "significant others". Some might claim that by making others economically dependent promotes the individual to a higher status.

Many of the boys spoke about body issues as an advantage of being male. Howard commented on "you don't have to have a baby", while Stewart suggested "you get more freedom as a boy, because you can't get pregnant." and Mick stated "we don't get periods, so we can't fall pregnant". For these boys, the conception of children, pregnancy and the upbringing of children is considered a liability. And yet, when the boys were prompted to examine Picture One, which was of a father and child, each of the subjects was able to project a future where being a father was a reality. Here, the contradictory nature of the value they place on being male are exposed. They intend to be fathers, but the thought of menstruating, conceiving and carrying a baby are seen as a liability, a hindrance, something they believe they are fortunate not to have to endure. There is a link here with freedom. Stewart's comment suggests that he believes personal freedom is more available for males on the basis that there is not the possibility of falling pregnant. Similarly, over time, the subjects espoused attitudes towards sexual activities that continued to acknowledge there was a double standard for males and females. Boys, who were sexually active with a number of partners, were admired by peers and considered a "stud" or, as Bob suggests, a "pimp", while girls who were similarly sexually promiscuous were considered "sluts" and labelled accordingly (Lees, 1993). These misogynist comments reflect a double standard as to what is considered "acceptable" gender behaviour and is further supported by other researchers' experiences of boys, including Connell (1987), Mac an Ghail (1994) and Robinson (2005).

The following transcript extract from the first focus group outlines a variety of discourses the boys share that indicate that they perceive their position as male as one of power, superiority and domination.

**Researcher:** So what are the some of the worthwhile things about being a male?

**Mick:** You got more of a say than a female.

**Researcher:** More to say, yeah.

**Stewart:** Can do some things better than a woman.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Stewart:** ...like strength.

**Researcher:** Okay, any other good things about being a male. I have heard some of you talked about...guys can sleep around a bit more...have a bit more of an active sex life. Is there a double standards here? For girls...

**Mick:** Yeah, if you saw a woman doing that you'd think...

**Bob:** Ssslluutt (Lower pitch, draws word out)

**Researcher:** These days? Okay.

**Mick:** You couldn't cope. Different story for a bloke.

**Bob:** You'd think pimp! (Other boys laugh)

**Researcher:** Yep.

The first discourse we see in this extract is tied to the notion of power. Mick suggests that men have more power in relationships with females because "you got more of a say than a female". Women are seen as being in a subordinate position, where men maintain power, which they exert through voicing issues and making more of the decisions. The participants see their positions as privileged in that sexual promiscuity conveys status, whilst for women it suggests inferiority.

The discourses shared by the boys in the above extract were further revealed when they were individually asked to examine Picture Eight. This picture showed a man involved in domestic duties, cleaning with broom and pan, and wearing gloves. Jack in response to this picture stated "he lives by himself. Likely, if he was with a woman, she might do most of the cleaning". Jack presupposes that women do the majority of household duties, and that for a man to be cleaning suggests that he must be single. Mick replied:

**Mick:** He's cleaning. He looks happy. It's acceptable for men to do it, but I don't normally see it. It's basically a

stereotype for women to clean. They think women are made to clean.

**Researcher:** Will you have to do cleaning?

**Mick:** Probably, sometimes if my wife makes me.

Here, we see the contradictory nature of Mick's beliefs. At first, we see that he recognises that cleaning has stereotypically been seen as female work, which suggests an openness to overcoming traditional images of male and female work, however, his later comment "probably, sometimes if my wife makes me" suggests that Mick still considers certain domestic duties such as cleaning to be the domain of the female, and only when his future wife "makes" him will he do such duties. Additionally, the subjects readily classified occupations, tasks and activities as either being male or female. All of the boys argued that "men get better jobs" and Blair reasoned "some jobs are female's and some would rather a male work for them, some are just blokes' jobs." Picture Seven, detailed two male nurses looking after a female patient in a hospital setting. All of the boys responded to the picture by indicating that the two men were doctors, presuming that being dressed in medical attire and caring for a patient would indicate that the men were in the more powerful occupations as doctors. When I asked why they thought the men were doctors rather than nurses, Bob indicated "nursing is often seen as women", and Jack stated "guys as doctors, women as nurses, that's how it normally is". Blair further claimed "it's unusual, think that mostly women are nurses." The boys' responses suggest that the work of nurses is not as valued as that of doctors, which prompts a more subordinate position. When asked whether any of the boys could project themselves in the occupation of nurse, none of the boys suggested that this was a suitable or worthy occupation for them.

The responses to the photos suggest that not only do they see occupations as either male or female, but also valued in their positioning of power. This raises some interesting questions. Do these values on occupations transfer in their choice of subjects at school? Do they value some activities at school more because they are considered more masculine because they indicate status or pathways to future careers which are considered powerful? In the following chapter focus will be placed on exploring the boys' attitudes to school and the future. At this point, I need to

mention that these attitudes were assigned to various subjects offered through the official curriculum of the school. The boys were quick to demonstrate that they would not do particular subjects offered by the school because they were considered to be “girl subjects”, this suggesting a position of inferiority.

### **Conclusion**

The masculinities displayed by the boys are a work in progress, often contradictory and elusive. Yet, their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs suggest that they were continually working and redefining themselves as males in order to project images of masculinities for the benefit of an audience. As Messner (1992) implies that “boys learn early that if it is difficult to define masculinity in terms of what it is, it is at least clear what it is not” (p. 35). All of the boys were establishing masculinities that were in opposition to all that was seen as encompassing feminine traits. Thus focus was placed on valuing heterosexuality, physical and mental strength, independence, risk taking, suppressing particular emotions, and appearing “tough” at all costs. To return to an earlier idea of Kenway (1990), who described “regimes of truth”, the boys come to place these attributes as truths, which they accept without question and obey through practice. As the boys become “judges of normality” these practices and attributes become a masculinity that is prized. Those that fail to adopt this code of masculinity are victimised because they are considered either “feminine” or “homosexual”, resulting in lack of status. These styles of masculinity are not considered normal by the boys.

At times, the study participants readily acknowledge that living and working in a world of masculinities is often confusing and difficult to master, that it is a journey they undertake where they seek guidance and look for acceptance from other boys and adult role models. There is no structured process to follow and it is making mistakes, and living with the consequences, that provide insights into the new directions that need to be taken in order to move forward as a respected male.

The constructs of gender are central in the project and play of identities (Connell, 1987; Morgan, 1992; Mac an Ghail, 1994). The boys’ masculinities inform and influence how they will be perceived by others, the roles they play and the identities they chose to shape and become. Mac an Ghail (1994)’s following statement could

be considered a strong précis in understanding the dynamic and varied issues surrounding masculinities and how these boys have undertaken the process of becoming male, “contemporary modes of masculinity are highly complex and contradictory, displaying power, violence, competition and a sense of identity and social support” (p. 51).

This chapter has shown how the boys’ displays of gender are performance based, that is a process for coming to be male. The displays of masculinities are about power. The study participants are propelled and motivated to seek positions of power in their activities and relationships with others. To be masculine is to be powerful. Many of the participants have developed hegemonic masculinities, which is a sanctioned performance, which is rewarded with popularity and power amongst their own group and the wider school community (Robinson, 2005).

This raises some interesting questions. If the participants are propelled to “always win”, to be the best, to be in positions of power, why is it that they resist learning? What is it in schooling that they do not value? The participants talk often about who they will become, and who they want to be like. They project towards the future. Much value is placed on physical strength, taking risks and being “tough”. Are these values seen as important for their futures? How will they embody them? Are the discourses of masculinities they value now, those they will value in the future? Since considerable focus has been placed on Wexler’s (1992) concept of “becoming somebody”, we should move towards some discussion of how the boys perceive “possible futures”.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Schooling and Possible Futures**

**“We know what we are, but know not what we may be”**

**William Shakespeare, *Hamlet***

**Act IV, Scene V**

## **Stewart**

*I know that I definitely don't wanna go to College, I don't even wanna come to school. I don't wanna be here. School is boring and you're locked up just like in prison. You're only here 30 hours per week, six hours a day, but there's no freedom, no space, no wide open paddocks. You gotta get a good education I know that, me Mum and Dad are always telling me that. The only things I really like are PE (physical education) and MDT (wood work) because I like working with me hands and running around. I'm pretty good at PE. I play footy and I'm not bad with cricket either. You can run around and be outside. Some people don't like sport, but I reckon you gotta have a go before you say you can't do it. I have a go at everything, except school work sometimes. I just don't like sittin' in a room and doin' all that writin'. I don't care about school work, I wanna be outside.*

*Mum and Dad say getting a good job and education is important. But when the bell goes at the end of the day I'm happy and can't wait to get out of the place. Get home, ride me motorbike, cleanin' the rifles, go out shootin' with dad and me two younger brothers. I love being in the bush. You can do whatever you want, you're free. I hate the city, just hate it. I love the open spaces where I live and the bush.*

*Me Dad works in the bush most days. He's a farmhand and that's what I wanna do. I wanna live in the country and work on a farm, maybe do a shearin' course, like me cousins. If I don't work on a farm I'd like to be a sniper in the army because I'm a good shot. I've been shootin' for a long time and I'm respectful of guns. All me family shoot, even me mum. Me pop taught me how. Got me own rifles and I look after them and teach me brothers how to look after theirs.*

*Me Mum and Dad said if I get a full time job I could leave school next year, when I'm in Grade 10. I reckon that would be wicked. I've been doin' some work experience on the farm every Wednesday that me Dad works on. Better than goin' to school, that's for sure. I like bein' with the other farmhands, the other men. We go out repairin' fences for a couple of hours and ride around on the back of the ute. Then sit around the fire for a couple of hours, talkin' and muckin' around it. Not doin' much. Better than being in any bloody classroom, trying to look interested when you're not. I wish I could do the work experience every day. Sometimes, I think*

*it would be better to be suspended for school, be a bit of a holiday, stay home, muck around, go bush. Be a holiday away from hell. But me Mum and Dad wouldn't like it.*

*The shearin' course sounds good. If I can't get a job then I think that's what I might do. I'll just have to keep goin' to school until then I suppose.*

## Introduction

In coming to know the boys in the study group, it is essential to examine the impact of schooling on their lives and what possible futures they see for themselves. We have come to appreciate the significant impact peer relations have on shaping these boys, their identities and their masculinities. In exploring the work of Dewey (1910, 1966) and Gadamer (1989, 1990), Alexander (1997) eloquently states:

As beings - in – the - world, we never find ourselves with the possibility of absolute knowledge of completely determinate Being. We are always in process and on the way. We find ourselves in contexts which are dynamic, in which there is both clarity and ambiguity, determination and indetermination. (p. 324).

We are always becoming, moving forward, perpetuated towards possible futures. We find meaning by being involved in communities, where one is forced to be a participant, to perceive the world by considering “the other” (Alexander, 1997, Dewey 1966).

Dewey’s (1966, 1910) focus on the importance of community and how this should be transposed in terms of education and learning has been further explored by Boisvert (1998) who writes “...the community becomes focal. Interaction and sociality, as we have seen, are inextricable accompaniments of human life. Since individuals always find themselves linked with others in a community, the search for truth is best conducted as a joint project” (p. 99). For the study participants, the search for truth comes as they struggle to find themselves as part of a group, to find meaning in their daily practices and communication with each other, to discover new meanings, and to develop and grow. Schools must provide opportunities for the social world to be at play in order to promote learning, where ideology shifts from individualism to community (Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000; Hickey & Keddie, 2004; Mills & Keddie, 2005), where learning is integrated into the child’s experiences, where the individual is an active participant. A school should be a place where the child is invited to do, to be socially engaged, to grow (Boisvert 1998, Dewey, 1910, 1966). Students need to feel that they belong to their school communities in order to engage in meaningful

experiences of learning (*Boys: getting it right*, 2002; Juvonen, 1996; Kindermann, et al., 1996) by having voice and agency (Hargreaves, 2003, Mills & Keddie, 2005).

These ideas, initiated by Dewey have been rekindled in recent times with a move towards the Essential Learnings in Tasmania (Department of Education, Tasmania 2002, *Essential Learnings Framework 1*; Department of Education, Tasmania, 2003, *Essential Learnings; Learning and Learning Provision*). The Essential Learnings have been developed through a process of consultation with students, parents, teachers, child service advocates and the wider community, which have;

...highlighted the personal growth and development of learners, and the education of learners for social, civic and environmental responsibility, as essential components in a new curriculum. There was consensus for the recognition of the importance of our interconnectedness and responsibility to each other and the environment. There was overwhelming agreement about the need to prepare learners to live full and healthy lives in the present and future, and to equip them to help shape a future they want to live in.

The five curriculum organisers, *Thinking, Communicating, Personal Futures, Social Responsibility and World Futures*, provide a framework that can be held in mind, a focus for teaching and learning and a means of selecting content that is significant.

(Department of Education, Tasmania 2002, *Essential Learnings Framework 1*, p. 11)

This approach draws on the theories of Piaget (2002) and Vygotsky (1978) and how human beings socially construct meaning and theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1985). The aims of such programs are for students to be intrinsically motivated to learn, to reconstruct and build upon meaning and understanding in response to their experiences (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2003, *Essential Learnings; Learning and Learning Provision*). The learner becomes the creator of meaning (Glattorn & Jailall, 2000). In coming to understand Dewey's (1966)

concept of “occupations” described by Boisvert (1998) as “an enterprise which marshals energy for the accomplishment of a goal” (p. 102), learning becomes an integration of the child’s experiences, encouraging curiosity and a focus on doing. The establishment of programs, such as the Essential Learnings, encourage pupils to become active participants in learning. Boisvert (1998) suggests that “the motivation, in such a case, is intrinsic, linked to the cumulative working out of an end, not extrinsic, based on fear of a poor grade or desire to impress a teacher (p. 113).

One might ask what relevance this theoretical background plays in understanding the subjects of this study, and their attitudes towards school and how they might see possible futures. Reports such as *Boys: getting it right*, (2002) suggest that “boys often find school hostile, irrelevant and a boring imposition that interferes with their lives outside school” (p. 13), while Trent and Slade (2001) claim that:

For most boys school is focused on preserving the status quo, which makes it culturally out of date and unable to respond to change. It remains detached from the real world, distant from the rest of their lives, and neither convincingly forward looking, nor plausibly concerned with the need to prepare them for a place in the emerging society. (p. X).

At the beginning of chapters, through the reconstructed narratives and the many dialogues presented in the thesis, we are aware that these boys see little relevance for much that is done at school. As a researcher, I was interested to know how the study participants might connect with school and learning, in what ways they did feel attached to learning experiences, and what impact this might have on how they perceive the future.

