

**Testing Times:  
The Construction of Girls' Desires Through Secondary  
Education**

**Sarah O'Flynn**

**PhD**

**Cardiff University  
School of Social Sciences**

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**To My Father**  
**Patrick Joseph Jarleth O'Flynn**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the links between sexuality and academic achievement for girls in secondary education. It investigates primarily how sexual and learner identities are embodied by young women and the implications of this for their educational success or failure, their emotional well-being, their relationships and their imagined adulthoods. I research a range of young women's experiences across the spectrum of educational attainment and draw from a range of self-identified and emergent sexualities and a/sexual practices. In contrast to much work which explores only the experience of young women's developing heterosexualities, the research presented here focuses particularly on young women who have emergent lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered identities or who practise culturally marginalised forms of heterosexuality. Although based on a small selection of case studies, it includes the experience of asylum seekers pupils, Traveller pupils and minority ethnic pupils. I argue here that the Cartesian mind/body split as it is enshrined in the standards and school effectiveness agendas has detrimental consequences for both highly achieving pupils and those who are not academically successful as defined within these agendas. The study concludes by suggesting that learning about sexuality and sexual knowledge needs to be more centrally and openly present in schools in order that marginalised sexual identities are able to participate more fully in learning; that the complexity of the relationship between sexuality and learning in psychoanalytic accounts is made available to teachers and that more research is undertaken to make visible girls who 'do girl' differently, by adopting non-normative sexualities or through the practice of masculinity.

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## Chapter 1

### **Sexual Regulation and the Production of Educational Success in Secondary Education.**

**'Her insistence on pleasure was ultimately bought at the price of her own  
education'**

**(Hey 1997: 101)**

#### **Introduction**

This quotation, taken from Valerie's Hey's research into girls' friendships in secondary school, is probably one of the most poignant observations in her research and concerns a young woman who made the choice to constantly evade school and seek the promises of 'heterosexual seduction' (Hey 1997: 101) outside school. She ended up jobless and homeless, referred to by her friends as a 'poor cow' (Hey 1997: 100). There was however, something highly transgressive about her 'insistence on pleasure' (ibid, page 101) as Hey also notes. I imagine for example that this quotation would make a good caption for a cartoon, promoting women's sexual power and autonomy and rejecting an education designed to ensure our subordination.

Another way of looking at this is to ask why it should be that such 'an insistence on pleasure' (ibid, page 101) should debar one from educational success. Hey implies that there was a choice between education and pleasure and that young women make this choice. However, the condition in which that choice is made is not under their control. The intolerance of female sexuality in school is hardly a new observation. It is what Sue Lees (1993) labelled the 'slag/drag' syndrome. The 'slag' is ostensibly a young sexually active woman, who enjoys sex, who is promiscuous, who places sexuality above school work and learning, whereas a 'drag' is more preoccupied with the notion of conformity and responsibility, doing homework, boringly destined to romantic love and an enduring relationship with one man. Of course these categorisations are in many senses fiction functioning as truth. Young women do not fit easily into either of them but often find themselves placed into one of them by young men and sometimes by other young women and adults, in ways that control their sexuality. As Lees (1993) points out, the construction of gender is crucial in the differential attitudes to male and female sexuality. The school girl drag is destined to make a good wife. We should also remember that the figure of the sexualised school girl, who wants to break out of the classroom and whose sexual desires are simply irrepressible is a fantasy figure of male pornography albeit one indulged and exploited by many female pop stars, most famously by

Britney Spears in the video accompanying her single, '...Baby One More Time' (Spears, Dick et al. 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, girls/women as 'drags' are constituted as inhabiting the sexuality desired and promoted in the UK government 'Guidance on 'Sex and Relationship Education' (DfEE 2000). The fact that the title of this document only allows of one sexual 'relationship' is in itself highly significant and is something I will return to in chapter 3.

This research concerns how young women construct their sexualities and their sexual desires while in compulsory secondary education in a London school and asks whether, why, and more importantly how 'pleasure' should so often be at the cost of education and conversely why educational success should so often be accompanied, publicly at least, by sexual abstinence. I started this research because I wanted to know why and how the signification of academic success in school came to be bundled so tightly with the concept of a 'delayed sexuality' for young women and the ways in which the construction and production of academic knowledge itself contained within it presumptions of gender and indeed sexuality, which girls had to negotiate and do battle with in order to produce successful and recognisable identities as successful young women.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting and humorous discussion of the Britney Spears video and the signification of its iconic sexual imagery see Wurtzel, E. (2000). *Why I love Britney*. The Guardian. London.

In western cultural contexts it is impossible to escape the traditions of Cartesian rationality, which has embedded a binary system of thought that has been particularly damaging to women but also to some men and certainly to those unable or unprepared to be designated either man or woman. In this system of thought, pre-eminence is given to the notion of the rational, scientific man, who can master the universe. It sets up a system of dualisms between rationality/irrationality and desire, the mind/ the body, reason/emotion, the public arena and citizenship/the private and domestic. These dualisms are asymmetric with greater social power accorded to rationality, the mind, reason and public citizenship. Apart from the fact that this system of thought has installed white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity as systemically powerful in our culture, government, public and economic institutions, it has also arguably damaged everyone psychically, including those men on whom it confers such power. I will return to the subject of Cartesian dualisms in chapter three, to explore in more detail the place of sexuality.

The taken for grantedness of this system of thought means that it is sometimes very hard to even notice it or to problematise it. For example, once when I was giving a seminar paper, I spoke at length about the impossibility of young women being sexual and achieving academically. I

was asked indignantly by a member of the audience whether I was suggesting that young women be allowed to become sexually active earlier. Surely, she said, we did not want a situation where we were advocating fourteen year olds or even twelve year olds (before their bodies were even mature) to be actively sexual. I was not suggesting this but immediately one raises the spectre of sexuality in relation to young women there is panic and someone will always try to shut it back in the closet and lock the door. There were other problems with this person's question. Firstly there was the question of terminology. What, for example, counts as 'sexually active' or as 'having sex'? In what respects is an average fourteen year old young woman aware of having a sexuality, even if she does not count as 'sexually active', however we are defining that? To what extent are young women dealing with or having to deal with sexuality, even if they are disavowing it in their lives? Why are young women so often closeting sexuality simply to keep the adults around them from getting worried or upset? The indignation with which the question was asked made me defensive in the instant. I felt I was being held up as some kind of advocate of paedophilia at worst and at best, showing a worrying disregard for protecting young women from sexual abuse. Yet I was trying to talk about the academic - rational/sexual - desire binary as it is embodied by young women in school. I was talking about the difficulties of identity work in this context and the cost to the health of the



self. The messiness of this required binary and the damage it does to young women was what I wanted to engage with and what the questioner was determined should be seen as a non issue. If there is no sexuality in the school girl, if it is kept at bay, then there is not a problem. Even if this were possible, I would suggest that anyone who has ever researched young women in secondary education will have experienced their struggles to accommodate adult expectations around their sexuality or rather around not having a sexuality and their academic success.

The difficulty of terminology around sexuality is one that I have struggled with throughout this research. I use the word "sexuality" always in the widest sense possible. When I am writing about sexuality I do not just mean sexual orientation, or different sexual practice, or sexual feelings or desires, or "having sex" with others or with oneself. I also include in the definition asexuality, not having sex and sexual abstinence. I use it as a term to define broadly the ways in which individuals manage the sphere of human experience which we term sex. When I write about sex education, I tend to call it sex education rather than sexuality education because the latter would deal with all the aspects of sex that I have included above as being part of sexuality. Current sex education in the UK does not do this.

Even with the broadest definition of sexuality possible there are still problems around the interconnectedness of sexuality, gender and the sexed body. This becomes most apparent in the discussions of transgender and trans-sexuality in chapter 6. Finally, young people and indeed adults often use the same word - sexuality - to mean very different things, a fact I will return to in chapter 2. The indignant speaker in my seminar was using the term "sexually active" to mean heterosexual penetrative sex with men, I was using the term sexuality – not even sexually active as I recall – in the way I have defined above. For many people the presumption that the only sex that counts as proper real sex is heterosexual penetrative sex by a man of a woman through her vagina limits and curtails all the different ways in which young women experience sexuality, are sexual and use sexuality to construct their identities. In the next section I explain briefly how my interest in this research came about and why I argue that sexuality should be accorded a much higher place in the minds of educators working with young people, not only because this would be more humane but also because sexuality is tangled up in the processes of learning and in knowledge itself.

### **'The Autobiography of the Question'**

The autobiography of the question is a concept developed by Jane Miller (1995). It belongs partly in the methodology chapter because, unlike

positivist research it presupposes that who I am and how I got to ask the research questions – that is, my ontological position - is integral to the 'answers' I find and indeed how I set up the research to do this.

The genesis of my project came from my observations as a secondary school teacher for the past fifteen years in London and particularly from critical incidents where the performance of sexuality and the performance of success seemed interconnected. I want to trace two of these critical incidents here to share the autobiography of the question/s I began to ask about sexuality and educational success.

### **Critical Incident One. Licence to Expel: Section 28, Teaching Homophobia and Failing Gays.**

The first incident actually involved a young man. However, it helped to reveal the interconnections between femininity/masculinity, sexuality and academic success in particularly interesting ways.

I started my teaching career in a large mixed suburban comprehensive school in Outer London. For a time, I became the deputy head of 'Special Educational Needs' as it was designated at the time. One day, I received a referral for a young man, Michael, who was at the time in year 8 and who

was extremely camp. He had previously come to my attention when he had asked for support to deal with homophobic bullying by other pupils. He subsequently came out as gay in year 10 (aged 14). The referral was from his maths teacher, who identified his difficulties with maths as being a result of his 'femininity' (her words). She had gone so far as to write this on the referral form. I wondered whether femininity could be strictly said to be a learning need, especially as female students in the maths class were not being referred. Of course, historically women have indeed suffered discrimination in education because their femininity was deemed to make academic study inappropriate but in 1989 it seemed anachronistic<sup>1</sup>. His maths teacher, a woman herself and therefore one would suppose less likely to see femininity as a stumbling block to mathematical success, made Michael's life a misery and in the end was disciplined over her behaviour towards him, which was also clearly homophobic. Section 28<sup>2</sup> was in full force and this was a perfect example of the kind of homophobic behaviour that it seemed to tacitly

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<sup>1</sup> Further reading would suggest that femininity does indeed make success more difficult. See, for example, Benjamin, S. (2002). "Reproducing Traditional Femininities? The Social Relations of 'Special Educational Needs' in a Girls' Comprehensive School." Gender and Education 14(3): 281-294.; Leathwood, C. (1998). "Irrational bodies and corporate culture: further education in the 1990s." Inclusive Education 2(3): 255-268.; Walkerdine, V. (1988). The Mastery of Reason. London, Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Section 28 was the infamous amendment to the Local Government Act of 1986, brought into force in 1988, which forbade Local Authorities from 'promoting homosexuality' or promoting 'the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. It was finally repealed in November 2003.

licence, by setting up a deficit model of homosexuality as undesirable in schools.

What was interesting to me was that 'femininity' performed in a masculine body could be read as a learning disability in relation to maths. It suggested that the construction of knowledge in curriculum subjects and the dominant pedagogies attached to curriculum subjects had embedded within them a requirement to learn in a particular sexualised and/or gendered way. The performance of 'good at maths', as constructed in this school's mathematics in 1989, simply wasn't available to a young gay man, because 'good at maths' also embodied a particular form of masculinity, which was definitely and definitionally not camp. What were the implications of this? Were the successful girls then, all doing masculinity in maths or was it ok for them to perform femininity and do maths because they were girls? Or was it simply taken for granted that mostly young women would fail at maths? Were the criteria of success for boys and girls at maths, the same or different? Heather Mendick (2006) has argued powerfully, that the pedagogy of maths is indeed masculinised and that young women's pervasive choice not to study maths at A level is not accidental. Mendick's work reveals how young people use maths to make their identities both as clever and as masculine and how young men and young women are differently positioned in relation to their

study of maths. She suggests that if young women were to be persuaded to study maths at A level in greater numbers, then the pedagogy of mathematics teaching would have to change and the construction of mathematical knowledge as made up of logical certainties and as supremely rational would also have to be reconceptualised.

...ideas about the type of people who do maths, about the ways that people learn and do maths and about what maths is, are closely tied together. They bring together ideas about natural abilities and hierarchies of knowledge and are held in place by a pattern of oppositions that define maths and tie it into an oppressive system of gender relations. The most important of these oppositions is:

Certain/uncertain

...For knowledge to be certain it must be kept separate from the world, so I am also interested in these oppositions:

Abstract/Relational

Rational/Emotional

Objective/Subjective

Neutral/Political

Separate/Connected

(Mendick 2006: 157-8)

The hard knowledge of maths is associated with archetypal 'masculine' qualities of rationality, abstract thinking, objectivity and neutrality, whereas femininity is other to maths, in that it is relational, emotional, subjective and connected. As Walkerdine has observed, in her analysis of mathematics teaching and learning in the primary classroom:

...reason, as mathematics, becomes a fantasy of masculinity in which masculinity has to be constantly proved, as does women's exclusion from it. The proof of masculine superiority and female failure has

constantly to be remade and desperately reasserted. (Walkerdine 1988: 200)

In a sense, then, the teacher who said that this young man's problem in maths was that he was too 'feminine', is bizarrely correct in one way, though it would have been more correct to have said, as Mendick has, that the problem is to do with mathematics, rather than those who are learning it.

Similarly, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) also contend that femininity leads to a capping on examination success in maths because young women are frequently entered for the intermediate tier in GCSE mathematics (with the highest grade attainable capped at grade B) rather than the higher tier, because of 'concerns about girls' ability to cope with some examinations' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000: 203)

However, as much as Michael's issues with maths might have been about gender, his failure at maths was also due to the teacher's homophobia and the teacher's homophobia was a reaction to his homosexual performance. The actual performative aspect of his performance itself was also important. If he could have just tried to act straight in maths, the referral might never have happened and he might have had success as a learner. It was the doing of gay male sexuality that made the sums so impossible! He was simply too camp for the maths classroom. It was as if it was impossible to expect

rationality from a gay male subject, a stereotype that is still pervasive in western gay culture. Maths couldn't be explained to him because there wasn't an ounce of reason there to process the explanation. So went the homophobic 'logic' of the maths teacher. It was impossible to explain this to Michael at twelve years of age, before he had articulated a gay sexuality to himself.

We can find a partial understanding of the issues involved here in terms of the Cartesian dualistic logic embedded in western societies which constructs the binaries that Mendick has noted above and which are so crucially implicated in both gender and sexuality. Shane Phelan for example, has explored how Cartesian dualism has implications for gay male citizenship:

Gay men, defined in heterosexual society entirely by their sexuality, are so completely embodied as to threaten civilisation itself (Phelan 2001: 42)

The gay man cannot do abstract thinking. He is entirely at the whim of his body, embodied so that he is perceived as a threatening other to civilisation. This can be transposed to the school. This young man's embodiment of sexuality was seen to threaten learning itself, in that it was seen as actively antithetical to the reasoning processes of mathematics, in a way that femininity as embodied by a woman was not. While femininity might make maths difficult, it did not threaten it in the same way as it did when



embodied by a gay man. I would suggest the problem was not that Michael was too feminine as the Maths teacher suggested but that he was mocking masculinity, which as a man was his for the taking. Instead he was treating it with disrespect. Interestingly, the reason the maths teacher was finally disciplined was because she got all the pupils' in the maths class to sign a petition demanding that Michael was removed from the maths class, because he 'disrupted' (her words again) their learning. His supposed threat to learning, the possibility that he might topple reason in the classroom, brought about this excessively paranoid reaction from the teacher and in the process it implicitly endorsed the homophobic bullying which was going on in the maths classroom and which was the real reason for the disruption. For example, in one disruptive incident, Michael was sent out of the maths classroom because he was shouting and would not settle to work. It emerged that other pupils had thrown all his belongings out of the maths classroom window. Yet the teacher had chosen to blame him for the disruption this caused. It is important to remember that Michael was only twelve/thirteen and had not come out as gay. Ironically this protected the maths teacher for some time. How can one be homophobic to someone who isn't gay? Of course many male pupils in school who do not define as gay are routinely accused of being so and suffer homophobic bullying because of it. However, in this instance, what I wish to draw attention to is the fact that he didn't

define as gay, so that it was something about his attitude to masculinity, which drew the teacher's attention to him as the reason for the indiscipline of the maths class. She called it femininity, but it was femininity practised in a male body. A key feature of this seemed to be displays of emotion, which she regarded as excessive and obviously as also un-mathematical!

The Cartesian dualistic logic of mind/body and rational/irrational splitting has particular relevance to the site of the school. Schools are places which are designed to produce rationality and cognitive development. Schooling is a deeply modernist project. In this context, it is unsurprising that the body is required not to draw attention to itself. The individual body becomes part of the corporate body of the school, clad in its uniform. The performance of sexuality is 'other' to the performance of learning and cognition and therefore in simplistic terms, those who are perceived as sexual in any way are likely to be less successful than those who suppress or closet sexuality. Schools educate for a delayed practice of sexuality and sexuality practised outside school, partly because it is perceived as a practice of the body and is therefore not compatible with the development of reason. The ideal position for the secondary school pupil logically, is to be quiet about sexuality and if possible to remain heterosexually asexual. Any active practice of sex for young people is therefore potentially undermining of academic achievement. On the other

hand, Michael was not voted out of his maths class because he was having gay sex. It was because of his tendency to act gay and not to be able to closet it sufficiently, so that he was labelled as gay by others. Halley (1993) has argued heterosexuality is a 'default category', incorporating even homosexuality, provided that it remains covert. In short, the class of heterosexuals is 'home to those who have not fallen out of it' (Halley 1993: 85). All pupils in schools belong to the default class of heterosexuality unless they choose to step out of it. A performance of masculinity that is atypical is punished. Chapter three explores further the links between gender and sexuality but as Judith Butler has remarked, "'intelligible" genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire' (Butler 1990: 23) and, we might also add, knowledge. In this instance, incoherence not only made gender unintelligible but also produced the subject as unintelligent.

Interestingly, in the adult world of work, sexuality is no less subject to controls, but these work rather differently. Adkins (1992) for example, has shown how female workers in the leisure and hotel industry are required to behave in an appropriately heterosexual manner and that heterosexuality was a requirement for success in the job. Adkins argues the requirement to practise heterosexuality as they worked is the key way in which women's

structural subordination in the workplace is ensured. Thus a convincing performance of heterosexuality is required from women in order to be successful workers.

Michael's case convinced me that there was more to educational success than met the eye, that sexuality of any sort led a precarious existence in schools and that any trace of non-normative sexuality could close down the possibility of being successful in certain curriculum subjects altogether. As a teacher this was a real concern for me. It suggested that the control of adolescent sexuality was just as important in the production of educational success, as any sort of cognitive development I might try to support in a classroom and that the discourse through which cognitive success materialised was intricately bound to sexuality. It suggested too, that the control of adolescent sexuality was achieved through access to educational success. Rationing occurred when sexuality became out of control, or stepped out of line. Thus, if we return to Valerie Hey's research subject, Carol, referred to at the start of this chapter, we have to ask whether she jumped or whether she was pushed. Did she leave school or were her educational rations so meagre that they were not worth waiting for?

Ostensibly, schools use sex education to present an official view of sexuality to young people, that it would be in their best interests to delay sexual activity. It is presented as 'advice' (DfEE 2000). However, a far more significant and potent way of ensuring young people's compliance with this advice is by rationing education, controlling access to educational success for those who are overtly sexual, limiting access to subject choice or level or even to full time education.

It was possible of course that the incident involving Michael was an appalling but isolated incident of homophobia in school. I have found many examples since this incident where the practice of sexuality has been key in the construction of educational success or failure. There are incidental examples or even critical examples of it in other educational research, mostly attributed to gender rather than sexuality, but where a connection is made between success/failure and sexuality. The key issue for me in this research was whether and how pupils experienced this dialectic between sexuality and academic success and if they felt it, how they then managed it, or whether it managed them, sweeping them along in ways that they didn't understand. The worst aspect of Michael's case was that he did not understand what was happening. It seemed to him that he was subject to poor treatment for no reason at all that he could divine. He was twelve. He was swept along as a

victim of homophobic treatment, the subtlety of which he did not understand and what it meant was that he felt he could not and would never be able to do maths and that he could not help getting into trouble.

### **Critical Incident Two. Licence to Expel: Sexuality and Exclusion from School**

Perhaps the most important formative experience for this thesis occurred while I was working in a comprehensive, grant-maintained, over-subscribed girls' school in an outer London borough. Helen, a young woman with cerebral palsy, was admitted into year 9 at the school at the end of the autumn term of 1998. Prior to this, she had been in a mixed school and prior to that, in a special school. The reason given for her wishing to leave the mixed school and attend this school was that she had been badly bullied by the boys at the mixed school. She only managed to remain in my school for one term and by the beginning of March she had been permanently excluded on the grounds that the school could not meet her educational or emotional/behavioural needs.

Within the first few days of Helen's arrival the following observations were made: long absences were noted when Helen went to the toilet and she was

constantly late to lessons on the first floor as she found the stairs difficult. Subsequently over a period of weeks, pupils were sent with Helen to accompany her to the toilet in order to chivvy her along and a number of incidents seemed to have occurred. One pupil reported that Helen had started banging her head on the wall, saying she was going to kill herself; another, that Helen had wrapped toilet roll around her neck in a mock hanging. Yet another pupil explained that Helen had said that the toilets were inhabited by a ghost and they were too scary to go in. The pupil in this instance was apparently distressed and her parents reported it. Helen was then reported to be masturbating in the toilets, though I remain unsure how this was discovered. Then the Key Stage 3 director said in the staff room to two of us early one morning that Helen had been caught masturbating in a geography lesson, so 'something would have to be done now'. Later that week, having been refused permission to go to the toilet, Helen 'deliberately' according to the deputy head, wet herself in the classroom. Helen was then permanently excluded from school. The head teacher was furious with the educational psychologist who had said that the problem was not so much Helen masturbating, but the issue of effective sex education for the other pupils and that, after all, most secondary school aged pupils masturbated. This brief narration of the events leading up to Helen's permanent exclusion doesn't do justice to the everyday processes of 'othering' that she was

subjected to as a young disabled woman. The key event which led to her exclusion however, was undoubtedly the fact/myth of her masturbation.

In many ways Helen is an example of what Shereen Benjamin has suggested is 'the really disabled discourse of success' (2002: chapter 8). As Benjamin argues these pupils are those whose diversity cannot be valued because it is 'too diverse' (2002: 132). What made Helen really different and really disabled however, was her overt sexuality but this has to be interpreted in the context of her dis/ability because they were productive of each other. The notion of ability is extremely important here, because physical impairment becomes conflated with the perception that the disabled subject is incapable of rational thought. The disability embodies the subject or rather engulfs it and there is a tendency to perceive those whose bodies are disabled as completely at the mercy of their bodies. The sexual behaviour of disabled people has been identified by Robert Murphy as working at two polarities in the popular imagination:

The sexual problems of the disabled are aggravated by a widespread view that they are either malignantly sexual, like libidinous dwarfs, or more commonly, completely asexual' (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells et al. 1996: 83)

Perceptions of disabled sexuality take to extremes the conflicting discourses of sexuality already found in schools about children's sexuality, either as



unruly sexual adolescents with hormones raging out of control or as protected in a walled garden of childhood sexual innocence/ignorance.

Helen's masturbation keyed into the first of these stereotypical assumptions about disabled sexuality and meant that she operated in opposition to the discourse of childhood sexual innocence. She might also pollute the other children. At a carefully repressed level, there were also hidden eugenic beliefs, never stated, about the undesirability of the propagation of 'disability' and therefore the undesirability of Helen having any sexuality at all.<sup>1</sup> As Shakespeare et al have remarked:

Another factor involved in the unwillingness to contemplate disabled people's sexual subjectivity is the fear of disabled people joining up with other disabled people and breeding more disabled people. In a century which has seen repeated policies of eugenics, and ongoing concern about the purity of the race, the spectre of more impaired children is viewed with alarm. (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells et al. 1996: 108)

The key events in Helen's progression towards exclusion often centred around her body. Her masturbation led her to be viewed as governed completely by her body and without a mind. This served to produce Helen

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which eugenic arguments were used to justify abortion, in the campaign against the Alton Bill see the collection of articles in Part 3 of Off Centre Franklin, S., C. Lury, et al. (1991). Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies. London and New York, Routledge. in particular the essay By Steinberg. For a more recent exploration of the way in which eugenic understandings underpin pre-natal screening see Shakespeare, T. (1998). "Choices and Rights: eugenics, genetics and disability equality." Disability and Society 13(5): 665-681.. See also Steinberg, D.L. Steinberg, D. L. (1997). Technologies of Heterosexuality: Eugenic Reproductions Under Glass. Border Patrols: Policing the Boundaries of Heterosexuality. D. L. Steinberg, D. Epstein and R. Johnson. London, Cassell: 66-97. on the part played by eugenics in IVF programs.

as ineducable. Foucault (1976) described the Victorian preoccupation with the masturbating child, using the metaphor of disease:

Educators and doctors combatted children's onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated. (Foucault 1976: 42)

Masturbation was perceived as an activity ruinous of healthy development and this appeared to be a residual interpretative frame for Helen's masturbation. Thomas W. Laqueur (2003), and Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck (2001) have documented extensively the historical preoccupation with preventing children - and indeed adults - from masturbating, because it was seen as ruinous of one's health and as causing degenerative illnesses. Whilst these attitudes underwent a considerable reworking in the latter half of the twentieth century especially in relation to adolescents, for whom it became a permissible though immature form of sexuality, it could still only function as a very private practice and one not to be spoken about. Even in 1994 the then US president, Bill Clinton, dismissed the Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, for suggesting that masturbation be included as a topic within sex education in public schools (Lancet 1994) (Irvine 2002). Helen's masturbation was an institutional threat to the perceived legitimate activities of the school. Her behaviour was seen as corrupting of others and, as the carrier of this diseased behaviour, she had to be forcibly and permanently expelled. The metaphor of Helen as diseased is an important one in the process of producing her as

completely at the whim of her body. One of the most upsetting processes in what happened to Helen was the production of her as incapable of reason, through her totalising embodiment.

I have been eager to show that Helen did not have the power attributed to her by staff and pupils at the school. I want to finish however, with the possibility of Helen's active engagement in transgression. It is possible that many of the incidents in the toilets were transgressive, especially her masturbation. They might have also indicated Helen's distress and anxiety about school. Pupil toilets are transgressive spaces in schools. They are the places where pupils go traditionally to smoke, miss lessons, have private conversations, commit vandalism, and in the case of the young women Valerie Walkerdine researched, sing pop songs and recreate themselves as the fantasy object of the sexual gaze (1990: 123). Helen could only scare pupils because of the phobia and panic her impairment induced, a phobia endorsed by many of the staff. It could be seen as an attempt by Helen to use her limited power as 'the other' to mock her audience. Whether or not Helen intended an act of transgression or rebellion within school, what she did do was open up the possibility of such an interpretation of her behaviour and this in turn, showed that there was a space in the school that was transgressive. This also meant that she had to be excluded.

As Gordon et al. emphasize, it is social processes rather than individuals, which create marginality in schools (Gordon, Holland et al. 2000: 193). I would suggest that it is social processes too which create transgressive opportunities and that in this instance, Helen showed the rest of the school, one such opportunity. It was this opportunity which had to be closed down and this was done through Helen's exclusion, which ultimately ensured that the transgressive reading of her acts was unsuccessful. In this respect Helen is comparable to the figure of the pregnant schoolgirl, who is excluded (or more recently displaced) from mainstream schooling because of a sexual practice which cannot or will not be hidden and which can come to signify symbolically resistance to learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have begun to consider the questions which preoccupy this research. They may be summarised as follows:

- How do young people and young women in particular use sexuality and sexual practice in the construction of their identities as successful or failed learners?

- What are the dominant discourses of sexuality in school, how are these linked to education and how do these constrain the agency of young people in producing themselves as successful?
- Why is it that overtly (uncloseted) sexual or promiscuous behaviour in young women should so often lead to academic failure?
- What sexuality may be tolerated in young women, as compatible with academic success?

In raising these questions I have briefly explored the stories that led me to ask these questions in the first place. I have suggested that the construction of knowledge in schools is predicated upon Cartesian thought and that Cartesian dualisms not only structure the relationship of gender to knowledge but also of sexuality and sexual values to knowledge.

The next two chapters contain a discussion of the methodology and epistemological underpinnings of this thesis. While chapter two tackles the methodological issues of the research and outlines the methods used, chapter three concerns itself mainly with the theories used in the thesis and particularly with different approaches to understandings of sexuality, gender, the body and academic achievement.

The substantive analysis occurs through case studies over chapters 4 -9.

Chapters 4 – 6 deal with those pupils who fail to attain 5 GCSEs grade A-C.

Their failure to do this is linked in each case study to overt sexuality or sexual practice displayed through: an uncertainty about sexuality or learning which

manifests itself in explorations of sex; a movement of the body towards

transgender; a culturally unrecognizable relationship to heterosexuality

within dominant discourses of the modern UK citizen. Chapters 7 – 9 explore

how academically successful pupils manage their bodies and their sexuality.

It will show three different strategies for the management of sexuality. These

are: fusing the academic and the sexual into the teacher as an object of desire;

the intellectualization or 'thinking' over sex; the rejection or displacement of

the sexual to another space or time.