### **“Hell”**

We have already know that school holds little meaning for the study participants, other than the setting it provides to meet socially and engage with other students, particularly the immediate peer group. Lees (1993) description of a “pro-school, anti-work” attitude (p. 167) is appropriate for many students, including the subjects of this study. Blair withdrew from school before the study was completed, while all

other participants continued to attend with the main motivation to engage socially with their peers. As already described, the most important aspect of school was to be with friends. In this extract from the first focus group we hear the boys, when asked about the concept of school, continue with this theme:

**Researcher:** First one, when I mention the word ‘school’, what images come into your head? What are the things you think about?

**Bob:** Work.

**Researcher:** Work, yeah.

**Mick:** Teachers.

**Researcher:** Teachers, yeah.

**Stewart:** Hell.

**Researcher:** Hell, anything else?

**Mick:** Mathematics.

**Bob:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Yeah. Okay, is there anything positive that comes into your head when it comes to school?

**Mick:** Friends.

**Researcher:** That’s pretty important I gather from all the stuff I have done with you individually.

Initially, the boys’ responses to the question were negative. School was couched in terms of work, teachers, particular subjects and even “hell”, possibly a place of punishment. It was not until further prompting that the boys thought about the positive implications of school. Mick’s response was immediate. “Friends” are mentioned. At this point, the other boys in the focus group nodded and responded with smiles. The tone of the focus group immediately changed from negativity to a mood of optimism. This is in keeping with Martin’s (2002) study of 3773 students in Australian schools, which found that “for most boys the best thing about school is the friends they make there” (p. 12).

The responses to this question suggest that the boys see school in terms of its organisation, the teachers, the subjects and the structure that is imposed on them.

They also talk in terms of the product of all this, and that is “work”. Trent and Slade (2001), in their study of approximately 1800 boys in 120 focus groups in 60 schools throughout South Australia, found that “when the boys talk about both work and teachers being boring, irrelevant and repetitive, they do this as though they were inseparable aspects of one process that they simple call ‘*school*’ (p. 33).

In Benjamin’s (2001) study of “underperforming” 12 year olds in the United Kingdom, she found that “their apparent priority, manifested in daily struggles inside and outside the classroom, was to achieve viable positioning in the school and classroom informal masculine cultures, these were usually in direct contradiction with the school’s formal stated pedagogic aims” (p. 42). For many, the social goals of school are of higher importance and value than the learning goals imposed by the structure of school (Dweck, 1996; Wentzel, 1996). One might consider that if peers play such a pivotal role in the importance of school, then educators might look more closely at how peer influence could be used to motivate learning. When we see young children in their early years of schooling we often see students totally engaged in learning. So what factors influence these changes in motivation and, in this case, what made the difference for this study group, when and how did they become alienated from school and learning?

It has been suggested that education models contribute to this alienation. Many of our current education systems centre on the products of learning such as grades and assessments. Often students are involved in a reward system where the process of learning may be undervalued and education loses its meaning (Harter, 1996). There is no longer a connection to the learning, and as we will see through the boys’ responses, they feel at a distance, that there is little meaning in much that is done at school, that what is done is removed from their lives at home, with friends and at work. Further, once education moves to a system of rewards based on marks and grades, a system based on competition is created. It establishes a hierarchy where academically there are those that win and those that lose. The individual is forced to compete to win, or in some cases he may be motivated to avoid failure (Covington, 1992, 1998; Jackson 2002; Martin, 2002, 2003; Martino and Berrill, 2003). As Martin (2002) intimates “fear of failure has links with student’s constructions of masculinity and impacts negatively on their motivation, orientation towards school

work, enjoyment of school and achievement” (pp. 6-7). Fear of failure becomes a central theme.

We have already seen descriptions of Blair as he resists learning activities as a way of evading learning tasks in which he is inept. Here again, we return the impact of power relations in schools. Those who achieve academically are rewarded through symbols that are powerful in themselves. They are often given official leadership positions, such as being “prefect”, creating division amongst the student body and, as shown previously, those that are talented sportsman such as Stewart are also promoted within the school system.

I would like to return to the idea of the motivation that the boys have to be socially accepted by their peers. In fact, educators might look at this in order to understand what it means to belong, the importance of peer investments and how this might be accommodated with the hope of encouraging improved motivation and academic achievement (Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000). Ongoing research indicates that the peer group impacts significantly on student attitudes to education and the behaviour within the school setting (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). The desire for peer approval is a very active, real motivator in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Dweck, 1996; Ford, 1996; Wentzel, 1996). Wentzel (1996) has suggested that the social goals and academic goals that young people aspire to cannot be treated as separate or independent. Strong peer relationships can promote better engagement in learning (Dweck, 1996; Kupersmidt et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1996). As Dweck (1996) outlines, “thus it appears that optimal school adjustment in either the social or academic arena calls for the ability to pursue and attain goals in both arenas” (p. 183).

Motivation and academic achievement declines in adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan, 2001; Whitelaw, Milosevic and Daniels, 2000), and those affiliated in the same peer group share a similar level of motivation (Kindermann et al., 1996; Kupersmidt, 1996; Ryan, 2001). Ryan (2001) suggests that the peer group influences the intrinsic value of school, including whether the students enjoyed school. The boys of this study define enjoyment of school as experiences where they are connected to friends. Belonging is about social connections, the connections with

peers. Peers are a pivotal and ongoing force in adolescent life and can influence how one defines himself as a learner (Harris, 1998; Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000; Keddie, 2003).

Of late, there has been an increased use of the term “belonging” in reference to boys and schooling. The recent Australian inquiry into the education of boys, *Boys: getting it right*, (2002), states in point 6:8 “it is possible to employ peer influence to exert a positive influence over boys’ behaviour and engagement with learning and to counter the anti-achievement attitude which affects some schools.” (p. 131). Furthermore, point 6:9 affirms that “the essential element in most of the strategies for turning peer influence in positive directions is creating a sense that boys belong and are respected and valued” (p. 131). Boys readily seek out opportunities to belong to a social network, most notably that of a peer group. One might ask how can educators create this same sense of belonging to learning, school and education?

**“Teachers and parents, I don’t think they understand the importance of friends”**

The subjects of this study valued “belonging” highly and in order to belong there is a focus on adopting a way of behaving and we have seen how the students conform in their dress and the language they share. It appears that the values they hold are in conflict with those of teachers and, possibly, parents. Harter (1996), in her longitudinal study of students in junior high school, found that students placed emphasis on appearance, likeability and athletic ability, while believing that their parents valued academic ability and orderly conduct more highly. There is a marked discrepancy between what parents and teachers value and what students value in schooling (Dweck, 1996). As Blair suggested in an early interview “teachers and parents, I don’t think they understand the importance of friends”.

While Blair does cite conflicting values of parents and teachers as compared to his world of peers, as a researcher I did see on many occasions the study participants totally engaged in learning activities. The boys steadily commented throughout the study on subjects they enjoyed. Comments were consistent over time and shared by the majority of the respondents. They enjoyed practical learning experiences that were “hands on”. Applied Technology, Physical Education and working with

computers were cited as favourites. Two of the boys, Stewart and Blair, asked that they not be withdrawn to take part in interviews when Applied Technology classes were scheduled, demonstrating their enjoyment and commitment to this subject. During a number of classroom observations, students were often given the incentive of free computer time if and when they completed work tasks. Jamie and Howard, in particular, would work diligently and quietly in order to secure this promised reward.

Recent research indicates that boys generally like to be actively involved and enjoy learning experiences that are “hands on” (Bleach, 1998a; Bleach, 1998b, *Boys: getting it right*, 2002; Lingard, Martino, Mills and Bahr, 2002; Martin, 2002; Trent and Slade, 2001). Boys perform better than girls at information technology related tasks and the *Boys: getting it right*, (2002) report recommends that allowing boys to access computers more readily “may encourage them to engage in learning tasks or motivate them to spend more time or put more effort into literacy tasks” (p. 95). One of the key findings of Trent and Slade’s (2001) study was that 91% of male participants in the Survey of Student Views agreed with the statement ‘computers are the way of the future’ and 76% of the same participants agreed with the statement ‘teachers don’t know much about computers and they won’t let you tell them’ (pp. 36-37). In my current study it appeared that these students were keen to use Information Technology in all aspects of their learning. They would ask teachers if they could work on computers to complete tasks and access information. Many requests were denied, regularly resulting in an escalation of resistance on the student’s behalf.

While computers are highly valued, it was invariably the “hands on” experience and connections to real life which engaged the boys. Blair, who was the most resistant learner, was keen to undertake a practical course called the Water Edge program, which taught boating skills in Grade 9. Blair demonstrated a level of commitment to this program that was unprecedented for him. He attended school on the days of the program, was compliant and engaged in tasks. During an Applied Technology class the day before the commencement of the program the following conversation took place between Blair and Jack:

**Jack:** Wicked...fuck, it’s going to be wicked.

- Jack:** Lush.
- Blair:** Be out on a boat, wouldn't mind that at all. Fuckin' better than school.
- Jack:** For sure.
- Blair:** Be real. Fuck, wonder how fast it goes.

Blair uses the word “real”. Does this infer that he regards the other learning experiences to be not real, removed from his world, his reality? Is this reality about being focused on “doing”? In a later interview, when asked “How could school be improved for boys?” Blair replied “it would be more fun. More stuff like the power boat one, rather than being stuck here all day, every day learning stuff that is boring and shit. You'd be out doing stuff”. For Blair his interests were in “doing”. In early interviews he gave details of ambitions of being a mechanic. The experience of this short course allowed Blair to feel connected to his learning. It had a reality for him, just as Art experiences were for Bob. In the earlier reconstructed narrative we see Bob empowered and connected to the subject, facilitated by the teacher, through her respectful manner, and her ability to allow the students to feel ownership and to direct their own learning. In this instance, the teacher places emphasis on the process of learning, rather than the product. Bob does suggest that the products of his work are important as he proudly displays them in his bedroom, but he is also able to articulate the skills he is learning in drawing such as brush techniques. He finds relevance in gaining these skills in order to improve the product of his work.

In their extensive study of Australian secondary boys, Trent and Slade (2001) found that boys see much of what they learn as irrelevant and focused on product, resulting in removal from the process and finally boredom. They define this as:

Most boys don't value school; it's more about getting credentials than learning, and these don't operate usefully as short term motives. Apart from social life, school for most boys is considered to be an unwanted means to an end that starts out being too distant and becoming increasingly unachievable. (p. 20)

In many ways school becomes a place of work, where work and play are separated, learning and friendships are considered opposites.

Nayak (2003) wrote, in her ethnographic study of male students in northern England, that they adopted a strong masculine discourse that focused on manual labour despite declining opportunities for employment in this field. She found that:

School was seen to be of little worth compared to ‘genuine’ work experience and it made little sense to apply oneself academically when reputations could be more quickly established with the accepted registers of working class masculinity which valued strength, loyalty, humour and physical stature. (pp. 151-152)

The participants of this current study describe learning tasks they are asked to complete as “work”, work that is removed from the values, experiences and lives they have as individuals and as a group.

### **“You need to get an education to get a job”**

Apple and King (1979) established that kindergarten children were able to define tasks into categories of either play or work, and that they understood that work activities were of a higher value than those of play (p. 46). Shanks’ (1994) descriptions of the Burr Oaks Elementary School are pertinent in exploring this idea of “work”. He suggests students:

Viewed school as work; school was their job. It demanded that they complete certain activities. They did their schoolwork with little or if any questioning of the expectations placed on them or of what they were taught. This attitude was evident in the way students approached their schoolwork. They finished their work quickly, even if they did not understand it, because real work had a product, a right answer that they were to find. This attitude seemed to structure the students’ prevailing definition of work: all work has a product. (p. 51)

Similarly, the participants of this study see school in terms of work that needed to be completed. As discussed in the second focus group, much of this work was considered boring or irrelevant.

**Researcher:** What about work at school? What's that like? Does that...I mean you told me that its work isn't it?

**Blair:** Boring.

**Researcher:** Yeah.

**Blair:** Crap.

**Researcher:** Boring, anything else?

**Mick:** Um...some fairly...

**Blair:** ... it would have been...no...it wouldn't have been boring.

**Mick:** Yeah, only because life was not like Romeo and Juliet. I don't really like that sort of stuff...

**Researcher:** ...actually that you just find that...

**Mick:** It's all right, if you were like learn something you really wanted to learn, because you get down and do it.

Blair describes learning tasks which he considers to be work as "boring", while Mick states that the recent unit he has been studying in English is not relevant to his current life. Glasser (1990) claims "when students say that they hate school, much of what they are saying is that they hate being asked to work hard at something that does not fulfill their needs" (p. 90). Mac an Ghail (1994), in his study of male adolescents, found typical comments amongst his subjects, such as "the work you do here is girls' work. It's not real work. It's just for kids". The work is de-valued, seen as feminine and childish.

Mick sees this English unit as removed from his life, it holds little value or meaning for him in the present. What is interesting is that he makes the distinction that if the student is somehow interested or finds connection in what they are to learn, they are better motivated to "do it". We return to the verb "doing". We often connect "doing" with work. This raises an interesting question: what do these boys consider to be the purpose of education?

For many boys education is perceived as preparation for future careers, a place Martin (2002) describes “where they learn skills for life, skills they will need for the world of work...” (p. 12). As already outlined in this thesis, the participants of this research see future occupations as a way of determining their masculinities. In the first focus group conducted towards the end of Grade 9, the boys readily spoke about the need to undertake studies in certain fields as preparation for their future, and most importantly to be skilled in the work force:

**Researcher:** School is supposed to be about learning. But what learning do you think is important?

**Mick:** Your basic...the main studies that you have to do.

**Bob:** Maths.

**Mick:** Maths and that.

**Researcher:** Okay. So you think maths is pretty important?

**Stewart:** Yeah, in the long run.

**Researcher:** Okay. So even in the long run, why do you need it in the long run?

**Stewart:** Because...um...you going to have to deal with numbers in life sometimes.

**Bob:** Working in the shop and asking customer what's...

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Yeah, okay. So maths is pretty important. So it is to do for preparation...

**Stewart:** With getting a job

**Bob:** Yes

**Researcher:** ...with basically jobs, is that what you think?

**Stewart:** Yeah.

The boys disclosed over a number of interviews that Maths and English were their least favourite subjects, and yet here, they agree that Maths should play a significant role in their learning. Stewart discloses that mathematical skills are important, and Bob agrees, to secure employment. Thus schooling is perceived by these boys to be a necessary burden in order to secure a possible future. It is interesting that they do

not mention school might help them develop skills in the present, skills that focus on social interaction, connectedness, initiative and problem solving, for example.

When these boys spoke there was a sense that education was a necessary evil, and the future was a much brighter option. Wexler (1992) claims that “there are students who believe that tomorrow will be ‘bigger and better’ and that when you finish school, they will be able to begin life more broadly and to consider the larger social questions” (p. 63). Stewart mentioned on a number of occasions that “you need to get an education to get a job”, while Jack stated “I’m going to work harder in Grade 10, that’s when the real work starts. You are getting closer to where you want to go. You’ve got to knuckle down and get on with it if you want a good future”, and Mick showed concern that Blair was “throwing his future away” when he showed a pattern of not attending school in 2004.

The underlying values articulated by the study participants suggest an inter - play of family values in their attitudes towards school. Stewart’s comment, “you need to get an education to get a job”, may be a response conditioned by parents and teachers. As already stated, the boys placed emphasis on being able to provide for future visions of possible families. They saw a role as a “provider”, school thus providing the means to secure an occupation and realise their dreams. Paid work was a way of defining their identities as males and by mid 2004, three of the boys had secured regular casual employment of up to 20 hours per week, as well as attending school, while two of the other boys were employed during their school holidays in a variety of casual jobs. Much of their conversations with each other during this year were about ways of securing work. Being financial independent was highly valued and allowed individuals to acquire status and power. They now had the means to undertake activities they had previously relied on their parents to support. This permitted the boys the financial means to add to their definition of who they were with the purchase of designer label clothing and drugs and alcohol, and gave them the ability to fund interests such as skateboarding and motor cross riding. Earning an income allowed them economic freedom and autonomy from parents.

Stewart described how he was looking for full time work, and that if he was able to secure employment he would leave school in Grade 9, as mentioned in the earlier

reconstructed narrative. Securing work was of high importance to him, and would allow him “to do whatever I want. Do my own thing. Be myself. Don’t have to worry ‘bout what my parents think any more or want me to do”. For all of the participants, securing employment and becoming financially independent was a major step in defining who they were, and future identities as men. They demonstrated an understanding that an education and study is vital in determining future employment and possible future identities, however, as Glasser (1990) suggests:

...If you ask them if they are working hard in school most will answer no. What they are saying is that, as much as they want the vague something that to them is a good education and know that it takes hard work to get it they do not have a clear idea of how school work as they know it, relates to what they want... (p. 91)

**“Cause computers are important. You got to know that stuff for the future”**

Research indicates those students who have clearly defined goals, whether they be academic, social or extra curricular, are more likely to find purpose, engagement and success at school (Ford, 1996; Lingard et al., 2002). As the study participants see some purpose in school as a preparation for possible futures, one might ask, whether this provides them with some motivation to succeed in their studies and engage in learning?

All of the participants were able to give details of careers that were of interest to them. Mick and Blair disclosed an interest in being mechanics and this did not change over time, while Jack, in earlier interviews, suggested he might attend University and study languages in the hope of becoming a translator. At the final interview conducted in 2005, Jack disclosed that this was the vision his parents had for him, and that it was far removed from what he wanted to do. At the conclusion of writing this thesis, Jack was attempting to secure employment as an apprentice in the automotive industry and had not continued his education beyond Grade 10. Jamie had ambitions of becoming an AFL player, while Bob, Stewart and Howard were unsure about the future. Stewart’s ambitions changed over time. Initially, he

had an interest in joining the army as a sniper, however, as already stated as the study progressed, Stewart's main ambition was to secure some type of work either in a factory or on a farm. Bob had difficulty in identifying a particular career, but expressed a strong interest in utilising his artistic skill, possibly as a car detailer. Of all the boys, Howard was the student who was the most unclear about what the future might look like. During Grade 10, however, he increasingly voiced an interest in defining a pathway in the police force and made a decision to continue his education the following year selecting subjects that were prerequisites for entry to the police force.

In defining ideas of possible future and occupations, one would assume that the study participants would find certain subjects more relevant and interesting to them. Students who move into senior levels of schooling are often given more choice to determine which subjects they will study. One might ask how did these participants make decisions about subjects, and did this ensure a higher level of motivation to succeed for those who saw relevance in subjects chosen?

Research indicates that teenagers are more likely to talk to parents or other adults about career options and further educational pathways (Ryan, 2001; Young and Ferguson, 1979). Who was most influential in the decisions the study participants made concerning the subjects they chose to study? What role did parents or the peer group have in assisting these decisions?

In meeting with each of the participants individually in the second year of the study when they had moved into Grade 9 they were asked about the influences on the choices made in selecting three elective subjects. The boys were invited to rate each one of the following influences: parents, older sibling, friends in the same year group, older friends at school, friends outside school, teacher, coach or mentor and other important relative as influential in their decision making in subject choice selection. A 0 to 10 scale was used, with 10 being the most influential and 0 being of no influence at all (see Appendix 3). The highest average of all the boys' scores was 5.7 which suggested parents were the most significant influence on subject choices. Jack, Bob and Stewart all scaled parents as 7 or above, while Blair and Mick ranked parents as being of no influence in determining elective subjects.

For the study participants, either parents played a significant role in determining possible futures and thus subject choices, or participants were less supported at home and this influence was of little or no significance. It is worthy noting that some parents have a significant influence in this area, although study participants might not consider them to be influential or are reluctant to voice this because they may want to present an image of autonomy in making such decisions.

In his extensive study of Australian adolescents, Martin (2002) determined that “nearly half those asked reported that their parents had the greatest influence on their motivation and learning. Approximately one in four of those asked reported that their friends yielded a greater impact” (p. 124). For some of my research participants, peers did play a significant in determining subjects to study. The average score for “friends in the same year group” was the highest in the similar categories regarding friends and was ranked lower than the influence of parents with an average of 3.1. Stewart ranked this the highest with a score of 8, followed by Bob (6) and Blair (3). Howard and Jack ranked this category low with scores of 1, while Mick ranked this of no importance at all on his decision making.

During individual interviews each of the boys was asked to discuss the reasons for choosing particular subjects. Many chose subjects because they thought it would “help them get a job” and it was “linked to what I wanna’ do when I leave school”. A number chose Information Technology “‘cause computers are important. You got to know that stuff for the future”. Research indicates boys link subject choices to future “male” vocational orientations (Arnot, 1984; *Boys: getting it right*, 2002; Connell, 2000, Martin, 2002). Arnot (1984) suggests that male students consider “education for work” (p. 44) and that priority is given to selecting subjects that will advance these goals. Arnot (1984) further suggests that “the result of ideologies about masculinity is that boys are taught to see their major commitment and interest in life as life - long paid work” (p. 44).

Drawing a strong correlation between the benefits of studying particular subjects and the impact on their possible futures, the study group see the learning as compartmentalised and separate. Shanks’ (1994) study found that students at the school found learning to be segmented. While concepts raised may be repeated there

was little integration of these across courses or subjects. Furthermore, many of the boys interviewed as part of Trent and Slade's (2001) study found that concepts were often repeated across subject areas making study "boring".

To study Information Technology is important because computers are seen as an integral part of their futures. All of the study participants had access to computers in their own homes and had considerable skills and competence in using a range of technology; yet they considered the study of computing at school would provide them with a formal qualification that would be recognised when pursuing employment.

**“It's not important, not valued, wouldn't help you get a job, not for what we want to do. It's for females”**

While each of the boys articulated the possibility of being a father of children as a possible identity for the future, there was a strong discourse amongst the group that studying Child Studies was inappropriate and would bring ridicule and possibly labelling as “a girl”. In the first focus group the boys openly discussed this issue.

**Researcher:** So is it basically students or boys don't study child studies at school because they might be labelled gay?

**Stewart, Bob:** Yeah. (In unison)

**Researcher:** Teased?

**Mick:** As a boy, you wouldn't want others to know you were studying it.

**Researcher:** Okay. Ah...would there be other reasons?

**Mick:** It's not important, not valued, wouldn't help you get a job, not for what we want to do. It's for females

**Researcher:** ...for women...women?

**Stewart:** It's more to do with women. They're the ones that have to carry the baby around.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** They're the ones that have to look after it.

**Researcher:** Yeah.

**Mick:** Yeah

The participants de - value activities and learning that they consider to be feminine. While they actively see a future for themselves as fathers, as mentioned earlier, they see little value in Child Studies. Students define subjects along gender lines. Studies are seen as either masculine or feminine (Connell, 2000; Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Lingard et al., 2002; Mac an Ghail, 1996). Martino and Pallotta - Chiarolli (2005) further explore this issue of subject selection, claiming “an important component of masculinity is avoidance of what I perceived to be the feminine, so boys in secondary schools may still favour ‘masculine’ subjects as a way of reinforcing their identity as males” (p. 16). They further intimate “the link between these traits and some school subjects could be this: the ‘masculine’ ones are career oriented and concerned with the phenomena and the world of objects, while the ‘feminine’ ones are people oriented, involving expression and exploration of human emotions” (p. 16).

The study participants consider that the majority of parenting is the work of females, and that learning parenting skills is considered less of a priority for them. Mick’s comment “it’s not important, not valued” is a strong affirmation that de - values parenting. He makes the distinction that studying such a subject will not prepare him and his friends for careers. This further suggests that they distinguish school as only a preparation for careers. They fail to discern that much of what they will learn will prepare them for life, including relationships and skills that they will need to live from day to day. If parenting and child studies are de - valued, studying such a subject would place the student in an inferior power position. He may become the target for ridicule amongst his peers.

### **“School is work. You have to do it to get somewhere”.**

During the fourth interview I asked the following question of the boys “What does the future look like? What images do you see?” Mick’s response was typical. He stated “I see myself living in a decent house with a bit of land. Hopefully, I would have a girlfriend, maybe even a wife with a kid. I see myself having my own mechanics workshop and I see myself still riding motor bikes. I always picture a good neighbourhood, with a boat outside of my house, and the sun is always out. And that’s all I can picture.” The boys have dreams, ambitions for the future. The possible futures they see for themselves encompass more than just employment.

Mick's picture is comprehensive, built around him and incorporating relationships, possessions and images of happiness.

In all of the future descriptions of the six participants interviewed there is mention of employment. Future identities are reliant on the security of employment. This is a high priority and education is seen as the means to achieve this. They recognise that without prospects of employment, the other visions they have of possible futures are unlikely to be achieved. Steady jobs will ensure disposable income to support families and acquisition of goods that determine status, power and identity. Even Blair acknowledges a future, which he describes as "I think of a job, then I'll be set for life". School becomes a means to an end. School is a preparation for work and, in many ways, school is their work. During interview four, Jack defined the term "work" as "work is hard labour, a chore, something you have to do. School is work. You have to do it to get somewhere". It is a cost you have to bear to secure a future.

Returning to the earlier ideas of Shanks (1994), who found that:

Clearly, students viewed school as work they had to do. All "real" work had a product and the goal of work was to find the right answer and to finish, although it was frequently more important to complete an assignment quickly than to complete it correctly. If "asserted" work did not have an end product, students often questioned it and did not even value it as work. (p. 53)

One might suggest that these subjects see their identities at school as workers, to complete tasks, to produce work, work that is often has little relevance to their lives outside school.

The boys define many of the subjects they study as work, while others are defined more like play. Subjects like Maths, English, Science and Information Technology were considered "work", where there were tasks to complete and to not necessarily understand or be valued. Howard explained that "you just do it, get it done, but don't usually remember it or know it. Not like PE, you remember that stuff, but Science and Maths you don't. You just do it, get it done and don't worry about it", Stewart

stated “its’ work, yep, depends on the class though. If you don’t like it, you just make out you’re doing it. You don’t do much, like IT, Humanities and Creative Writing. I get away with it. Doing nothing”. Stewart demonstrates passive resistance to these tasks by choosing not to complete them. It is not surprising that school has little meaning for these boys. Their focus is on providing what they believe the system requires of them. They do not value education as something that might help develop their wholeness as individuals.

Glasser (1993) states that “few students in traditional schools do quality work because they do not believe that what they are asked to do and/or how they are asked to do it does anything to improve the quality of their lives” (p. 17). The study participants believe the quality of their lives will be improved through acquiring possessions and being financially independent. They believe that this will bring them happiness, power and prestige, and yet much of the knowledge imparted at school is removed from the values the boys hold.

When schools devalue the life experiences of students, they resist learning imposed in the classroom through “protest masculinity” and “taking up the offer” (Connell, 1996). Towards the end of the study, Blair demonstrated total rejection of the values of schooling by choosing to not attend school. His friends reported that he was becoming increasingly associated with a local street gang that was involved in petty crime, drugs and which presented itself as “tough” and “aggressive”. Jackson (1998) suggests that:

In many boys’ lives at school, there is a dynamic interaction between their social/economic worlds of failure, dependency and powerlessness and their deep investments in dominant forms of heterosexual masculinities...they counter the ‘failure’ of their lives by reaching out for alternative sources of power and dominance. Dominant, heterosexual masculinity is one of the most enticing sources of compensatory power. And that often means buying into a culture of aggressive, heterosexual manliness which deliberately rejects school learning as an unmanly activity. (p. 89)

Blair felt that school had little to offer him, and that when he did attend he was a failure and often “in trouble”. There was little reason to attend school and in his final year of high school he attended only one day of school. Past prominent studies have shown how some boys withdraw from education if they see themselves as failing, and find other ways of claiming status and power through the affiliation with street gangs (Sewell, 1998; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977).

**“I wanna do alright at school. I might muck around a bit and not look like I’m doing much.”**

One important question to address is, how do boys like Jack who are more academically talented, balance the identity of learner, with the identity of being part of the peer group? This question focuses on how students, particularly boys, fashion their identities as learners. For some years there have been a number of prominent researchers that claim much of boy’s underachievement at school is the result of a widespread belief amongst boys in the Western world that it is “not cool to be clever” (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Head, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Lingard et al., 2002; Renold, 2001; Skelton, 1997; Wexler, 1992; Whitelaw et al., 2000). Renold’s (2001) ethnographical study of Year 6 students concluded that “being academically orientated, for a boy, is often devalued and denigrated because of its equation with ‘femininity’” (p. 375). Archer and Yamashita (2003) found in studying boys in an inner city school in London, that “boys in our study suggested that being seen to work in class would result in being labelled ‘a pussy’” (p. 27). Researchers have indicated that it is not “cool” to be seen as studious or achieving good results (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Head, 1999; Wexler, 1992), while Willis (1977) suggested that male students distance themselves from school structures and figures, and do not want to be seen to be colluding with a system that worked against the hegemonic masculinities they were so busy establishing. As Martin (2002) implies, “the main difference between boys and girls in motivation and learning is boys’ reluctance to be seen as working, learning, or motivated. Boys are less willing to be seen to try hard, stand out from the other students, or be labelled” (p. 15).

Many boys have a range of coping strategies which either disguise academic ability or avoid it all costs for fear of being labelled as a “spock”, “geek” or “swat”, or for those at the other end of the spectrum who are afraid of being labelled as a “failure”,

“dumb” or “stupid”(Connell, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Renold, 2001). None of these identities sit well with boys who are trying to formulate masculine identities that aspire to being ‘cool’. Harter (1996) established that, increasingly, as students move to higher grades, “the more students endorsed “feeling stupid” as a motive causing one to be turned off schoolwork” (p. 20).