## Chapter 2

### Researching Young Women's Sexualities in School

**"I didn't even know you could study that."**

**(Hester, Fieldnotes September 2001, on the occasion of my explaining to her that my PhD was about young women's sexualities)**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I outlined 'the autobiography of the question'. In this chapter I want to explore some of the complexities of researching young women's sexualities in school. Skeggs (1997) suggests that methodology underpins all theory:

To ignore questions of methodology is to assume that knowledge comes from nowhere allowing knowledge makers to abdicate responsibility for their productions and representations. ... Methodology is itself theory. It is a theory of methods which informs a range of issues from who to study, how to study, which institutional practices to adopt (such as interpretative practices), how to write and which knowledge to use (Skeggs: 17)

Epistemology therefore, is of central importance to methodology. Stanley (1990) defines epistemology as:

A theory of knowledge which addresses central questions such as; who can be a 'knower', what can be known, what constitutes and validates knowledge. (Stanley 1990: 26)

Hester, one of my research participants, captures nicely in her comment above the epistemic challenge to the suggestion that sexuality can be studied and known about. The mind/body split (see chapter 1) is so entrenched in schools that sexuality was something that Hester associated with a life outside school, with the body, with pleasure and desire but not as a topic about which worthy knowledge could be generated. There was nothing in the national curriculum she studied in school that would have made the study of sexuality comprehensible to her as a legitimate area of research inquiry - hence her surprise. Interestingly she made no association of sex with knowledge in relation to what she had learned in sex education, or even of sex education as the study of sexuality at all. I had a vain hope that this might provide at least some reference point through which to legitimate the study to pupils. Epistemic scepticism about the validity of research into sexuality created particular challenges for the research. Hester's view is one which is shared by many professionals in education. Gaining permission to research sexuality in schools is not always easy. As Epstein and Johnson observe, 'Putting the terms 'schooling' and 'sexuality together is the stuff of which scandal can be, and often is, made' (Epstein and Johnson: 1). At the time I undertook the research, Section 28 was still in force and made many



senior leaders in schools nervous of addressing sexuality and especially marginalised sexualities. Redman (Redman) for example, tells the story of a headteacher's nervousness at allowing him to conduct research in her school, once he mentioned the word 'sexuality'. Part of the reason I chose to conduct my research in the school where I worked was because I had already established a reputation for integrity and was trusted. Even then I remember finding it very useful that I had an ESRC grant because it gave legitimacy and respectability to the research. The researcher is the powerful figure of research, in terms of control over the interpretative framework. However, because of a lack of currency in school of sexuality as a subject worthy of study epistemological challenges were made to its validity on a relatively regular basis by both pupils and teachers, but especially by pupils. I will explore further epistemological issues raised by sexuality as research topic when I consider the different modes of address used by students in their relationship with me

### **Introducing the Study**

This is a piece of small scale ethnographic research, following the traditions of feminist ethnography:

Contemporary ethnography or fieldwork is multimethod research. It usually includes observation, participation, archival analysis, and interviewing ... it does not typically include testing or large-scale surveys (Reinharz 1992: 46)

The data comes from one comprehensive secondary girls' school in South London. It comprised observation and description involving 43 pupils at the school and in-depth, qualitative interviews with 15 pupils at the school. All the pupils included in the study were either in year 10 or 11, between fourteen and sixteen years old. Interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2002. Some of the fieldwork was conducted in pupils' homes and their understandings about their homes and their local areas proved to be as important to the research as their schooling.

### **Manor High School**

The school where the research took place was a comprehensive girls' school in South London, for pupils between the ages of 11-16. I will call it Manor High School, though that is not its real name. The fieldwork took place between May 2000 and July 2002 and during this time the school went through substantial structural changes. In 1997 the Local Authority made the decision to amalgamate the school with the neighbouring boys' school on the site of the boys' school, which was to be completely refurbished and extended. Those on roll at the time were guaranteed that their education would be completed in a single-sex setting. The school remained a girls' school up to the end of the summer term of 2002. There were approximately

600 pupils on the school roll by the end of 2002 and its population was ethnically diverse. Approximately 40% of pupils classified themselves as White British or Irish, 20% as African Caribbean, 20% as of Asian origin and 5% as African. The school also had a casual intake of 11% of pupils who joined the school during the school year. This percentage was made up of pupils permanently excluded from other schools and pupils who were newly arrived in the UK. Because of the nature of the structural changes taking place, the turnover of staff between 1998 and 2001 was relatively high, with staff choosing to apply for posts in schools elsewhere, often in order to continue working in a girls' school but also because some staff were likely to be made redundant in the amalgamation of the two schools. The rationale for the amalgamation was to save money and cutting staff was one of the key ways of doing this. As a result, there were a lot of teachers on one year or termly renewable contracts. The school mounted a campaign to try to prevent the amalgamation in 1998-2000 but failed. Many staff were resentful of the local authority's decision and had decided to leave specifically so that they did not have to work for the authority again. The resentment was especially acute because the local community and staff and pupils at the school, felt that the girls' and boys' single sex schools at the more prosperous end of the borough had escaped amalgamation because of their powerful middle class parents' groups. It was generally felt that yet again the

authority had not supported those living and working in the poorer end of the borough.

The head teacher for the school's final year was a popular member of staff, who up to that time had been the deputy head teacher. Astutely, he was able to offer some interesting perks for staff at the school. The most attractive of these was that the school would not implement the new DfES guidelines for performance management, which had been much resisted by teacher unions.

The school was also exempted from the publishing of examination performance tables for the year 2002 and from any ofsted inspection from 2001, as it was effectively closing. This meant that the school was in a very odd position, in the sense that it was cocooned from the targeting audit culture of new managerialism for the final year of its existence. As a result, although some staff did decide to leave, in that final year many staff also chose to stay and some, myself included, were even recruited specifically because they were attracted to working outside of new managerialist practices. The lack of a new managerialist culture did not mean that staff didn't care or think about how to support pupils to achieve the best results possible in examinations. In fact, the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grade A\*-C went up in the final year and correspondingly those achieving no GCSEs went down (see Appendix 2).

In a sense, the choice of research site seems odd, in that it is atypical of what schools are like today, particularly in terms of how they are managed.

However, I decided to use it for several reasons. Firstly, the research wasn't intended to be about the micropolitics of the school though it was concerned with the discursive construction of success and sexuality in the school's structure and ethos. This had relevance and bearing upon the research results but the main purpose of the research was to explore pupils' own evaluations of their school success and relate that to their sexualities. This meant exploring not just their identities in relation to school but also outside the school - in relation to their homes for example. I had prior connections to the school and had established good relationships with staff. These proved very useful because staff in key positions would indicate to me pupils they felt would have interesting narratives to tell about their sexualities. In other words, staff were useful in helping me to find pupils who would be critical cases for the research. Finally, I wanted to be in a position where I would be in contact with the research participants on a daily basis. It is not easy for secondary pupils to talk about sexuality with adults, especially not in interview contexts. I did contemplate working with interview material alone, interviewing pupils on one occasion in a school where I was not known, thinking it might be easier for them to talk about sexuality to a stranger who they would never have to see again. However, I wanted to explore the

interconnections between sexuality, sexual practice and academic achievement and that is really only possible by researching over time, using a multimethod approach, therefore ethnographically. Given also, that I was working for four days per week in the school and enrolled part-time as a PhD student, it was not practical for me to do ethnography in another school because of time constraints. By working with specific groups of pupils in school as a teacher, I could spend time gaining trust and discuss issues around sexuality as they arose in context. Pupils also had the chance to get to know me, to be aware of my lesbian sexuality and also to decide whether they wanted to trust me in terms of research participation. Interviews took place towards the end of the research period once I had established relationships with pupils and because it allowed me to discuss events that had happened over the course of the research period, giving pupils the opportunity to comment on them or re-evaluate them. Pupils often conveyed a sense of how they had changed over the course of the year in interviews. I was a participant observer, as a teacher, in the fullest sense but of course, still operating at a distance from pupil cultural worlds. Whilst I was a teacher – researcher, this was not a piece of action research in the sense defined by Cohen and Manion:

Action research is situational – it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context: it is usually (though not inevitably) collaborative – teams of

researchers and practitioners work together on a project; it is participatory – team members themselves take part directly or indirectly in implementing the research; and it is self-evaluative – modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation, the ultimate objective being to improve practice in some way or other. (1994: 186)

This research does not have the circuit of production of action research. It is not about making a change in the school. Rather it concerns the generation of grounded concepts which will lead to new understandings of how young women embody or resist embodying sexuality in school and suggest how this may have a significant impact on their academic achievements. However, where it was possible and if it was possible, I did want to make a positive difference to the lives and the academic achievements of the research participants. On occasions this did constitute something of an experiment to see if working with pupil sexual identities in the broadest sense could lead to an improvement in academic achievement.

### **Pupils' Homes/Areas**

The school was located on the edge of a South London borough. About a third of the pupils on roll were recruited from the neighbouring Inner London Borough and there were also some pupils, who tended to be the wealthier pupils, who lived in the neighbouring Outer London Borough.

Most of the pupils expressed strong feelings about where they lived though some had not lived in their current homes for very long. Mobility within the borough and within the neighbouring inner London boroughs was quite high and this was reflected in the research participants, as can be seen in Appendix 1. None of the pupils who formed part of my research group were living at the more affluent end of the borough. Some were living in respectable semi-detached properties on roads in the poorer side of the borough. Most were living on one of three of the borough's large council estates, while three were living on council estates in neighbouring Inner London Boroughs. Two pupils were living in neighbouring more affluent Outer London Boroughs. One Somali pupil was in bed and breakfast accommodation and all of the other Somali pupils I interviewed were living in poor quality accommodation above shops in one of the high streets in the neighbouring Inner London Borough. One pupil was placed in local authority care and was housed in a hostel for teenage mothers in a neighbouring Outer London Borough. Another pupil had been living with twelve other family members in a two bedroomed flat in a neighbouring Inner London Borough but was then rehoused. Rachel Thomson (2000) has shown convincingly that there is a 'logic of sexual practice' which operates differently within different communities and which shapes young people's sexuality so that it holds value within their community. The high mobility within the group of



research participants with whom I worked also significantly impacted on the value they attached to the different logics of sexual practice they encountered across the various communities in which they lived. Logics of sexual practice often became destabilized through relocation.

### **My Roles at Manor High School**

I worked at this school in a variety of roles. Initially, in the summer term of 2000, I worked one day per week, completing a research project for the school, into the underachievement and 'unhappiness' (as described by the deputy head teacher) of Somali students in the school. During this time I was also working for the authority's Traveller education service for three days per week. I conducted discussion groups with Somali students, made home-visits, completed classroom observations, worked as a support teacher in classrooms, ran study sessions and one-to-one conflict resolution sessions. These activities contributed to my research for the school and at the end of the Summer term I asked the Head Teacher if I could continue to work with the students the following term, incorporating them into my own research. At this point, the Somali students who were in year 11 at the start of the academic year of 2001 were invited to participate in my own research and completed consent forms. More widely I continued to work with Somali

students offering support, but also making fieldnotes of discussions and completing lesson observations for my own research.

From September 2000– July 2001, I continued to work for 1 day per week in the school. The main focus of my work was to research 3 different groups of students. These were Somali students, a wider group of newly arrived asylum seekers and a group of 5 non-attending year 11 girls. Specifically, I was asked by the school to investigate whether any action could be taken to help the integration into school of newly arrived asylum seekers. In relation to the young women not attending school, I was asked to explore why they were not attending school and what the school could do to help. Again my work was not confined to the school site. Half the time would be spent working with pupils at their homes, or if this was not possible, at another mutually agreed location. During this time, I made extensive fieldnotes on these visits with a view to finding out what it was that made it impossible for these young people to attend school. We were often able to have fairly detailed conversations about their lives more generally. These students were aware that I was completing research and agreed to participate, usually eager to present their views. During this year, I built up a rapport in school with some of the asylum seekers and wider community of refugee and minority ethnic pupils, particularly those who were Muslim and those who were from

Africa, through introductions by Somali students to their friends. However, it wasn't really until these pupils were in year 11 the following academic year that I started to work with them. I was still very much seen in school as a researcher as much as a teacher, in the sense that I was working to find out the perspectives of each of the groups of young women with whom I was working, in addition to a secondary role offering support.

From September 2001 – July 2002 I was working for 4 days per week in the school, with the specific brief of supporting year 11 girls, who were at risk of not achieving any GCSEs or of dropping out of school. It is from this cohort that all of the case studies are drawn. I was given a room which contained a multi-purpose classroom and office. It was redecorated, had access to ICT, an area for completing art work, a study area and an area with a coffee table and chairs. There was also a small reference library with key text books used by year 11 in GCSE courses, white board and flip-chart, TV and Video. The idea was to create a safe independent study space for these year 11 pupils in particular, where they could learn when they could not, would not or were not allowed to learn in classrooms. The priority as far as the school was concerned, was that this group of students should not be roaming the corridors during lesson time but engaged in positive learning activities. It

was also a good social space and was the place where all of the interviews were conducted, mostly at the end of the school day.

Because of the nature of my role I had to spend most of my time in this space, as a resource on which pupils could draw and also to supervise the space, to ensure it was comfortable and safe. This restricted some of my research activities and gave greater opportunity for others. I was able to get to know and observe pupil cultures to a greater degree in that space and also to have many discussions about life, sexuality and learning with pupils. As I recruited pupils for my research they completed consent forms as did their parents/guardians. I took a lot of fieldnotes each week from October 2001-June 2002, based on my observations of these pupils. Sometimes I did manage to leave this study area and was able to work with or observe pupils in classrooms.

I worked with a group of sixteen year 11 pupils some of whom self-referred for support with learning but the majority of whom, were referred to me by their teachers. From this group I completed home visits to 13 of them on at least one occasion. In addition to this I also began to get to know year 11 girls more widely, partly because of a Summer School I'd run in the summer of 2001, partly through wider study support after school and partly by working

on ICT projects after school with year 11 pupils. This gave me access to high attaining pupils in year 11. The study space I created in the year 11 block of the school became much more widely used by many year 11 students during the course of the year and so, by the second term, it was regularly being used as a space by between 30-40 pupils. I'd also set up (although I wasn't running it) a dance club two lunchtimes per week, which ran in the gym with a professional dance instructor. So many pupils wanted to attend this club that it had to be limited to forty pupils per session. This again brought me into contact with a lot of different pupils, some of whom agreed to participate in my research by giving interviews.

The following table 2.1 gives an outline of the interview and observation schedules. (For further information about individual pupils see Appendix 1).

**Table 2.1: Interview and Observation Schedules**

Timing	Type of Data Collected	Pupils involved
September – December 2000	Observation  Interview	Somali students  Traveller pupils
January 2001 – July 2001	Continued observation in school and on home visits	Year 11 students in 2001 not attending school, Somali Students and newly arrived refugee and asylum seekers
September 2001 – May 2002	Observation in school and on home visits fieldnotes 'thick description'	Year 11 students in referral group
January 2002 – May 2002	Observation – fieldnotes	Year 11 students recruited through other means who agreed to participate
June 2002 – July 2002	Interviews	Year 11 referral group students and other year 11 students recruited through other means

### **Teacher/Researcher, 'Miss Sarah' and Me: Revealing Relationships through the Mode of Address**

For the Somali pupil research participants I was a mixture of researcher and teacher. Because I was a teacher, I could offer them some academic support which they wanted. As an ethnographer I wanted their views and I wanted to observe practices over time through a more informal relationship with them. As a group I noticed that these pupils started to call me 'Miss Sarah', which encapsulated my dual role in relation to them. Once I took a job at the school, I then became a more clearly identified as a teacher who was also doing research. The specific group of year 11 pupils who I supported worked out a way of addressing me. When we were in our year 11 space they would call me Sarah and around the school, in front of other pupils, they would call me Ms O'Flynn. This is more or less the etiquette which operates between staff at the school.

However, the way in which I was addressed was more complex than this. I felt that I was assigned a variety of roles by pupils once they became aware that I was undertaking research around sexuality and success at school. It tended to heighten their expectations of the ways in which I might be able to support them. In the course of the year I had pupils arriving at my door to

talk to me about anorexia, self-harm, pregnancy, sexual harassment, sexual orientation, sexual propositioning, seduction and bereavement. Partly, it seemed as though I had, through the announcement of my research area, become the person who wanted to listen to stories of love and sexuality and their discontents and they wanted to talk about them. At first, I attributed this to the fact that sexuality was not often permitted to be spoken about with teachers and that I had simply created a way of starting to do this. However, I then began to consider more carefully the roles in which I was being cast. Sexuality was spoken most easily about through a therapeutic discourse, in which I was assigned the position of therapist. It was possibly the only accessible discourse available to pupils through which to address an adult about sexuality within an institution. More uncomfortably, there were two pupils who avoided talking to me, casting me less favourably in the role of some sort of sexual freak. Sometimes I was included in pupil culture talk in the role of friend and occasionally this forced me to redraw boundaries – for example, when Hester invited me to her New Year's Eve party and I had to spend a long time with her discussing why this would not be appropriate. Occasionally I was placed in the role of a parent. This occurred particularly when pupils' own parents were not available to them as a source of support or advice, or indeed where their parents were the problem as in Carol's father's physical abuse of her but there would also be slippage in the



classroom when I would be addressed as 'Mum'. Whilst some of these roles emerged as a result of being a teacher in the sense that many teachers are cast in multiple roles by students, I felt that there was instability with regard to their understanding of my role as researcher of sexuality, an instability I shared. Bringing sexuality openly into the school as research and hence a legitimate subject for sustained inquiry and discussion and my openly declared identity as a lesbian, fractured boundaries about what was knowledge and what was not and what was the status of pupil experience and whether it could count as knowledge. Could their ontologies be used to make new knowledge? Interestingly, after her initial disbelief that sexuality could be a topic for research, Hester came back into my office two days later to ask me if you could study 'women' at university, because if so she wanted to do a course which was just about women's literature, history, science and medicine and so on 'but only women's'. She had clearly been thinking about what might count as knowledge in other academic but non-school settings. She was delighted when I told her about Women's Studies courses. There were instances throughout the research such as this one when an engagement with sexuality led to a re-envisioning of whether one could after all, make a successful learner identity.

## **Moments of Closeness and Moments of Distance**

My experience of doing ethnographic research is that it is full of uncomfortable moments of misrecognition and misunderstanding but that these moments also tend to be ones which allow one to refine one's interpretation. Take for example the following exchange which took place between myself, Hester and Tracy, in my car. Tracy was preparing for her mock Art GCSE examination and it materialised that she had been strongly advised to buy a set of fabric paints, in order to complete the piece of art work she wanted to do. The Art department had none because Tracy had forgotten to lock them in the cupboard after the last time she had used them in my room and they had been stolen. Tracy had no money to buy anything, so I had managed to get permission to draw out money from the school fund and to accompany her, to ensure the appropriate paints were bought. Hester was in the car because I did not want to risk leaving her at school, because I was worried that she might get into some sort of trouble there.

Hester: Sarah - do you like a band called U2?

Sarah: Yes - quite - I do listen to some of their stuff.

Hester: Trace - have you ever heard of a band called U2?

Tracy: *(from the back of the car)* No.

Hester: No – *(knowingly satisfied)* didn't think you would have. Hardly anybody has heard of them Trace *(me gulping in amazement!)* seriously though - you would not believe it - they are well popular - they have proper massive concerts and just loads of people go -

Tracy: *(bored)* Yeah?

Hester: Yeah - I'm not joking -

Tracy: *(Making an effort)* What kind of music is that then?

Hester: Don't know what you'd call it really? What would you say  
Sarah..um..

Sarah: Well it's Rock Music really I suppose that's what you'd call it.

Tracy: What's that then?

Hester: Kinda loud.

Tracy: Oh...*(unimpressed)* Miss have you got any Garage then?

Sarah: What's that then?

Tracy: *(Exasperated)* Oh never mind - - Miss can Hester tune the radio  
to Kiss 100?

Sarah: All right

*(After much adjusting Kiss 100 is finally found).*

Tracy: *(enthusiastically)* Yeah I like this - this is pukka - this is Samatha  
Mumba's new one - look at how she is now – *(disapproving tone)*  
started off all like a virgin and now look at the way she dresses!

Hester: Yeah that's like Britney too. Sarah - I'm not being funny but  
when we get there, can I have a fag? I won't let no-one see but I  
really need a fag. I feel sick.

Tracy: Oy Hester - give us one too.

Hester: All right darling.

*(27.11.01 Record of a conversation in my car between myself,  
Hester and Tracy as we're going to Hobbycraft to buy some  
more fabric paints for Tracy to replace the ones nicked out of  
my room. Lest I should ever make the mistake of thinking I  
share the cultural worlds of my students!)*

My comments at the time of writing up the fieldnotes that day make it clear  
that I have been brought to recognise that my cultural distance from these  
pupils is not simply one in which I am distant from their world but they are  
to me, astonishingly distant from mine. I had naively assumed that everyone  
would have heard of the rock band U2. The knowingness of Hester's  
assertion that 'hardly anyone' had heard of them, made me re-evaluate this  
band's location as specific to my age group's cultural world. This also led

later to some further interesting discussions with Hester about her identifications with, as she perceived it, more adult cultural spaces and her investment in knowing about these. Yet we also see them here bringing sexuality to the discussion through music and image. It is also clear from the fieldnotes too that I found some humour in this situation, as was often the case with situations involving Hester and Tracy. This raises the issue of audience in the fieldnotes. The fieldnotes of course are an interpretation of what happened. This example clearly employs the conventions of script writing, especially the addition of mood/tone in brackets to indicate how I remembered the words being spoken. For the pupils the conversation had no humour. It is my positioning as researcher in relation to them that adds the humour for me. Yet this in itself is also indicative of the distance between myself as researcher and the pupils as those researched.

In her study of girls' friendships, Valerie Hey has written about how her fieldwork involved 'a series of complex tradeoffs':

In the course of the study the girls and I developed an implicit micro-economy of exchange and barter. The girls provided access to their social lives in return for certain tangible goods: my attention; advice; sweet money; access to a warm room; or absence from lessons. These small trades are endemic in most field relations but because they smack of the marketplace there is very little reference to them and like a lot of the 'housework' of research, these details seldom surface in research reports or theses. (Hey 1997: 48)

Clearly there is some such bartering going on in the above extract. I get Tracy out of a fix in relation to her mock Art examination and in doing so I get to be part of an interesting conversation which is of use to my research. However, although such bartering occurred, I was positioned differently from Valerie Hey, because of the job I had in school as a teacher. I got my barter money from the school fund but I also had to get permission to take pupils off-site and pupils expected me to behave within certain boundaries as a teacher, even as they occasionally challenged them.

### **Ethical Considerations of Teacher/Researcher Identity**

It is important not to minimise the power I had in relation to these pupils either in my role as teacher or researcher. Sometimes I had to make very costly decisions in terms of the research. For example one pupil, Fiona, could have been a critical case in my project. However, in terms of her unhappiness at school the best thing for her education was to be accepted on a local authority project for year 11 pupils which began after the first half-term in year 11. I could have supported Fiona in school and she would have continued as one of my research participants but I knew that this would not be in her best interests. Therefore part of the first half-term's work was spent writing referrals for her and completing several home visits to explain the project to her parents - all with the unfortunate outcome for me, of Fiona no

longer being able to participate in my research. Ethically I clearly had to be governed by what would be in her best interests, especially when they conflicted with my own.

The school had a counsellor and as a teacher I referred several pupils to work with her at their request. I also made it clear to pupils during my discussions with them that this support was available. Often what pupils wanted was more academic support and I either organised this with other staff or provided it myself as appropriate. Pupils would also arrive with thoroughly school based crises going on. Shane sat crying in my office for almost two days continuously and I was at the point of despair in terms of getting her to articulate what was wrong. Finally she turned up again at my office with Sandra. They confessed they had truanted from Art for twelve weeks, missed a total of 36 hours of teaching and now 'Sir' had said he assumed they did not want to be entered for the examination. However Shane was distraught about how upset her mother was going to be with her. They did not know how to go back to Art lessons and they wanted to know what I thought. Eventually we hatched a plan that got them back to Art and on that GCSE entry list. It still did not stop Shane crying silently in my office on a regular basis though occasionally she articulated a sort of existentialist angst about her role in the world. Shane came out as a lesbian in the latter part of that

year having seen the counsellor for several sessions. After she came out she decided to be more distant from my support. I would have loved to have interviewed Shane but I sensed that it would not even be appropriate to ask her, since she had chosen to step away from me for whatever reason. She did seem happier in school.

The most challenging ethical issues occurred when pupils told me about aspects of their lives whose confidentiality it was not tenable to maintain. In these contexts research ethics and teacher protocol clashed. For example, when Hester told me that she was pregnant, I felt that in my capacity as a teacher I had to inform my senior manager. As a researcher I would not have felt compelled to do so. I thought that Hester's mother should be told of Hester's pregnancy because I thought, having visited her several times, that she would be very supportive of Hester. However, as Hester was sixteen my senior manager at school absolutely forbade me to do this or to put any pressure on Hester to do so. I felt that Hester would regret not telling her mother, would undoubtedly tell her at some point and regret not having done so earlier. This was, in fact, what happened. In this situation I felt that ethically, as an ethnographic researcher and as a participant observer with an investment in her well-being, I would have wanted to have a more earnest discussion with Hester about the possibility of telling her mother. As it was,

Hester had an abortion with her friend Tracy as support. This was the starkest example of my roles as teacher and researcher in conflict.

Another major ethical conflict occurred for me in the interview with Mataia which took place soon after the destruction of the World Trade Center and America's invasion of Afghanistan. Tensions in school between Muslim and non-Muslim students were quite high at the time and Mataia embraced Islam much more stridently following the American invasion. In the interview she expressed sentiments that were both homophobic and anti-Semitic. For example, in part of the interview she discussed the possibility of a truly Islamic state. We were discussing how such a state might treat different social groups and given my own lesbian identity, I was interested to know how this state would treat gay people:

Sarah: Ok. How would this Islamic state, this ideal Islamic state that doesn't exist – how would it treat gay people?

Mataia: They wouldn't be allowed. They would have to get stoned to death.

Sarah: And ...(*interruption*)

Mataia: So that's it. Gay people wouldn't be allowed.

Sarah: So you would be OK with that?

Mataia: Yeah.

Sarah: Stoning of gay people?

Mataia: Yes I would. I bloody well would. I would be happy.

Sarah: Why?

Mataia: Because they're gay! I don't mean to offend anyone but ...

Sarah: (*Incredulous*) Yeah?



Mataia: I don't mean to offend anyone but they're gay and it's just not right cos the Qu'ran says it isn't right and I believe in the Qu'ran so – that's the argument.

As a researcher one has several options here. Firstly one can say nothing and in analysis offer an understanding of the psychic functions such expressions of prejudice serve for the individual. This is easier in situations perhaps where one's research role is as a non-participant observer. Secondly, one can intervene in the interview with counter views and arguments or by making one's disapproval clear or at least making one's own ethics clear. Failing that ultimately one can end the interview. In the extract above I do not present at this stage, any counter arguments but I do express astonishment and disapproval. I remember feeling incredulous that, knowing my sexuality, she felt happy to openly express her homophobia in this way. However, as a lesbian, I felt that her affront was directly addressed to me and that I could choose to deal with it in whatever way I felt appropriate. In a way I had also provoked the conversation. Although she instigated the conversation about the ideal Islamic state, I was the one who brought up the treatment of gay people. Her anti-Semitism was much more disturbing for me. It revolved around a conversation about Palestine, also instigated by Mataia:

Sarah: There are Jewish people who abhor what has happened in Palestine.

Mataia: No. They're all for it.

Sarah: No that's absolutely not the case.

Mataia: It probably is. They're all for it. They probably don't show it yeah because the Israelis are more racist than the Nazis

Sarah: No, no that's...*(interrupted)*

Mataia: I swear that...*(interrupted)*

Sarah: I'm really really...*(interrupted)*

Mataia: *(Shouting)* They lie, they lie. They're lizards. They lie, they lie.

Sarah: That's just the kind of thing that some people are saying about Muslim people.

Mataia: Listen. I'll tell you about the Jews now they just lie. They lie in your face and they're good at lying. It's what's got them through.

Sarah: It hasn't 'got them through'. It's not true and you know they have suffered terribly....*(interrupted)*

Mataia: *(Shouting)* Yeah and we're suffering now.

Sarah: I am sure there are Muslim people - not you especially I have to say - there are Muslim people in Palestine who are suffering and elsewhere....

Mataia: Yeah basically every single Muslim country.

Sarah: But I wouldn't say you were suffering would you?

Mataia: I'm not suffering enough. That's the problem.

As a teacher, as well as a researcher, I was also bound by the school's Anti-racist policy and I did report this incident to a senior manager, clearly stepping outside the researcher role. I felt guilty about this because she was not obliged to give me an interview. However, if I had not reported it then it would give it credibility. It would become a simple disagreement. Given that I had also sat with my year 11 group and devised a statement to go on the wall about the unacceptability of racism, anti-Semitism, prejudice against Traveller culture and homophobia or anti-lesbianism and given that the interview took place in this room, some school based action was required. I was taken by surprise by Mataia on many levels. Initially I was shocked by

her views and eventually found it impossible not to contradict them. In the situation I am not sure I dealt with it very well. Her hugely insulting comparison of Israelis generally to Nazis merited a tougher response. I spoke to the argument rather than to her deliberate and calculated anti-Semitism. I did not pull her up on the conflation of Israeli with Jewish. Most of all I did not respond to the imagery she used and as I read over the transcript the use of the word 'lizard' is what struck me as the most disturbing. Finally, I never really dealt with the notion that she was not suffering enough, possibly an indication of more radically fundamentalist Islamic doctrine, bordering the logical step to martyrdom. Phil Cohen (Cohen 1989) has argued cogently for the need to intervening in racist comments in research. However, it is not always easy in the moment to tackle such anti-Semitism effectively. I remember closing the interview down eventually, because I did not want to listen anymore. We did discuss the interview at a later date and she said that it had made her rethink some of her views, especially in relation to a Jewish teacher on the staff. However, it was the most disturbing interview I conducted and I found it enormously emotionally difficult to transcribe. Indeed in the first draft of this work I could not bring myself to quote either her homophobic or anti-Semitic views, because I felt it was a reflection on me as a poor researcher, because I didn't want to give credence to her views by

allowing them space on the page and finally and unbelievably, I didn't want to prejudice the reader against her when reading the chapter about her.