Jackson’s (2002) comments about protecting self worth have some relevance here, particularly when considering the resistance strategies Stewart, Blair and Howard employ. Jackson (2002) argues that by protecting self worth an individual avoids not only failure, but also the implications of failure. She details four main strategies employed by boys to protect self worth, as well as identities. These include procrastination and deliberately withdrawing effort towards academic tasks. This was earlier illustrated by Howard choosing not to complete tasks and being placed in classes well below his ability. Martin (2003) describes this as a process of self sabotage in which boys are more likely to engage in.

The third strategy Jackson describes is the creation of the persona that the student has made little effort resulting in apparently effortless achievement. Students may downplay their efforts to peers, while making efforts to study at home (Dweck, 1996; Juvonen, 1996). Mick touched on this in a later interview when he stated “I wanna do alright at school. I might muck around a bit and not look like I’m doing much, but I usually do my homework and get it in when I have to. My mates wouldn’t know I do it and I wouldn’t tell them. They’d pay out on me big time”. Once again, the audience is paramount in formulating identities. Mick chooses to study away from his peers and he makes an effort to not to draw attention to this. It appears that he wants to learn, and yet, he is forced to hide this in order to protect the identity he has established for himself within his peer group. He fears ridicule and being labelled studious. Being the victim of ridicule would place him in an inferior position. It is better to disguise his interest in learning and studious habits.

Some boys are afraid to achieve academically, or been seen to complete work tasks at school for fear of their masculinity being questioned by “significant others” (Epstein, 1998; Francis, 2000; Lingard, et al., 2002; Mills, 2001; Mills & Keddie, 2005). Jackson’s (2002) final strategy in the protection of self worth is for males to

display disruptive behaviour, which is evident in many descriptions of Blair's behaviour at school. Peers "police" not only the social performance, but the academic performances of boys as learners (Collins et al., 2000; Epstein, 1998; Kenway et al., 1997; Mills, 2001).

Returning to Renold's (2001) study she found that:

Two - thirds of the boys ('working' and 'middle class') went to great lengths to avoid studious behaviours, particularly boys who were deemed high achievers...some boys deployed humourous techniques (including the teasing and ridiculing of others) and some boys engaged in disruptive, rule-breaking behaviours. Others played down their achievements. Each strategy was a means of concealing conformist attitudes to schooling and to avoid being positioned as studious. (p. 373)

For many boys, cleverness is undervalued. As a researcher, I was interested in exploring attitudes towards students who were achieving strongly at school. There were contradictions in the discourses surrounding this topic. During focus groups, boys who were "clever" or "bright" were spoken of in a positive and yet observations I made suggested that the study participants often bullied and harassed students who were more academic. Jack detailed how he was ridiculed by his mates for taking French and Mick disclosed that they took great delight in predicting how bad their school reports would be because they had not completed work and had been disruptive. Mick continued to state "the reports, they're never that bad. We just say they are. I would be pretty upset if I got a bad report. We make out they're bad, but I'm sure they're not as half bad as we make out". When I asked why this happened, he stated: "I suppose its just part of the game we play with each other. You don't wanna do bad at school, well I don't any way. You just don't wanna be called a "geek" by your friends". Whitelaw et al. (2000) indicate that:

Many boys may be acutely aware of the need for academic achievement, or, indeed be very keen to achieve academically, but be overwhelmed by their perception that to voice such views or actively pursue such goals may turn them into pariahs. (p. 9)

While all of the study participants said that to gain an education was a priority, that study was important in determining future outcomes, they were reluctant to be perceived as achieving in the school environment. Those that are studious and scholarly are often the targets of bullying in schools (Keddie, 2001; Mac an Ghail, 1994).

Reay (2002) tracked an individual male student, Shaun, over the duration of four years as part of a research project. The research focused on how the student attempted to balance academic achievement and being part of a male peer group, which he described as “two selves”. Reay (2002) comments on Shaun’s tenuous position when she states that “he is caught between two untenable positions, continually engaged in a balancing act that requires superhuman effort; on the one hand ensuring his masculinity is kept intact and on the other hand endeavouring to maintain his academic success” (p. 228). One is reminded that individuals are active agents in the construction of masculinities and that through their subjective positioning they must determine how they will accept or resist these masculine discourses depending on what they hope to achieve (Robinson, 2005).

In this study, Jack was involved in a similar balancing act, an act to balance his masculinity and affiliation with peers by playing “cool” and downplaying effort and success with academic pursuits. Research indicates that many boys display a lack of effort signalling indifference and lack of importance for school tasks (Bleach, 1998a, 1998b; Juvonen, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Younger and Warrington, 1996). Adopting a cool demeanour towards study tasks by boys academically achieving is widespread amongst adolescent males (Lingard et al., 2002; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino, 1999, Reay, 2002). While Jack demonstrated autonomy in choosing subjects that were considered more academic by his mates, teachers stated he was often lazy and underachieving, performed well below his capabilities, particularly in classes which he studied with his immediate peer group. Jack reduces effort devaluing work tasks. He reduces efforts towards his school work when he is aware of his peer audience to create an identity that suggests “I don’t care about school, and I don’t have to work at it”.

The boys spoke about others they admired who were clever. In individual interviews, three of the participants spoke openly about Jack's academic abilities. They described him as "clever" and "he's got the smarts". They admired him, but it was largely because Jack was able to balance this scholastic identity with being "cool". He had other abilities the boys admired, his physical attractiveness that made him popular with the girls, branded clothing and apparel, as well as his skill as a drummer. He often played in assemblies and local rock band competitions as part of a group, promoting his status within the broader student community. These characteristics allowed him to balance the identities of the "academic" student with those of being "cool" and "popular".

As part of the first focus group the boys spoke about a popular student in their year that they deemed as clever and "cool":

**Researcher:** So who is someone you would admire that is a student here? That's what I want to know, not someone necessarily that the teachers think is a good student.

**Bob:** Jake is all right.

**Stewart:** Yeah.

**Bob:** He just talks to you and shit. He's pretty bright too.

**Mick:** As long as he is a good student and he mucks around too, if he feels like it.

**Jack:** He's funny, always cracking jokes. Does alright at school Too, does his work. The teachers like him.

**Researcher:** Do the other students like him?

**Mick:** Yeah, he's wicked.

**Bob:** He's cool. He's funny, cracks jokes all the time.

Jake is admired by the study group. He is able to balance his identity as an academic achiever with being a popular classmate. It is his sense of humour and ability to "muck around" that allow him acceptance and removal from ridicule. In an earlier interview, Stewart spoke in detail about this particular student who was in the same English class. He stated "Jake knows a fair bit about everything, or if he doesn't know much about it, he will ask questions. He gets a bit of flack because he

knows a fair bit. But he's fairly cool. He's known around the school by heaps of kids. He's wicked on the guitar and he doesn't mind helping you in music". Here, Stewart mentions that while Jake appears to be able to balance his academic abilities with "fitting in" through his musical talent and use of humour, he is still the victim of ridicule amongst the student body.

These extracts suggest the research participants admire cleverness. They are quick to describe characteristics of cleverness for both Jack and Jake. Trent and Slade (2001) listed that 91% of the boys interviewed as part of the Survey of Student Views in agreement with the statement "I think it's good to be clever", but acknowledged that there was an element of "giving shit to the smart people". The boys surveyed suggest that this was done "in fun". They discuss the importance of succeeding at school, and there is admiration for those that are clever, but they believe that academic talent needs to be balanced with other worthwhile attributes to ensure acceptance by peers and freedom from bullying and ridicule. These attributes or behaviours are those that are considered to increase status amongst peers (Adler & Adler, 1998) such as sporting ability, skills in adolescent cultural aspects such as music and being witty and popular. Lingard et al. (2002) advise that:

Hence, being cool - and perhaps more importantly, not being a nerd or a geek - is sometimes about acting tough and tormenting girls. This social dynamic amongst the boys is also explicitly linked to macho sporting cultures and to the imperative to avoid the attribution of being labelled a 'sissy' or 'gay'. (p. 79)

Peers play a vital role in determining ways in which students create identities as learners. Less academic students resist learning by rejecting the academic values, while those who are fortunate enough to be scholastically talented reduce efforts, hide abilities or find ways of making themselves more appealing to peers. As Connell (2000) suggests "masculinity shapes education, as well as education forming masculinity" (p. 142). Through the strategies the study participants employ to identify themselves as learners, the discourses surrounding masculinities are continually at play and have repercussions for their lives beyond high school. The participants understand that school is vital to secure a future, and, yet, they willingly

underachieve academically because of the need to be accepted by their peers and to avoid feeling powerless or inferior through the ridicule studiousness brings.

**“I suppose they’ll think you’re a nerd if you answer a question”**

Over the three years of observing the study participants, I saw few of them ask for help from teachers. Blair was the only exception. He would often ask questions of teachers at the most inappropriate times, possibly as a way of resisting authority and retaining some power in the classroom. As already demonstrated, he would ask frequent questions disrupting the pace and climate of the class. During observations, it was clear that when the majority of the boys in the group were unsure of what was required in tasks, or they did not understand, they would ask those they were sitting next to, or move off task, not completing the required work commitments. These were often times when students were reprimanded for talking, or being “off task”, or being disruptive. Many of these situations escalated, and, on a number of occasions, some of the pupils were removed from the classroom to “time out” as part of the school behaviour management plan.

As part of the fourth interview, the boys were asked to respond to Picture Two, of younger boys with their arms up in a classroom environment. Of the six boys who responded to the picture, three of the boys stated they would not ask for help, while two of them stated that it depended on the class and teacher, while Jack stated he would be happy to ask for help. Bob stated “I suppose they’ll think you’re a nerd if you answer a question. You might get called a dumb arse if you don’t know something and you raise your hand, just friends stuffing around”. Jack described boys’ failure to ask for help as “an image thing. You might feel embarrassed. Your mates might tease you”.

Bob justifies that, by answering questions, one might be classified by the peer audience as a “nerd”, but asking for help results in classification as a “dumb arse”. He acknowledges that these judgements come from friends and are intended as part of the “blokeiness”, but they are still powerful judgements that determine his behaviour. Consequently, he refuses to answer or ask for help.

### **“Yeah, he let’s you have fun while we’re learning**

Recent research indicates that the impact of teaching style is imperative to the learning outcomes of students (Bleach, 1998a, 1998b; Buckingham, 2000; Keddie, 2006; Lingard et al., 2002; Martin, 2002, 2003; Martino et al., 2004; Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003)). The recent publication of *Boys: getting it right*, 2002 presented to the Commonwealth House of Representatives in Australia, stated that “the relationship that a teacher establishes with students is more important for all students although the need for the teacher to establish a connection with individual students is more important to boys, and particularly critical for difficult boys” (p. 134). On a number of occasions, my boys articulated that it was the relationship with individual teachers that determined whether they enjoyed and learnt in that subject or not. As Darling Hammond (1997) proposes “relationships matter for learning” (p. 134).

In hearing the voices of these students it became apparent in their descriptions of their relationships with a variety of teachers that it was the feeling of connectedness they had with individual teachers that determined their interest, motivation and success in the subject, such as Bob’s descriptions of his Art class. The participants were able to articulate how they wanted to learn and the factors that they believed would improve their learning and time at school. As already mentioned, they valued “hands on” experiences, but more importantly they wanted learning to be fun. They wanted to be able to learn in situations that respected and encouraged their social connections with peers. In the first focus group they discussed a teacher that was new to the school and the enjoyment they gained, even in a subject that was more traditional such as Maths.

**Researcher:** Tell me about Mr A’s class? Is there learning happening in that class?

**Bob, Stewart, Mick:** Yeah, yeah.

**Stewart:** Yeah, a fair bit, a big bit. He let’s us talk

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Bob:** Most of the work he’s done is more practical

**Stewart:** He doesn’t do much Maths work.

**Researcher:** Okay.

- Stewart:** It's good. He doesn't make us do much writing.
- Researcher:** Okay. So he is more into lots of social interactions.
- Mick:** Yeah, he let's you have fun while we're learning.
- Researcher:** Does that make a difference?
- Mick:** Yes, it does. Yeah, it's not bad. It's wicked.
- Bob:** Yeah.
- Researcher:** Okay, so actually going to his classes basically is enjoyable...
- Stewart:** Yeah.
- Researcher:** ...because he allows you to interact in your learning.
- Stewart:** Yeah, when he came here, our first class this year, he said there isn't much bookwork, not a lot of theory, more practical. He was right and he kept his word. We have him for about four lessons per week.
- Mick:** He's wicked.

These students look forward to Maths because the teacher finds ways of engaging them. He allows them to interact freely, finds practical ways to promote learning making it fun, and they feel empowered because he keeps his word. They feel respected and give respect because they feel they share power in this classroom.

Trent and Slade (2001) made some valuable comments about those that are considered "good" teachers by boys, when they state:

Furthermore, from the boys' criteria of 'good teaching' it is evident that these teachers display a genuine, practical commitment to the democratisation and liberalisation of the young and respect them for who they are, while making 'reasonable' demands of them...In other words, they give them sufficient reason to believe in themselves, in others, in the value of learning and of working towards long term goals; that what needs to be done in their lives can be done. (p. 29)

Boys respond positively to teachers who are friendly, respectful, easygoing and fair, and who provide learning environments that are fun, interesting and supportive, and

where teachers listen to students ((Keddie & Churchill, 2003; Lingard, 2003; Lingard et al., 2002; Martin, 2002, Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003).

Good teachers allow students to feel hope. They allow students to have a “voice” (Hargreaves, 2003; Mills & Keddie, 2005), to have agency (Davies, 1993) and position students with some control in their lives in the classroom. Keddie and Churchill’s (2003) study that surveyed approximately 370 boys from a Catholic boys’ school provides further evidence that boys want to learn in environments that are respectful and supportive. Keddie and Churchill (2003) suggest that “...we can see the importance many boys place on respect and fairness - on being heard, being seen as legitimate and being positioned with agency and control in their everyday school interactions” (p. 7).

The study participants are seeking more control over their learning, and by having more scope to choose, how and what they learn. When I asked the subjects “What do students want power over?” the dialogue was animated with all of the boys contributing and expressing ideas with enthusiasm. Here is part of an extract that demonstrates their understanding and desire to have more control over their learning and the way that they learn.

**Jack:** Teachers, classes...

**Mick:** Other students.

**Researcher:** Other students. Yeah. What about things they learn? Do you want to have some control on power over that?

**Jack:** Yep!

**Researcher:** Okay. So to act...and I have seen that at the times like people said M’s class is cool because basically you get the freedom...

**Mick:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** ...to choose what you want. So is that in a sense part of having some power in that class that you get...

**Mick:** More to say, yeah.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Mick:** More to say what you are doing.

- Researcher:** Okay. What about having some power over the way you learn, because students learn in lots of different ways? I considered watching Romeo and Juliet, if he could actually have some power over the way he learned, like you have been learning...
- Jack:** It's like having choices...
- Mick:** You can choose topics you want to learn.
- Researcher:** Okay.
- Mick:** Even if you had choices it would make it better.
- Researcher:** Yeah. But having some choices is what you are saying about things you are doing.
- Blair:** Yeah.
- Mick:** If we get to choose maybe we wouldn't learn that much, because we might stuff around!

The boys express a desire to have more control over learning by having “more to say”, “more to say about what you are doing”. Jack’s comment “it’s like having choices” and Mick’s further comment “you can choose topics you want to learn” suggests that participants are keen to have more freedom to make choices, and thus direct their own learning. They want to have a “voice” and be heard, expressing a desire to have more freedom, freedom to choose and, yet, Mick also voices concern that the ability to choose may result in a poor work ethic. Initially, it appears they want control, but on closer analysis they want freedom to choose and direct their own learning, even if it means possible failure to complete tasks. This is why Bob enjoys Art. He feels empowered to make his own choices and feels worthy as a result. Further to this, the study group describe a desire to attend College, where it was perceived there was more freedom, and students were empowered to make choices about the subjects to be studied.

- Jack:** I don't know whether there is difference between here in college
- Blair:** Yeah, there is a big difference.
- Mick:** You don't have to go to class if you don't want.
- Jack:** But it's in your best interest to.

- Blair:** Yeah...
- Researcher:** So...
- Blair:** Heaps better
- Researcher:** ...so you think college would be better, do you? because it would provide more freedom for you or is it different...
- Mick:** Yeah...
- Researcher:** ...again like...
- Jack:** ...it's freedom, you know, you get to choose what you want to study. That's important.
- Researcher:** Okay.
- Blair:** Yeah.
- Researcher:** So school...high school could be more like college, would that be better?
- Mick:** Yeah, it would.

The boys project towards a future that embodies freedom, expressing a positive outlook towards College and looking forward to a freedom that they believe their current high school does not offer, and an opportunity to be with friends, to be social. The ability to have choices is perceived as a way of retaining power and control. College provides them with hope: they are hopeful of an education where they will determine what is worthwhile and meaningful for the future.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter the reader has been witness to the boys' focus of schooling as being a time for connection with peers which gives their life meaning. The boys readily talk about future identities that are closely associated with "occupations" and they recognise that gaining an education is necessary to secure these possible futures. The boys dream and look towards the future as a time when their masculinity will be proved. They will become complete and the images of these identities are closely affiliated with economic wealth, and material possessions they believe will bring them status, power and happiness.

The participants of the study group are able to articulate their experiences in the school setting and the reader is privy to further discourses the boys share around

schooling, such as their attitudes towards academic subjects which are judged on the male/female dichotomy. Subjects such as Child Studies are de-valued and considered feminine by the boys, and to study such a subject would open them to ridicule by their peers and result in a lack of status.

Most interesting was the participants' attitudes to class work. The boys saw little value in many of the tasks they were asked to complete at school, describing them as work that had to be done. There was a belief amongst the boys that this work was removed from their lives outside school or the futures they were projecting for themselves. Most of the participants disclosed that they wanted to succeed at school, but it was important to present a reluctant interest in learning and, for those who were more academic, this needed to be balanced with other identities that were admired and respected.

Glasser (1993) describes the need to build "quality schools" that fulfil the basic needs of power, love, freedom, fun and survival (p. 19). The study participants have provided insights by describing learning experiences and classrooms that have allowed students to have control over what is happening to them and around them, a place where students have agency, a place where they are heard. They give detailed descriptions of teachers who are supportive, respectful and provide opportunities for them to direct their own learning, work with their peers and provide choices in what they are to study. These students talk often of being separated from their friends, as if teachers devalue the importance of groupness. In the case of these participants there was a deliberate attempt by the authorities of the school to split this group of boys by allocating them to different classes in the second year of the study. The boys felt the school made every effort to split them up, to individualise them, to reduce the power they held as a group, and yet, one might question if the strongest meaning in their lives is that of their peers then schools will have little luck in engaging these students and others like them.

Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000) spend considerable time describing a need to develop "conversation" between students and teachers in the hope that:

..the opportunity to speak, the opportunity to be heard and the need to be supported, in an endeavour to give expression to the personal and collective knowledges and investments that exist for young males in the context of their peer groups. To this end we believe that there is a need for establishing new modes of communication designed to work with, rather than in opposition to peer groups. (p. 82)

Teachers need to foster a dialogue with students that encourages a place where students and educationalist can come together, a “third space”, a place of hope, a place of equals, that encourages rich dialogue and discussion. As Keddie (2006) suggests “...the context of mutually respectful and conciliatory relations allows a paradigm shift from a prescriptive (and inevitably rational and masculinist) focus on controlling and punishing boys to a situated and contingent focus on knowing and understanding boys” (p. 106). The shift may be difficult, but it is a necessary one, if we want those boys who are failing at school, and indeed all students, to achieve the best possible outcomes in their educational experiences.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusions**

**“The miserable have no other medicine,  
but only hope”**

**William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*  
Act III, Scene I**

**“We must take the current when it serves,  
or lose our ventures”**

**William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*  
Act IV, Scene 3**

## Introduction

The impetus for undertaking this research was to contribute to the increasing volume of research examining the underachievement of boys in schools. My endeavour has been shaped by the work of Gadamer (1989, 1990) and Taylor (1989, 1994, 2002), and the drive to find a “third space”, a place of openness between myself and the participants of the study, a place where the horizons we each look from become fused. I have used the model of the researcher as a primary instrument (Janesick, 2000; Merriam, 1988), as a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) who is immersed in the research, and through a process of crystallization (Richardson, 2003) uses writing as a way of coming to know (Charmez, 2000; Hodder, 2003, Richardson, 2003).

As a researcher I have striven to bring passion to the work. Greene (1986) maintains:

...passion has been called the power of possibility. This is because it is the source of our interests and our purposes. Passion signifies mood, emotion, desire: modes of grasping the appearance of things. It is one of the most important ways of recognizing possibility... (pp. 427-428)

My passion was to hear the voices that had been silenced, those boys who choose to underachieve or reject school and learning because of fear of failure. As Denzin (1995) attains:

What is voiced, or given a voice, is also heard. To hear is to perceive, to be aware of sound, the sound of the other's voice, to acknowledge, to attend to, to ascertain, catch, discover, eavesdrop, examine, find, gather, heed, harken, investigate, judge, learn, overhear, try to understand, listen, to seek a hearing of one's voice or one's opinion. Hearing requires that one give careful attention to what is heard, and said. Hearing presumes listening, and the conscious effort to hear, to attend closely, so as to hear; to give or lend ear; to keep one's ears open; to prick up one's ears; to hang on to someone's words. Listening can also mean to heed; to give heed to; to take advice; to obey; to take notice; to observe. One can hear and not listen. A listener is one who hears and listens. (p. 13)

This powerful and extensive extract by Denzin (1995) has provided focus for my work in this thesis as a researcher. While bringing passion to the work, I have attempted to hear and listen in the expectation that I can bring a sense of hope to the subjects, to make visible what has been hidden. Sumari (1996) describes this as a process of excavation of “sites of rupture” (p. 120). In his explanation of Gadamer’s ideas, Sumari (1996) makes valuable comment when he states that “when we are confused, when we misunderstand, when we misinterpret, when we are excluded, silenced or marginalised, we are experiencing a rupture - a breach in the relations between ourselves and the world” (p. 120). The study participants are experiencing a rupture between themselves and learning, and, as part of this project, I have come to understand that as an educator I also was feeling a rupture - a rupture between myself and some of my students because I could not reach them and thus I could not engage them in learning.

My study has attempted to explore how the study participants perform, resist and weave multiple discourses to shape their experiences as boys (Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003) which impacts on gendered identities and practices as learners. They have actively demonstrated and shared personal understandings of masculinities as socially constructed practices. While the intention of the study was never to prompt change within the participants, they have been involved in what Connell (1998) suggests is “critical autobiography”, being propelled to new understandings by questioning one’s own history and gender practices which promotes insight and the first step towards change (Connell, 1998, Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003). Throughout the study the boys explore and delve into their understandings of masculinities, identities and power, as well as the contradictions these understandings bring. There have been enlightening moments when insight has been gained and these understandings questioned. These are moments of hope, hope that educators may affect change through dialogue, giving students voice so that they can be engaged to improve educational outcomes. As Greene (1986) proclaims:

Perhaps we can invent ways of freeing people to feel and express indignation, to break through the opaqueness, to refuse the silences. We need to teach in such a way as to arouse passion now and then; we need

a new camaraderie, a new en masse. These are dark and shadowed times, and we need to live them, standing before one another, open to the word. (p. 441)

Chapter 9 includes a postscript that will give insights into the further journeys of the study participants at the conclusion of the writing of this thesis, closer examination of the key questions that were the impetus for this study, and a summary of key findings, as well as implications for stakeholders. The final section of the chapter will investigate ways to move forward in approaching how, as educators, we might improve the learning outcomes of boys.

### **The continued journey of the study participants**

In November 2006 the participants were embarking on the following journeys:

**Bob** had enrolled in a senior secondary college. He reported that college “was heaps better than high school” and that he had enjoyed the work placements in 2006 as part of his vocational training program in the construction industry. Bob was intending to return to college in 2007 for Grade 12 in a second vocational training program in Furnishings. While Bob did not continue with his study of Art at college, he increasingly became interested in the areas of Computer Graphics and Video Production. Bob was keen to move towards gaining a trade at the conclusion of Grade 12.

**Blair** had secured two casual positions in 2006 in small retail outlets. He had been fired from the first position because of unreliability and inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. Blair was currently employed in the second position, but the work was unreliable and poorly paid. He continued to see Jack and Mick on a regular basis.

**Mick** had enrolled in vocational training program in Automotive Studies at the same college as Bob. Mick reported that he found the Automotive course to be “wicked” and that he had “really enjoyed the work placements” in various automotive businesses. Mick worked steadily at his subjects in 2006 and achieved solid results. He was keen to complete a second vocational training program in 2007 in the area of

construction and Mick listed working as a mechanic or welder as possible pathways beyond Grade 12. Much of Mick's spare time was spent perfecting skateboarding skills and riding motorbikes. He continued to be "good friends with Jack".

**Jack** was successful in gaining an apprenticeship in a well respected automotive business in Tasmania at the end of 2006. Mick reported that Jack was very happy in this position.

**Howard** was studying a range of subjects including Legal Studies, Drama, English, Health Studies and Introduction to Sociology and Psychology in 2006 at the same college as Bob and Mick. His attendance at school had improved considerably, but lateness to morning classes continued to be a problem during 2006. Howard has decided to aim towards University and in planning his Grade 12 he was keen to study a demanding load of pre - tertiary subjects.

The destinations of Stewart and Jamie were unknown despite considerable liaison with Mercury High School regarding post school destinations.

### **Discussion of research questions**

In coming to address the key research question of this thesis, *In what ways are masculinities constructed in the school setting?* my work has focused on gender as being socially constructed ((Beynon, 2002; Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1996, 2000; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kenway, 1995; Kimmel, 1987, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Nilan, 2000; Renold 2001; Warren, 1997), and that there are multiple ways to be male (Mills & Keddie, 2005). The themes of identity, power, and peer relations have been used as a framework to shape the investigation and to provide focus on how one might address this question. As a result, three sub questions were developed and it is now the intention to examine the key findings in response to these three questions.

#### ***What impact do the discourses of masculinities play in identity formation?***

In my research I have concentrated attention on the importance of community in defining and formulating identities. Taylor (1989, 1994, 2002), Frankl (1969, 1992) and Gadamer (1989, 1990) see man as self determining. Individuals seek to find

meaning in relation to others (Alexander, 1993, 1997; Dewey, 1966; Gadamer, 1990). Grondin (2002), in an explanation of Gadamer's ideas, suggests that "as a being that is always concerned by its own being, human existence is always concerned and in search of orientation" (p. 38). Self is understood in relation to time. Humans live an ongoing narrative where they are projected towards the future (Beistegui, 2005). Individuals are always in process, existence is forward bound, hopeful of becoming (Besitegui, 2002), and yet this process is never fully realised or achieved (Hall, 1996; Smith, 2002). In this project the boys play multiple identities which are underpinned by the predominance of gender. Gender is a "life project" (Connell, 2002), something that is never mastered, and demands its owner to be in a process of continual rehearsal (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Nilan, 2000). Gender is a performance (Butler, 1990; Cornwell & Lindisfarne, 1994a, 1994b; Nayak & Kehily, 1996) that supports all identities the person plays, depending on the context and gender relations in which he is immersed.

The study participants refer to identities as fixed and dependent upon the perception of others. Audience is significant in determining the identities an individual plays. The boys describe characteristics individuals display and how this becomes a prescribed identity. What was fundamental in their descriptions was a sense that they wanted to become a "somebody" - a person of status, privilege and power. These understandings were strongly tied to a projection towards the future. The boys had dreams of who they would become and this sense of self was strongly tied to an understanding of masculinity as the "provider". There was a belief that by securing future occupations this would bring economic wealth and status to provide for future families. A "provider" claims power in that he can support and protect others. In the descriptions and dialogues the boys shared there was a sense of expectation of completion and fulfillment as a man if one could achieve the identity of "provider". The boys express a need to feel complete, to know, and that manhood would provide this sense of completion.

Displaying strong understandings of what it means to be male, and the significant impacts of this on the various identities they play, the study participants discussed the importance of being tough, and physically and mentally strong, and of mastering their body. The findings here are not unusual, as previous research indicates that

masculinity is often defined by boys as being dominant, powerful and tough (Davies 1993, Epstein, 1998, Keddie, 2003; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Pattman et al., 2005).

Identities, and thus masculinities, are embodied (Connell, 1990, 1995; Merleau - Ponty, 1962; Messner, 1992; Paechter, 2006a; Watson, 1999; Whitson, 1990). Bodies are central to an individual's sense of self as a gendered identity (Merleu-Ponty, 1962, Paechter, 2006a; Whitson, 1990). There is a need to have a sureness of body, which allows mastery over oneself, but also affords the individual the ability to dominate, to gain respect and status. Those who are tough are promoted to positions of power (Gagnon, 1974; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Skelton, 1997; Martino, 1999). There is little wonder that many boys work hard at achieving identities through sport, and, in this study, Jamie and Stewart, in particular, train and use their bodies and develop physical skills in male orientated sports to gain privilege, position and power. Central to these identities is the importance of "winning at all costs". The boys describe a competitive ethos that is central to the masculinities they display. Messner (1992) explains "...winning it all counts most" (p. 45) to many males and in the dialogues with the study participants we see that this is a central understanding that underlies the gendered identities displayed. They are highly competitive and, yet, when there is a possibility of failure, they are more likely to withdraw from competition, rather than be seen as failing, as this positions them as less powerful.