### **My Sexuality**

Pupils were aware of my lesbian sexuality and this seemed to allow a more open account of feelings of ambivalence in relation to heterosexuality on the part of pupils. It also made some students uncomfortable and less willing to talk to me, notably Sonia and Shane, who for reasons related to their own respective sexualities were unwilling to give an interview. However, given that other researchers who have completed research in schools in relation to sexuality seem to have only encountered an exclusively heterosexual school population (Measor, Tiffin et al. 2000) (Holland, Ramazanoglu et al. 1998), I think that on balance, I was able to give at least some pupils the space to talk about non-heterosexual, or even unconventional heterosexual sexualities or sexual encounters or feelings. It is interesting, in relation to young men, Mac An Ghail's research (1994) took place in a boys' school in which he had previously worked and again made visible a gay population. I think that even in such a small scale study what emerges from this is a different view of young people's sexuality from that which is generally presented in educational research in this area. Three of those interviewed spoke about

same sex sexual attraction and fantasy. One spoke of lesbian experience in relation to bisexual identity. Another spoke about her masculinity. Pupils also narrated experiences of sexual violence, or self-harm. Pupils achieving more highly in academic terms spoke about the pressure to see sexuality as something that would affect them only in the future, while others spoke about the pressure to be heterosexual in the present. Two pupils spoke more intimately about sexual practice, desire, fantasy and pleasure. I think my own sexual identity was instrumental for these pupils, in deciding to speak with me around these issues.

In the context of working as a teacher, within government guidelines of sex and relationship education, I was also forcibly struck by how inadequate those guidelines are in terms of being able to support young people in the cultural worlds in which they find themselves. For example, one of my interviewees came back to me a few weeks later and asked my advice. She had been propositioned by her next door neighbour and his partner to have sex and she thought it sounded like fun but she wanted to know what I thought about it. After twenty minutes of talking this through and exploring the context in which it had been suggested and thinking about the possible consequences, she decided that this was not such a good idea and could end up being not much fun at all. Government advice presupposes that this type

of situation is highly unusual for young people to be in and yet, when one starts to work with young people in this way, examples such as the one above are not uncommon. In this instance I think I was able to support a young woman to avoid putting herself in a situation which on balance, seemed likely to cause her a significant amount of sexual and emotional harm.

It is more difficult to have this type of impact as a researcher coming into the school environment from the outside and then disappearing immediately after the research is complete. Whilst many would argue that it is not the job of the researcher to work with research participants in this way, but retain a degree of distance it becomes part of the research process here, because even this small example suggests simply that talking with young people about sexuality more openly can be instrumentally advantageous to them at a later date, when they need support.

This situation with this particular pupil would not have arisen without my having undertaken the research interview in the first place, because we would not have had conversations about sexuality in this way and so she probably would not even have thought of getting advice from me and perhaps from anybody. Yet it also would not have been possible if I were not

a teacher working in the school, because I would not have been as easily accessible to her for such a discussion.

### **Epistemological Issues: Representing the Self**

Any attempt to discover new knowledge or make a claim to knowing needs to make clear the epistemological status of the knowledge, or as Bev Skeggs (1997) has argued, it needs to show the 'archaeological foundation' upon which the knowledge is based. This research is theory led in that it works from understandings that are both post-structuralist and also feminist. In accordance with the post-structuralist turn to language, I work with the assumption that there is no such thing as unmediated experience. Experience is always mediated through language and therefore the knowledge of research is always also constitutive of the experience itself. Experience has to be articulated, either through observation, story-telling in the interview process or through conversation. In that sense it is always a reworking and an interpretation of experience, a version rather than some objective 'truth' to be discovered as more positivist approaches to research assume.

The mediation of experience through language forges a relationship between the past and the present and in doing so not only provides a subjective account but contributes to the constitution of subjectivity in the telling. For

example, in the interview process, the young people I interviewed and myself were constructing the experiences we were talking about, in the process of talking about them. As Epstein and Johnson (1998) explain in relation to their research into young people's stories about their lesbian or gay sexualities:

..it must be recognized that the telling which obtains in an interview situation is itself a way of constituting identity in the here and now, using narrations from the past and present entwined in complex ways. (Epstein and Johnson 1998: 101)

I might have listened more and spoken less than the interviewee but nevertheless the experiences were brought to life through the interview context. The interviewees' representations of experience, influenced to some degree also by my interviewer role, are constitutive of the experience as well as the meaning of that experience. Further to this, I then transcribed the interview and the knowledge then constructed came from my interpretation of the interviewees' interpretation of the experience. Peter Redman has suggested that although qualitative data collected in this way are 'profoundly fictional' that they do actually 'refer to existing social and cultural worlds and to the subjective experiences of these worlds' (Redman 1999: chapter 4).

Research which works from this post-structuralist perspective is not less valid but rather acknowledges itself as 'partial, situated and relative' (Taylor 2001: 12). Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that although the relationship between people's experiences and their representations of them through



speech is not transparent, it is one of critical realism. They argue for a perspective which:

...posits research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world. (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 4)

They view their research subjects as psychosocial and argue that this has particular implications for the way in which research can be undertaken, ethically, theoretically and methodologically. One of the major problems I had in working with interview transcripts was that when I coded issues which arose in each interview, they tended to provide what I considered to be at best a shallow reading of what those issues meant for individual pupils and at worst a distortion of them. To give one example, while three research participants, Mataia, Hester and Ann all acknowledged same-sex desire, the meanings of that desire both within their social and cultural worlds and within themselves were very different. In the context of the whole interview transcript, same-sex desire seemed to be doing very different work for them in the constitution of their identities and consequently their investments in that desire were also differently motivated. Only by reading each interview transcript separately in its entirety, did this become apparent. This is particularly likely to be the case in interview work around sexuality. In the end I found it more useful to narrow my research to specific case studies, so

that I could spend time exploring them as psycho-social subjects in the way Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest and to use the larger group of research participants to contextualise and situate the research.

Sedgwick's reminder of the fact that 'people are different from each other' and her list of the ways in which people's articulation of their sexuality can diverge makes it amply clear that the meaning of sexuality and sexual practices would vary greatly between research participants. Take for example these three items from Sedgwick's list of thirteen examples of the ways in which people understand their sexualities:

- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't *want* to do.
- For some people it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonant with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be; to others it doesn't occur that they might be. (Sedgwick 1990: 25)

These examples are richly suggestive of the complexity of talking about sexuality. If sexuality is experienced and understood by individuals outside of contexts 'resonant with meaning, narrative and connectedness' for example, then the stories those individuals tell about sexuality will be qualitatively different from those for whom such narrative is important. Although all experience is mediated through language, this does not mean

that everyone has the same capacity or even desire to talk about it in the same way or to the same degree. They could, for example, resist the invitation to narrativize sexual experience or desire.

Skeggs has argued that there are other problems with using narratives exclusively told in interviews to arrive at research findings. She argues that narratives 'are readings of others based on appearances' (1999: 46) and that in this sense they work within a 'conservative frame'. She argues that they tend to close down interpretations because they 'provide us with stories that people want to tell rather than the ones they may live' (1999). Clearly, this maybe true, though again we need to be clear that it may not necessarily be stories that people want to tell, but those they feel *obliged to confess*, so we understand 'want' as complex and nuanced. The stories that interviewees tell, even if they are in some senses deeply untrue are also not necessarily invalid. Towards the end of my research, staff in the school where it was conducted, came to tell me that Ayani, one of the young women with whom I had been working, seemed to 'be living in a fantasy world'. She was telling staff what they perceived to be impossible stories about her life. The retreat into fantasy by Ayani is dealt with later in this thesis, interpreted as the only means Ayani had of coping with the impossible situation in which she found herself. However, for whom were Ayani's narratives fantasy? Staff

perceived them simply as untrue and other pupils seemed to avoid her so she became steadily more isolated. For the purposes of my research, it was important both to acknowledge the purpose of fantasy in Ayani's life, what it meant for her, its status for her as truth or fantasy and also to find a way of triangulating her account within the cultural and social contexts of the school. This was not necessarily to discount it but rather to account for it. The important guiding principle is that the data generated has to be sufficient to bear the weight of interpretation placed upon it. If I had only interviewed Ayani on a number of separate occasions and her participation as a research subject had been limited to this, then an analysis which explored why Ayani told the stories she told, may well not have been available to me. In this sense, the grainy day in and day out observation and recording of daily life, provided a context against which Ayani's stories could be interpreted. As Beverley Skeggs argues, the power of ethnography is that it allows us to try out a range of interpretations over time, to see if they have any value but also 'it pays attention to the moves we all have to make to survive' (Skeggs 1999: 43). The interview with Ayani came at the end of a period of observation of her and conversation with her, over four months. This data provided a different account of Ayani to the one she gave of herself but the interpretative work then involved understanding the gap between the accounts, to offer insights into Ayani's necessarily complicated relationship to the world.

The underlying assumption governing interviews is that the interviewees will minimally participate in good faith and tell the truth as far as they are able to. The fictionality of the account stems from the fact that language is our means of constructing reality, not because interviewees are trying to mislead the interviewer. Interviewees however, do not always mean what they say or say what they mean. In the interview I conducted with Mataia, for example, Mataia was very conscious of the actual process of constituting identity through the interview. Margaret Wetherall analyses this process when she explores the way in which Princess Diana tried to control this process in her interview with Martin Bashir (2001). Of all those I interviewed she was most conscious of the notion of 'discourse as social action' (Wetherell 2001: 15) and of using the interview in a thoroughly post-modern way to invent herself. This presented particular challenges to me as interviewer, especially at those moments when she appeared to choose to be controversial or to shock and I was left wondering about the truth of what she'd said, especially in relation to her recounts of sexual fantasy. Plummer has suggested, in relation to sexual stories, that they are socially constructed:

No longer do people simply 'tell' their sexual stories to reveal the 'truth' of their sexual lives; instead, they turn themselves into socially organised biographical objects. They construct – even invent, though that may be too crass a term – tales of the intimate self, which may or may not bear a relationship to the truth. (Plummer 1995: 34)

Mataia's constitution of her sexual identity through the telling of sexual stories is captured here in the process outlined by Plummer.

### **Doing Feminist Research**

In this part of the methodology I want to discuss where I situate myself in relation to feminism, in what ways this research could be considered feminist and some problems which arose in relation to the research. I call myself a feminist because firstly I believe that the categorisation of people by sex/gender is one of the most fundamental ways in which identity is socially and culturally constructed and experienced in contemporary western society. I accept that this system has been imposed by colonialism on societies outside the west, for whom, prior to colonialism, it may not have been an important organising category. I also situate myself in opposition to those feminists who seek simply to valorise the female side of the sex/gender binary. While this may be a good strategic position in order to obtain more status for women, the true task of feminism is to make the binarism of this system redundant. I do believe that from this binarism, society is organised according to a patriarchal system and that groups of men and women accrue power differentially under it. This is not to say that all men have more power than all women. In specific respects certain women gain some power

through their positioning under patriarchy and some men, lose power. For example, as radical feminists in the 1970s and 1980s pointed out, middle-class heterosexual married women gain significant privileges as married women (Rich 1980); (Leeds and Feminists 1981); (Bunch and Myron 1974). Whilst the workings of the patriarchal process are complex and power does not always operate in one direction and while it is possible to argue that patriarchy has less structural power than it did, I believe it is still a relevant construct for understanding contemporary British society.

Indeed it is particularly relevant today because, although much research acknowledges gender and for example, within education seeks to understand masculinities or femininities, the definitional use of the terms 'boy' and 'girl' seem to remain unproblematic and are not often discussed, so that for example, a piece of research about 'girls' makes no attempt to define what a girl is. In fact they are so taken for granted, that no-one seems to see the need to even explain the terms, though they might within their research methodology have explained how they arrived at categories of class or ethnicity. Research which is clearly working from a feminist perspective also often slips over definitions of sex/gender (Kenway, Willis et al. 1998). When I started this research for example, I intended it to be about girls and I did not imagine that I would have to explain how I arrived at the definition of a girl.

It was going to be about – and still partly is about, how girls embodied sexuality or tried to develop disembodied learner identities and the tensions between the two, but then I met Carol and Nathan, who made writing about 'girls' more difficult. For example, in a conversation I had early on in the research with Carol, I found myself confronting a young person experiencing considerable hardship because of a masculine identity:

Carol feels really upset at the moment with her Dad because he's told her she can't go on holiday with her new friends - who she met at Cadets - in the Summer holidays. She went on to explain to me just how hard he was on her. She said that he calls her 'a fucking dyke' and asks her why she doesn't dress more like a woman...In desperation she said to me that she couldn't wear women's clothes - they were tight and scratchy and they made her feel stupid... She said to me 'look Sarah - I've always been like this. Look I've got a man's shirt on, man's trousers, man's shoes. It's just what I like to wear'. (Fieldnotes 11.2.02)

Judith Halberstam (Halberstam 1998) describes this as female masculinity, a term which I prefer over transgender or transsexual, because it allows more room for different versions and performances of such masculinity and avoids pathologising medicalized discourses of gender dysphoria. Halberstam identifies the methodological problem for me succinctly in relation to Carol and Nathan:

Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified by heterosexist and feminist/womanist programs alike; unlike male femininity which fulfils a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach (Halberstam 1998: 9).



My version of feminist research should not add to the vilification, either directly or indirectly, of Carol and others like her. They have suffered quite enough of it. However I believe that feminist research methodologies are still relevant and important but the version I adopt has to be rigorously anti-essentialist. While much feminist work was critiqued by black feminists and those writing from a post-colonialist perspective who suggested that research that purported to be feminist often made too grandiose claims for the relevance of their work for all women, young people like Carol and Nathan challenge feminism on its key definitional foundation that of sex/gender. It is this fact which I think makes it much more comfortable for feminist researchers to ignore their difference. I do not believe that researchers in schools have not come across pupils who perform female masculinity in the course of their research and that uniquely they just happened to exist in the school where I was undertaking my research. What this means is that they are silently present and that their difference is elided or misrecognised in school based research. I would argue that this means researchers miss a more complete understanding of the challenges gender presents to young people in school or at the very least, a greater understanding of the diversity of repertoires used by young people for managing it. It would clearly be possible to interpret Carol and Nathan as girls who were different and in a

sense the school itself understood them in this way because, minimally, they had to qualify as girls in order to attend the school. However, as they did not understand themselves in this way and as they put such great effort into their masculinities, it would be a misrepresentation of their experience of gender and sexuality to see them as girls who were different. This research is based on a feminism which challenges the sex/gender binary, while recognising its power as a key way of organising human behaviour.

In practice this involved me thinking gender differently. What Carol and Nathan did for this research was force me not to take gender for granted. The work of queer theorists who argue against the sex/gender system is also useful. Butler provides a powerful account of gender as

...an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.  
(Butler 1990: 179)

While this is helpful in making transparent the work of doing a gender, I don't think that Carol and Nathan would understand their gender as performative in quite the way that Butler intends, although, as can be seen above, Carol was clearly aware that gender can be put on. However, they 'felt' they were boys, so they didn't have to act like boys and whilst they may

put some performatively conscious, stylistic work into the kind of boys they wanted to be, their fundamental conviction that 'boy' was their natural state was unflinching. They were also boys, not just because they did boy so well but because they couldn't do girl convincingly. In his critique of Butler's work, Prosser argues that Butler's use of the performative depends heavily on a version of gender as visible, on 'body-as surface':

The transsexual doesn't necessarily look differently gendered but by definition feels differently gendered from her or his birth-assigned sex....the transsexual narrative depends upon an initial crediting of this feeling as generative ground. It demands some recognition of the category of corporeal interiority (internal bodily sensations) and of its distinctiveness from that which can be seen (external surface): the difference between gender identity and sex that serves as the logic of transsexuality. This distinction is tactically, ingeniously and rigorously refused by Gender Trouble: it is this refusal that allows for a reconfiguration of sex into gender. (Prosser 1998: 43)

For Carol and Nathan, their masculine identity came from within, in the way that Prosser explains as 'corporeal interiority'.

Carrie Paechter (Paechter 2006) has recently taken Halberstam to task over the use of the term 'female masculinity' arguing instead that the term

'masculine woman' is more liberatory in that:

It allows for girls and young women to behave in masculine ways, without having this as their central defining quality. Similarly, boys and men can be and act as feminine, without having to see femininity as central to their being. This is surely a more flexible and equitable way for us to understand gender, one which treats masculinities and femininities as truly multiple, and as ways of 'being a man or woman,

boy or girl', rather than central to our whole existence. (Paechter 2006: 261)

In one sense it does appear to be a more liberatory political strategy of naming to allow for multiple versions of masculinity and femininity in one body, which can stretch the notion of normalcy to new limits. However, Halberstam is I think, talking about something different again. She is talking precisely about those women for whom masculinity is 'a central defining quality'. A girl who changes her name to Nathan and insists on being called Nathan, who cross dresses in such a way as to pass for a boy, is demonstrating a qualitatively different form of masculine woman, one that presents a far greater challenge to the definitional term of 'woman'. By using 'female masculinity' we make something that is outside of the 'normal'. I use the term 'female masculinity' to describe these young women, because I feel it better captures their understandings of themselves as outside the normal, as different even from other masculine women.

## **Conclusion**

When I originally undertook my MA dissertation, I wanted to research young women's sexuality. It proved to be impossible to do this in 1996. Section 28 was still in force and talking to young women about sexuality and especially about non-normative or 'queer' sexualities was fraught with problems. I

decided instead to explore how lesbian teachers embodied their identities as lesbians and as teachers.

Being able to talk to young women finally about their sexualities was a great privilege. Those I spoke to at length did not constitute a representative sample, even within the school. They were a critical sample made up of young women who stood out from the crowd. They were young women for whom the issue of sexuality was making a difference and often making them different from or 'other' to the majority. As such, they often demonstrated poignantly, the personal and social costs of sexuality in schools.

In this chapter I have outlined the research study and drawn attention to some of the methodological and epistemological complexities of researching sexuality in schools. I have given examples of some of the practical and ethical difficulties I encountered in the research and the purpose of the research to generate new understandings about the relationship between young women's sexual identities and their achievements in school. The next chapter will consider in more detail how sexuality is regulated in schools currently and review research literature to explore the impact that this has on girls' sexualities and their success or failure in school.

## Chapter 3

### Sexuality and Success in Secondary Schools

**Educators have yet to take seriously the centrality of sexuality in the making of a life and the having of ideas...educators continue to ignore the stakes of the demand to renounce instinctual pleasures, specifically as this prohibition may then also work against the capacity to risk love and work (Britzman 1998: 70)**

#### Introduction

In this chapter I want to explore in more detail dominant understandings of sexuality in western culture and thought, developing ideas presented in chapter one and suggest how this impacts on young women's sexualities at school, particularly in respect of how their identities are policed. I will look at the place of sexuality in the secondary school as it is enshrined in UK government policy and the work of researchers in the field of sexuality and gender, particularly in relation to secondary schooling and educational success. I will use this research to make the case that young women's health and welfare and the possibilities of their sustained educational success are jeopardised by the current place of sexuality in school. This research will demonstrate how young women between the ages of 14-16 are trapped by the

demand to choose between working on their sexual selves or being academically successful.

### **Taking Sexuality Seriously**

Deborah Britzman (Britzman 1998) is not the first researcher ever to have considered that sexuality occupies an unjustly peripheral place within education in the minds of educators themselves. There is a small but increasing body of educational research which documents the ways in which schools regulate and produce sexual and gendered subjects and indeed also how pupils and sometimes teachers have resisted attempts to have their sexualities regulated in particular ways (Fine 1988; Sears 1992; Mac an Ghail 1994; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Renold 2005). Britzman (1998) is using the concept of sexuality here psychoanalytically, but the implication is not only that schools are instrumental in regulating sexuality but that sexuality itself is also intricately bound up in discourses of learning and educational success. My research explores specifically whether and how young women use sexuality in the construction of educational success, the importance they accord it and their responses to the dominant discourses around sexuality and learning in schools.

Britzman's interest in the role of sexuality is not simply about the production of the sexual and gendered subject, through regulatory discourses or even resistance to such discourses, but to the more interior psychic role sexuality plays in the individual in the 'making of a life' and the 'having of ideas' (1998). She suggests that sexuality plays a pivotal role in the construction of educational success in school, insofar as educational success requires pupils to renounce 'instinctual pleasures' in order to 'have ideas' and she identifies the costs of this renunciation in terms of the individual's 'capacity' subsequently 'to risk love and work'.

We may look at this another way and say that what Britzman is in fact considering is the instigation and putting in place in the psyche of the individual, the dominant discourse in western culture of the Cartesian mind/body split. Young people are required to renounce the body, 'instinctual pleasures', in order to become educated. She identifies the process of interpellation through which a big social idea hails the individual and is taken up by her/him. Successful learner identities are contingent upon negotiating the Cartesian mind/body split. However, this is a deeply gendered discourse. On the mind side of the split is masculinity, rationality, order, logic and a body fiercely regulated by the mind. On the body side of the split is femininity, excessive emotionality, indiscipline and a body with a



life of its own, operating instinctually. Thus women and indeed some men, particularly those who are not straight or not white, find they must renounce more than others in order to achieve educational success.

### **Good sex/Bad sex – Charmed Circles and the difficulty of Getting into Them**

Sexuality is produced differently on either side of the mind/body split. On the side of the mind sexuality is in the service of what I would call 'good citizenship', of the interests of the nation state, whereas on the body side sexuality is in the service of the body's individual pleasure, libidinous and unruly. Though one often hears it said that one's sexuality is a very private affair, in fact marriage and the institution of the heterosexual nuclear family are the principal means through which sexuality is regulated and disciplined politically and publicly. The reason that lesbian and gays have fought for admission into the institution of marriage is not simply that some of us want to marry but more importantly for the legal and state protections that come with that marriage, in relation to inheritance or parental status for example. The management of individual sexuality by the state differentially rewards certain sexualities over others and this starts in schools.

We can use Gayle Rubin's (1984) concept of a sexual value system to help us consider more specifically how sexuality might work across the mind/body split. Rubin identified 'a charmed circle' of 'good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality' which was perceived to sustain society on the one hand and in contrast, a sexuality at the 'outer limits' which was 'bad, abnormal, unnatural and damned'. Rubin did not link her sexual hierarchy to the mind/body split but it has considerable explanatory power when we do so. Rubin writes:

According to this system, sexuality that is "good," "normal," and "natural" should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is "bad," "abnormal," or "unnatural." Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines and may take place in "public" or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys or unusual roles. (Rubin 1992: 13-14)

Rubin first wrote this piece in 1984 and one might argue that sexual values have changed since then, as she acknowledges in her postscript added in 1992. There are areas of contestation, notably the increasing acceptance of long term monogamous lesbian and gay relationships or the acceptance of masturbation, especially in adolescence. Adolescence is generally perceived by adults to be a time of great hormonal and physical change in a young person and, interestingly, much more likely to involve sexual activities at the

outer limits. Whilst sexual experimentation is generally perceived to be a part of adolescence and moreover in important respects, 'the charmed circle' is barred to adolescents in the sense they cannot marry and should certainly not be procreative, sex at the outer limits is never acceptable.

Life in the charmed circle of sexuality brings social approval and social power. Young people are exhorted to delay sexual activity because they are not old enough to enter that charmed circle. As they grow older their sexual interactions are approved of insofar as they show an orderly movement towards this charmed circle: a gradual progression towards a long term, stable, heterosexual relationship, with relational aspects clearly established and parental blessings given before sexual intimacy is allowed. While Rubin suggests a circle, I think this sexual value system has more powerful explanatory power, when it is conceptualised as part of the Cartesian mind/body split, with sex in the 'charmed circle' being sex on the mind side of the mind/body split.

Structurally it is very difficult for a young person to enter this charmed circle. Adolescent sexual experience may well take place outside the home, in a variety of settings, it may be masturbatory, non procreative, involve a succession of sexual partners, involve members of the same sex and

sometimes involve adults, whose status as sexual partners is often coveted, because they have access to social and material power. This crucially makes adolescent sexuality a problem for society, requiring micro-management.

Schools are perfectly placed to undertake this. It becomes enormously difficult for all young women and many young men to do the identity work necessary to be academically successful, without considerable repression and self-regulation of the body and desire; without 'costs' as Britzman puts it.

When they become overtly sexualised, there is often no discursive space through which they can also produce themselves as academically successful.

The central hypothesis of this research is that Cartesian dualisms not only create oppositions between mind and body, masculine and feminine, but also carve up our sexual selves, identities and behaviours between desire and reason between stupid/risky/dangerous/irresponsible and clever/sensible/heterosexually romantic and responsible. Simply put, it is almost impossible to be sexual and clever when you are still at school without costs and these costs often involve the distress of having to closet sexuality. Yet this is itself part of the disciplining of schooling. Sexuality is forced to be private, secretive and furtive.

Two recent cultural examples will suffice to make the point. In the film, *The Hole* Keira Knightley played a 'posh', clever girl at a public school who was

rampantly sexual and utterly unromantic. The upshot was that she ended up dying down a hole, murdered by her best friend. The more sexual Knightley became, the more she seemed to take leave of her senses, thus demonstrating that it is not possible to be sexual and clever and a schoolgirl. Even more recently, the new *Prime Suspect* (ITV October 2006) featured Helen Mirren as DI Tennison, taking under her wing a very bright young school girl, passionate about Art, but involved sexually with a young black man, involved in various petty crime. This school girl turned out to be the psychopathic killer of her best friend and DI Tennison (Helen Mirren) was left kicking herself for not having worked it out sooner, because it was, to use her words 'so obvious'. Absolutely. Unless the discourse of romance is correctly mobilised by such young women, (a discourse through which they are produced as appropriately heterosexual and in which they save themselves until legal adulthood for Mr Right, who will probably not be a young black man involved in crime incidentally), then they are definitionally 'not clever' even if they were clever before or appeared clever. Something is seriously awry in the moment in which that cleverness becomes governed by libidinous energy or by emotion. Whilst these are thankfully fictional examples they reinforce and prop up this Cartesian sexual logic. In this thesis there are much sadder examples which demonstrate exactly how this

logic costs young women their cleverness, or their 'capacity to risk love' or their capacity to appreciate or value the physicality of their bodies.

As I have suggested in chapter one resistance to the consideration of the difference that sexuality (in its widest sense) makes to learning is not accidental. In important ways the opposition of sexuality and the body to rationality and the mind is pivotal to Cartesian dualism, the principle upon which western education is founded. According to Elizabeth Groz (2005) and Denis Carlson (Carlson 1998) sex is conceptualised as irrational and pleasure seeking rather than rational and knowledge seeking. It is therefore often pushed out of official school discourses about education and what education should be officially about. In this way sexuality becomes the possession of those identities which are marginalised in society and which also often fail in schools, because they really have no right to be there:

...all marginalised identities have been represented in the dominant or logocentric culture of modernism as under the influence of what Freud called the "pleasure principle," whereas dominant groups have been represented as operating under the cool, dispassioned logic of the "reality principle." In the language of Cartesian dualism, marginalised identity groups represent the body and desire, whereas dominant identity groups represent mind and reason, which must rule over the the body. (Carlson 1998)

My contention is that even within Cartesian dualisms sex appears on both sides of the mind/body split but differently configured. It is not simply that it

is not present in the lives of dominant identity groups. It is just differently managed, through public institutions and rituals, which have the effect of producing the body and desire as so thoroughly respectably under social control that they seem to disappear from view.

Giddens (1992) has argued that lesbian and gay relationships are in the vanguard of the reconstruction of the meaning of intimacy and intimate relationships in our society. While this may be the case in certain instances (there are definitely good gays and bad gays in our society (see Epstein and Johnson 1998)), those relationships which fall outside of this are more and more stringently policed, for example through the new UK Sexual Offences Act 2003 (2003). A reconstruction of what constitutes intimacy is not indicative of new government driven acceptance of sexual minorities generally but an 'inclusion' into respectability of some long-term, monogamous, lesbian and gay relationships. The cost of this inclusion is an even greater protection for the heterosexual nuclear family from the intrusion of any other sexuality. In terms of pedagogy around sexuality education government policy is driven by the perceived need to preserve and promote heterosexual family life for the majority.

Sexuality education enters the classroom as political polemic rather than as educative *per se*. This polemic suppresses the acknowledgement of the significance of sexuality as a practice of identity and it is therefore possible to ignore it in a way that class, ethnicity, gender and ability are not ignored within educational priorities. Social science and education researchers have thus been working in a very particular political context in researching sexuality in schools. In relation to sex education, Frank Mort has suggested this context can be traced back to sexual purity and social hygiene campaigns of the early twentieth century which sought explicitly to produce heterosexual desire in men and, in women, a sense of responsibility for men through heterosexual desire and marriage:

The ideology of sex education at first sight appears so coherent and confident, so seamless in its handling of conflicting demands, that we might be tempted to tip over from the moment of ideological production to that of implementation. This error is particularly seductive when dealing with new liberal or state socialist programmes in the early twentieth century. There is a utopianism in these social and political philosophies in the very worst sense, with their projected vision of social order which assumes society to be conflict-free. Most forms of official power are wilfully covert about the tensions in their projects, but many of the initiatives around motherhood and eugenics reproduce the Benthamite mania of the 1830s. Contemporary sex education stands squarely in this totalising tradition. (Mort 2000)

Mort's point here is reiterated by James Sears in relation to the USA, where he suggests that, 'There is an integral relationship between the learning of human reproduction and the reproduction of social relations' (Sears 1992: 19).



Sears, evaluating sexuality education programmes in the USA, concluded that they presented a 'techno-rational worldview' (Sears 1992: 7). An emphasis on rational decision making in the sexuality curriculum and 'the failure to explore the eroticism associated with sexuality' (1992: 18) in Sears' view was also integral to the fact that learning about human reproduction was also about the 'reproduction of social relations' (1992: 19). Summarising studies on the content of sexuality education also showed that homosexuality was consistently one of the subjects least discussed within sexuality education (Sears 1992: 9). Evidently, such an education is unlikely to increase the understanding by young people of their own sexuality or that of others.

### **That Still 'Missing Discourse of Desire' and Government Determination It Should Remain Hidden**

In 1988 Michelle Fine wrote 'Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire' (1988) which has proved to be a key work in any discussion of young women's sexuality in schools. Fine identified three dominant discourses of female sexuality operating in sex education in an American High School. These were: sexuality as violence; sexuality as victimization; sexuality as individual morality. In addition she identified a missing discourse of desire. Fine was writing over fifteen years ago in the

context of the USA, so it is interesting to observe that her analysis is equally applicable in 2006 in the UK. The government's recent Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' (HMSO 2003) and the subsequent Children Act (2004) detail five key outcomes for children which are identified as 'key to well-being in childhood and later life' (DfES 2004: 1). These are:

- Be healthy;
- Stay safe;
- Enjoy and achieve;
- Make a positive contribution;
- Achieve economic well-being.

Sexuality features only in the outcomes, 'Be healthy' and 'Stay Safe' (DfES 2004: 5). Listed under these outcomes are statements that young people need to be 'sexually healthy' and 'stay safe from sexual exploitation' respectively. Interestingly sexuality does not feature at all under the outcome 'Enjoy and achieve', ensuring that sex education in school will continue to work within the dominant discourses identified by Fine and that a discourse of desire will remain absent. Fine believed that:

A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators (Fine 1988: 33).

One of the reasons a discourse of desire is missing from sex education is that it addresses pupils as embodied sexual subjects, who speak from experience,

as Fine's comments above make clear. The failure of sex education to do this means that it is unable to enhance the development of sexual subjectivity in young people. It also means that the embodiment of sexuality by young people in schools is perfectly placed to be invested by them with radical potential. In this context it can become a strategy of resistance to the disciplinary power of their school and to their production through education as neo-liberal subjects, to stay sexually healthy and remain safe from sexual exploitation but remain unengaged with their own sexual desires and pleasures at that age. Sexual practice and overtly sexualised identities may be embodied as part of an anti-school position symbolically on the body side of the mind/body split. This is not to say that all young people use sexuality to radically embody resistance to schooling in this way. Mostly, they seem to *want* to become the neo-liberal subject, or are represented as wanting this.

Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody suggest that the commitment by Blair's New Labour government to globalisation requires:

Subjects who are capable of understanding themselves as autonomous agents, producers of their present and their future, inventors of the people they are or may become. However, such self-invention demands a particular kind of psychological subject, stand-alone people who are aware of and responsible for their own thoughts and actions (2001: 2)

This is the neo-liberal subject and increasingly in education the 'personalising learning' agenda is being used to promote it. This New Labour agenda aims to promote and mould precisely the type of subject described above:

In the last year, much has been said and written about the need to personalise public services. David Milliband, in particular, has made a powerful case for personalised learning: 'A new generation of self confident, independent students is of course a challenge. But it is also a genuine opportunity significantly to raise the productivity of the education system – by tailoring teaching and learning to individual need, and developing students as more active partners in effective learning'. November 2003 (forward in Hargreaves 2004)

The fact that those compiling the Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' say they consulted extensively with young people and the production of the neo-liberal subject is enshrined in the resulting document, suggests its investment in representing young people as rational self-confident neo-liberal subjects in the making.

This thesis will show that some young people step outside neo-liberal subjectivities (possibly because they are not tenable or sustainable) and use sexual practice and desire as a resistance to school but also that often those who do not are misrecognised as doing so. Equally, staff or pupils may project on to others a sexuality, which is then carried and contained symbolically. Such young people often seem to incur either punishment within the institution or often exclusion from it and they often turn out to be

already discriminated against through their subordinated positions across other vectors of power, such as race, class, gender or ability. This thesis will argue that schools contribute to the constitution of young people's sexualization and their sexual practice, and that this is a process which is linked inextricably to learning.

### **Historical Explanations of When, Why and How the 'Discourse of Desire' went Missing.**

In order to better understand why it should be that desire and the body are absent from schools we need to consider the work of Foucault. He observed that the repression of sex coincided with the development of capitalism:

If sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those – reduced to a minimum – that enabled it to reproduce itself? (Foucault 1976: 6)

Foucault argued that with the repression of sex came the proliferation of discourses about sex and the regulation of sexuality. Indeed the repression of sex was itself a discursive construct and paradoxically led to sex being more discussed. Sex became the business of the State. It is not surprising therefore, that schools should have emerged as one of the key sites for the regulation of sexuality in order to educate a workforce to generate wealth. Foucault

identified the putting of sex into discourse from the sixteenth century as creating a regime of power-knowledge-pleasure. The repression of sex led to the proliferation of discourses about sex, which meant paradoxically that it was spoken about more often and in more places:

One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit ... one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. (Foucault 1976: 24)

Schools were key sites for the administering of sexuality and Foucault took many of his examples of the movement of sexuality into discourse from schooling.

The current UK government is governing in world in which capitalism has taken a new and more pernicious globalised form. Its response to this in terms of education is reactive, in that the aim is that Britain should compete in this globalised economy rather than be more circumspect about those whose lives it harms. Its neo-liberal agenda means that its primary concern is that everybody should be able to participate in global capitalism and we can see this extended even into foreign policy, with the aim being for developing countries to participate, by enabling a 'fairer' playing field or not, as the case may be, rather than resisting the processes of global capitalism itself. This

became particularly pertinent to my research in the case studies of young Somali women, whose life ambitions were as much for Somalia as they were for themselves.

The following extract from the introduction to the DES Strategy for Education to 2006, makes clear government priorities for education:

The Government's number one priority remains raising standards in education. We can only create wealth through the knowledge, skills and enterprise of our people. We must measure our education and training performance against international benchmarks, learning from the best of international experience and sharing good practice. (DES 2002: 6)

Coming at the start of this document, it is a bald declaration of government capitalist aims and the place of education within it. However, most teachers don't even read these documents and teachers I have shared this information with have often been shocked by the government's priority that education should create material wealth. This has usually been because this has been so at odds with their own understandings about why they became teachers; their understandings of the purposes of education formed around social justice, equality and to inspire a love of learning as self-fulfilling. In the context of government priorities one might expect that the practice of sex, those 'pleasurable pursuits', as Foucault calls them, to be subject to stringent regulation in schools. In this highly competitive globalised economy such

pursuits would be risky because they are unproductive of wealth and are, in this sense, directly opposed to the government agenda. It is unsurprising then that a discourse of sexual prohibition is indeed present in government documentation on young people and sex. Government advice on sex and relationship education in schools for example, urges education which enforces on pupils the benefits of delaying sex: 'Secondary pupils should learn to understand human sexuality, learn the reasons for delaying sexual activity and the benefits to be gained from such delay...' (DfEE 2000: 4, paragraph 5). The advantages of delaying sexual activity are to avoid teenage pregnancy (paragraph 2.16) and to prevent infection (paragraph 2.22). Three points are worth making here. Firstly, the emphasis is on sex as a risky activity, rather than a pleasurable one here and indeed throughout the advice. Secondly, the most obvious way of reducing risk is to increase condom use, though I accept the arguments of the WRAP (Women, Risk, and AIDS Project) research that the negotiation of condom use takes place within gendered power relations (1990). Finally, for young women, there is the possibility of advocating lesbian sex as safer sex, or for all young people, masturbation (See Epstein and Johnson, chapter 8, especially page 180 for a discussion of sex education in relation to safer sexual practices 1998). Whilst I do not advocate sexual activity or promiscuity in young people, I do wish to point out that the reasons for promoting 'delay' may be as much to do with



education economics, the A\*-C economy of GCSEs, ensuring pupils' minds are focused on academic achievement, or squeezing extra percentile points' worth of GCSE attainment from them, as it is to do with concern about their readiness for sex and that 'relationship' or their general well-being. Indeed, the current pressure on young people to succeed at all costs academically, sometimes shows no concern for their general well-being.

The two dominant discourses in UK education today are the school improvement or effectiveness discourse, within which is situated the "Standards Agenda" and the "Social Inclusion Agenda", both part of the current Labour government's reworking of its older Equal Opportunities agendas.<sup>1</sup> Another extract from The DES's 'Strategy for education to 2006', makes clear these agendas as priorities at the outset:

Expectations are higher in a consumer age and people demand more of our public services. We want to provide world-class public services that help all children to have the best possible start in life, so that when they leave formal education they have a passion for learning and the desire and ability to succeed in the world. Our determination to build an inclusive society where all can flourish underpins all our objectives. (DES 2002: 6)

The 'number one priority' is the pursuit of wealth creation, but there is a determination that all of 'our people' will share in this through state provided services such as schooling. Of course the ways in which this government

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<sup>1</sup> While I am discussing education in the UK, similar educational agendas are in place across Anglophone western countries.

owns or disowns its people is very interesting and will prove highly relevant to discussions in later chapters about the situations that young people who are also asylum seekers find themselves in. This chapter however, explores the relevance of both these dominant agendas in relation to the limited ways in which sexuality has been seen as having a bearing on their remit or rather the much greater ways in which it is thought to be an irrelevance either to social inclusion or to academic standards in schools. My suggestion is that sexuality is of far more importance than is generally acknowledged and that a failure to acknowledge this has had and continues to have serious consequences for all young people. In relation to academic attainment in schools for example, why is it not thought unusual to discuss the difference that ethnicity or ability or social class or gender might make to attainment (Epstein, Elwood et al. 1998; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Benjamin 2002), but considered novel to suggest that sexuality can and often does make a huge difference to young people's achievements in schools?

Indeed the current UK government is concerned to the point of obsession about gender differences in attainment such that a website is devoted to the topic [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/genderandachievement) (accessed 14.2.05) but it has comprehensively failed to consider that sexuality might have a bearing on this although, it has to be said, that the preoccupation with



gendered patterns of achievement is largely consequent upon the fact that some boys seem not to be achieving as well as some girls, leading to panic about boys' underachievement (see Epstein, Elwood et al. 1998)). This is in spite of the fact that many researchers into gender identity and particularly feminist researchers and theorists would argue that the constitution of sexuality is pivotal in the constitution of gender (Wittig 1993; Butler 2004; Renold 2005). The standards and inclusion agendas make class, gender, ethnicity and ability count in the perceived need to raise academic standards and participation rates in education. Indeed this seems to be the only way in which these identities do count. Thus for example gender equality for schools seems to have become equated with the equal academic achievement of pre-defined boys and girls and is not at all about wider issues of justice or equality, nor even about the social-constructedness of these categories in the first place. The relevance of issues of gender, ethnicity, class and ability are trivialised in terms of government and educational concern to dominant government agendas on standards and inclusion. Dominant discussions of their importance tend to lack any considered attention to their sphere of understanding in their own right. Sexuality does not merit this scrutiny because it is seen as a matter of private life and individual choice and therefore talk about sexuality is always talk about just that. In contrast, talk about gender, ethnicity, class or ability, is always talk about attainment or

participation in education. As Benjamin observes, 'There is a growing tendency for policy debate on inclusive schools to be located within the (highly reductive) school effectiveness paradigm,' (Benjamin 2002: 50). As a result, these inequalities are not perceived to have more than a passing relevance to relationships between students, social attitudes or appreciation of what specific minority groups bring to society

Apart from the areas of sex education and teenage pregnancy official documentation on sex, young people and education is scant and one gets the general impression that sex is a peripheral concern that has to be dealt with in schools, so that the real business of education and ever improving results is not interrupted. Sex is therefore seen very much as the 'other' to education. Even the official curriculum of sex education in school is drawn from the field of health rather than education. As I have noted elsewhere, there is very little that is truly educative in the content of official sex education in schools (Epstein, O'Flynn et al. 2003, chapter 4). Important theorising and research around sexuality in the fields of science, psychology and sociology is never discussed with young people. There is no consideration of the work of experts in the study of sexuality, nor is there any discussion of desire in the terms that Michelle Fine suggests would be beneficial. Indeed the messages of the government's sex and relationship advice correspond uncannily to a

demand that young people adopt Rubin's 'charmed circle' of sexual values, to sexuality as it is lived on the mind side of the mind/body split.

### **A National Disgrace**

One real life example of the difficulty that overtly sexualised young women have in producing themselves as academically successful and remaining in full-time compulsory education is contained in the figure of the pregnant schoolgirl. She is a figure of national shame and one which attracted considerable media attention since the end of 1999, when the report of the UK government's Social Exclusion Unit into Teenage Pregnancy (SEU June 1999) made her public as a symbol of Britain's shameful inability to control young people's sexuality. The sense of national shame is evident in the forward to this document by Tony Blair:

Britain has the worst record on teenage pregnancies in Europe. It is not a record in which we can take any pride. ... Our failure to tackle this problem has cost the teenagers, their children and the country dear...What is even worse is that the high rate of teenage pregnancies is not inevitable. While the rate of teenage pregnancies has remained high here, throughout most of the rest of Western Europe it fell rapidly. As a country, we can't afford to continue to ignore this shameful record. (SEU June 1999: 4)

This passage is an odd reading experience. One feels vaguely as if one is being lectured by a teacher, except on this occasion, addressed as a failing citizen in this all new inclusive democracy; it is the country, its citizens and

its young people we have all let down. Britain is named and shamed as bottom of the class with all its European peers having worked harder and achieved more. In a discursive sense, then, even here overt sexual practice by young people is replete with meanings of failure for which we are all held accountable. More than that, the way in which the foreword to this document is written clearly demonstrates the control of sexuality as the responsibility of the state and of modern citizenship. The New Labour government has targeted a reduction in the number of teenage pregnancies by 50% by 2010 as a key indicator of the success of both its Sex and Relationship Education Guidance and also its policies with regard to social inclusion. Indeed, following the Social Exclusion Unit's report in into teenage pregnancy, the government set up the 'Teenage Pregnancy Unit' to coordinate work on this issue [www.dfes.gov.uk/teenagepregnancy](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/teenagepregnancy) (accessed 14.2.05).

In their research, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) demonstrated a process of educational rationing in schools which effectively discriminated against the attainment of poorer, minority ethnic pupils. Exploring the micro-political practices of schools they used the metaphor of educational triage to explain how pupils were selected or deselected from educational treatment, to help them attain the benchmark 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C at sixteen. The rationing

of education for those who display openly any sexuality in school is, I would argue, even more widespread and particularly severe in the case of pregnant schoolgirls. The report by the Social Exclusion unit seems vaguely puzzled by this fact:

### **Continuing education**

8.22 Attention to ensuring a pregnant teenager continues to receive education is often very weak, and the Unit heard innumerable examples of pregnant girls pushed out of school on grounds of pregnancy or 'health and safety'. This is particularly damaging while educational provision for those out of school remains so poor: an example of a 13 year old receiving only 6 hours education a week from 20 weeks was not at all untypical and for many teenagers this is the beginning of permanent detachment from education. (SEU June 1999: 60).

Gillborn and Youdell's analysis makes sense of rationing education to a pregnant schoolgirl. Spending teacher money and time on the education of a pregnant schoolgirl is a very shaky investment in terms of the likely reward it will yield in the A\*-C economy of examination results because the young women concerned may not be in a position to take examinations if they are on maternity leave. However, more symbolically, pregnant young women who intend to keep their baby are making a statement about their academic status; they are seen, within the context of schooling, as embodying a supremely anti-school, anti-mind identity, being instead entirely at the whim of their bodies.

Bullen, Kenway and Hey (2000) have suggested that government policy in this area has failed because it has taken no account of the perspective of the young women themselves, particularly their position within a dominant discourse of gender politics:

Nowhere in this address is there space for an educational, social and family policy awareness that builds on the complexities of the social and sexual positioning of teenage girls and their gender politics of pleasure and fantasy. No attention is paid to the systemic risks associated with girls' twin biographical trajectories through to adulthood as both economic and sexual successes. Indeed, nowhere do the themes of feminism – 'sex, power and politics' emerge. (Bullen, Kenway et al. 2000: 8)

I would suggest that pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers are subconsciously understood within Blairite policy as having no sense. They are not consulted because they have already demonstrated that they don't know what's good for them – or the country for that matter.

In relation to schools, the important point is not that being pregnant or being a mother and academically achieving is difficult. Whatever their age, pregnant women or mothers trying to bring up young children and work full-time would find life difficult. The point is that obstacles are deliberately thrown in the way of academic success for pregnant teenagers or young mothers at school. To preserve the 'truth' of the logic of the mind/body split,



the pregnant schoolgirl has to be produced as academic failure, so that other schoolgirls do not make this choice.

### **The Body**

This thesis could not do without an engagement with the sociology of the body. The dominance of the Cartesian split between mind and body in Western culture and the supreme quality of rational thought being expressed precisely through its disembodiment, is clearly important in a piece of research set in school. Much of my work concerns what happens to the body when pupils orient themselves towards or away from learner identities, or from knowledge. How does this process impel them to manage their bodies, to produce disembodiment or to radically embody resistance?

The cultural construction of the body as a location of anti-social desire is highly significant within the disciplinary processes of schooling which seek to control the body and this is particularly located in sex. Teachers are looking everywhere for such resistance to education. We can see it minutely managed through regulations about school uniform or make-up, through seating arrangements in classes and more recently through the extended remit of 'child protection'. Childhood sexuality holds a particularly contentious place here. Foucault suggested that the need to take charge of

and control children's sexuality 'in a continuous way' (Foucault 1976: 104) was one of the key strategies through which knowledge and power centring on sex was instituted. Schooling was a key institution in the regulation of childhood sexuality, so the failure of regulation, symbolised for example, in the pregnant school girl, meant a failure of schooling more fundamentally to churn out productive, disciplined, self-regulating adults.

Finally, the body's relationship to identity is also of key relevance here. The fact that much of my research for example, took place in girls' schools suggests an unproblematic relationship between the body and sex assignment, insofar as one might assume that only 'girls' would exist in those spaces. However, I show in chapter 6, biological sex is actually an embodiment of culturally held beliefs about sex, a fact which becomes obvious in relation to FTM young people who disrupt such understandings and which exposes the limits of sex as a category of recognition of humanity. When I initially set out to complete this research, I had intended it to be about girls. However, as discussed in chapter 2 and 6, I found 'girls' who were not girls in spaces where only girls were supposed to be and I have had to rethink carefully the research to be inclusive of these young people and their experiences of sexuality and schooling.

I have found Connell's (1995) notion of 'body-reflexive practices' particularly useful to explain how the body in its materiality is connected to social processes and how these constitute each other in a circuit of production of meaning. This is particularly useful when considering how the body becomes dis/embodyed through schooling as a social process and its contribution to pupil success or failure. Connell describes this practice as follows:

With bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern beyond the formulae of current social theory. This pattern might be termed body-reflexive practice. (Connell 1995: 61)

In the case of schooling we might suppose that the circuit goes from bodily interaction and experience via the social processes of schooling which produce learners through body disciplinary aspects of schooling such as the wearing of uniforms, sitting in rows in classrooms, or standing in lines in assemblies, or as Walkerdine (Walkerdine 1988) has argued in relation to primary school pupils, as child centred learners who discover knowledge through doing . Making one's body behave in this way then produces success. Connell, borrowing a term from Czech philosopher Karel Kosík, calls these processes onto-formative. This thesis explores in more detail the onto-formative processes relating to successful learning and their relationship to the onto-formative processes relating to sexual identity.

Quinllivan and Town (Quinlivan and Town 1999) provide us with an excellent example of body reflexive practice at work through schooling. They explored the pathologizing of homosexuality in their interviews with young lesbians and gay men. They were interested in how, by focusing on anatomy and reproductive heterosexuality, these young people's sexuality education had 'perpetuated the separation of physical bodies from feelings and thoughts' (Quinlivan and Town 1999: 246). This resulted in different problems for gay men and lesbians. For gay men, the lack of opportunity to explore their emotions became problematic. All but two of their participants had explored the physical dimensions of their gay sexuality 'but still found it difficult as young adults to articulate their feelings about themselves and their place as gay men in a male world' (Quinlivan and Town 1999: 247). In addition the mention of gay sexuality only within the context of HIV/AIDS education led them to perceive their sexuality as a disease. For the young women, the effect was that they tended to express their love through crushes and infatuations while being unable to explore the physical dimensions of their sexuality. They commented in relation to one young woman who experienced this mind/body split acutely:

The negative pathologizing messages that she received about her body as a young woman, combined with the silences that surrounded any mention of independent active female sexuality or lesbian

sexuality, led her to shut down any physical expression of her sexuality (Quinlivan and Town 1999: 248)

The body is addressed here by social processes of learning about sexuality and these processes affect the body as agent, which in turn, shapes future sexual activity and identity. This is important to this research, because the implication is that the body has a significant contribution to make to emotional and psychological development in its own right.

### **Working with Sexuality**

Much of this chapter has been concerned with exploring the place of sexuality within government policy. I now explore how central sexuality is in the lives of young women and return again to the problem of defining sexuality. This is a key concern of this PhD. One of the criticisms it might be possible to make of research which is about the centrality of sexuality in the construction of academic success is simply that sexuality isn't a central concern of young people. As I have already noted in chapter 2, Eve Sedgwick has explained in relation to adults, how sexuality touches people differently:

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.
- To some people, the nimbus of "the sexual" seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them.
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others.

- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even don't *want* to do.  
(Sedgwick 1990: 23)

Sedgwick's list continues and draws attention not only to the truly great variety of sexualities present in the world, but also to the contrivance and limitation involved in naming sexual identities as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual and lesbian and so on. Whilst these identities have clearly become a dominant way in which sexuality is understood and organised in our society today, object choice is only one way of measuring the differences between people in terms of sexuality.

However, much as Sedgwick is right to draw our attention to these differences between people in relation to sexuality, sexuality in schools is a different matter again. She gives us perhaps an over-indulged sense of the range of individual choices about sexuality. I say this because her list tends to give the impression of sex as expansive and not easily subject to control – and this is itself another discourse about sex. In the context of psychoanalysis for example, Britzman also argues that sexuality might best be considered as 'that which is other to boundaries' (Britzman 1998: 64). Sedgwick's list in fact, is also made up of points which draw attention to the interiority of

sexuality, its psychic life and perhaps to the sub-conscious. Its usefulness is that by doing this, she presents a challenge to the creation of categories of sexuality and also demonstrates the capacity of the individual to do her/his own version of sexuality. Because this research explores what young women do with sexuality, this sense of the expansive psychic life of sexuality is helpful and some of the young women in my research managed their sexualities in ingenious ways. However, in schools pupil choices about sexuality and more specifically their embodiment of sexuality are limited by the conditions in which those choices are made, which are highly specific. The tension between the interior psychic life of sexuality and its disciplining in schools is played out throughout this thesis and is evident in the tensions between the official and informal school, between fieldnotes about girls and interviews with girls, between the category of girl itself and individual girls who stretch the boundaries of that category to its limit, through their performance of sexuality.

Nevertheless, most young people have an understanding of sexuality as comprised of fixed identity categories (Measor, Tiffin et al. 2000). According to this common-sense view, people have a sexual identity, defined through sexual object choice, as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or gay or more recently as he/she or she/he, transgendered identities, these being considered by

young people as categories of sexual identity, rather than of gender.

Certainly, the young people that I have worked with generally have relatively fixed and essentialist ideas about sexual identity, what we might term traditional conceptions of sexuality, so that the work of queer theory about the fluidity and instability of sexual identity categories or indeed of gender has had relatively little impact on them. This is not universal and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2000) (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998), for example, has shown how young women in Australia are defining sexuality in ways that are much more fluid. Pallotta-Chiarolli developed the concept of multiple lifeworlds, borrowed from Cope and Kalantzis (1995) to explain how these young women negotiated their membership of different social worlds:

Girls are resisting being trapped in the duality of what they have inherited and what the dominant group wishes to enforce, or indeed resisting being defined by any single set of perceptions and ascriptions, bearing in mind that minority groups also tend to enforce their own conformist criteria for "belonging" (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2000: 33).

The notion of lifeworlds is useful as it emphasizes the creation of multiple individualities embodied within different social sites. Carlson (Carlson 1998) argued that identity politics were essential to empower marginalised groups, but he also suggested the importance of a politics of the self 'which does not lock itself into rigid oppositional identity politics' (Carlson 1998: 118) and



which encouraged young people to relate to each other outside the same-other binary. This is a crucial consideration within sexuality education for all young people. However, partly because of a homophobia that is rife in schools, there is an overwhelming anxiety on the part of most young people to avoid at all costs the label of gay or lesbian, which means that eradicating any sort of same-sex desire in the self, becomes an important part of young people's identity work generally (see for example Nayak and Kehily 1997). The opportunities to explore sexuality as it is constructed in queer theory then become considerably less and educators are likely to meet with very defensive reactions from young people, when they attempt this.

### **Common Understanding about Childhood and Adolescent Sexuality**

The general public seems torn between two dominant discourses in relation to young people's sexuality. The first one is the notion of childhood innocence about sexuality. In this discourse sexuality is not or should not be a concern for young people and is seen as something that they should be protected from for as long as possible. The school is a safe, sex free haven where the young can learn about the world, away from its harsh realities. They can develop their minds. Conversely a discourse about adolescence presents young people as at once at risk and also a risk. Young people in this

discourse are at the mercy of their raging hormones, likely to be totally preoccupied with sex and their own and each other's bodies and therefore in need of adult protection. There is some research that suggests that research itself on adolescence is inflected by this dominant discourse and researchers only choose to research those aspects of adolescence that confirm it as a 'stage of storm and stress' (Ayman-Nolley and Taira 2000, p.36). As Angie Williams has explained:

The life stage we know as adolescence is a social construct ... In short it has historical antecedents rooted in the development of industrial societies. This alongside other processes such as the writings of early developmentalists was highly influential in constructing adolescence as a time of revolutionary personal change – a time of 'storm and stress'. ...Even if we accept that physiological changes align with development at a certain age (and we can even debate this to some extent), intellectual, social and emotional development are more uncertain constructs if only because they are not so heavily linked with physiology. There is little doubt that development is heavily dependent on the way we have arranged modern society – it is therefore a social process as much as or even more than it is a biological process. (Williams and Chair 2002: 9)

Adolescence can be viewed as a particularly dense point of transfer about ideas regarding sexual development and notions of adulthood. While young people within dominant discourses of sex education are discouraged from sexual activity, conversely sexual activity in adolescence is also regarded widely by young people and indeed by many adults, to represent a rite of passage in the transition from child to adult. Sexual practices are therefore deeply symbolic for young people. Sexual acts make statements not simply

about sexual identity for young people but also about their maturity and their adulthood. In a world where adults have consistently more rights and power than children, we should expect that any act which is symbolically replete with significations of adulthood, will be important for young people as offering the potential of greater social power. This will be the case particularly in schools, which are so governed by notions of teachers as experienced knowing adults with authority and pupils as children or adolescents lacking knowledge and authority.

Shane Phelan, in her work on lesbian and gay sexual citizenship, has argued that what is crucial for anyone to have full citizenship is 'acknowledgment' and 'the emergence into publicity as an equal with other citizens' (Phelan 2001: 15) . Schooling is predicated upon hierarchical structures of power between adults and children. Young people, can use sexual practice to produce their 'emergence into publicity as an equal', often forcing an acknowledgment of their adult status from teachers. However, this acknowledgment is costly as it also jeopardises their successful identities as pupils or learners, which are premised on identity categories of childhood innocence and will only just stretch to adolescent sexual awakenings. Young people who are overt or promiscuous about their sexual activity or their

sexual desires can therefore often find it very difficult to be in school, though interestingly experience much greater success at Further Education Colleges.

For individual pupils in schools, what this means is that in terms of sexuality whatever choices are made, they are interpreted through discourses which dominate about sex in school. The idea that one might leave one's sexuality at the school gates and pick it up later, either later in life or even later that day (an idea that those in charge of schools are very fond of), is illusory because whatever individual pupils do, even if it is to ignore sexuality and never speak of it, sexuality cannot be escaped. Their silence itself speaks volumes about their relationship to sexuality. One of my interests is the extent to which pupils seem to know this and the extent to which they consciously and deliberately read themselves and each other into or out of discourses about sexuality in school, or closet sexuality and their understanding of the ways in which sexuality and educational success are interrelated.