The identities we see the study participants play are heterosexual. Heterosexuality is an uncontested norm in schools (Cockburn, 1987; Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Mac an Ghail, 1996). The boys choose to display identities that send a message to the audience of others that makes strong statements about their sexuality, by using sex - based harassment, bravado, humour and language to define their status as heterosexuals, both amongst themselves and in their relations with the wider community of peers. There is a definite fear of being labelled "gay" or "feminine" which they deem would result in a lack of status and power.

Using Gee's (2001) model of identity we have seen the importance of audience in determining various identities. The identities developed, and those aspired to, are informed by a strong understanding of masculinity that places focus on being

masterful and powerful, and a desire for position and status. Recognition and respect of others is needed to feel complete. Yet there is a contradiction in that selves are never fully realised or complete.

***How are discourses of masculinities informed, mediated and governed by the male peer group?***

The participants have provided a wealth of insight into how the peer group operated in developing and defining the masculinities the boys shared. For me, one of the most significant insights gained was the supremacy of the peer group in its control of individuals and their displays of masculinities, and both the subtle and overt ways in which the peer group operates to sustain masculinity. Peers define and police gender definitions (Arnot, 1984; Connell, 1996). These understandings use a male/female dichotomy (Davies, 1989). The peer group creates “the regimes of truth” around issues of being male and the individual does all he can to adhere to these presented truths in fear of being rejected.

The need to belong is paramount and the peer group provides affiliation, status, prestige, power and a collective way of being male. In interviews, the boys willingly shared their biggest fear which was to be excluded from the group, resulting in social isolation. The need to belong to a community of peers is a strong motivation. In the vivid descriptions, the boys discuss belonging as a means of providing collective identity, while social isolation results in a sense of powerlessness, as “without a group you are nothing”. There is a continual drive to seek and maintain membership with the peer group. Membership is fluid and never guaranteed. There were changes in the peer group structure over the study period where the boys made significant changes to those they consider to be friends. Specific examples of the peer group determining who is included or excluded from membership, as well as the power structures at play in making these choices, are evident. This was strongly displayed when we saw the participants discuss Howard’s precarious position within the group and the justifications they gave for his possible exclusion. The peer group is a powerful entity that acts as “judge and jury” in determining whether one is worthy of membership and the treatment one should receive as a result.

Membership is based on shared interests and there is a strong discourse of “mateship” based on loyalty, support and trust (Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2003). The stylised performance of masculinity presented to those outside the group is one of solidarity and, yet we see factions within the group. The boys usually support one another and willingly display collective resistance towards authority as a way of being loyal to each other, and protecting their collective identity, however, because relations within the group are based on power, there is a defined hierarchy in which each boy must find his place in the “pecking order”.

The study peer group is not always what it seems. It presented as solid and unified to teachers and fellow students, and yet, through the interviews with individual participants, and in the focus groups, there is division and continual play for power and position. In order to find their place in the hierarchy and secure membership, individuals must actively negotiate, construct and perform their own subjectivity within this stylised masculinity. Individuals must interpret their location within the power relations of the group by adhering to, or rejecting, the understandings of masculinity. In most cases, the study participants chose the masculine discourses of the group, which means primarily denouncing all that is considered feminine, such as emotions and intimacy. To advocate such traits would make one vulnerable and open to ridicule, resulting in a lack of status and power. Jack talks unguardedly about his experiences of comforting another boy, but chooses to do so only when he cannot be judged by his peers, while Stewart rejects physical comfort from family members because it might question his sexuality. The practice of intimacy with other males is not acceptable, and questioning one’s maleness, unless on a sporting field where affection is demonstrated to enhance one’s masculinity and place in the team.

The masculinities the boys display are always propelled towards gaining status and power. To be powerful is to have privilege and respect, and the ultimate reward is to have the respect of the immediate peer group. Status amongst peers can be gained through displaying humour, toughness and being competitive, being good at sport and proficient in fighting. In this study, Blair creates identity and a style of masculinity that centres on fighting ability and being resistant to authority. His peers

are both envious and fearful of him, and yet he is rewarded with a higher status and certain privileges holding power within the group.

A culture of competition is built within the peer group and if an individual believes he is capable of being defeated, he is more likely to withdraw from the competition. To win results in increased status, but to lose results in a positioning of inferiority, and being labelled a “girl”. There are multiple examples of the subjects withdrawing from competition such as decisions not to enter sporting carnivals, collective resistance in rejecting activities the school has organised such as training with the premier Tasmanian VFL team, and how Jack avoids confrontation with his immediate peers because he knows he has overstepped the mark of acceptable behaviour when he purchased a motorbike in which Mick was interested.

The masculinities the boys adhere to are displayed through a range of behaviours that include a strong physicality with each other, the use of humour, and a shared language that aims to exclude others and mark a collective identity. There is a selective dress code as demonstrated by the wearing of caps and branded apparel, as well as continual displays of bravado, the constant use of “put downs”, ridicule, slang and the stylising of language borrowed from popular movies. The students work continually at defining their maleness through displaying their sexuality as heterosexual. There are numerous examples of them defining masculinity by using sex talk, innuendo and harassment towards each other and those outside the group, particularly female students. In doing so, the boys define their masculinity to themselves, to their peer group and the wider audience of students. Status is gained from the actions they display.

Some of the most powerful moments in undertaking this research have been when individual participants have started to reflect and question the discourses of masculinity they are entrenched in and have helped to create and govern. Jack in particular has been able to see contradictions in these discourses. He was challenged to consider the complexities and tensions that framed his understanding of what it meant to be male, and the practices by which he was governed. Such moments provided opportunities for individuals to consider other ways to be masculine.

*How are power and resistance employed as strategies in response to learning?*

Foucault's (1971 1977, 1978, 1981) work has been central in shaping the inquiry in this area. Power is perceived as relational, embodied in institutions such as schools, continually shifting and often elusive (Connell, 1993, 1995 1996, 2000; Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1980; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Munro 1996; Walkerdine, 1990). In coming to understand power and resistance as inseparable, I now see resistance as a method for students to exercise power in the school setting.

The students at Mercury High School are active agents in power relations: in their relationships with each other as peers; and in their relationships with authority figures within the school. The hidden culture of the school and the power regimes of the student world, operate simultaneously alongside the official culture of the school. The students claim transitional periods during the school day as their own where the regimes of power are played out amongst the student body. In their relation to the power relations between teachers and students, the boys display contradictions in their understandings of power. They claim to have no power and the explanations given suggest they see power as possessional, where teachers hold and exercise power because of the authority and power granted to them. There is evidence that the study participants actively use resistance to gain power in classrooms, clearly describing methods and strategies they use to resist learning. Often these are collective displays of resistance and shared understandings of how they waste time and distract student and teacher attention from task to claim power.

Rejection of the "regimes of truth" presented at schools as knowledge and learning is clear. As Glass (2004) writes:

Educators routinely silence voices and amplify others through the selection of the curriculum, the design of assignments and assessments, and the structure of the classroom relations and learning environment. Each of these seeming pedagogical choices embeds ideological commitments that have real social economic and political consequences.  
(p. 19)

There is an awareness amongst the study participants that the world of learning presented at school is far removed from their lives, and that school devalues their worlds. Most importantly, school devalues the need to belong and be with peers. In most cases, the school aims to separate by individualising students, working against the notion of their discourse of belonging. While the subjects reject these “regimes of truth” they understand that education and schooling are necessary to fulfill the visions and dreams of possible futures. Consequently, they do not openly reject the school, but operate simultaneously by often demonstrating passive resistance through apathy, withdrawing efforts to achieve. Howard deliberately chooses to underachieve at school through procrastination and little effort, whilst Jack hides his abilities as a capable student through deliberate underachievement, but also creating a “cool” identity amongst the student body that is more highly valued by him and his peers. Jack must continually work towards balancing a number of identities, the identity as a learner who can still achieve academically, but presenting an image to his peers as “effortless achievement”, and demonstrating enough resistance towards the institution of school to allow him the identity of belonging to the peer group.

In addition, Blair deliberately rejects school through active resistance, through a “protest masculinity” (Connell, 1996), intentionally defying authority figures, purposefully challenging the rules of the school by being disruptive and fighting, and not attending classes. Blair is disorientated and finds little meaning in school, his world is devalued and the only way he can have voice in this setting is to actively resist. Blair uses his body as a site for power. Through the earlier reconstructed narrative at the beginning of Chapter 3 and various observations of Blair during structured classes, it was evident that he used his body as a way to resist the power regimes of the school, by threatening students and teachers through displays of physical strength in slamming doors and chairs, intimidation through invading other’s physical space, using verbal abuse, and, in some cases, violence. Blair has mastered the ability to appear “big” by using his physical strength to exercise power. In most cases, he is rewarded with recognition by his peers with elevated status because of his lack of fear and his displays of anti - authority. Blair’s power amongst the student and teacher body has built on the reputation he has built. He often uses his body as a tool to intimidate and victimise. This is his way to claim power in a world in which he feels powerless.

What was noticeable in developing a relationship with the study participants over the period of investigation was that they were clearly able to articulate the power relations that existed in classrooms and in the school in general between students and authority figures. Through the insights they gave there was a clear demonstration that they understood power relations that promoted better learning environments for students. Without prompting, the boys frequently discussed teacher styles. Through observations at recess and lunch times it was evident that the boys often discussed teachers they liked and disliked. The subjects saw the teachers as responsible for setting the tone of the power relations between students and the teacher. During this study, the participants were often totally engaged in learning. For Mick it was Applied Technology, for Howard it was Creative Writing, for Bob it was Art, for Stewart and Jamie it was Physical Education and Jack it was in Music. Bob's reconstructed narrative at the beginning of Chapter 5 is a powerful description of a classroom environment where students are immersed in learning. Through a number of interviews, Bob returned to descriptions of this learning environment, describing a climate where students had agency and were treated as equals. This appeared to heighten Bob's interest in Art and he often cited that he enjoyed learning in this classroom because it was "calm", "fun" and he felt empowered. There was little need for student resistance.

In the observations I made, there appeared to be significantly less resistance by the subjects when they were engaged in certain learning activities. There was little need to resist when students felt empowered. Overwhelmingly, there was a feeling that these boys did want to be more engaged in learning, and that having voice and agency in directing their own learning was a significant way school might be improved for these students.

### **Significance of the study**

While there is a growing collection of studies that investigate masculinities amongst boys and men, this study is pioneering in that it uses a particular conceptual framework to examine the issues surrounding masculinities. The framework has used the themes of identity, power and peer relations, to provide focus to the research, but more importantly, has created a multi - dimensional way to come to know and understand the participants, their discourses and the interconnectedness of

these understandings and how they impact on identities as learners. It has prompted the students, and myself as researcher, to enter new and authentic dialogues, where we are forced to reflect and question the discourses we each bring. In many ways this framework is rich with possibility for further use in schools. The adoption of the framework through curriculum implementation would allow others to enter similar discussions, between educators and students, to deepen questioning and understanding of how the gender discourses we hold impact on our identities, our relationships with others and the power and resistance that exists in classrooms.

### **Limitations of the study**

Some researchers might suggest the main limitations of this research are that the study was conducted in a particular setting, at a particular time with a very small sample group. As the researcher, I recognise that the results of this study are specific to these students, however, specific attention and detail have been paid to describing the context and setting in which this research took place, providing extensive descriptions to allow the readers to make judgements about the transferability of conclusions reached. Like all qualitative research, the study relies on the skills of the researcher to represent the voices of the subjects. The researcher and participants are implicated in a relationship of power (Martino & Pallotta - Chiarolli, 2005). My approach to this research has been one of collaboration with the study group in the search for meanings to encourage transparency in the study. The participants have been actively encouraged to have voice and, through the extensive use of narratives and transcripts, they have had ongoing opportunities to legitimise and judge the credibility of these aspects of the research. Their voices should be ever present and I am hopeful the reader feels that he/she has come to know each of the participants well at the conclusion of reading.

At times, the reader may have found some of the ideas presented repetitive. In seeing this research as a crystal, the reader has been encouraged to view the phenomena of masculinities from different points of view, the ideas and themes overlap creating richness and depth. The repetition becomes a feature of the study, providing insight into the interrelatedness of the meanings the subjects share.

Some might argue that the study is limited in that it looks at gender as being socially constructed, declining to examine biological arguments of gender in detail. It has been important to focus the study and to allow the ideas that speak to me as an educator in how I might contribute to better educating adolescents. The social construction of gender speaks profoundly to me as a teacher working with young people, and the extensive research undertaken in this area over the past two decades provides significant evidence to suggest that gender is socially constructed. This research and its findings aim to contribute to this growing area of understanding gender.

### **Emerging possibilities**

Returning to the crystal metaphor for a final time, the issue of boys' education is presented as a crystal, multi – faceted, with a viewing position giving a different perspective each time. The issues surrounding boys' education are extensive. We have those who argue that while boys might be underachieving at school in current times, one must be mindful that as men they will have higher status in the societal gender order. Men are still afforded status, power and privilege, while women continue to deal with inequality (Connell, 2002; Gill, 2005; McLean, 1997). Educators such as Lillico (2000a, 2000b) argue for "boy's friendly classrooms". In Australia, extensive funds at a federal and state level over the past decade have been granted to deal with boys' underachievement in schools. Many argue that *Boys' education: (2002)* has made little significant difference since its inception because it relies on research and theory surrounding biological differences between males and females (Gill, 2005; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Keddie, 2006).

Embarking on this research has allowed me to come to understand that there are no quick or easy resolutions to these extensive, complex and difficult issues, and thus, there is no one single solution to the problem of boys' underachievement in education (Keddie, 2006; Martino et al., 2004). As Kenway et al. (1997) claim that:

The interaction between knowledge, power and sexuality is a core part of gender relationships of schooling, a particularly volatile combination which raises many issues for both students and teachers. These are not easily understood or resolved, but while they remain unaddressed and

unresolved, students cannot become powerful learners or knowers. (p. 95)

We must remain active in continuing to examine and explore the crystal to affect change in schools, to better engage those boys and girls who are not connected, who do not find meaning in school. To gain insight into the crystal we can provide students with agency and voice to unlock dialogue, to find a “third space”, a place of dialogue (Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000). This research, if nothing else, has provided seven students with the opportunity to enter a rich dialogue, a dialogue where they felt safe to voice their beliefs, values, and practices as males. The participants had the courage to open themselves to the dialogue and to reflect and question the discourses of masculinity they shared. They became aware of contradictions and tensions in these understandings. They responded to the opportunity to have voice and as a researcher I endeavoured to hear and listen. I am hopeful that as they read this paper they believe that I have done justice to their meanings, and that I accurately represented the hopes they have of how education can be different and improved for students like themselves.

We cannot afford to let students become disengaged from learning, and who, in turn, disrupt the learning outcomes of fellow students. Gill (2005) claims:

...despite the complex and dispersed nature of power, hegemonic masculinity prevails with deleterious effects for girls and indeed boys. Of course hegemonic masculinity may change over time and location. However, at present, it needs to be acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity is existent and in its present form can be harmful to boys and girls. (p. 107)

The study participants are immersed in a code of masculinity that relies on “hegemony”. It impacts significantly on their identities as learners, and may in turn significantly impact on their futures and who they will become.

What I take away from the research is a sense of hope. These adolescent boys regularly expressed hope. While many of the authorities at Mercury High School

saw them as “difficult to manage”, there were teachers that also saw great strengths and abilities in these individuals. They showed insight, they dreamed of possible futures and they wanted to find meaning in school as they understood that education was fundamental in securing their dreams. Identity was found in belonging to a group, the peer structure having many benefits for individuals, providing status, affiliation and power. At times, they are engaged in learning experiences that are pivotal in their understanding of how they wish all learning to be. What these students are telling educators is that they want to have voice, that they want to enter authentic dialogue with teachers, they want to feel empowered in their learning and the meanings they take from it.

There is a need for schools to significantly shift in their philosophy. In recent years a number of Australian researchers in the area have called upon educators to consider a shift in paradigm - from one of control to democratising classrooms by building a conciliatory approach through trust and respect (Keddie, 2006; Keddie & Churchill, 2004; Martino & Pallotta - Chairolli, 2003; Mills & Keddie, 2005; Lingard et al., 2002). A climate of positive and supportive relationships is central to improving the outcomes of students. Educators must find ways to connect with students, to attach value to their life experiences and their sense of self (Keddie, 2006). Keddie (2004) reiterates “breaking down the power imbalances between teachers and students is seen as central particularly given boys’ resistance to being overpowered and controlled” (p. 106). Students disengage by demonstrating resistance when they feel controlled and powerless. They need to feel empowered, to have a voice and to be heard. As Hargreaves (2003) suggests “care must become more than charity or control: it must become a relationship in which those who are cared for (pupils or parents) have agency, dignity and a voice” (p. 47). The majority of students are silenced. As Palmer (1998) indicates “behind their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices heard. A good teacher is one who can listen to those voices even before they are spoken - so that someday they can speak with truth and confidence” (p. 46).

Allowing students to have agency and voice will lead to the opportunity for authentic dialogue. It is here as educators we need to engage critically in gender issues, amongst ourselves as teachers, but also with our students. As Martin (2002) claims,

“any treatment of boys’ education must therefore take account of the social construction of gender and its place in the classroom and school” (p. 30). As we have seen in this study, students benefit from open discussion about the construction of gender in order to expand their understandings and open up other possibilities to “do” gender (Alloway et al., 2003; Martin, 2002; Martino, 2000; Martino & Berrill, 2003, Robinson, 2005). Davies (1993) adamantly claims that as teachers we have “the radical possibility of giving children the capacity to disrupt the dominant storylines through which their gender is held in place” (p. 1).

Students, and particularly boys, must be engaged in critical analysis of gender and gender relations. We need to value the experiences the students bring in this discussion. Keddie (2006) clearly outlines how such programs can benefit boys:

The aims here are two: enhance boys’ understanding of the multiple ways masculinity is constructed, performed, negotiated and navigated in different contexts; help boys identify and understand how and why they take up or ‘perform’ their masculinities in relation to various (often inequitable) social processes and discourses; facilitate boys’ recognition that many culturally accepted understandings and enactments of masculinity, and their complicity or endorsement with such understandings and enactments can work to harm and constrain (as much as advantage) their (and others) opportunities, life experiences and relationships; and, encourage boys to identify ways that inequitable social processes might be questioned and transformed, rather than taken-for-granted. (p. 108)

To engage students in discussions of the construction of gender is to open them to new possibilities of being (Davies, 1997). It is a process of enabling them, rather than disabling them. Such work as educators requires courage and passion. We must move beyond our fear of the unknown and not being in control, because we in turn must critically reflect on our discourses of gender. We need to question the discourses we have that rely on biological arguments, where we claim boys are predisposed to certain behaviours and thinking, and allowing boys to exercise

hegemony, which results in boys dominating and having power in classrooms (Martino et al., 2004).

Teachers and community members should challenge the constricted discourses of masculinities students present (Martino et al., 2004) and encourage new investments in different styles of masculinities (Robinson, 2005). Much work is already being done in schools on an individual basis and there are a range of programs that exist that encourage a discussion of gender, and in particular masculinities. One such program developed in Australia by Brook Friedman (1996) is *Boys - Talk* which encourages male high school students to engage in topics surrounding masculinity, violence and relationships, but, as Friedman suggests, the program is only one strategy to deal with issues of gender. He suggests that “to ensure the greatest chance for sustainable change, this holistic approach needs to involve all young people, their families, school staff, youth service providers and related workers. Gender equity needs to extend to all parts of the curriculum and work practices at all levels” (p. 6).

In many ways, educators have to examine the curriculum and lay the foundation of it as an ongoing inquiry of gender. Gender is the fabric of who we are, the way we interact with each other, and impacts on who we will become, and the choices we make throughout life. The discussions of gender, needs to be ongoing, moving beyond units of study imparted as part of studies in English or Wellbeing courses. The discussion needs to be woven across the curriculum, grades and structures of schools continually involving students, parents, teachers and administrators. It should allow powerful dialogue about gender, but also sexuality, identity, power relations and the way individuals interact with each other. It enables an openness with each other, a safe place to question and reflect.

Schools ought to model changes in power relations and move away from models of increased sanctions and surveillance. In current times the Western world has moved towards increased surveillance and this has been transposed into our schools. By exercising control over students' behaviour and movement, the divisions between teachers and students are widened. Students feel distrusted and devalued.

A move away from a notion of individualism to one of groupedness is required to create the sense of “belonging” the students wish for. By listening to the voices of students, teachers have to embrace the connectedness the students have with their peers, their collective culture and identity. As Kenway and Fitzclarence (2000) claim:

Such an acknowledgement demands that educators develop effective communications with members of such groups and attempts to inculcate a sense of group and personal responsibility. Secondly, it becomes important to acknowledge that peer group understandings may be based on fundamentally different values and commitments to those of teachers and parents. This demands the exploration of new ways to bridge understandings and languages that accommodate and challenge competing sets of values and knowledges, without rendering either more or less legitimate. (p. 81)

What Kenway and Fitzclarence are describing is the need for teachers to establish a safe environment in order to create a “third space”, a space where the importance of peers is valued. Educators must build bridges of understanding to accommodate the requirements of students in order to better engage them.

The biggest hurdle faced in addressing the issues of boys’ underachievement is our own fear as educators. We fear to know our students and ourselves. Palmer (1998) captures this very theme, when he stresses:

We fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters on our own terms, so that we can control their outcomes, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self. (p. 37)

It is time as teachers we show courage and passion by opening ourselves to truly care for our students, to allow them to have a voice and agency in their learning, to value them as both individuals and collectively as a group, and to question ourselves and our students to prompt us to new understandings of being.

## **Implications for stakeholders**

Embarking on this research has forced me to question myself as an educator. In hearing the voices of these young people I have at times felt uneasy in my practices as a teacher and have changed considerably in my views towards discipline towards students. The study has reaffirmed that the difference I can make as an educator is to encourage and provide opportunities for authentic dialogue with my students. I know that these times will sometimes require courage and reflection on my practice, but also continual questioning of my values and beliefs. I feel more confident that I can enter this domain and can encourage other teachers to do so.

It is my hope that the participants have gained much from being involved in this study and anecdotal evidence suggests this is correct. Some of the boys maintained irregular contact during 2006, as they were students at the college at which I worked. Mick, Howard and Bob would see me on their travels around the college. The boys would instigate discussion with me and asked how the thesis was proceeding, expressing an interest in seeing the final document. Previously, a number of the teachers at Mercury High School had mentioned that the subjects felt an importance in being involved in the study. They felt heard: they felt encouraged that someone was listening. Previous excerpts suggest that some of the boys have been moved to question and reflect on the discourses they have created, shared and governed surrounding gender. Such questioning often proceeds change.

For Mercury High School the implications are broad. The school continues to work towards developing curriculum that moves across traditional subject areas and more integrated learning, where students can direct their own learning that is practical in focus. In 2005, students were successfully involved in the completion of an Australian garden that has become a prominent feature of the school. From the voices of the study participants we have learnt that they want voice and agency and to enjoy learning that values their worlds. Often these learning experience are practical in focus.

Mercury High School should take heart that these boys were capable of quality work and engagement in learning tasks, often speaking warmly of learning experiences where they did feel valued, had control and power, and consequently, were motivated

to learn. The experiences they related were dependent upon how the teacher set the tone and managed the power relations between him/herself and the students. An engagement in professional dialogue amongst the teaching staff about ways to allow students to have voice and agency should be encouraged to further explore new ways of interacting with the student body. This takes courage, time and reflection, and prompts an openness amongst professionals. By teachers entering such dialogue with each other it is hoped that this will transfer to classrooms, where teachers and students can move to a “third space”.

My research indicates that even reluctant learners welcome the opportunity for deep discussion. While at times the boys stated that the questions around gender were difficult and that they felt uneasy because this was new territory for them, in an environment that was built on trust and openness they took the leap in entering this discussion. I am sure that many of the teachers the subjects felt connected to could enter similar discussions around gender in their classes. Bob’s Art teacher could lead an investigation into the perceptions of various artists towards male and female figures in major art works to promote discussions of gender, while the Maths teacher could lead a discussion about why the boys are using resistance as a strategy in the classroom and how this might be linked to masculinities.

Mercury High School and its staff need to enter discussion and reflection on how the discourses surrounding gender and power are mirrored in the structure, culture and traditions of the school, and the messages this sends to the pupils. This may require a revision of the increased surveillance patterns at the school and the structure of behaviour management that makes students distrustful and devalued. Such a move demands great courage by the Principal and staff in a time when society is progressing increasingly towards surveillance and control of its members. Involving pupils in these discussions is vital.

The staff and students of Mercury High School should be commended for taking the opportunity to be involved in this research. They made me feel welcome, as an outsider into their classrooms, school activities and discussions. This displays an optimism and transparency, and suggests that the school wants to move forward, to find new ways of seeing. They should take great courage and hope in continuing on

this journey. There is a hope and optimism to enter authentic and open communication with students. We know students are keen to welcome such opportunities.

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## **Appendix 1**

**Letter to parents inviting participation in study**

**Consent form**

Monday 17th May 2003

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am conducting a research study into how the male peer group influences learning within the classroom environment as part of my studies through the Curtin University. The aim of this research is to provide educators and teachers with a deeper understanding of how teenage boys interact with each other at school and how these relationships influence their education. We are asking \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study from May 2003 to approximately November 2005.

It is important for the researcher to gain an insight into the behaviour, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values of the peer group. As a result, participants will be observed, as well as take part in interviews and possible learning activities such as journal writing. The majority of the researcher's time will be spent observing the behaviour of the participants within the classroom environment.

As the researcher, I will continue to communicate with teaching staff at Mercury High School to ensure that observations and interviewing do not affect the learning of the participants.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the research study at any point and do not have to offer any explanation. Any comments made by the participants through the duration of the study will not affect the participant's grades. All information collected will remain confidential to protect the privacy and rights of the boys involved.

We hope that \_\_\_\_\_ will participate in this study. This research meets the strict guidelines of the Curtin Human Research Ethics Committee and the

Tasmanian Department of Education and Arts Ethical Committee. Should you have any questions or desire for further information please feel free to contact me on ph 0400 702 446.

Please complete the attached consent form and return to Ms \_\_\_\_\_ by Friday 21st May.

Rebecca Wilson  
Researcher

**Participant Consent Form**  
**Masculinities as Peer Discourses: Identities, School**  
**Cultures and the Resistance to Power**  
**Research Project**

**Please return the completed consent form to Ms \_\_\_\_\_ by Friday 21st May**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/guardian) hereby authorise my  
son \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this research project from  
May 2003 to approximately November 2005.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2**

### **Interview 1 - Subject background**

**Interview 1 - Subject background**

**Researcher:** Rebecca Wilson

**Date:**

**Starting Time:**

**Name:**

**Address:**

**Date of Birth, Age:**

**Family background, living arrangements:**

**Hobbies, sporting interests (what do you do outside school?):**

**Ideas for the future – career, job, goals (what will you do after high school?):**

**What are you good at?**

**What are you not so good at?**

**Primary School & details (What primary school did you go to? What was it like? What are some of the most vivid memories you have of this time?):**

**Best five friends in and out of school:**

**Best five friends at school:**

**How would your friends describe you?:**

**First impressions of Mercury High School (What do you like? What do you dislike about school?):**

**Favorite subjects (Why?):**

**Least favorite subjects (Why?):**

**Best things about school:**

**Worst things about school:**

**Questions asked by participant:**

**Researcher notes (non-verbal, verbal clues):**

**Finishing time:**

## **Appendix 3**

### **Interview 2 - Aspirations and Subject Selections**

## **Interview 2 - Aspirations and Subject Selections**

**Researcher:** Rebecca Wilson

**Date:**

**Starting Time:**

**Name of subject:**

**Date of Birth, Age:**

### **FUTURE ASPIRATIONS**

**Ideas for the future - career, job, goals (what will you do after high school?)**

**Has this changed from the last interview? Why? What has influenced this change?**

### **ATTITUDES TO SCHOOLING**

**Now that you have moved into Grade 9, how has school changed for you?**

**Is it better or worse? How?**

## **ELECTIVE SUBJECTS**

**You have had to choose 3 - 4 elective subjects. I am interested in knowing how you chose these subjects overall.**

**Who helped/influenced your decision about elective subject choices for grade 9?**

**Rate each of the following categories (1-10) in how they may have influenced your subject choices for Grade 9**

- **Parents/guardian**
- **Older brother or sister**
- **Friends at school (in your year group)**
- **Older friends at school**
- **Friends outside school**
- **Teacher/s**
- **Coach, mentor**
- **Another important relative e.g. grandparent**

## INDIVIDUAL SUBJECT CHOICES

Subject 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about how you chose this subject and rate the influence of each group/statement.

	very low	low	don't know	high	very high
• The teacher	1	2	3	4	5
• Enjoyed subject previously	1	2	3	4	5
• Friends doing the same subject	1	2	3	4	5
• Might help me get a job	1	2	3	4	5
• Linked to what I want to do when I leave school	1	2	3	4	5
• Parent/s influence, suggestion	1	2	3	4	5
• What I had heard from other students	1	2	3	4	5

Subject 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about how you chose this subject and rate the influence of each group/statement.

	very low	low	don't know	high	very high
• The teacher	1	2	3	4	5
• Enjoyed subject previously	1	2	3	4	5
• Friends doing the same subject	1	2	3	4	5
• Might help me get a job	1	2	3	4	5
• Linked to what I want to do when I leave school	1	2	3	4	5
• Parent/s influence, suggestion	1	2	3	4	5
• What I had heard from other students	1	2	3	4	5

Subject 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about how you chose this subject and rate the influence of each group/statement.

	very low	low	don't know	high	very high
• The teacher	1	2	3	4	5
• Enjoyed subject previously	1	2	3	4	5
• Friends doing the same subject	1	2	3	4	5
• Might help me get a job	1	2	3	4	5
• Linked to what I want to do when I leave school	1	2	3	4	5
• Parent/s influence, suggestion	1	2	3	4	5
• What I had heard from other students	1	2	3	4	5

### FAVORITE SUBJECTS

**Favorite subjects (why? what do you enjoy about the subject?):** Last time you stated that \_\_\_\_\_ was your favorite subject. Is this still the case, what has changed?