In a sense this thesis might do very well without a definition of sexuality for two reasons. Firstly, its concern is with the sexual discourses found in schools with which pupils have to contend and which may be incorporated into their successes and failures in school. In this sense, what is of interest is

precisely the discursive range of definitions of sexuality, rather than one definition. Secondly, it is impossible to define sexuality for the young women that form these case-studies. The object of the research is to try to understand how they define it for themselves, if in fact they do so at all. Each of the young women in this research managed sexuality in different ways and was also constructing the meanings of sexuality for herself as she did so. It was this fact that led me to focus on individual pupils, who formed critical cases in the research. Because sexuality was so slippery a subject to discuss and because it proved impossible to take for granted how sexuality was being taken up by these young women and what it meant for them, the only thing to do was to observe over time, to interview and ask questions about those observations, to allow the research subjects to educate me from their perspective and to deduce from that the interior logic operating in relation to their choices about sexuality and whether or not this was related to educational success in school. Sexuality is also constructed as a very private part of oneself within the UK and as I have already suggested, promoted within the context of a sexual relationship. Talking about sex and sexuality with young women sometimes broke both of these boundaries and therefore had to be done carefully. The very act of talking about 'it' arguably also changed what sexuality meant for pupils and their relationship to it and sometimes to me. Talking about sexuality was perceived as somehow

transgressive and pupils reacted to that, sometimes by being transgressive themselves, or by being defensive. Equally they could find it enlightening. As Janet Holland and her team of researchers found, when they were undertaking the WRAP (Women, Risk and Aids Project) research (Holland, Ramazanoglu et al. 1998), many of those they interviewed were grateful to talk about their sexuality at such great length to an adult.

### **Researching Sexuality**

Contemporary researchers of sexuality in schools have tended to focus their attention on the opposition between official school discourses on sex education on the one hand and on young people's sexual cultures and everyday practices on the other - that 'hidden' curriculum of sexuality, which circulates in schools and is generally seen as more pervasive and influential amongst young people than the official knowledge gleaned in sex and relationship education classes (Sears 1992; Kehily and Nayak 1997; Measor, Tiffin et al. 2000). While such work has been useful in debunking a view of young people as sexual innocents, its focus on pupil sexual cultures emphasizes and limits the parameters within which sexuality may be understood and ignores its importance as a social vector of power, affecting all aspects of learning, not just that about sexuality. In this way, sexuality

becomes self-referential, in the sense that research about young people's sexuality is only about their sexuality and on the one hand and on the other, everything else becomes divorced from sex and sexuality. For example, the focus of research into schools and sexuality is usually (Carpenter 2001, Kehily 1997, Measor, Tiffin et al. 2000) still upon the specificity of young people's attitudes to sex, or their sexual practice, rather than the complex interconnections that one might draw between young people's sexuality and their learning, their understandings about the world, their sociality or their psychic investments in identity work more generally. Similarly, research which explores young people's learning rarely investigates its connections with issues of sexuality, sexual practice or identity, though it may engage with gender, ethnicity or class (Kenway, Willis et al. 1998) (Gordon, Holland et al. 2000) .

Where the discussion of the sexual has extended beyond this, it has almost always been concerned with the way in which school is experienced by those already identified and labelled as specifically sexualised young people. For example, for young lesbians and gay men, the particular sets of issues generally identified as being of concern are social isolation, homophobia, a lack of role models in the curriculum and in the school generally of lesbians and gay men and the absence of specific guidance or counselling for these

young people in relation to their sexuality (Sears 1992; Epstein 1994; Harbeck 1995; Unks 1995; Butler 1996; Herr 1997; Thurlow 2001; Micelli 2002; Connexions Service 2003). Some research has been undertaken to explore how young lesbians and gay men cope in schools, but this is usually taken up by those concerned for these young people's rights to be sexual in the way that they choose or in the sense in which they feel they are. Such research is usually ethnographic and/or activist and has observed two opposing trends in relation to young lesbians and gay men and their success at school. Either such individuals appear to be high achievers, or even 'over-achievers' (Harbeck 1995) at school, or alternatively, they drop out of school altogether and leave with few, if any, qualifications (Friend 1993; Harbeck 1995; Friend 1997; Herr 1997). Indeed it seems as if some queer young people specifically bury themselves in school work in order to avoid the heterosexual pressure of the school. As one young lesbian reflected to Debbie Epstein, when asked about using academic work to avoid heterosexuality:

DE: You could choose to be the academic girl and avoid the compulsory heterosexuality?

Rachel: Yes. I don't know how much it was a choice and how much my friends very much steered me into it, because I *was* good at my work. I don't think I had very high self-esteem; I think I got labelled, but they might think I labelled myself. I remember the conversations on the Monday mornings after the parties - 'and so-and-so go off with so-and-so and so-and-so got off with so-and-so and Rachel got A in her Maths tests'.

It's really funny now, but it wasn't, it was horrible.

(Epstein, 1994: 21)



These anecdotal examples by researchers of the interconnections for young lesbians between success in school and their sexuality suggest that we would do well to investigate whether the interconnections between academic success and sexuality operate across a range of sexualities and a range of educational success or failure.

### **Sexuality Meets The Standards Agenda in Research**

Work in educational research around gender seems largely to ignore the difference that sexuality makes to the ways in which gender is imagined and embodied and the difference that it can logically therefore make to educational achievement or indeed participation in education at all. As Morley and Rasool observe, even more radical research critics of the Standards Agenda or School Effectiveness, fail to make mention of sexuality:

...Even in excellent collections deconstructing the power base of school effectiveness such as Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson (1998), no mention is made of sexualities in the many discussions of equity. It would seem that the gaps and silences in education reform and even in the work of its most articulate critics, have reinstitutionalised hegemonic forms of heterosexuality. (Morley and Rasool 1999: 126)

The implication of this they further suggest, is that school effectiveness is a normalizing discourse, relying on the notion of a universal subject which stigmatizes any minority and particularly sexual minorities. However, even more to the point is the lack of acknowledgment that not only is

heterosexuality indeed hegemonic, but even heterosexuality itself also has forms that are marginalised and have real costs to those embodying them. One of my key concerns is about the difference that sexuality makes in education and the ways in which it is itself productive of success or failure. By sexuality here I mean all the forms there are of being sexual, including the adoption of asexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Coming back to where I started this chapter, Deborah Britzman, in her psychoanalytic study of education, points out that Freud insisted that sexuality began with life, not with puberty. The refusal of society to engage with this, the marginalisation of psychoanalysis and the insertion of sexuality into a dominant developmental discourse of childhood, she argues, has disciplined sexuality to appear as part of a process of normative development:

In the insistence that pleasure be confined to utility, the work of the apparatuses of education, law, and medicine becomes preoccupied with normalizing sexuality to the confines of proper object choice and marital reproductive sex. In normative developmental models of education, sex education poses as a problem the specification of the proper object and rewards those subjects who comply with the interdictions or morality and the state apparatus (Britzman 1998: 69)

Throughout this chapter I have made the point that sexuality is implicated in learning and therefore in teaching and therefore in educational success.

Although sexuality is disciplined through educational discourses, if sexuality in its widest sense constitutes instinctual desire then education has to take account of its interference in the processes of desire and the possible resistances to that.

The young women who were the subjects of this research proved to be involved in the constant processes of regulation of sexuality and learning.

For successful learners instinctual pleasures do not go away but have to be managed, suppressed, closeted or displaced. All successful learners seemed to have grasped that the management and regulation of sexuality was pivotal in the production of success. Those less successful were either openly resistant to the disavowal of sexuality and in a way took the education system on, or they were only vaguely aware that their embodiment of sexuality was moving them away from educational success and were more bemused by it.

The next three chapters explore the ways in which three different groups of pupils managed their sexualities; they are four Somali pupils, a Traveller pupil, a white working class pupil and two pupils who identified as

transgendered. None of these pupils managed to achieve academic success within the A\*-C economy. I explore the role that sexuality played for them in barring them from academic success. In some cases this academic success was very much sought and in others a choice was made to invest more consciously in the promise of sexuality.

## Chapter 4

# **Bodies that Learn: Negotiating Educational Success through the Management of Sexuality**

### **Introduction**

This chapter continues to develop the hypothesis that sexuality and success in school are complexly interrelated for young women and that it is a relationship which they must negotiate daily in the site of the school. The chapter will argue that education (or the possibility of becoming educated) cannot occupy the same space as sexuality, in the formal school.<sup>1</sup> However, as Epstein and Johnson (Epstein and Johnson 1998) and others, (see for example Gordon, Holland et al. 2000) show, while sexuality is expelled from the space of the school and made taboo it is, simultaneously, ever-present, indeed pervasive. Pupils embody identities both as learners and as sexual subjects. Sexuality and education, therefore, come together in embodied ways. Schools are fundamentally modernist institutions and education, as a process, privileges rationality and the mind. But pupils are, simultaneously,

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<sup>1</sup> The formal school is the curriculum, pedagogies, lessons and policies which explain how the school carries out its function as an educational site. In contrast, the informal school refers to pupil and staffroom cultures.

expected to pursue this rational aspect of their lives and to develop as sexualised, gendered, subjects. These two aspects of their lived experience are often in a collision course, which is exaggerated by the hegemony of the ultra-rationalist approaches of school effectiveness and the standard regimes in place in many countries. As noted in the previous chapter Carlson (1998) suggests that marginalised identities, such as those of gay or ethnic minority students, represent the body and desire on the one hand, while dominant identity groups, especially those that are white, male and middle class, represent the mind and reason. This has severe implications for the ways in which students from marginalised groups are able, or not able, to embody identities as successful learners. This chapter is concerned principally with the silenced, marginalised or disallowed versions of heterosexuality, exploring how young Somali women living in South London attempt to manage their identities as learners and as sexual subjects in school<sup>1</sup>.

I analyse the resourceful and ingenious ways in which four young Somali women negotiate the mind-body split, holding it in place in order to be good pupils and achieve the education they so much desire and, simultaneously, invest themselves in future versions of heterosexual marriage. However, for

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<sup>1</sup> My research about these pupils has been previously published: Epstein, D., S. O'Flynn, et al. (2003). Silenced Sexualities in Schools and Universities. Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books. O'Flynn, S. and D. Epstein (2005). "Standardising Sexuality: Embodied Knowledge, "Achievement" and "Standards"." Social Semiotics 15(2): 185-210.

these young women, the situation is complicated by the fact that their familial biographies are not normatively heterosexual (at least in Western societies), which led them into further negotiations between the heterosexual familial expectations of the school (both official and informal), government policy and their own personal situations. I suggest that they produce their educated mind/desexualised body (for the moment at least) through the construction of a 'closet' which is comparable to that occupied by young queer people. Their complex heterosexual identities are formed, also, around diasporic allegiances to Somalia, the racism of their present abode in the UK and the necessity to position themselves as members of 'useful' and productive families rather than as 'asylum-seekers' (which, in the UK, is generally accompanied by the adjective 'bogus'). They thus have a double imperative: to produce their families as heterosexual nuclear families and themselves as acceptably heterosexual, but only in a married future after they have been educated; and to negotiate the limits of their behaviour in ways that are possible to sustain in both their school and home communities.

As noted in chapter 2 (table 2.1) I had been working with these young women, at the invitation of the school prior to undertaking the research and the interviews were a continuation of my relationship with them. This chapter discusses aspects of three of those interviews, involving four of the

students. Each young woman chose her own pseudonym. Ayani arrived in London when she was 7 years old. She had been in London the longest of the four students. Both Nadjma and Nazrin had lived in London for 3 years. Deqa had been in London for only one year.

### **Fitting in with Institutional Heterosexism**

'I didn't tell them because I didn't want to tell them because they think it's so strange - they will think it's strange'. (Deqa)

One of the first ways in which the Somali students felt it necessary to closet and/or rework part of their identities was through 'family'. I had been asked by the school to ensure that it had a clear understanding of who the responsible parent/guardian was for emergency contact forms. I was told that it had been very difficult on several occasions to contact the person named on the form and that often the same contact person was variously described as 'auntie', 'mum', or 'step-mum'. On one occasion, the school had been particularly concerned because the named person had seemed to be under sixteen.

Deqa gave a very moving account of her life and recalled the moment in Somalia when the fighting had started and she had lost members of her family:



When I was little — five — the fight happened in Mogadishu so we came back and I mean — I mean we came to Djibouti — which is near to the Somalia ... and then I used to live with my mum and we couldn't find our sisters or brothers except my younger sister because they run and then they go to another country like the Yemen and then after that we couldn't find as well my Dad because he was — he was like a businessman — but before the fight happened he's gone out — so the fight happened so he can't get an aeroplane or stuff like that — we don't even know where he is so we couldn't find him.

Deqa didn't see her father again. She remembered the point at which she asked her mother for an explanation:

Deqa: I grow up now — into when I was ten — I ask my Mum and I say 'Mum, where is Dad? Why didn't he call us?' And Mum said 'I don't know where he's gone'. And I said, 'Why? Why you don't know?' and then she said, 'He was a businessman — we — you know we couldn't find him in that time. When the fight happened, he'd gone out. He'd just gone out of Somalia — so we couldn't find him, where he's gone' and then I said 'OK Mummy' — so my Dad, his brother, we call him Dad. Until now we call him Dad. We respect him like a Dad. We treat him as our Dad.

Sarah: So you - so it's your Dad's brother?

Deqa: Yes it's my Dad's brother and then we call him Dad. Me and my sister still now we call him Dad.

Sarah: So you haven't seen your Dad?

Deqa: No we haven't seen our Dad since — I don't know if he's alive or dead.

In this account, Deqa describes how 'family' is kept together through the inscription of her uncle in the role of father. This is a standard practice within Somali culture and not at all unusual (Ali 2001). Later his role appears more

distantly symbolic, as she tells me that he is not usually in England. She goes on to describe her family:

Sarah: So in this country now you know — your Dad (uncle) is here now.

Deqa: Yes he came here but he's not even here now actually — but he came sometimes.

Sarah: So who is living here? D. [a sister] is living here...

Deqa: [*continuing*] D. is here and R. [another sister] is living here and my brother he is living here and my sister F. is living here — but my Mum she has only me and K. [another sister] — that is other Mums — same father.

Sarah: Yeah.

Deqa: My uncle as well, they call Dad.

Sarah: Do you think people in this school would find that strange?

Deqa: I didn't tell them because I didn't want to tell them because they think it's so strange - they will think it's strange.

Sarah: hey won't understand?

Deqa: [*emphatic*] They won't understand *anything*!

Deqa's reference to 'anything' here refers in fact to the polygamous relationships embedded in her family structure, common in Somalia. It is an impossible story for her to tell her non-Somali classmates and for them to understand and also very difficult for her to explain to staff in school. This means that her story has to be closeted from the wider dominant pupil culture in school and from official school documentation (contact forms etc.). The language to tell it is not available, for one thing, and Deqa's knowledge of English makes finding words to explain family structure very difficult for her. It is also hard to see how, given Government guidelines on sex and relationship education and its insistence on Western [Christian] marriage and

familial values, this story could be told with pride, without defaming the character of both her biological father, who had several wives, and her biological uncle, who had married his dead brothers' wives in order to care for them and their families. Instead Deqa tells her classmates another story. When she is asked about her family, she says that she lives with her Mum and Dad and brother and sisters in London, that she was born in Djibouti and her father is a businessman who travels a lot. There is no mention of Somalia, of a war, of the loss of her father, of her several mothers. There is what there has to be for success in school: a 'happy' heterosexual nuclear family. Even the happiness seems to have to be there, partly to counter the views of some of the white students that all asylum seekers are 'unhappy' and in need of help. The happiness has to be fabricated through the loss of the experience of war from the story.

Deqa: Yes when they ask me where I am from I just all the time say Djibouti — I was born in Djibouti — my Dad's living here some time...

Yet in the suppression of the story that one might describe as 'authentic', is the unhappiness of being silenced, of feeling suppressed.

Sarah: So do you think you've changed since you've come to England?

Deqa: Yeah.

Sarah: How have you changed?

Deqa: I change everything because um like I mean — I didn't change my behaviour — but I change my — I mean — my personality

because I feel - because all the time I feel so angry — and I can't do anything —

Sarah: So all the time you feel angry about your situation?

Deqa: Yeah.

Sarah: So is your personality now an angry personality or is it that you just have to keep everything inside?

Deqa: I just need to keep everything inside —

Sarah: That must be terrible.

Deqa: I know Miss but what — I can't do anything innit? So I just have to keep quiet and that's it.

Deqa is angry not only because she feels the need to suppress the truth of her family. She is also appalled by some of the racism she has experienced in England, which had included being robbed, racially insulted and beaten up on a bus on the way home from school one day. She is haunted still by her experience of the war in Mogadishu but addressing that becomes impossible if you first have to pretend for most of the time and to most people that you were never there and it never happened. Deqa lives her life in relation to the 'closet' — in important respects it is the same closet that young queer students in schools have to work with in their dealings with normative heterosexuality. The broader effects of this closeting here, are to ensure that Somali identity lacks cultural definition within the school, achieved by only allowing one particular form of heterosexuality a place in it.

Explaining and renaming was also important for Ayani. She explained that she called her grandmother her mother because 'she took care of me all my life'. She also explained her relationship to her father:

Ayani: And we used to have a worker cos my Dad left — never got to see him.

Sarah: So you've never seen your Dad?

Ayani: No. But I've seen a picture. He used to send me pictures — for my fifteenth birthday.

Sarah: So is your Dad still in Somalia?

Ayani: Yes — he's got some kids and we just found out — four days ago I think it was — that we have an older brother.

Sarah: Wow.

Ayani: Yes. He lives in Somalia.

Sarah: How do you feel about that?

Ayani: OK — we've only got one brother in our family and it's like now we've got two — and like my Dad was married to another woman — before he married to my Mum — that was in Somalia and now he's married to another woman — she's got more kids.

Ayani tells a different story in this interview, not the happy heterosexual family, but not a story about polygamy either. It is carefully modulated into a story of serial monogamy and is a narrative that can be understood within the context of the school — only just understood — three wives raises eyebrows even in its serial form, but understood nevertheless. I do not wish to endorse any particular form of heterosexuality or its institutionalisation and privileging in any form. However, I do wish to show that an insistence on one version of heterosexuality means that some pupils inevitably feel their families to be stigmatised, no matter what the Government says or claims

about avoiding stigmatisation. This is especially the case for those who are marginalised. Such students, as Deqa and Ayani must further marginalise, even rewrite, important aspects of their histories and identities, in order to fit in and that this has serious consequences for their well-being in school.

### **Education, Heterosexuality and the Phallic Body.**

‘I told my mind not to go with boys and not to do that thing until I finish my education’. Nazrin.

In a particularly interesting discussion, Nazrin and Nadjma discussed the possibility of boyfriends and the implications of this for their lives.

Throughout their discussion, tensions between education and sexuality were apparent. For them, the possibility of sex combined with education appeared impossible since one seemed to negate the other and sex in particular endangered any project of education. This tension was not one simply dreamed up by Nazrin and Nadjma. As I noted in chapter 3 it is clearly observable in UK Government discussions on teenage pregnancy (SEU June 1999) and in the *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance*, (DfEE 2000: 5 ). In the following extract, Nazrin and Nadjma struggle with the implication of their bodies, their sexuality and their education. I have just asked them for their views on being/becoming sexually active:

- Nazrin: I think I want to finish my education before doing things like that [having a boyfriend, having sex]. I told my mind not to go with boys and not to do that thing until I finish my education. I mean you can have a boyfriend.
- Nadjma: Yeah yeah...
- Nazrin: But not like do the silly things .. [*the rest is obscured by Nadjma's interruption*].
- Nadjma: No, no - you're saying it like that - but if I say I don't wanna have a boyfriend but sometimes it happen to you - cos you don't - you don't wanna have a boyfriend but who knows?
- Sarah: You meet someone?
- Nadjma: Yeah. You meet someone but if you be careful in yourself...
- Nazrin: Yeah — like more hard.
- Nadjma: Hard.
- Nazrin: Like hard on the inside.
- Nadjma: So that means nothing happen to you. You can have a boyfriend and it's not a problem.
- Nazrin: Yeah ... boyfriend.
- Nadjma: But if you look like you [*word obscured*] it will be all right for you. Look after your education, have a boyfriend, not to do nothing.
- Nazrin: Not have him to take all your mind and all that ...
- Sarah: Take all your mind, so like you mean...
- Nazrin: Do whatever he tells you to do.
- Nadjma: [*emphatic*] No I don't think so [*waving head no to indicate dissent*] mens tell you to do this, do that... [*disparagingly of men*].

My reading of this extract suggests that Nadjma and Nazrin, but especially Nazrin, play out a particularly carefully organised resistance to the idea of heterosexual sex. They seek both to abstract themselves from their bodies — become almost disembodied — and also draw attention to their bodies — becoming more fully embodied — by marking them out in their

description/ascription of themselves as learners. That they have a considerable investment in this move is demonstrated by the heatedness of their conversation, the way that they constantly butt in and interrupt each other to complete the thought, and the emotional charge of their emphases. Nazrin begins the conversation by referring to the tensions between sex and education. She also sets up the mind/body split, by allying her mind with education: 'I told my mind not to go with boys and not do that thing until I finish my education'. There is a powerful sense of self-discipline here, policing desire and bolstering the docile body of the school subject (Foucault 1976: chapter 2), a point to which we will return later. She knows, however that 'having a boyfriend' is important in the pupil culture of the school, both as a way to gather status and as a sign of maturity which is more than sexual — hence her insistence that, 'I mean you can have a boyfriend'. It is the practice of sex that is problematic — what you do: 'not like do the silly things'. Nadjma both reinforces and challenges Nazrin's view. She suggests that a rational decision not to have a boyfriend is simply not an effective resistance because 'who knows?' A more effective form of resistance is to have a boyfriend but 'be careful in yourself'. Both young women seem to find the description of 'hardness' particularly appropriate for their bodies — or the inside of their bodies. Intuitively they seem to have understood the requirements of a phallogentric curriculum. The phallic body of the learner



must be impermeable, impenetrable. We can see here how Nazrin's and Nadjma's description is not so much a resistance to heterosexual penetrative sex *per se* or to the 'dangers' of pregnancy, but rather acts as an inscription of their bodies as phallic; these are the bodies of learners. Thus, being 'hard' means that you *can* have a boyfriend but 'Not to have him take all your mind and all that'. These young women seem not to be anxious about the threat of rape or pressurized sex; rather it is the threat that heterosexual penetrative sex holds symbolically for their education that they worry about. It is the mind that is given primacy in the description but its hardness has to be written on the body: 'If you look like ... it will be all right for you. Look after your education, have a boyfriend, not to do nothing'. Taking away one's mind is problematic. The mind is needed for education and to take it away is profoundly disempowering. Doing as you are told by a man is ridiculed by Nadjma — 'No I don't think so - mens tell you to do this, do that' — but both Nadjma and Nazrin at various points remind each other of the threat, as Nazrin does here — 'But some people does...'

Both young women give the impression of being constantly self-surveillant. They monitor their behaviour: 'you meet someone but if you be careful in yourself'. Their self-surveillance involves transforming and disciplining the body: 'like hard on the inside' — and policing the mind: 'I told my mind...',

'not to have him take all your mind'. Nazrin tries to disarm the power of heterosexual sex as 'the silly things', almost imputing it to immaturity and of course, for a rational learner/citizen the public arena is more important or 'adult' than the private one. These young women clearly perceive that the process of regulating their sexualised bodies is a prerequisite for educational success.

Given their strength of feeling about both their education and the threat to it posed by hetero/sexuality or at least what it stands for, the conversation moved in what appeared to be a contradictory way immediately after this, as I discussed their attitudes to marriage.

Nadjma: No I don't think so - mens tell you to do this, do that -

Nazrin: But some people does...

Sarah: Yes, so if you ever get married for example, you don't want to marry someone who's going to tell you what to do?

Nadjma: No. If you get married you have to listen what your husband say.

Nazrin: No — both the same — you have to listen to what I say and I have to listen to what he says. If it don't work then...*[shrugs shoulders]*

Nadjma: No, no. Not us religion Nazrin. Remember here — us religion is ... stop doing this Nazrin. Us religion is like if you get married you have to listen to your man. If you like to go to school or college or whatever, if he tell you don't go to school stay in house, you have to listen to him.

Nazrin: No, no.

- Nadjma: But try your best to tell him, 'but I wanna do that - stop telling me this', because of course he's going to listen to you if he love you.
- Sarah: But what if he doesn't listen to you?
- Nadjma: If he gets on my nerves I will tell him to fuck off then.  
[*Laughter*].
- Sarah: You have the same views as Nazrin really.
- Nadjma: Yes. But I don't think boyfriends telling me to do this and do this and ...
- Nazrin: There are some girls, he's been taking their minds.
- Nadjma: But if you get good relationship, maybe he's gonna come to you — but if you don't, he can't tell you that, 'stop doing that, stop doing this'.
- Nazrin: Yeah? [*in disbelief*]. How many people have seen any — crying — [*imitates crying*]  
[*General Laughter*] —
- Nazrin: I think so!
- Nadjma: I don't think so

This is a rather convoluted conversation. The argument starts when I assume, incorrectly, that their determination to keep their own minds will lead to either a resistance to marriage or a presentation of it in liberal terms as a contract between equals. Nadjma's immediate reply is to correct me, saying that if you are married, you must listen to your husband. Nazrin's response to this, in contrast, is in line with my expectations, 'you have to listen to what I say and I have to listen to what he says'. Nadjma disagrees and moves religion, being Muslim, centre stage in this discussion, imploring Nazrin, in an exasperated tone, to remember it too:

No, no. Not us religion Nazrin. Remember here — us religion is ... stop doing this Nazrin. Us religion is like if you get married you have to listen to your man. If you like to go to school or college or whatever, if he tell you don't go to school, stay in house, you have to listen to him.

Interestingly, again it is envisaged that disputes will be around education.

The conflict between sex and education is held in place here and marriage too carries the danger of leading to the sacrifice of the education that Nadjma has striven so hard to protect. Rachel Thomson (2000) has suggested that for pupils in some locations, resistance to heterosexuality in school occurs in order to defer it until later, so that educational rewards can be reaped in the present. This appears to be occurring here, though one might further suggest that educational success demands such resistance — is even implicit in it. Nadjma also uses 'love' as a strategy through which to reconcile marriage and education. In a good relationship a Muslim man who really loves his wife will not stop her from doing what she wants: 'of course he's going to listen to you if he loves you'. In the eventuality that he fails to listen, he fails as a good Muslim husband and can legitimately be told 'to fuck off'. Nadjma told me later that a good Muslim woman has to marry a good Muslim man and if he turns out not to be so, then it is actually a duty to leave him. This is a clever argument, drawn on when Nadjma implies that authority in a relationship is only granted if the relationship is 'good' and that if it isn't 'good' then the right to authority is lost. Nazrin clearly disagrees. She has

seen women crying in relationships in which they are forced to do as their husband asks and yet his authority is held in place.

The contention here between Nazrin and Nadjma is heartfelt. Nazrin is holding out for a marriage that is more fashionably 'a partnership' which may or may not work, very much in tune with the UK government's representation of what a marriage is in its *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (DfEE 2000). She does not accept Nadjma's view of their religion and Nadjma has to struggle to explain how the relationship is to work and subsequently to reconcile this within a religious framework, perhaps in order to accommodate Nazrin's uncompromising views and the consequent risk to their friendship. As Hey (Hey 1997) has observed, girls' friendships work to police girls into being normatively heterosexual. Here we observe a rare moment in which friendship is caught between competing versions of married heterosexuality and in which some very careful negotiations have to take place. However, what is held in place by both as 'fact' is the difficulty of embodying both a sexual identity and an identity as learner. Nadjma imagines the point of contention in the marriage will be around her continuing education, echoing Nazrin's insistence that men might take your mind.

Nadjma's and Nazrin's views on education, heterosexuality and marriage are further shaped by their experience as asylum seekers in the UK from Somalia. Their identities could be described as diasporic inasmuch as Somalia is of central importance to their lives and is the place to which they intend to return and rebuild, as soon as it is 'safe' to do so.

In the following extract, we are discussing the difficulty of achieving success in school.

- Nazrin: Some people are born here, but me I start in year 8.  
Nadjma: No that's how you are if you learn quick — even the British girls or whatever, they're not good.  
Nazrin: That's cos they didn't learn but I start in year 8 and year 9. I didn't even speak English.  
Sarah: Yes, so some of them they really had a head start from you and you're saying that some of them are not very good anyway. They've been here all the time but they're not very good.  
Both: Yeah.  
Nazrin: That's the people who give up.  
Sarah: The people who give up?  
Nazrin: Yeah. They don't know what they wanna do.  
Sarah: You think there are students like that in this school? Who give up?  
Nazrin: Some people, not all of them.  
Sarah: I don't mean really Somali students here. I mean other students.  
Both: Yeah.  
Nadjma: Some people they don't care about...  
Nazrin: their education.  
Sarah: But you both care?  
Nadjma: Of course.  
Nazrin: Yeah.  
Nadjma: Because we wanna be good when we go back to Somalia. That means good grades and all that so we can help them.

Nazrin: Know everything and all that.

The dream of returning to Somalia and rebuilding their lives and those of other Somalis is a central motive for their education. They recognise the difficulty of education without such a motive, identifying those who 'give up' as those who 'don't know what they wanna do' and those who 'don't care about their education', in stark contrast to their own situation. They want to 'know everything' and they have faith that their education in the UK will allow them to have a significant and positive impact on the lives of Somali people, 'so we can help them'. This is an important motive not only for their education but also organises their imagined future heterosexual relationships.

When Nazrin tells herself at the start of this conversation, not to jeopardise her education 'I told my mind not to go with boys and not to do that thing...', we need to ask what constitutes this 'I'. What part of her is it, which is telling her mind? I suggest that for both young women the 'return to Somalia' acts as a powerfully organising principle of identity here, both in relation to their sexual identities and their identities as learners. It is this that leads to their very strong investment in the hard, phallic body required for education. It also explains, for example in Nadjma's case, why, there is apparently no contradiction for her in asserting that she will not succumb to a 'boyfriend'

now but that she will obey a future husband. A future marriage is part of a cultural investment in Somalia, whereas a boyfriend now jeopardises that investment.