**Least favorite subjects. Why?**

**FRIENDSHIP/PEER GROUP**

**You have made some choices to do elective subjects. Since this is happened has your group of friends changed at school?**

**Last time you said these five people were your closest friends at school? Has this changed? Why?**

**STUDENT CULTURE**

**I notice in class and when you are moving to and from class there seems to be a different world going on - the world of student life.**

**How important is this? Do you think it is more important than the stuff you learn? Can you tell me a little about this?**

**Do you think the teachers know what's going on during these transition periods? How come? How do students hide this world?**

**I also notice that there is a bit of a hierarchy amongst the students during these times. Can you tell me more about this? Who is at the top? Who is at the bottom? Why?**

**Questions asked by participant:**

**Researcher notes:**

**Finishing time:**

**Results from Interview 2 - Aspirations and Subject Selections**  
**Overall influences on subject selections by individual research participants**

**Table 2**

	Mick	Stewart	Howard	Jack	Bob	Blair	AVG
<b>PARENTS, GUARDIAN</b>	0	7.5	4	10	7	0	5.7
<b>OLDER SIBLING</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>FRIENDS IN SAME YEAR GROUP</b>	0	8	1	1	6	3	3.1
<b>OLDER FRIENDS AT SCHOOL</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.1
<b>FRIENDS OUTSIDE SCHOOL</b>	0	0	0	0	3	0	0.5
<b>TEACHER</b>	0	8	3	0	4	0	2.5
<b>COACH, MENTOR</b>	0	8	0	0	0	0	1.3
<b>OTHER IMPORTANT RELATIVE</b>	0	0	0	0	2	0	0.3

(Rating from 0-10, 10 most important)

**Comments:**

- This interview was conducted with each of the participants in May 2004 when the subjects were in Grade 9.
- Generally the boys have been most influenced by parents in the selection of subjects for 2005. This scored an average of 5.7, with friends in the same year group being the second most important influence, scoring 3.1.
- For Jack, Bob and Stewart parents played a vital role in influencing subject choice.
- For Blair and Mick (who selected subjects on the day, without any consultation with others) parents played no influence.
- Two of the boys (Stewart and Bob) were heavily influenced by conversations with peers and subjects were selected based on whether friends were going to study the same subject or not.

- Overall older friends in and out of school, older siblings, other important relatives, teachers or coach/mentor played little role in influencing students when they were considering subjects for 2005.

## **Appendix 4**

### **Interview 3 - Friendship Patterns**

### **Interview 3 - Friendship Patterns**

**Researcher:** Rebecca Wilson

**Date:**

**Starting Time:**

**Name of Subject:**

**Age:**

#### **COMPLETE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS**

**1. Friendship amongst a group of boys is about...**

**2. Mates talk about...**

**3. Our group of friends never talk about...**

**4. A cool friend is....**

**5. My group of friends in the future will be...**

**6. In my group of friends, decisions are made by...**

**7. When there is a conflict within my group of friends, I...**

**8. When my mates are around I don't ...**

**9. When my friends are involved in something I know is not right, I...**

**10. My group of friends think school is ...**

**Finishing time:**

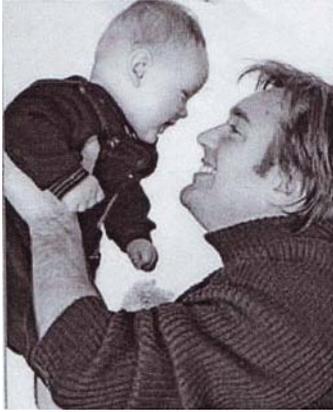
**Researcher's notes:**

## **Appendix 5**

### **Interview 4 - Masculinities**

**Interview 4- Masculinities**

**PICTURE 1**



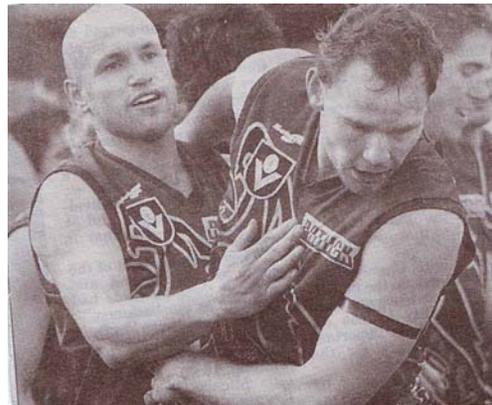
**PICTURE 2**



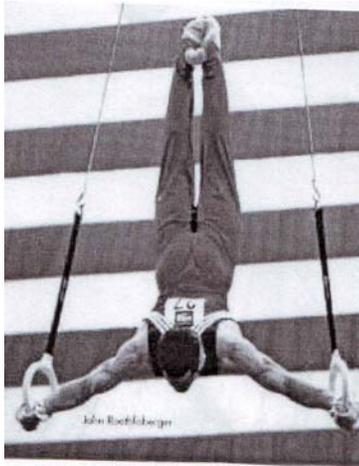
**PICTURE 3**



**PICTURE 4**



**PICTURE 5**



**PICTURE 6**



**PICTURE 7**



**PICTURE 8**



**Interview 4 - Masculinities**

**Researcher:** Rebecca Wilson

**Date:**

**Starting time:**

**Name of Subject:**

**Age:**

**RANGE OF PICTURES**

**Response to Picture 1**

**Response to Picture 2**

**Response to Picture 3**

**Response to Picture 4**

**Response to Picture 5**

**Response to Picture 6**

**Response to Picture 7**

**Response to Picture 8**

**What are the good things (advantages) of being a male?**

**What are the bad points (disadvantages) of being a male?**

**What's it been like growing up male?**

**How do you learn to be a male? Who helps you in becoming a male – the way to act, how to look, what to do?**

**Many people would say that there are rules for the ways males and females act and behave. Who do you think makes the rules for boys?**

**How and where do boys learn these rules?**

**What happens to boys who break the rules?**

**When was the first time you realised that there were rules for boys?**

**What are the rules?**

**Are the rules different for girls and why?**

**Tell me about how these rules for being male and female exist at school?**

**People talk about “masculinity”. What do you think that term means?**

**Finishing time:**

**Researcher’s notes:**

## **Appendix 6**

### **Interview 5 - The Future and Aspirations**

## **Interview 5- The Future and Aspirations**

**Researcher:** Rebecca Wilson

**Date:**

**Starting time:**

**Name of Subject:**

**Age:**

### **The Future**

**Now you are in Grade 9, is there a strong focus on thinking about the future?**

**What does the future mean to you? What images do you see? What does it look like? What do you see?**

**What are the possible futures that you see for yourself?**

**Is there pressure to think about the future? Who is placing this pressure on you to think about the future? Yourself, parents, teachers, what you read in the paper or hear in the newspapers?**

**Is the future all about career? Or does it involve other things as well?**

**Success at school**

**I hear a lot of you, class mates and teachers talk about work in class. I hear teachers say stuff like “get your work done quickly”. In what ways does the stuff you do at school feel like “work”?**

**What does “work” mean?**

**Are there times at school, when you are completing the “work”, but not much learning is happening? When does this happen?**

**Is all the learning you do at school, just “work”? Or are there times or lessons when it is more than this?**

**Can you also learn through “play”? In what ways?**

**If school could be changed to a place of “play” rather than “work”, how do you think school would change?**

**How would it be better?**

**Is it being well behaved or good work that gets results at school? What's more important?**

**In life, what do you think are the things that get you the furthest?**

#### **Athletics Carnival and Competition**

**Mercury High had an athletics carnival over two days a couple of weeks ago. I noticed that there was really low attendance on both days. Why do you think students stay away?**

**Is it a holiday for students or is it more about not wanting to take part in competition?**

**The school has had a long tradition of house teams. Are they still important or doesn't it really matter who wins?**

**Do students feel like they belong to their house and want to win for them?**

**I noticed that some students did come to school, but only took part in the fun activities. Why do you think this is?**

**Do you think boys are reluctant not to enter the races because they might not win?**

**Does it matter if you come second, third, fourth or last?**

**Do people only take part in the fun activities because it doesn't really matter who wins, its just fun?**

**In what ways is competition important to boys?**

**What kinds of things are they competitive about?**

**Do mates compete against each other? What kinds of things do they compete against each other about? Is this part of male friendships/peer groups?**

**Is competition more important to boys than girls? Or is there no difference?**

**How important is competition to you? What are you competitive about?**

**Finishing time:**

**Researcher's notes:**

## **Appendix 7**

**Focus Group 1 Questions**

**Focus Group 2 Questions**

## **Focus Group 1**

**Starting Time:**

**Participants Present:**

- Explain rules of confidentiality, respect for others
- Duration of interview one hour
- Thank participants for taking part in study
- Topics to cover during this focus group will be school and learning, friendship and masculinities

## **SCHOOL**

When I mention the word school, what images come into your head?

School is supposed to be about learning. But what learning do you think is important?

Does learning happen in some classes more than others? Which ones?

Do you have to be enjoying what you're doing in classrooms in order to really learn?  
Can you give me some examples?

I notice that some of you can sit in class and appear to be learning. The teacher thinks you are learning and doing the work. But really you might be chatting or not doing much. What strategies do you use to get away without doing much in classes.

## **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

Tell me about detentions and being suspended. Do you think these punishments work? Does it stop you from doing the wrong thing in class?

## **FRIENDSHIP**

All of you guys have stated that the best thing about school is spending time with mates, and that friends are the most important part of school. Tell me about the social side of school. Is there learning going on here? What kinds of things are you learning?

All of you stated that friends are pretty important and that loyalty is an important part of friendship. What do you mean when you talk about loyalty?

Earlier I spoke to you individually about who helped you make decisions when choosing option subjects for Grade 9. Some of you stated that choosing subjects that friends were doing was pretty important, others of you stated that your parents helped you choose your subjects. Which do you think has been the biggest influence, parents or friends, when it comes to school subjects? Why?

You have told me that you might hang around as a big group, but there is no real leader, decisions are made by individuals and others can choose to join in or not. Is that pretty much how it is? Can you tell me a bit more?

## **MASCULINITIES**

I want to talk now about masculinity and what it means to be male. Most of you have told me that in many ways you have to learn to be a bloke, and that you learn this stuff from an early age from watching and interacting with other boys, fathers, and older boys. Can you tell me more about this?

So when we talk about masculinity, what does it mean you think?

You've told me about some of the good things about being a bloke: more freedom, men get better paid jobs. Are these true? What are some of the other things that make it worthwhile being a male?

What are the worst things about being male?

Let's focus on the idea of affection between males. You might remember I showed you some photos of different situations where guys were showing affection to each other. All of you have told me that it is okay for guys to show affection to each other on the sports field, but other than that it is off limits. Why?

Why is being called "gay" such a bad thing? Is it about being seen as a woman? And is that a real insult?

Is that also the reason why guys don't study Child Studies, that they might be labelled "gay"? Or are there other reasons?

When you think about the image of a male you admire, what do they look like, what do they do, how do they act?

So what are the characteristics of an “acceptable” male?

If I was to build a picture in my head of what is an acceptable male student what would he look like, act like, be involved in?

How much is masculinity a part of who you are?

**Finishing Time:**

**Researcher’s notes:**

## **Focus Group 2**

### **Starting Time:**

### **Participants present:**

- Explain rules of confidentiality, respect for others
- Duration of interview one hour
- Thank participants for taking part in study
- Topics to cover during this focus group will be school and work, power and control and belonging

## **SCHOOL AND WORK**

If what you do at school is “work”, then is school like a job? Can you explain this further for me?

Some of you have told me that “work” is something that you produce (there is a product at the end of doing work), and that you usually get paid for it. Is that what you see as “work”?

What about “work” at school?

Is school and the “work” you do here separate from other parts of you life? Can you explain to me how?

How important is school a part of your life? In what ways is it important?

We know that school is not always working for some boys. They are not interested and not learning much. I have asked you this before, but I want to hear what you think as a group - what can be done to make school better for boys?

### **BELONGING**

What does the word “belonging” mean to you?

In what ways do you feel you belong at school?

How important is it to belong to a group at school?

### **POWER**

Some of you guys have talked about power in the classroom and who has it. What do you mean by this word “power”?

How do you get power as an individual?

Who has the power at Mercury? How do they use power?

In what ways do teachers use power over students?

Is power the same as control?

What about particular students who have power in classrooms on a particular day?

Does every one want power? For what reasons?

What do students want power over? Things they learn? The way they learn? Their future? Their identity?

What do teachers want power over?

When do students feel powerless and what does it feel like?

What about punishment - detentions, time out, suspensions - are these ways of making student feel powerless?

I've noticed in the two years I have been coming here that there has been an increase in security - teachers wear photo ID, main front door is locked. Why do you think the school has moved this way? In what way do you think this might be linked to power?

I've noticed that you guys often use language as a way of gaining control in the classroom. You often use a language that teachers do not understand. Can you tell me more about this? And is this a way of getting some of the power back?

## **FREEDOM**

When you think of the word "freedom", what is it that you see?

What freedom/s do you have a school?

Is this is what is missing at school - freedom?

### **RESEARCH**

You guys have been involved in this research for a long time now. What do the other students say about it? How do they respond?

What about me coming and observing classes. What has that felt like for you?

You've told me a lot of personal stuff and I've asked you a lot of pretty difficult questions. How would I have been different if I was a male researcher? Would you have told me more or less stuff, would the stuff you have told me been different or the same?

I've changed my outlook on things a fair bit from working with you. What parts of the research have challenged you or you've found difficult?

**Finishing time:**

**Researcher's notes:**