Nadjma and Nazrin are aware of the need to fashion the body and to consider the implications of their sexual bodies for their education. They work through this in discussion. Competing versions of heterosexuality are important, characterised differently through religion and cultural context. For Nadjma perhaps, being won over to heterosexual marriage as a liberal contract (the preferred reading of the UK government), means, in important respects, sacrificing national, cultural and religious identity. It means assimilation and that for her, perhaps, would undermine the whole project of the return to Somalia. She constantly reiterates the point that husbands have authority over their wives, though she qualifies by reference to the need for them to be good Muslim men and thus to listen to and respect their wives. Both Nadjma and Nazrin are clearly aware that if one wants to learn as a young woman in school, then sexuality has to be actively resisted. Not resisting sexuality means failing as a learner. There is no dispute about this. Furthermore, an important way of resisting is to constitute one's identity through a more powerful discourse — in this case the return to Somalia,



which can help at least to defer sexuality now, even if it demands heterosexuality later.

### **Negotiating Success against a Deadline for Compulsory Heterosexuality**

'I've got until June the 6th' - Ayani

For Ayani, negotiations between sexuality and education were extremely complex, although again characterised by an overarching desire to return to Somalia and rebuild the country, using her education:

Sarah: What do you want to do after, cos you, you're going to leave at the end of this year. What do you want to do then?

Ayani: I'm doing two years GNVQ Business Studies. Then I'm gonna — hopefully I'm gonna get 4 A to Cs and then I can do two years GNVQ Business Studies. And then after I do that I can get a degree or whatever man — I do a one year ATT course

Sarah: A one year what?

Ayani: ATT something course?

Sarah: What's that?

Ayani: Accountancy.

Sarah: Oh right.

Ayani: It's not high and it's not low. It's about middle accountancy but if I want to go for the higher Accountancy then I have to do A Levels ... which I'm not capable of doing A-Levels. I will find it boring and drop it and I don't want to do that ... cos if I do business studies - learn about business ... because hopefully I will go back to Somalia and set up my own business out there

Sarah: That's what you want to do is it?

Ayani: Yeah, because Somalian people believe that women can't do a lot, you know, but I want to show them that they can.

Sarah: Do you think they'll let you? What will your Dad say?

Ayani: My Dad has no control of my life anyway — but if I go up there

...

Sarah: [*prompting*] If you go to Somalia he might have some control?

Ayani: Yeah ... no not really. You know my mum [*grandmother*] always said to me — you know I never really had a father or a father figure — do you get me? I've only had a mother and she showed me that she can take care of so many kids but — she's held up two jobs, seven kids — a house everything and in Somalia they used to think that she was crazy like to do that. She needs a man to do the work but she proved them wrong. And if she can do it I think I can do it with me getting the education here — getting the course, getting the degree or whatever and then going up there. We still have our house and our shop and just make that into a restaurant or something and show the Somali people that women are capable — because — that... after the war there's going to be a lot more mess and they really do need women's help.

For Ayani, an education in business seems to be key. She has a view that in Somalia women are undervalued generally and she has a mission to change that. She uses the example set by her grandmother to give her the confidence to believe that it is possible for women to function outside of the model where a man/husband is necessary, although she is a little unsure about this. Unlike Nazrin and Nadjma the pressure exerted on Ayani to marry is very great and means that her efforts to suspend heterosexual marriage, have to work differently:

Ayani: I have a boyfriend — hopefully we'll get married soon. Still, it won't stop me [*going back to Somalia and setting up a business*].

Sarah: Hopefully you're getting married soon?

Ayani: Yeah

Sarah: And what's he like then?

Ayani: Very nice...um...cos we're allowed to — children — we're allowed to get married at the age of...my mum wants me to get married — third cousin...I don't — and she goes to me if you find a man quick enough — by the time you get to 16 — if you

have a man then you marry - if you don't you marry him [her third cousin].

Sarah: So you've only got 'til you're sixteen.

Ayani: Yes I've got until June the 6<sup>th</sup>.

Sarah: Ur [*surprised*]. What marry on June 6<sup>th</sup>?

Ayani: No if I have my man, which I have now and tell my Mum I do have a man and we plan to get married but not now then ...

Sarah: So is he Somalian?

Ayani: [*Nods*].

Sarah: So how long has he been here then?

Ayani: He's been here all his life. But um my Mum won't approve of him because she wants me to marry someone who's good at the religion...

Sarah: And he's not good at the religion?

Ayani: He's useless — a maniac — he's one of those boys, he's finished school and he's into college. He goes to XXX College. He plays his role — like me — he plays his role but he does other things like he goes out goes clubbing and does this and that...

Sarah: What's he doing at College then?

Ayani: Um, he's doing Engineering —

Ayani is a little confused perhaps about how to reconcile the image she has of her grandmother as a lone woman in Somalia, managing without a man, with the reality that her grandmother is pressurising her into marriage with her third cousin. She veers between being allowed to marry and being forced to do so. In the circumstances she does the best that she can do. She secures for herself a boyfriend, who she describes as 'like me', someone who 'plays his role' and someone who like her, is used to moving with some agility between the demands of different cultural worlds. She also seemed determined to set the agenda as far as the relationship was concerned:

Sarah: And is he your first boyfriend?

Ayani: Not first boyfriend - first Somalian boyfriend.

Sarah: And do you, is your religion quite strict about these things?

Ayani: You're allowed to talk to a boy but you're not allowed to do like more than that.

Sarah: So you're not allowed to sleep with a boy or anything like that?

Ayani: No. I don't even believe in that myself so... but I do other things that they say I can't do so [*starts laughing*]

Sarah: So you'll do other things but -

Ayani: Not go overboard.

Sarah: Until you get married.

Ayani: Yes.

Sarah: So how long are you going to wait until you get married?

Ayani: When I finish college, two years. He want to do it quick but no — it's going to be a big [thing] so...

Sarah: And you think you'll wait for two years?

Ayani: He said he will. He said even if we get married now he will treat me — he won't treat me like the Somalian men treat their women

Sarah: What do you mean? How do Somalian men treat their women?

Ayani: They treat their women — stay at home, do my cooking, ironing whatever. But he said to me you go and do your stuff and I'll go and do my stuff, but we'll be a couple and we'll work on it — otherwise ... Cos I won't do cooking, so he'll do cooking and I'll do washing up. Whatever. We'll just share it as a couple — it's not going to be a one way thing.

Sarah: So do you think for young Somalian people it's different? They're changing maybe?

Ayani: Yes they're changing. It's because we're always included into what the men are ...

Sarah: But if you go back to Somalia?

Ayani: [*Defiant*] It's going to change.  
[*Laughter*]

Sarah: What? Cos you're going to make it change?

Ayani: No, but there is how many people are in this country, who are Somalian? Everyone's going to go back and they ain't going to want what the old people's thing was. All the young boys are going to say right — no. Do you get what I mean? They're all going to be like, 'Oh we don't want to go to work. We don't want to do this.' Do you know what I mean? There's going to be a load different — cos you got Somalia - cos we weren't allowed to drink — but you got Somalian people who drink,

smoke, everything. They're not going to have it. Either they're not going to go back unless things changes.

Ayani's setting of the agenda in her relationship with her boyfriend had to be established both now, before marriage, and in an imagined future, after marriage, in Somalia. She is both defiant of the situation for women as she sees it and hopeful of change. She too, against considerable odds, feels that she needs to finish a college education before getting married.

Ayani moved with agility across the different cultural worlds she inhabited, from her grandmother's very traditional values at home, to a more Westernised version of the Somali household at her sister's house, to her friendships in school with many students. Particularly important were her friendships with other Somali students, especially Nadjma, her best friendship with a young South Asian woman student and her semi-pragmatic relationship with her boyfriend.

Ayani's friendship with the young Asian woman is of particular interest here. This young woman insisted on being called by a boy's name, Nathan. She presented herself as a 'lad' through her appearance, dress and behaviour. She was very friendly with many other students, in the context of being the local source of illegal drugs. At one point, she had even run away from home and

had stayed with Ayani for a while to escape intolerable pressures of homophobia at home, a situation which Ayani's grandmother had accepted as being preferable to not knowing where Nathan was or, more importantly, where Ayani was. The relationship between Nathan and Ayani was very intense. Ayani described Nathan as 'my very best friend ever' and they had been friends since Year 4 in their primary school. Whilst it is important to be cautious in the ascription of lesbian to either Ayani or Nathan, the intensity of their relationship and its secrecy draw attention to the possibility of a sexual dimension to the relationship.<sup>1</sup>

In school, Ayani had experienced considerable educational failure, which she had also had to negotiate and which had an impact on the way in which she chose to construct her student identity:

Sarah: Right and would you say in the end that you've enjoyed being at this school?

Ayani: Yeah it's really cool

Sarah: And would you say you're a successful student?

Ayani: Yes, because I used to be very, very, very, very low.

Sarah: So what changed?

Ayani: I changed. I think being in year 8, year 9 ... because I didn't start from high basis reading. I started from ... I never started — you know the alphabet, learn the vowels. You know the first reading step. I never did that. I just went into hard core

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<sup>1</sup> Neither of these pupils defined publicly as lesbian, though I think Nathan was generally assumed, by other pupils to be sexually attracted to women. I would like to hold on to the possibility of same-sex eroticism in their relationship, because closing it down implies greater heterosexual hegemony than existed. Griffin, C. (2000). "Absences that Matter: Constructions of Sexuality in Studies of Young Women's Friendships." *Feminism and Psychology* 10(2): 227-245.

reading because I had to and I couldn't understand... I couldn't read nothing. And then I got some help in year 10 and now Miss what's her name come up to me and — Miss — that support teacher — Miss G. — she come up to me and she said to me, 'Oh I can't believe that we had to give you a tutor. You're very intelligent. You've improved yourself and you don't need no more help and you're working really hard'.

Sarah: And you feel pleased with that yeah?

Ayani: Yeah.

Sarah: So would you say you were a good student?

Ayani: Ah — I have my moments but ...

Ayani felt proud of what she had achieved and evidently felt that she had been supported. However, although she felt that she was a good student in terms of her progress with reading, she was simultaneously resistant to an image of herself as 'good' in the sense of 'well-behaved'. Having 'her moments', it transpired, involved being late to lessons, truancy from them and playing a role as 'a joker'. Some of the behaviours she talked about appeared to be quite macho in the way they were carried out. She seemed to have a veneer similar to that of the 'lads' in Mac an Ghail's study (1994). For example, this image often permeated her language throughout the interview. Uncool tasks were given a cool edge. Others may look at 'hard-core' pornography or music, but Ayani had to get to grips with 'hard-core reading' and she had to do that, without ever having been through elementary letters and vowel sounds — just straight into the adult stuff! Her turn of phrase showed a real attempt to live this image. As she said on different occasions in

the interview, 'I don't respect people who don't respect me. That's how it goes. If I get it, they receive it — simple as that'; 'no-one messes with me'; 'it don't bother me — if I can protect myself I don't care what I am'. However, later she commented that 'people think I'm tough but I'm not really. It's just a phase I have to go through at this school...'. This statement was particularly revealing, seeming to indicate that toughness was about image, about negotiating her status in the pupil culture of the school, that it felt coerced in some way and not a reflection of how she felt inside. At the same time she and Nathan became cast as 'the lads' of her year. They may have been likeable rogues but their behaviours were often disruptive and exasperating for both teachers and many other students. For example, they often used to take over the toilets at break times in order to pursue their drug deals with one of them keeping watch and the other inside, doing the deals. Of all the students interviewed, Ayani was the most conscious of the multiple roles she had to play, perhaps because the stakes were so high for her and time was running out.

Style was crucial in the making of identity and involved astonishing maintenance work. In school Ayani rarely wore school uniform. She and Nathan invariably wore track suit bottoms and a jumper of some description, in a style that was aimed at being more 'laddish' than either more



traditionally Somali feminine dress or that of conventional UK versions of femininity. She explained the importance of what was worn to school, in terms of the cultural status that could be accrued through it:

Sarah: Well part of your image in school... What are you wearing now? Let me see – uniform up to about here [*indicating waist*]

Ayani: I don't know. It's the way you dress as well – helps you ...

Sarah: Explain.

Ayani: If I come into school with boots and off key ... like things that does not go – well like an orange top or a top that has no name whatever. Same way – the people would say that has no name and cuss me – and people would say that doesn't look good. But if it's got a name on it and it doesn't look good – like a red/orange shirt and it's got Reebok on it, people will say, 'Yeah, yeah, that's nice!' But if it's just normal without nothing on it, 'Urgh! That's off key, that's off key'. You really need to have names. You don't have to, but if you want to get in with the crowd I think you do.

Sarah: Do you think that's strange?

Ayani: It's strange yeah – people do care. I don't really care but people do care. People do look at you and they do judge you from what you wear

Sarah: And you live with your Grandmother don't you? What does she think of what you wear to school?

Ayani: She doesn't know [*Laughter*]

Sarah: She what?

Ayani: She doesn't know.

Sarah: She doesn't know?

Ayani: She thinks I wear black skirt or trousers, white shirt with a tie and shoes.

Ayani went on to recount the time that she spent in the transformation of herself on the way from home to school and back again. This required bringing an array of clothes to school each day. Yet it was worth it for the

status it conferred on her. She identifies consumerism as an important force in pupil culture. 'Names' confer status even if the actual item of clothing is unflattering or doesn't match the rest of one's outfit. As a Somali student, the pressure to take part in such consumerism seemed even greater and Ayani spoke about how racism constituted one of these pressures. At the time of the interview, asylum seekers in the UK were still subject to the voucher system for buying essential goods<sup>1</sup>. Buying luxury brand names meant you had your own money and indicated that you were not an asylum seeker. It thus helped in warding off anti-refugee racism. Ayani narrates a specific instance of the pressure to show off newly bought goods and the conflict with her grandmother about doing so:

Ayani: I'm wearing the shirt — it's just the jumper she [grandmother] won't let me. Like I had a white Reebok nice jumper, cost me a lot of money and I wanted to bring it to school and show it to everyone and everyone was like, 'Yeah, I want to get that jumper'. And I was the first one to get it out of all of them. And my mum wouldn't let me take it to school. I had to like put it in my bag and take it to school — she wouldn't — she wouldn't accept it ....

Sarah: So do you like — when you go home, would you change, before you get home?

Ayani: When I go home I take this off.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Straw, when he was Home Secretary, had introduced a system of vouchers for asylum seekers while they were waiting for their cases to be heard, in place of social security in the form of money. This humiliating practice meant that they had to present voucher in shops, not all of which would accept them, thus identifying themselves as asylum seekers in an atmosphere of considerable anti-refugee comment in the popular press. Furthermore, these vouchers could only be exchanged for items identified as necessities by Government. This practice has now been stopped.

Sarah: So your mum — it's your grandmother? — would ...

Ayani: Yes but I call her Mum cos she took care of me all of my life.

Sarah: Right. So you will go home now and you'll be wearing your white shirt, your black trousers and your black shoes and a coat?

Ayani: Yes. [*Laughter*]

Being at the cutting edge of style in school is one thing, but at home, Ayani has to remould herself into a more demure image of Somali femininity. Apart from having to change her appearance before going home, Ayani also feels she has to constrain other parts of her identity to do this:

Sarah: And a final thing. Really what's it like for you? Cos you're maybe one person in school and another person at home and another person with your boyfriend. Do you know what I mean? There are lots of different you's. How do you manage with all that?

Ayani: It's difficult — it's hard to please everyone.

Sarah: I'm sure.

Ayani: It's very hard — because at home I have to speak in Somali. I have to eat whatever my mum says I have ... I have to be everything my mum says I have, I have to say everything she wants to hear.

Sarah: Why?

Ayani: I'll say, 'Oh Mum, I got an F for my exam', and then I will be in trouble. I have to say everything she wants to hear. I have to. That's really hard — cos we — I feel horrible to cheat on her but cos she's not allowing you to have your freedom — she's not allowing you ... I'm not allowed to listen to music, I'm not allowed to watch TV, which I find very hard. So I try most of my time to go to my sister's, aunt's, sister's — anywhere I can just to get away from my Mum.

Sarah: Yeah I can imagine.

Ayani: When I'm with my Mum, she takes the mickey out of me cos I can't speak proper Somalian — so they will tease me like that...

Of course, in this exchange, I have provided Ayani with the opportunity to talk about the difficulties she finds. In asking her how she manages all her different 'you's', I have offered recognition of the ways in which she moves between locations and contextual identities. This recognition may be what enables her to express the feelings here — that much of the time, she seems unable to win, always being somehow 'wrong'. In spite of our understandings around the fluidity of identities and the multiple life-worlds inhabited by young people, Ayani feels trapped both at school and at home. While she seems to have a very Westernised understanding of what constitutes freedom, she is caught trying to establish some kind of control over the way in which compulsory heterosexuality is being enforced in her life. She must negotiate between school failure/success and her image as a young Somali woman within a pupil culture that demands a certain style. The style she adopts in school keeps heterosexual femininity at bay, through the development of a harder 'laddish' posturing, which can account for academic failure but also gives her social confidence to tackle racism and which she hopes will help her build some academic success. Unlike the macho behaviour of 'real lads' (Willis 1977; Mac an Ghail 1994), her borrowing of laddishness functions not to distance herself from educational success but as an attempt to get her closer to it by pushing away heterosexuality and, at the same time, combating racism.

In spite of her extreme hard work at moving between multiple identities, in the final part of the interview Ayani is not very optimistic about having gained anything from doing this:

- Sarah: So do you think other students are, I mean do you think it's different for other students? White students or ...
- Ayani: Not all of them, but some of them
- Sarah: They don't have these...like, got to be three different people...
- Ayani: [*Emphatic*] No, they get to be one person — same language — same everything.
- Sarah: Do you think there are advantages in having — [*interruption*]
- Ayani: Yes, and they take the mickey out of everyone.
- Sarah: Yes, but do you think that there might be advantages in the long run for you?
- Ayani: Not really. I got no advantage out of that. I got ... I get to show people my different sides, that's the good thing. But I'm not [*interruption*]
- Sarah: But that is a good thing. Because if you don't have that, it's a bit boring isn't it?
- Ayani: Um
- Sarah: You get to mix with a lot of different people. Seems to me like you could get on with... and you're also proud of your culture and your heritage and ...
- Ayani: Yeah, it doesn't bother me what I am. At the end of the day I am what I am and if you don't like it, I can't make you like it and I can't change it.

In spite of my desperate attempt to present a picture of the positive elements of working across different cultural spaces, Ayani does not feel empowered. In her opinion, white British students, or at least some of them, get to be one person and that has advantages in the power stakes. She 'gets no advantage' and the necessity of the constant maintenance of different identities is not

experienced as fluid but as fixed, 'I am what I am'. Despite the reference, perhaps coincidental, to Gloria Gaynor's song, which has been adopted as a signifier of gay pride, Ayani's tone is one of resignation, not defiance. There is the implication that if you don't like her, she would change into something you might like if she could. Indeed, it seems from her account of herself that she does spend a lot of time doing precisely that — changing who she is or how she presents herself in different context. However, she is exhausted by her identities rather than proud, and trapped in them, as revealed in her poignant final words here: 'Yeah, it doesn't bother me what I am. At the end of the day I am what I am and if you don't like it, I can't make you like it and *I can't change it. (my emphasis)*' Ayani has cultivated specific gendered and sexualised ways of being in order to manage school and home. These intersect with her achievement in school in complex ways. Moving towards or away from heterosexuality in different contexts helps her to sustain and shape these identities and attempt to fashion academic success.

In practice, her attempts fell apart and, by the last term of her compulsory schooling, she had suffered a virtual breakdown. The permanent exclusion of Nathan left her feeling extremely isolated and she herself often did not come to school. Her accounts to teachers of her actions became increasing bizarre and unconnected with reality, she spent several weeks shut in her bedroom

smoking cannabis, and told me that she could see nothing else to do. Her tragedy was that her brave and resourceful attempts to hold things together by shifting identities did not, and perhaps never could, work in practice.

## **Conclusion**

The demands imposed by institutionalised heterosexuality on these young women clearly structure their behaviour and possibilities for identity formation in school. Success in school is beset by complex negotiations around heterosexual identity and practice and in Ayani's case, the closeting of possible same sex desire. These are linked with and complicated by relations of ethnicity, nationality, class and gender. Important in this process, is the creation of safe space, by pushing heterosexuality away. This was achieved variously by keeping silent about family structures, by using robust arguments about the need for a productive future in Somalia and by adopting a style at odds with conventional femininity.

The silencing of home identities in the school context is particularly important, here. While at its most poignant for Ayani, Deqa, Nadjma and Nazrin also have to contend with the imperative of negotiating the differing forms of heterosexuality that were compulsory for them in each of these

different sites. Ayani had to choose a putative future husband, though her emotionally intense relationship was with Nathan. Nadjma was producing herself as the dutiful future Muslim wife, with the proviso that any husband who demanded unreasonable (from her perspective) duties, would not be a good Muslim and therefore not worthy of the respect due to a husband.

Nazrin sought a more Western-style equality in her imagined future relationships, while recognising that there was an imperative to marry a Muslim man. For Deqa, her negotiations took place through the adoption of silence as a strategy for holding things at bay.

At the same time, the school was placed in a difficult position. Senior management and teachers wished to be supportive and my employment as a consultant with the brief of finding out what the Somali girls wanted and needed is evidence of this. However, their options were severely limited. The school could only work within the context given, of the 'standards' and the 'inclusion' agendas. Neither of these had a way of speaking to or dealing with the enormous complexity of these girls' lives. It was not that nothing could be, or was, done, and it may be that the school could have done more. But what was done, was akin to covering the wounds with sticking plaster while leaving the sore beneath untreated.



This chapter has been concerned with the formations of identity for Somali asylum seeker girls. I've shown how these girls demonstrated clearly an understanding of the need to be 'asexually heterosexual' in their striving to achieve academic success, whilst also constructing imagined heterosexual futures sometimes by overt coercion as in the case of Ayani and at other times through complex negotiations of the kind of heterosexuality which would be accepted in their communities<sup>1</sup>. All of these pupils were marginalised by their status as asylum seekers and all were involved in decisions about whether and how to closet aspects of their Somali identities, particularly in relation to their familial structures and relationships.

However, it is not only ethnically marginalised versions of heterosexuality which have to be managed in school, in order to produce academic success.

In the next chapter I explore the cases of two white working class girls, one of whom was also of Traveller heritage. Their different investments in the social

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, when I was first working with this group of Somali pupils it was to try to understand why they were engaging in particularly vicious fighting amongst themselves. This culminated in a very serious fight between Deqa's young sister and Nazrin's older sister. What emerged was that the fighting had been about how Somali young women should represent themselves to the wider school community. Nazrin's older sister felt that Deqa's sister had been dressing inappropriately, trying to become too westernized and that this had brought shame and a bad reputation to other Somali pupils in the school. In my first few weeks working with the pupils, I spent a lot of time talking about the complexities of individual identity work and group identity work, in a context in which Somali pupils were subject to racism from the wider school community. We never 'solved' the problem but we did acknowledge just how complex this was and it did seem to stop the fighting.

and cultural worlds of their communities led them to negotiate the mind/body or academic mind/embodyed sexuality split in other ways.

## Chapter 5

### **Sexual Rebellions against Education and the Standards Agenda:**

#### **Introduction**

As a practising secondary school teacher, academic failure as defined within the 5 A\*-C economy concerns me on several levels. Firstly, as Benjamin has researched, it is an economy with a punitive effect on those who are not capable of achieving within it (Benjamin 2002). As she explains in the introduction to her research:

[the] argument is that the standards agenda and its impact on schooling policy is itself one of the most insurmountable barriers to learning for these students [defined as having special educational needs] (Benjamin 2002: 1)

Secondly, as suggested by Gillborn and Youdell (Gillborn and Youdell 2000), achievement within this A\*-C economy appears to be rationed according to one's ethnicity and social class. They conclude:

We have argued that though equity issues are now once again paid lip-service by government, dominant approaches to the policy and practice of education actively reproduce and extend existing inequalities of opportunity. This is especially so in relation to social class and 'race' inequalities that have increased significantly as a direct result of recent reforms. These inequalities are shaped by the daily routines of selection and differentiation in schools, a process that is deeply scarred by the racist and class based notions of intelligence and

ability that have long been rejected by mainstream science but continue to shape 'common sense'. (Gillborn and Youdell 2000: 220)

The detail of their research shows powerfully that staff in schools are actively engaged in reproducing inequalities.

In this chapter however, I am specifically concerned with relative academic failure by two young working class women, Mercedes and Hester, who appeared articulate and reflective in school. They should not have failed within the A\*-C economy. Although both were on the Special Educational Needs register in the school, this register itself can be seen as functioning to ration education. Certainly, studies have suggested that access to learning support is highly gendered (Hey, Leonard et al. 1998) but schools also use the number of students on the register, to increase their 'value added' status in the league tables of results. Having worked with these young women for a year, I found it impossible to construct them as challenged academically in my interactions with them. In spite of my reservations about the A\*-C economy as a way of judging pupils, I could not help but be surprised by their lack of success. Working as their teacher as well as a researcher was a contradictory position to be in. For while I read research (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001; Hey, Leonard et al. 1998) which painstakingly explained how these young women were disadvantaged

through schooling practices, I still found myself wanting to prove that they would succeed. This is the position many teachers are in of course.

Government policies and practices in education ensure that individual teachers bear the burden of policy failure and in so doing instil a public lack of confidence in teachers' professionalism. The assumption embedded within the standards agenda is that every child is capable of achieving more and more and should do so, even if that pressure then results in mental health problems for individuals. Moreover, if this proves not to be possible then that has to be down to the failure of individual teachers and increasingly also, to individual parents.

Building on the work of Gillborn and Youdell (2000), this chapter suggests that educational rationing processes were at work for Mercedes and Hester, not only in respect of their social class but more significantly in respect of their practices of sexuality and gender. While Gillborn and Youdell showed how these rationing processes were structural in schools in relation to class and ethnicity, I want to suggest that they also function in relation to sexuality and to atypical gender performances by young women. Mercedes and Hester did have some power and agency in their choices, but these were made against dominant discourses in education, that made assumptions about what they wanted, which turned out not to be true. Here I explore the fact

that the academic failure of the young women in this study was not in any simple sense a structural failure within the school. In many respects the school concerned did attempt to address their attainment. However, what occurred was a complex interplay of educational space being used not only as a space in which to attain academically, but also as a space to manufacture gender and sexuality in relation to or rather in contradistinction to academic attainment.

Mercedes' and Hester's academic failure was bound to sexual rebellion and sexual otherness. Within discourses about sexuality in pupil culture, it is academically successful girls who are often read as sexual failures, as frigid or asexual. Young women who fail academically may still achieve success in the short term in these pupil discourses. Of course, young women who cultivate heterosexually asexual identities at school are promised rewards later in terms of good jobs and good husbands! However, even within pupil culture, these young women's active sexualities did not make them particularly powerful in the way that words like "rebellion" and "transgression" suggest. Indeed, in the end, both these young women lost out through academic failure. What the words rebellion and transgression do get at is the idea that sex is used as a rejection of the values of an academic system which is failing them. Education was a contested space and invested

in, in different ways by these young women. The educational spaces of lessons were also spaces in which to create gender and sexuality and to make statements about identity, which in the instance were just as important as achieving educational success. Using the performance space of the classroom and the school in this way, however, also triggered educational rationing by the school paradoxically, in an attempt to be seen to be catering for the educational needs of the young women concerned. They had to be displaced from the classroom and educated elsewhere.

In some respects the students who make up the two case studies in this chapter reminded me of Benjamin's 'big bad girls' (2002: 84) or the tragic figure of Carol in Valerie Hey's examination of girls' friendships, 'whose insistence on pleasure was ultimately bought at the price of her own education' (Hey 1997:101). They were also like some of the young working class women, whose education Valerie Walkerdine et al. explore in *Growing up Girl* (Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001), who were backed into an emotional corner when it came to deciding on post 16 education because of the implications for their families and their relationships within them.

In this chapter I use Skeggs' idea of 'respectability' as an important factor in investments in education by working class young women (Skeggs 1997). In

relation to Hester, I explore how her investment in respectability worked through her schooling and indeed how counter investments in “disrespectability” and being disrespectful made up what I would term ‘a discourse of scorn’ in relation to the disciplining culture of respectability within her schooling. Skeggs (Skeggs 1997) interviewed women on caring courses in further education to explore how respectability was achieved through developing ‘a caring self’, through disidentifications with working class subject positions and through heterosexuality. Hester, however, in her final year of compulsory education actively resisted the construction of herself as caring or heterosexual but, like the women in Skeggs’ study, her identification as ‘working-class’ was ambivalent and it was an identification from which she was eager to move away.

Although focused primarily on Mercedes and Hester I will also make reference to numbers of other students through fieldnotes, who formed part of their little cultural world, and who also provided powerful examples of this discourse and counter discourse in action. Central to respectability was not simply learning and career but also feminisation and heterosexuality. The chapter explores particularly what happens when heterosexuality in its normative form is either not achieved or rejected.



## **Mercedes**

### **Building Traditions of Seamless Continuity**

Mercedes was a young woman of Traveller origin. Throughout her education, she received significant support from the local Traveller Education Service. Since completing her interview in 2002, I have remained in contact with her. Mercedes left school at the end of year 10 to attend a local project for pupils in year 11, who were likely to achieve no GCSEs at all were they to remain in school. Places were strictly limited on the scheme and one of the criteria for having a place was that the young person concerned wanted to be part of it. Mercedes felt that she would achieve more on such a placement. She achieved 3 GCSEs at the end of this project, a 'D' grade in English and Drama and an 'E' in Mathematics. She also obtained a place at a local college to do an NVQ level 1, in Hair and Beauty. Arguably, this is more than she would have achieved in school and she certainly felt that she had enjoyed her final year of compulsory education. However, during the first term of her post -16 NVQ course, her mother attempted suicide several times and was finally admitted as an in-patient to a local psychiatric hospital for twelve weeks. Mercedes felt she had no choice but to leave college and become the full time carer for her three younger siblings and to visit her mother as much as she could in hospital. In the end this became too difficult for her to

manage and she moved out to live with her father, while her siblings were placed in foster care. For a time, her grandparents looked after her siblings but this did not work out. Mercedes ended up as one of the government's NEET group of young people (Not in Education, Employment or Training). It is important to pay attention to this fact because for government it is precisely this group who are defined as socially excluded<sup>1</sup>. Mercedes is due to get married in the summer 2006 to her long term boyfriend, with whom she had been in a relationship since the age of fourteen when I interviewed her.

At the time of her interview, Mercedes was about to leave school and embark on her placement in the year 11 alternative education group. Her interview was characterised by the overarching importance she placed on family, tradition and community and by cautiousness about 'authority', as represented variously by government, local government 'the council', school and social services. Having worked previously for two years within the Traveller Education Service I was well aware that such concerns often abound in Traveller communities, so this was unsurprising as an aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> 'The vast majority of Traveller pupils linger on the periphery of the education system. The situation has persisted for too long and the alarm bells rung in earlier reports have yet to be heeded'. Ofsted (2003). Provision and Support for Traveller Pupils, Ofsted.

her interview. However, two main issues concern me here. Firstly, I want to show that Mercedes' heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships were not based on dominant understandings in school of heterosexual relationships. I suggest that they had little to do with attraction and sexual desire but rather emerged as a result of a much more traditional, indeed almost archaic understanding of heterosexual relationships as important to building alliances and sustaining community. For Mercedes marriage was important but the liberal understanding of marriage enshrined government advice on Sex and Relationship education (DfEE 2000) was not especially relevant. Love or romance functioned only secondarily to alliance and tradition for Mercedes. In this sense her heterosexuality might be described as non-normative. Nor was she the stereotypical adolescent with 'raging hormones'. Even though she thought she would probably be pregnant by the time she was eighteen, Mercedes did not envisage this being the result of uncontrolled or irresponsible desire on her part.

### **Location and Community**

Mercedes lived in a particularly poor ward in an already poor area of the London borough, which I will call Mitchingham. The LEA Inspector for Inclusion had identified the street where Mercedes lived as being one of three

streets in the Authority, where social exclusion, as defined by government, was at its highest. Although Mercedes' family were settled in a house, the area in which she lived housed a large settled Traveller community and this was important to her. Location was particularly significant for her and it was through her location that Mercedes formed her sense of identity. When I asked her if she would ever leave Mitchingham, she said that she would never leave the area, 'because I've lived in Mitchingham all my life; I'm just a Mitchingham person'. For Mercedes being a 'Mitchingham person' meant that it would be virtually impossible to envisage living anywhere else. When I prompted her about maybe moving to see whether she might achieve a better life elsewhere, given that Mitchingham was a very deprived area, she exclaimed:

'Nope! People don't like it round Mitchingham. But I say how can you live ... I'd say you've been brought up in Mitchingham all your life, so why d'you wanna move now? That's what I'd say to people.'

Her acknowledgement that Mitchingham was indeed a very deprived and in some senses an unsafe place to live, encapsulated by the phrase 'people don't like it round Mitchingham', is counterbalanced by the view that having been brought up in Mitchingham all your life it would be impossible to move. The cultural knowledge of Mitchingham, acquired through being brought up there would be redundant if one moved and had to start over again. Logically moving would also mean remaking one's identity and for

Mercedes, this appeared too threatening. When Mercedes contemplated further the idea of moving, she suggested that the only place she might move would be to Kent, where she also had relations and where there might therefore be a shared culture. Like Mitchingham, Kent is an area where many settled Travellers live, because traditionally they used to work in the county picking hops. For Mercedes places outside her community were full of danger. In the interview she toyed briefly with the idea of visiting America but concluded that it would be too risky:

'I'd go to America ... no I wouldn't, cos I'd end up like a balloon, an air-balloon that is. They all look like that. A slice of pizza is like that (indicating a huge triangle area with her hand). That's one slice of pizza where ours is like that (indicating a much smaller triangle area with her hand).'

The impending danger of death by pizza which America represented to her, revealed some interesting ways in which Mercedes' identity construction operated. Places outside Mitchingham represented a threat. In some ways Mercedes appeared to have absorbed New Labour notions of self-governance insofar as she did not want to put herself in risky situations. However, what was interesting was the fact that were she to go to America, she didn't contemplate the possibility that she might be able to refuse such big slices of pizza as would undoubtedly wend their way to her. This was revealing of how her identity was built through community. For Mercedes, if you were part of a community then you had to do what that community did. There

was not a choice to be different within it. So if in America, Americans eat enormous slices of pizza to the detriment of their own health then that is what she would have to do. Being a Mitchingham person involved doing what Mitchingham people did. This has huge implications for schooling. Mitchingham people, as far as Mercedes was concerned, stayed in Mitchingham and sustained the local community. New Labour initiatives such as Aim Higher, represented a threat to Mercedes because they were not about sustaining her community but about taking her away from it and sustaining her through individual socially upward mobility. Such initiatives also have implicit within them a taken for granted self-seeking motive, one which was arguably not present for Mercedes, but more importantly they do not take account of the costs to Mercedes' identity in moving away which would far outweigh the benefits of any enhanced standard of living.

Not only was Mercedes keen to stress to me that she was 'a Mitchingham person', throughout the interview she was also keen to constitute herself as central within that community. One of the techniques she used to do this was by peppering the interview with references to the many members of her extended family who were on roll at the school. For example:

- 'Me and V (another pupil in the year above) are cousins by my Mum. My Grandad and her Dad are cousins.'
- 'I'm related to F in year 8 – she's really quiet'.

- 'There's T Broaker (another pupil in her year) – um her two little brothers. I mean her brother and two little sisters. Two of her little sisters are my cousins'.

What came across here was a sense that her family were always nearby, in the vicinity and ready to come to her aid or support. This was just as important in school as it was in the wider community.

### **Moving to the Centre of one's Community**

Sexuality, or rather the heterosexual economy, was integral to Mercedes' beliefs about how to sustain her community. Not only for her, did this involve finding a boyfriend, but there seemed to be a need for links within the family to the boyfriend. For example, in discussing one of her previous boyfriends, David, Mercedes observed:

David. We just clicked like that cos my Nan got engaged to his Grandad. That would have made us like step-brothers – sisters. No it would have made us like cousins I think. Yeah, it would have made us cousins and my mum went with his dad and then I went with him, so we just like clicked

It seemed that Mercedes felt that her boyfriends also had to be Mitchingham people and those with whom her family had connections. Her assumption here was that shared tradition automatically meant that there would be a continuity of understanding. Because their grandparents and parents had gone out together she and David would share an almost automatic

understanding and 'just click'. 'Just clicking' is the closest Mercedes came to using a discourse of romance in her construction of heterosexual relationships. That sense of 'just clicking' was falling in love and came about through shared understandings from a shared history in the same community. Her current boyfriend at the time of the interview, Scott, also had family connections. Talking about her mother's approval of Scott, Mercedes said:

Yeah – she (her mother) says that I'm gonna settle down with Scott because my aunt was like his big sister cos when she ... Scott used to live with my aunt. And his mum and my Grandad, they used to live in the caravan – not in the caravan in the xxxxx estate (council Traveller site) but another one ....

For Mercedes, the purpose of a heterosexual relationship was to bind her further to her community. Sexuality bound her to her community and was used in the construction of an adult identity which would place her more at the centre of that community and increase her status within a large extended family.

While Mercedes consolidated identity through community and family throughout the interview in terms of her imagined plans for the future, which were primarily concerned with the sustenance of that community through heterosexuality, she also gave family and community a history and tradition, to suggest a sense of its solidity. This involved creating a sense of who she



was primarily in relation to her parents, of almost inevitably taking up their identities and making them her own. For example, following some quite serious rows with her mother, I asked Mercedes to explain to me why she thought they were getting on so badly. Her explanation involved a sense of identification with her mother:

Because we're both really argumentative and that's what gets us against each other. She likes having the last word and I have to. We both have to have the last word.

Similarly, her explanation for her bad temper which had landed her in trouble at school on several occasions seemed to be that it had been inherited from her father:

Sarah: Why do you think you've got such a temper?

Mercedes: Just got it off my Dad.

Sarah: Has your Dad got a temper?

Mercedes: He didn't have ... .. I don't really know my Dad that much but my mum said he weren't really a temper person but when he lost it he lost it bad. He kept it for awhile and when he flips he goes into one like I do.

Sarah: Right

Mercedes: It takes me a lot to lose my temper

For Mercedes, then, her behaviour was partly inevitable, inherited through family. In this extract we can see her actively working to construct this inevitability. Her father to start with, she acknowledged, didn't have a quick temper. However, through some hard identity work, she manufactures the similarity between herself and her father. It takes a lot for her to lose her temper, so she is, after all, like her father.

Bullen, Kenway and Hey (2000) suggest that governments' preoccupation with gymslip mothers and the notion of 'choice biographies', did not take account of young women's investments in heterosexual relationships. In this instance, a choice biography is not something in which Mercedes invested her time or identity, in the sense in which it is meant by Beck (Beck 1994). Her identity was built around inheritance and her investment was to show that she was her mother's and her father's daughter. The choice about who to be was not a free choice for Mercedes. Indeed her heterosexual relationships were not free choices either and neither were her career choices. They worked to sustain a community under threat, a community the government defines as socially excluded and therefore wants to provide more opportunities for. The problem is that such opportunities are at the cost of the community itself because they take scant account of, in this instance, Traveller community values, instead assuming a rational individualism as the basis for community. New initiatives to improve the situation for communities like Mercedes', in fact put further pressure on them to consolidate and solidify their identities, in resistance to assumptions about how community is made. Thus, the need to bind that community through heterosexual relationship building alliances becomes evermore urgent for Mercedes.

Mercedes chose not to talk much about school in her interview. When I asked her what she was looking forward to about the year 11 project she was going to join for her final year of education, she explained that it was 'Thursdays', when the group went out on educational visits and trips out. When she described her educational history, it was chequered with exclusions from school, for telling a teacher 'to kiss my fucking ass' and calling another 'a fat old bitch'. I discuss further the language used here, when I discuss the discourse of scorn used by some working class pupils against the demands of respectability placed on them by official school culture. Much of the time, these exclusions came about when she was being challenged for being out of lessons. Mercedes often failed to attend lessons in school, preferring to find nooks and crannies in the building in which to hang out. In primary school, she and her friends used to hide in a cupboard and in secondary school, she used the toilets for meetings during lessons. She used school as a space to consolidate her friendships within the community so that school pupil cultures were also community cultures. Official school culture was not something she could easily enjoy as she experienced it as oppositional to community. The only way Mercedes invested in official school culture was when it became individualised for her. She didn't want to be part of creating something in 'an official school culture' that she found

oppressive to her sense of community. The reason she learned well in one to one contexts, one might surmise, was because there was more opportunity to be culturally herself and less pressure to conform to official school culture, which embodied the values of the Standards Agenda. There was no reason intellectually why she should not have been able to learn in a classroom. It was the fact that official school culture wanted for her something that she did not want for herself that made it hard for her to learn with integrity. That is not to say that she didn't want to achieve academically, because she did. What she didn't want to do was to become alienated from her community.

There was also a sense in which Mercedes felt that her family and her community were under siege from the outside, from officialdom. Mercedes saw 'authority' as key in the attack on her community and the break up of family. What this meant was that the pressure she felt to create family became more urgent. Centre stage in the threat to family were social workers and, given what was to happen to her own family two years after the interview took place and her own inability to stop it, this threat was very real, as she had seen when Sally, a member of her extended family, had her children (unfairly in Mercedes' opinion) taken into care:

Mercedes: Yeah she (Sally) when she was with my cousin Les. I think he was the only one who treated her with respect. He never hit her. When she was with George he used to hit her. She

had one kid with him. George was her last bloke and now she's with someone else. I think she's having another kid but I know she's gonna get it taken off her.

Sarah: Because of the blokes?

Mercedes: Yeah, just because of all her kids. Just because of the way she lives. She's clean. Her kids are clean but I just don't think ... what's it her social worker is Sue something ... she's really bitchy. I didn't like her.

Ultimately, Mercedes attributes the fact that Sally's children were taken away from her, presumably against her will, to the fact that her social worker had no understanding of the way she lived, of her culture and that there was in terms of basic care, nothing wrong - 'her kids are clean'. There appeared to Mercedes to be a lack of understanding of her community from the outside that was responsible for the break up of family. Mercedes was also convinced that schooling could and did contribute in a variety of ways to this break up of community. For example, following the discussion about Sally, she argued that the school was to blame in getting Social Services involved in the first place:

I wouldn't have so many social workers, cos I wouldn't want them so nosey in people's business. Like schools are getting into people's business ... cos my cousin had a bruise on her knee and the school's asking 'how d'you do that?' - 'I fell over' - 'Are you sure your mother didn't do it - sure?' ... and then they start getting all social workers involved, cos they had little bruises.

For Mercedes, the interference of schools and social services' practice of over-monitoring or policing her community was something which bothered her greatly. When I went on to ask her what ought to happen in the event of

child abuse, Mercedes suggested it was important that the children were not placed in care:

I'd have 'em ... I wouldn't put them in foster care. If they've got other family who would look after them I'd give 'em to the other family, to that part of the family.

Mercedes envisaged a large extended network of people who would count as family being able to step into offer childcare. I asked Mercedes if she ever saw herself doing a job like social work herself. She was adamant that she wouldn't:

Long as the council keep out of my business and social workers keep out of my business that's all I care.

For Mercedes, it would be impossible for someone from her community, someone like her, to do a job like that: 'cos I'd be the totally different one out of the lot of them'. She imagined a scene in the social workers' staffroom, where the differences between them and herself were apparent in terms of dialect and cultural habits:

Mercedes: I'd be a different one out of the lot of them. You'd hear 'em all, 'Have a cup of tea and some biscuits'. They'd all have their posh voices and I'd be sitting there 'oh yeah, yeah - nah'. They'd be all, 'Yes, yes - no thank you'. I'd be 'No ta - see ya later' and that. They'd be...

Sarah: Would that matter?

Mercedes: Yeah

Sarah: Why?

Mercedes: Cos they'd probably be turning their nose up at me. They'd try and stick their nose in the air. That's the kind of people they are.

For Mercedes, then, imagining a professional career might involve sitting in judgment of her own community in ways that were neither possible nor desirable. It was not possible because she would be too different and continue to be judged herself and it also would amount to a betrayal of that community. To move within a professional community would mean adopting the dominant value system of that community and involve her in making her identity to best fit it. The option that she might bring new cultural insights to a profession such as social work simply did not occur to her.

At the end of her interview, imagining her future, Mercedes again used her own mother's history to create a projection of her own:

Mercedes: Tammy (David's mother) was about thirteen when she was pregnant with David and she had him at fourteen years old. He's seventeen this year and she's thirty-one. My mum was a sensible age when she had me, a normal age, eighteen.

Sarah: When do you want to have kids?

Mercedes: I'd say around eighteen to twenty-two. Actually no, about twenty-three. I want kids ... cos I want to live my life ...

Sarah: So you're going to give yourself...

Mercedes: I'd say I'm gonna have kids about eighteen. I know I will. I know I won't have them when I'm twenty-three. I know I'll have them when I come about ... probably end up pregnant at seventeen and have them at eighteen, or pregnant at eighteen.

Sarah: Why do you say that? How do you know?

Mercedes: I just have the feeling I will. If I'm with Scott then that's how it's gonna be.

Mercedes used her mother's history to define her own. Although she knew there was some uncertainty about becoming pregnant, this was dependent on whether she was still with Scott. Her own preference to have children at twenty-three was not, she felt, likely to be fulfilled. She saw tradition as dictating that pregnancy would happen at eighteen for her, as it did for her mother. Nevertheless, eighteen was still seen as being 'a normal age' to have children, contrary to much current government thinking on teenage pregnancy. What we see here is the constitution of a future identity as a mother, predicated on the overwhelming desire to create continuity with her past and affirm her as part of her community, as being her mother's daughter.

Set against such overwhelming psychic investments in family and community, with her own role as heterosexual trader in alliance and sustainer of that community, it is hard to see the positive interventions schooling could make, certainly in the ways that Charles Clarke envisaged in his White Paper on Schooling in the Twenty first Century. Mercedes' place in her community was central to who she could become. Her schooling and her sexuality were key in helping her support her community. Academic success would only make sense for Mercedes if she envisaged leaving that



community, something which she never contemplated. Delaying marriage and children would also be detrimental both to her community and to her sense of importance and centrality within it.

As I have already discussed, Thomson (2000) has explored the different 'logic of sexual practice' operating within communities in different social and economic contexts in the UK. She argues that some communities operate at a disadvantage since the capital accrued by individuals both economic, cultural and symbolic, is less transferable in other locations. She suggests that:

It could be argued that in achieving value within these local economies young people also develop de-centred identities, where authority is located in the social rather than the individual, tying them into collective relationships and obligations that are determined in time and space. In this respect, local values constrain social and geographic mobility – as values accrued within such an economy is not necessarily 'portable'. (Thomson 2000: 424)

We can see such processes at work for Mercedes. Also observable is self-regulation based not on simply accruing cultural capital in her peer group but taking on the cultural capital of her parents through the building and sustaining of tradition.

In the next case study, I explore the motivations of Hester, who unlike Mercedes, seemed desperate to escape her community and used every resource she had to do so.

## Hester

### **The Great Escape**

Hester was in the year above Mercedes in school. She finished year 11 with 3 GCSEs, a C in English Literature, a D in English Language and an F in Maths. The fact that she was able to gain a C grade, given the circumstances of her life, suggests that she didn't have a particularly acute learning need which would in itself, prevent her from achieving success. However, Hester's final year of compulsory schooling consisted of a series of almost insurmountable difficulties, ostensibly brought on by the fact that she made 'choices' which were very detrimental to her own health. Notwithstanding the fact that these choices were detrimental, they were important to Hester and had an internal logic embedded within them. It is the logic of these choices and specifically the way in which her sexual choices were interlinked with her wider choices about education which I want to explore in this part of the chapter.

In her final year of schooling Hester went out with a twenty-four year old man, who had been in prison and who dealt cocaine. She ran away from home for twelve weeks in the autumn term of year 11 to live with him. On her return home she was pregnant. She chose not to tell her parents of this and refused to allow any staff at school to tell her mother, arguing that she was sixteen and it was up to her whom she told, telling us that if we were to

tell her mother, she would leave home again. She had an abortion. During the spring and summer terms Hester developed a worsening alcohol and drug problem initially using cannabis everyday but later converting to cocaine. At the end of year 10 she had had a very successful work experience placement in a care home, but she had also found being in school difficult, truanting from lessons for much of the time. She was offered an extended work placement in year 11 to continue working in the care home but refused it, insisting that she wanted support to help her complete her GCSE courses. She did not want a vocational route to completing school arguing that she did not want to end up working in a care home as a career. Initially, we settled on trying to get her 5 GCSEs, English language and literature, mathematics and double science. This proved too much, given the amount of time she was not in school, and in the end she was unable to complete the science course.

### **Location as destiny**

Hester lived on a council estate in an Inner London borough in South London. According to 2001 Census data, as recorded by the National Statistics Office<sup>1</sup>, Hester's area featured as within the top 5% most deprived in London, in terms of recorded levels of crime and the top 10% most deprived

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<sup>1</sup> I have decided not to reference the website here in the interests of maintaining the anonymity of the local authority.

in terms of 'Income Deprivation', 'Access to Housing Services' and 'Income Deprivation Affecting Children'. Hester's own family circumstances broadly fitted within the recorded local levels of deprivation. She lived with her parents, her twin brother and younger sister. She had an older sister who had left home, become addicted to crack and had a baby who was born addicted to crack. Her father was quite severely disabled, being unable to walk far unassisted and the family did not have a car. Her younger sister had Downs syndrome and attended a local special school. Her twin brother had not attended school since the end of year 9 and despite continued efforts by his school to force his attendance, he rarely did so. Instead he had managed to obtain employment as a roofer, earning money cash in hand. He was the only person in the family who was working for money, albeit illegally. Hester's mother felt that her main role was to care for her husband and Hester's younger sister. The family lived on benefits and whatever money Hester's twin brother earned.

Hester hated the council estate where she lived. In that sense, she wanted most to escape the value system of her local community. She seemed to divide that community into two groups: those like herself and her family, who did not deserve to be there and those she scorned as being part of estate, in terms of their criminality. In this way she is similar to the case of Roger in

Hollway and Jefferson's study on the fear of crime (2000: 15 - 24). The vehemence with which she castigated the estate suggested that it served a defensive function for her. She perceived the estate as a trap, blighting her future chances of success and of her area as crime ridden and poor and this was substantiated in fact. However, such statistics cannot explore the personal impact on the psyches of the young people who had to live there. For Hester, this impact was enormous. Throughout the interview her hatred for the estate was overwhelming at times. Her desire to escape from the estate shaped the entire interview, so much so that at times it seemed as if the estate had its own malevolent personality which she actively constructed in the interview. During her time in school the priority for her future was to get away from the estate. She described how her estate seemed to blight those young people who lived there:

I dunno what it is with my estate yeah but this is a crazy thing. It's like something lurks over my estate. Something stops all the children, cos we're all roughly around the same age, do you know what I mean? Like quite a few school-leavers and that ...

The sense that her home address could be responsible for ruining her life featured in this way throughout the interview. When she was talking to me about her future, being from her estate loomed large:

It's two routes yeah when you're like of my age and when you live where I live yeah and you've grown up with the people yeah that I've grown up with. You have two routes, yeah? You can try to do what I'm doing now which is like as soon as I can, get into a training course.

That's one route or you can go or the other route which would be with um meeting up with a couple of um old mates that are now prostitutes and going to do their job. Those, those are the only two routes if, if you come off my estate. Those are the only two routes you can go. You can do the College thing or you can do the drug thing.

While it would be possible to challenge Hester's view of her projected future, the passion with which she conveyed this sense of the limited and constrained possible ways of living clearly served an important psychological function for her here. Escaping from her estate and being successful would turn her into a hero while failing to do so could be excused by her address, even if it meant accepting that you had been caught by whatever it was that 'lurked' over the estate. This is not to say that Hester's perception of her estate was false. Clearly, to live in one of the top 5% of areas in terms of crime in London would suggest that it was not a pleasant place to live but her representation of the estate was part of a wider personal project in which she became the hero of her own great escape story. Hester was determined to finish school. She told me that nobody in her family had managed to finish secondary school and that she was going to be the first person to do so. Throughout the year, even at her lowest points, she made continual reference to the fact that she was still coming to school and was still going to make it to the end. Her key target was to still be in school on Leaver's day at the end of June, to have taken her GCSEs and to have completed a Record of Achievement. However, whilst there was a continuous striving for success, it

was also clear she had an alternative route which linked her sexuality to money and to illegal drug use via prostitution. In this way, Cartesian dualisms loom large. Academic success is split from sexual desire and the body. If she didn't manage to finish school, then the only future imaginable involved working with her body, or working on the bodies of others. Money and drug use were integrally linked for Hester to sexuality. That is not to say that she had sexual intercourse for money or for drugs but sexuality was a key resource for the acquisition of capital, both economic and symbolic.

Sexuality was put to many and varied uses by Hester during her final year of schooling. For a start she used it to help her get away from her estate, by moving to live with her boyfriend. She also had an understanding of her sexuality through a discourse of romance, in which she dreamed of finding a soul mate, settling down and having children and this dream was partly responsible for her pregnancy. However, when she viewed her sexuality as a resource which could be used to help achieve a materially better standard of living, then pregnancy was the very last thing she wanted from it. At school, Hester used her sexuality as a form of rebellion against the discourse of respectability operating there. Using sexuality to achieve other things material or otherwise, was a pragmatic choice for Hester to help her leave her estate but was also fraught with psychological danger and detrimental to her

emotional and mental health. The minute she used her sexuality in this way to get somewhere else, she was ironically confirming her place on the estate by 'doing' the sex/drugs route, which she was trying to avoid. Hester's boyfriend, Tom, used to use the fact that Hester lived on this estate to make her feel bad about herself:

...it hurts more when he rubs it in my fact that I'm living on a council estate and he's not, yeah. It's ... I'm not embarrassed by it but it's not like a great position to be in and when he rubs it in my face all the time and plus but the worst thing is like constantly putting me down – constantly calling me dirty –

The 'dirty' here related specifically to her boyfriend's belief that Hester was having sex with black youths on her estate:

Hester: Like for Tom all I wanted was for him to understand that just because I'd been brought up on a council estate, just because most of my next door neighbours are black, doesn't mean that I'm a 'nigger's fuck' (Tom's words to her – quotation marks mimed by Hester) ...doesn't mean that you have the right to call me that neither. I don't want to hear anyone being racist especially not my boyfriend.

Sarah: Um

Hester: Especially not when he's aiming something at me. I've never wanted that off of him and half the people that know me know that I'm a decent person.

Sarah: Um

Hester: I've got a clean soul. I've got nothing to feel bad about, not, not in that sense anyway. I've never cheated on any men that I've been with and I never would.

The association of her housing with sexual promiscuity and specifically with being dirty or impure was something that Hester both constantly resisted and ironically constructed in her understanding of her identity on the estate. Her



insistence that she had 'a clean soul' and that she was a 'decent' person, suggested a very layered understanding of herself, with this at its core, as her "authentic" self. It would be hard, given the fact that Hester dealt drugs, used cocaine and had unsafe sex, to agree with her claim to decency on conventional levels. While, as she said, 'half the people that know me know that I'm a decent person', one might ask how the other half of the people that knew her, would label her. On the other hand, one might legitimately ask why it was that she chose to remain with a man who had such little respect for her. However, Hester did not view it in this way. As far as she was concerned that was how all women on her estate were viewed and the fault was not in naming it as such, but in the estate itself, for making real the sexual cheapness of women. In this way, her boyfriend could be viewed as a sort of hero rescuer, who deigned fearlessly to tangle with those on her estate in order to take her away from it. 'Dirt' was used powerfully throughout the interview to tie together a specific form of promiscuous female sexuality to all that was undesirable on her estate. 'Dirt' was infectious. While it may have infected her superficially, she still believed she kept 'a clean soul'. It explained why leaving the estate was overwhelmingly the most important thing she had to do, if she was going to increase her life chances. She felt that maintaining her decency on the estate was impossible because the estate itself contaminated her. This was part of the reason she gave for wanting to attend

a school out of the borough in which she lived. She would be able more easily to keep her address secret and the schools would be better because they would be further away from her estate. Closeting was at work here. Hester's best friend Tracy grumbled to me one day that she was fed up of Hester because she thought they were supposed to be friends and yet she had never even been round to her house. Hester never invited anyone to her house, even though she would spend the night at friends' houses.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that the defended subject, creates protection against its anxieties by projecting them elsewhere. Hester was invested in promoting a particularly negative view of her estate, as a way of projecting her anxieties about her lack of achievement at school and explaining them. It is important to emphasise here that I am not downplaying the real poverty on her estate, but I am interested in exploring the ways in which she used it in the construction of her own identity, through the identifications and disidentifications that she made. One evening after she had stayed late to complete her English coursework, I rang her mother to agree that I would give her a lift home. As we pulled up outside her house it was just getting dark. A group of young men were repairing mopeds on the pavement near her house. The following extract from my notes, documents her reaction to them:

... On arrival at her house, she said 'oh God the boys are out!' There were a group of young men, messing around repairing a moped. Hester seemed to find them harassing. She told me she hated it when they were out - when I asked why, she shrugged her shoulders, looked at me and said 'they just get on everybody's tits - racing up and down on their mopeds'. I know she's really unhappy with her area - she doesn't like the houses, the people - and doesn't feel especially safe either, I don't think. (Wed 6.2.02)

While it isn't hard to imagine that the sound of mopeds racing up and down past one's house might become annoying, Hester was also constructing them particularly negatively, as she did everything else in her neighbourhood.

This group represented one of its demons, carrying the responsibility in Hester's mind for the local crime and poverty. Interestingly, although she herself really was involved in dealing, she never saw herself in this way but seemed to dissociate from her own criminal activity.

The other side of Hester felt very strongly that young people on her estate did not have sufficient opportunity to better themselves. She was very friendly with a boy of a similar age to her, who was a close friend of the family and who was working as a minibus escort for people with learning disabilities. Hester eventually found a training scheme she wanted to attend when she left school and gave out the leaflet of the training provider to young people on her estate, including this friend:

Hester: You see I'm actually ...I've actually told quite a lot of people about this (training scheme) now, you know. I've told my god brother cos he's working um in a disabled club as an escort on the buses... and it's too much for him you know.

Like the club they run is totally... it's just not right yeah? The club is not right. They're mixing schizophrenics with people with your everyday Down's syndrome. Do you know what I mean?

Sarah: Yes?

Hester: And it doesn't work as well at all. And like the age difference of everyone is terrible cos I used to work down there myself. It's like really really bad. Like Schizophrenics there. They're quite elderly. Well not like elderly but in their forties, do you know what I mean? All right and they're being mixed with people that are like twelve and thirteen. It's...it's not a good mix, cos all it takes like is for one of them twelve or thirteen year olds to want...you know...and get pregnant...so I introduced him into this (training scheme) cos I thought that was quite a good idea...

At times it felt like Hester was running an escape committee with the sole purpose of ensuring that those young people on her estate, who she felt didn't merit living there, herself included, managed to get off it. Specifically it appears that the services provided on the estate for people with learning disabilities are themselves likely to generate sexual exploitation and corruption. 'It's too much' for her friend and she is eager to see him distanced from it.

Hester also had an escape fantasy. Her interview ended rather forlornly, with her contemplating a space where she would be able to escape:

Hester: I just ... I wish there was like this little house I could go to every once in a while when I want to get away, cos when I want to get away, I want to get away from everyone. I don't

wanna see no-one. Don't wanna see my Mum, don't wanna see my Dad – just no-one, nothing. And if there was like a little place I could do that, that would be fine but there's not. Like people suggested going and getting my own flat. Going to a hostel but I don't wanna move out of my Mum and Dad's.

Sarah: No? You just want the odd bit of space?

Hester: Yeah and like it's hard living in my house. I think you know that... ..

This fantasy was also shared by Hester's parents in a different form. They had twice informed the school that they were looking swap their council house for a house on a small estate in Devon. They pictured this estate as being rurally idyllic, with clean air. Hester was always hopeful that this dream house and new life would one day arrive.

## Sexuality

Given that escape was such a motif running through her interview it was not unsurprising that sexuality was also used in her bid to escape. When I asked Hester about the fact that she'd run away in her final year of schooling for about twelve weeks, she explained that this had been at her boyfriend's instigation and that it had brought with it two other kinds of entrapment, about which she felt much more ambivalent:

Yeah, he (boyfriend) was the one who suggested it, cos I was like drinking a lot and like doing a lot of drugs at the time. He said, 'Well maybe it's best if you're not with your Mum' and I went like, 'all right' do you know what I mean? I just went a bit soppo – it happens. But

now like ...now that I'm free I can ... This gives me more time because like Tom he was talking about um, right, he'd found me. Do you know what I mean? And he was talking about how he just wants to settle down and he wants like later on in life to get married to me yeah? And like to be totally honest as much as I thought yeah that'd be nice, (whisper) I was actually thinking to myself, 'Fuck and I'm only sixteen. I'm barely even ???? (obscured on tape)'. I wanna explore a bit more.

We can see clearly here Hester's confusion. She is both drawn towards the romance associated with a vision of a perfect married future, yet she also felt trapped by it. At other times she was much more cynical about her relationship with Tom:

I...I...I wouldn't have been on drugs nowhere near as bad if I hadn't have met Tom. Cos I'm pretty sure now that I was like put on to the drugs for a reason. Do you know what I mean? Like if ... if doesn't matter how badly ... cos these people on drugs, that's what they do. Do you know what I mean? If they've got a bloke that's supplying them with drugs then they're hooked on that drug, they're gonna keep on going back and back and back and he knows that. He knows I, how I am and like after a roll once he kind of knew, he knew that I'd gotten used to it. He kind of used that against me quite a bit of the time. Like if it wasn't, if it wasn't going to be one thing, it was always going to be another, d'you know what I mean? Like he, he got me on to crack but then he'd rub it in my face and say um 'So what you gonna do when you can't get it? What you gonna do when you can't afford it? Are you gonna go and sleep with a bloke for it yeah? You gonna get some money together? And like, like I never understood that part of it, cos it was his doing yeah and I was made to feel so guilty about it.

By the time the relationship had finished Hester was of the view that her boyfriend had deliberately encouraged her to use drugs, to ensure himself of her dependency on him and guarantee her inability to leave him, thus presenting another trap.

One of the contradictions for Hester was her understanding of the importance of faithfulness within a more traditional discourse of romance and her determination therefore to present herself as someone who would not cheat within an intimate relationship, with the opposing belief that sexual permissiveness was a sign of middle-class liberal 'worldly' values to which she aspired. For example, one day shortly after she'd left school Hester came back into school ostensibly to tell me how she was getting on, on the training scheme which she had decided to attend. Suddenly she abruptly changed the subject, explaining to me that her next door neighbours on the estate, a heterosexual couple in their thirties, had asked if she would be interested in a sexual threesome with them. She had told them she would think about it and asked me what I thought she should do. I asked her what she wanted to do. She said she thought that it sounded like fun. We spent about twenty minutes talking it through. Eventually, she decided that she didn't want to become involved in this. It struck me as ironic at the time that government advice on sex education took so very little account of teachers working in such contexts and placed us in a very difficult position as a consequence. What this proposition presented Hester with was an opportunity to show me that her sexuality was constructed around a discourse of permissiveness. She staunchly defended lesbian and gay rights in school and had briefly had

a lesbian relationship with a female friend in school. However, she confused lesbian and gay sexuality with a sexual permissiveness in which any sexual practice was viewed as acceptable.

Specific sexual practices were evaluated by Hester either as helpful in allowing her to migrate from her estate or as unhelpful. She saw lesbian sexuality as permissive and as a way into a more affluent culture away from her estate and she saw 'cocaine' in a similar way. She told me that she had met her boyfriend at a gay club in central London. One of the most difficult aspects of my relationship with Hester both as a researcher and as a teacher, was that she was determined to see me as sexually permissive also, because I was a lesbian. She had an image of herself as a cocaine using, party-going, bisexual hip, cultural eventer – and it was an image she projected on to me too. At times this could be very flattering. For a thirty-five year old secondary teacher/researcher, leading a relatively uneventful life, to suddenly be seen as the latest thing in 'cool', was not without its attractions. In this respect Hester was eager to know how and where I socialised. She was eager to tell me about her visits to 'The Comedy Store', about going to 'Heaven' (a gay nightclub) until 3am (something which I don't think I have ever done in my life!) about spending her morning drinking lattes in Starbucks, discussing the world (one of her favourite pastimes). She also sought my approval



about the places she would not go – ‘Caesars’ (a nightclub) in the local area and the type of girls with whom she would not mix – namely, girls who went to Caesars and who in Hester’s words: ‘like totally change their lives...totally change their personalities for a man’. She wanted always to distance herself from the local area and from the femininities found within it. Instead she wanted access to a far more cosmopolitan version of female.

At the same time as she moved between positioning herself within a discourse of romance, as pure and faithful and conversely as sexually knowing and experienced within a discourse of permissiveness, there was a third discourse through which she presented herself as confused about her sexual identity:

Hester: I'm so fed up of feeling confused about my sexuality. I wish I could just make up my mind.

Sarah: Do you think you have to make up your mind. I mean I have a friend who doesn't like to define her sexuality in that way anyway. She's more interested in sexual practice.

Hester: Doesn't matter. She knows what she is. It's ok not to make up your mind if you know that's what you've decided to do. I mean bisexuals is ok if they know they are bisexual ...and that's fine but I'm just confused. I really do not know what I am.

(Fieldnotes 17<sup>th</sup> January 02)

This was a third facet of Hester’s sexuality, operating within what is a mainstream discourse of adolescent sexual confusion, which argues that this is a time of raging hormones and sexual feelings which are out of control.

These three conflicting ways of understanding her sexuality, were also instrumental in moulding her attitude to schooling and the way in which she functioned in school.

### **Sexuality and Schooling**

At the times when she was viewing herself within the discourse of heterosexual romance, Hester failed to attend school at all. Swept along by Tom's desires of marriage and a life lived in a house away from her estate, she failed to invest in education at all. Instead, she ran away and tried to live that life, only to find herself at once trapped again.

However, by her own admission she spent most of her time in year 10 truanting from lessons. She wanted support to gain GCSE grades but in year 11 found it almost impossible to attend lessons. She'd turn up to lessons midway and then refuse to observe simple classroom rules such as taking one's coat off or putting a mobile phone on silent. Consequently, she tended not to make it through lessons. After one maths lesson, the teacher came to find me and told me that either I would have to be with her at all times in the lesson, or she would not be able to have her in the class. She had apparently

completely sabotaged the lesson by insisting on running private conversations with others and refusing to engage with any learning.

Hester constantly challenged any demand for respect from staff and any demand for respectability from her. The following extracts from fieldnotes I made at the time, begin to reveal the extent of this:

Hester arrives late with half a litre bottle of Lambrusco and a baseball bat. I am really shocked. It's like you think you 'know' pupils and then this. I wasn't surprised at the alcohol but I feel really devastated by the baseball bat.  
(18<sup>th</sup> January 2002)

A horrible time with Hester and Tracy. I discovered white wine in Hester's bag - only because the bag was open and wine had leaked all over a coursebook I had lent to Tracy. I was furious - I don't think she realises - or maybe she does - that she is putting everything into jeopardy by doing this. I wanted to speak to her before she left and she asked really aggressively 'What is this Sarah? Cos if it's a moan, I haven't got the time.'  
(Friday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2002)

I told the head teacher about suspicions that Hester was dealing in school.

He spoke to her - not mentioning the drugs but sticking to the alcohol she had brought in previously. He explained to her what would happen if she brought in anything she shouldn't into school or used it in school.

Hester was clearly rattled when she came up - 'who's been talking behind my back then?' was the question. She forgives quickly though -

and minutes later was offering me hula hoops. She didn't come in the next day though and had clearly been unsettled by the conversation. (Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2002)

There were some disgustingly explicit text messages flying between Hester and her boyfriend most of the morning as we tried to revise:  
Hester: Hope you're warming up the latex babe...

...Hester has yet further problems. Her mother is upset about the abortion. Her mother also read a text message from her boyfriend, stating that he had a gram of coke for her for later. Her boyfriend is on an ABH charge and as a repeat offender he is likely to get sent down - Hester wants to be at the hearing but has an English examination. I am worried that she will miss the English - I have to be careful not to sound only concerned about the exam rather than her predicament about what to do.

(27<sup>th</sup> May 2002)

There are several examples here of Hester constructing a very deliberate disrespect. I would argue that these are part of an equally deliberate but perhaps less conscious plan to create herself as someone disreputable, beyond discipline and/or control. These examples are by no means exhaustive. Complaints about Hester's behaviour came thick and fast everyday. She used this to distance herself from a caring heterosexual femininity. In some respects this is unsurprising, given the constant demand at home, to look after her younger sister and her older sister's baby and her father. Instead she constructed herself as sexually permissive, hedonist even, uncaring about other students, especially those who were younger and to whom she was dealing and at times, as downright dangerous. When I

challenged her she barked that she didn't have the time to indulge my 'moan'.

Her disrespect ensured that we didn't mistake her for someone who wanted respectable 'caring' heterosexual femininity. She refused this at the end of year 10, when she was offered an extended work placement in a care home. From that point on, she made it her mission to distance herself from a 'caring' identity. Her irreverence for school did not sit well with her determination to succeed academically. Hester was not identified in the group of students likely to gain five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE. Indeed, when I first met her and started to collate subject reports on her, many of her teachers remarked that they had hardly seen her at all in lessons in year 10 and therefore were unable to say much about her academic progress, other than that she had not completed much of the GCSE courses. Hester then became part of a group of students, for whom vocational education was deemed to be more appropriate. Her failure to engage with an academic programme meant that this was presented as an alternative. However, the problem was that what was on offer from school in terms of vocational education was essentially preparation for work in the 'caring' service sector, in the form of work placements, college courses and some GCSEs in core subjects. It also meant, as Skeggs (Skeggs 1997) has documented, achieving respectable heterosexual

femininity. At the start of year 11, Hester set about deliberately dismantling this image of herself as caring, in order to create an altogether harder, more selfish and provocative identity. She used a discourse of sexual permissiveness in order to try to achieve a less working classed sexual identity and in doing so, attempted to undermine the ethos of feminine respectability which underpinned the school's ambitions for her. Her aim in doing so was as always to get away from her estate but it only brought with it further problems.

Hester professed that she didn't want to end up on government run training schemes once she left school. Instead she wanted a clutch of GCSEs in 'good' subjects – maths, English, science and she wanted to be able to talk about literature, politics and sexuality. Hester was interested in the subjects she wanted to study, not simply as a means to an end but in their own right, recognising that this was a much more middle class identification in relation to learning. She felt that she was being targeted for a curriculum to produce a respectable worker, doing a regular working class jobs, possibly on a fairly low wage and this was not what she wanted. Her aspirations were bigger than this. She wanted to be part of the cohort of students who went to university not those who were destined for vocational courses in the Government's new 14-19 Curriculum. Sadly, she ended up where she least

wanted to, on just such a training scheme, in large part due to the identity she had created for herself.

### **Social Justice**

The fact that within a discourse of sexual permissiveness Hester presented herself as hard and uncaring did not mean that she did not care about social justice or inequality. Indeed, Hester spent much of her time angry about injustice and constantly professed an interest in wanting to change society.

There were many examples of her sense of social justice during her final year at school. One day she arrived in school in a temper. She explained how she had been on a bus, coming to school. There were no seats, so she had had to stand. A young Asian woman had got on the bus with a toddler in a buggy. No-one had offered her a seat. She commented that in fact one man had positively sneered at the woman. Hester had helped the woman fold up the push chair. Before she got off the bus, she had turned to the assembled people on it and given them a lecture about how they should be ashamed of themselves and accused the man who had sneered, of being 'a racist shit'. She had then said goodbye to the woman and got off the bus. This was not unusual.

In school, she gave up a lot of time protecting a new student, Carol, who was transgendered and received a lot of harassment in school, often being mistaken for a boy. Hester used to take time to talk to her and used to make sure that other people knew that she was Carol's friend, in order to protect her. While students might bully Carol, they would be unlikely to be courageous enough to take on Hester.

On another occasion she came to me after her careers interview. The Careers' Officer had been unable to help her when she told her that her ambition was to become a liberal democrat MP. Her family had traditionally voted Labour, but Hester felt that Labour had let her down since they had come to power and had done nothing to ameliorate the situation on her estate or to support her family. The Careers' Advisor had apparently never had a student who had given this as a career's choice. What she ended up recommending was that Hester join a training scheme and enrol on an Entry to Employment programme, also known as E2E<sup>1</sup>. What seemed to have been elided in

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<sup>1</sup> These programmes are designed for young people with relatively low level skills. It is not necessary to have any formal qualifications at all to enrol on such a programme and they are targeted at individuals who either do not know what they want to do when they leave school, or who have unrealistic goals and ambitions. They have evolved to target young people at sixteen who leave school with no qualifications and are 'at risk' of falling into the government's NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group of young people. The E2E course provides almost guaranteed access to further education.



Hester's Career's interview was her determination to bring about some change in her community.

### **Contradictions**

Hester's sense of wanting to change society and bring about greater social justice was in spite of the fact that she may have been dealing drugs to others younger than herself. She had no sense of the incongruity of this. However, she did acknowledge that her own use of drugs and sex made it more difficult for her to focus on going to college and that, in this respect, she was being drawn back to the estate from which she was trying to escape.

Following the point in the interview, where she talked about the career routes for young people on her estate in terms of the choice between drugs or

College she went on to say:

Now it's harder for me because both mine are clashing. I know what I want to do but I know what my body's telling me to do. D'you know what I mean? Like I know – I know what I should do. I should go to this training course, try and get into college, try and do this, try and do that but it's like um it's, it's not even a needing now, it's more of a wanting It's like a wanting. It's sweet. Dunno. Sounds bit bad but just more of a wanting....

She felt she had an addictive personality, in a situation where she was surrounded by temptation (her estate). Her decision to attend the training scheme in the end, something which she had always previously resisted, was

in order that she would not have free time and would not have to think too much. 'That's all I want. Just to be able to think about something else rather than the same old shit'. I would argue that the contradictions within her own life and the failure of any of her attempts in the long term to leave her estate, in the end were in danger of compromising her mental health. At the time she gave the interview, she was not eating, was cutting herself and was drinking alcohol first thing in the morning to steady her nerves.

At the same time, Hester also railed against the fact, that she felt it was not permitted for her to be unable to cope:

Hester: Everyone always says to me you're such a strong person, you've got this going for you, you've got that going for you. I'm not that - I'm not that strong - I'm not that strong yeah but it's been ... because everyone's always expecting it of me. Everyone's always expecting me to be strong. It's almost like I'm not allowed to um ...

Sarah: ...Be weak?

Hester: Be weak. Maybe when I want to be. You know if I want to be weak I want to be weak. Everyone else is allowed to be -

Sarah: Um

Hester: Someone wants to have a nervous breakdown they go and they can have a nervous breakdown, but I'm not allowed to be cos I've got to be strong and bubbly, cos that's the way I'm meant to be and it's like no-one really - no-one really accepts the fact. Everyone wants to talk to me, "Oh come on Hester let's talk. You can tell me your problems". But the thing is by talking to someone and telling them my problems, it's not like - I'm not getting it off my chest. I'm telling someone. I'm not getting it off my chest - and they're - they're not gonna be able to sort out my problems. See counsellors. Counsellors. What could a counsellor possibly do for me? They can't get into my

life and sort out my problems. They can't deal with my problems - um - they can't go and deal with Tom - yeah - they can't stop actually ... yeah get into my head and stop the thoughts that I have. They can't physically do it. All, all they can do is listen to me. I don't want no-one to listen to me. I want someone to actually help me. D'you know what I mean? Actually - I dunno - just like - help me - d'you know what I mean? Let me ... let me actually take a couple of steps with them. I don't want no-one to listen to me - I just want someone to help me –

In this extract Hester clearly felt an emotional pressure to always be strong and upbeat 'bubbly', not to have problems. Given her family situation, with an older sister addicted to crack, a younger sister with learning disabilities and a father who was disabled and living on benefits, Hester felt it clearly fell upon her to provide emotional support and sustenance to her family. For Hester, 'getting it off my chest' seems to mean more than talking about her problems. She seems to suggest the help she wants is more practically focused. It would also give her some respite from having to be the person who was emotionally strong, who was one of the main carers in her household. Within this context it becomes easier to understand her resistance to vocational education within the caring sector. This was part of what she wanted to escape. More importantly, her interview reveals a strong need for some sort of care for herself. This interview took place at a time when Hester felt that her strategies to escape from her estate and to achieve some success had failed. Counselling might have enabled her to articulate this to herself

more clearly, but it is less likely have provided her respite from the relentlessness of the demands on her to care.

Hester's expressions of rage, her railing against her fate in having been brought up on her estate and against her schooling which she felt did not help her, would have been easy to turn back on her and many teachers did exactly that. How could she expect to achieve anything substantial in life when she was rude, aggressive, drunk, on drugs and off with her boyfriend, instead of at school. However, if the best that school seems to offer, is a few core GCSEs and a work placement in a care home, in exchange for appropriate heterosexual femininity, then the trade off is manifestly not worth it. Caring was always what she was trying to escape and in the end, making herself socially disrespectful and utterly irresponsible, ensured that she would be debarred from caring.

Hester's placement on the post-16 training scheme failed. According to her friend Tracy, there was a problem when Hester started to have sexual relations with a boy on the course and her boyfriend assaulted him very badly. Hester was asked to leave.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored how these two young women struggled to make their sexual identities through schooling and in relation to their communities. In the case of Mercedes, a young Traveller woman, it was important to contextualise her educational aspirations in terms of her psychic investment in becoming a more central member of her community and in sustaining her Traveller heritage, by embodying its values, specifically through sex and relationship practice. Conversely, in the case of Hester, a young woman living in poverty on an inner London housing estate, I discussed her educational aspirations, within the context of her desire to escape her community on the one hand and her refusal to accept what schooling 'offered' her as escape, on the other. Hester's ambivalence to schooling and community was given voice through her sexuality. I suggest that Government initiatives, focusing on raising academic achievement at sixteen, failed both these young women in different ways. These initiatives present a vision of a universal rational self-creating subject, updating skills and qualifications to fit into a modern flexible, skilled labour market.<sup>1</sup> As such,

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, the then Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, in her speech on the Government's 14-19 Strategy, given at the Learning and Skills Development Agency Summer Conference in June 2005:

The success of the economy, and our ability and obligation to educate our citizens, are not two separate agendas. We need a strong economy if we are to make progress on the Government's social reform priorities. And we need to meet the challenge of

they failed Mercedes because her investment was precisely in becoming central within her community, using a specific form of heterosexuality to stabilise her identity as part of that community against attempts to change it. For Hester, these initiatives presented a social demand to achieve and accept 'respectability', in a career centred around femininity and heterosexuality when what she wanted was social power and a career that would allow her to demand social justice for those on her estate in particular. In relation to sexuality, this chapter argued that government advice on sex and relationship education presumes a female teenage subject with a taken for granted investment in heterosexual romantic love or as a victim of her own uncontrollable teenage lust. For Mercedes, however, sexual relationships were built around older ideas about marriage as alliance and were about increasing her status within her community. Government advice on 'Sex and Relationship' failed her, as it misrecognised her. For Hester, sexuality was a perfect vehicle for rebelling against the demand for respectability, as well as promising the opportunity of immediate and exciting escape from the

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raising participation at 16-19, as well as closing our historic skills gap, if we are to build that strong economy.

So let me turn to my priorities.

Employers need to be able to adapt, and they need a workforce which is skilled and flexible. And we all have to be more responsive. We've got to get better at matching and meeting their demands Kelly, R. (2005). Speech to Learning and Skills Development Agency Summer Conference. Learning and Skills Development Agency LSDA Summer Conference.

painfulness of her social context. In a sense the demands exerted on her by the perceived appropriateness of a future career for her in a caring profession, actually made central the demand for appropriate feminine heterosexuality within schooling, attempted to impose the identity of good working class girl on her and it was unsurprising therefore that her rebellion had to be a sexual rebellion, rather than a rebellion against learning itself. For both young women, the 'barriers' to raising academic achievement were actually embedded within the Standards Agenda itself. I suggest that, frustratingly, it was the Standards Agenda, together with government initiatives to raise educational attainment, its vocational education targeted at working class pupils from the age of fourteen and policy advice on Sex and Relationship Education, which made it less possible for educational achievement to happen. Sexuality played a key role in mobilising both these young women's resistance to much of the education they were offered.

In the next chapter I move from considering how non-normative versions of heterosexuality were embodied by pupils to more radical disavowals of femininity.

## Chapter 6

### Transgendered Identities in Secondary School

**'What's happened to Carol? What's she done? She's really gone overboard.....'**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will explore what happens when girls fail to embody femininity and instead develop masculine identities in school. Specifically, the chapter explores the cases of two pupils who were configuring their gender in this way within the context of Manor High School, a girls' school. Whilst there were quite a few girls at the school that one might have labelled as 'butch' in appearance, the masculinity of these two pupils was much more pronounced. The chapter considers the implications this had for their educational attainment and more generally their success in school, both in the formal school but also in the informal pupil cultures of the school.

There is a small but growing body of work exploring the issues of transgender, often heavily theoretical and almost never in relation to compulsory school aged pupils (Prosser 1998; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Butler



2004). In this chapter I will use Judith Halberstam's (1998) concept of 'female masculinity' as a framework through which to understand the two young people who form the case studies here. Halberstam's work is useful in that it maps out a much wider understanding of masculinity as practised by those who at one time defined as female or who still partly do so or who are in transition, whilst also providing a space to consider more inchoate expressions of female masculinity. Halberstam explores the appearance of female masculinity in girls and young women as well as adults, through the figure of the tomboy, which has an important place when considering female masculinity in school. However, she also offers a range of different adult female masculinities and both pupils under consideration here could be seen not only as in a transitional space in relation to gender but also as transitioning from a childhood version of female masculinity to an adult one. The young people that formed these case studies, Carol and Nathan were not transsexual or even transgendered in the sense that they had an awareness of transgender and named themselves as such. Their understanding of their own identities wasn't always politicised within discourses of transgender or transsexualism, as they are written about and practised today. However, the fact that one of them changed her name to 'Nathan' and insisted on being called this by everyone was clearly indicative of an explicit demand to be considered masculine. One might interpret it as a highly politicised identity

act but it would be wrong to suggest that Nathan was politicised about her/his gender/sexuality in the sense that s/he belonged to any transgender community.

The chapter explores two questions. Firstly, it considers the links between gender identity and educational success/failure and uses ethnography to describe the work involved in living with female masculinity both for the two pupils in the case studies and for everybody else in school, with whom they came into contact, both staff and other pupils. Second, I use this ethnographic work to point out the management issues that female masculinity posed for the micro-processes of the school. Finally the chapter also discusses these young people's relationships outside school, particularly within their families, in order to explore the expectations of family in relation to gender and educational success.

One hitherto virtually unexamined problem when investigating educational attainment by gender and particularly with quantitative statistics of gendered achievement patterns, is the presumption that there are two distinct genders, female and male, and that both of these are 'natural' or given. There has been research and commentary which has deconstructed the notion of gender as homogenous particularly as it is embedded in these statistics (see for example

Epstein, Elwood et al. 1998), as well as research which has queried what counts as success and the limited discourses of success available in schools to young people (see for example Benjamin 2002). Again, through the case studies in this chapter, I raise queries about how many different versions of gender there are and indeed how many genders there are. There are many different versions of masculinity and femininity and these may also be variously adopted by any/all pupils at different times, to different degrees and in different contexts. In this chapter I take the view that gender is an unstable category, requiring maintenance, constituted through appearance, behaviour and action - or what Foucault would term through 'technologies of the self' (see Rabinow 1997).

Because the two case studies in this chapter lie at an extreme end of gender non-conformity, it is also possible to use them to point out some of the assumptions often embedded in discussions of gender and education and particularly in discussions of gender and patterns of educational attainment. I suggest, here, that in fact it is not one's gender that determines or partly determines one's educational attainment, but rather that the successful cultural practices of specific gendered identities demand the embodiment of an attitude to educational attainment, modified by class, ethnicity and religion. Developing a gender identity is not a given, it is an identification

which is sustained through identity work. Part of that identity work relates to educational success or failure. This turns the traditional view of gendered achievement on its head. What I am suggesting here is that pupils' relationship to educational success is also a resource through which they construct gendered identities. For example, as I will show, Carol invested in doing 'naughty boy' in the classroom and although this had a detrimental effect on her educational success, it sustained her masculinity. It has been more common to suggest that educational success or failure is dependent upon already being a particular gender, class and ethnicity. Historically, educational success and indeed subsequent career success was the provenance of the white middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied male. Consequently, much of the work of feminist education (see for example, Murphy and Gipps 1996) has involved identifying discriminatory practice and taking steps to overcome it. However, more recently there have been concerns that girls are outperforming boys (though we should note that the widespread panic seems to ignore class entirely) and assertions that it is now boys who are facing discrimination. I would suggest that discriminatory practices still exist in education and the work place but there are also very complex trade-offs for young people involved in creating sustainable identities, which affect their investments in education. Discriminatory practices are mobilised in these trade-offs, and young people are thus often

made complicit in their own discrimination. All of the chapters in this section have highlighted young women's ambivalence towards some of the key aims of education in the UK precisely because they compromise important aspects of their identities and this chapter will continue to develop this theme.

Because of the panic about boys' underachievement there has been some mainstream attention particularly in the media given to the nature of schooling and the construction of academic attainment (see, for example the introduction to Epstein, Elwood et al. 1998: 6-7). The explanation for boys' perceived underachievement from within the Men's Movement is that feminism has been allowed to go 'too far' and that the curriculum tends to support the perceived learning styles of girls as well as their curricular interests. This is generally coupled with complaints that there are not enough male role models for young men in the form of successful teachers. This is slightly different from the argument which others have propounded that academic success in schools tends to be feminised, so that masculine identities and particularly working class masculine identities eschew academic achievement because it jeopardises secure gender identity. The problem with some of the proponents of the latter argument is that they tend to value only one form of (often particularly oppressive) masculinity and to argue for its protection, rather than advocating an expansion of the masculine

repertoires that can be adopted by young men and indeed young women (for an interesting discussion of this see Raphael Reed 1998: 60-64). No-one for example, who espouses this argument ever suggests that a simple solution would be for boys to be actively encouraged to behave more like girls. The case studies in this chapter are of girls who were practising masculine identities and as such, the feminisation of academic success made it threatening to their identities. However, one of the most interesting parts of the case study was an exploration of the ways in which a performance of masculinity for Carol became more nuanced and less dependent upon slavishly modelling herself on an enduring stereotype of working class masculinity. Throughout her interview there were points where her ambivalence to this form of masculinity became clear.

The chapter also builds upon understandings of how the mind/body split works in education and in schooling and the problems this holds for pupils in school, because they must carry around with them their minds, in their bodies. There is a focus, therefore, on issues of embodiment within the chapter. There is very little explicit recognition by schools of the complexity of embodying successful learner identities without compromising other aspects of one's identity. This is not to say that there is no tacit recognition of this. For example, many schools place huge importance on school uniform.

Usually one rationale for this is that it markets the school, enhancing its reputation within the local community. I have attended countless assemblies in schools where pupils are exhorted to wear the school uniform well on the journey to and from school, because they are representing the school in the community. However, this argument only works if we acknowledge that school uniform is widely understood as a mechanism for ensuring that the body is clothed for learning and that it helps the embodiment of a learner identity, usually by minimising signifiers of the body and particularly sexuality (no make-up, no short skirts, no jewellery, no cut off shirts to show rippling muscles etc) . The effort placed by schools into ensuring that pupils wear the right school uniform, therefore, is precisely because it is seen as key in the production of success, both by the school and the community. A good school is one where all the pupils are in full school uniform. However, from pupils' perspectives it is often unclear how the absence or presence of make-up impacts on their ability to learn. It would certainly not be a demand of adult education for example. The mind/body split demands however, that school pupils regulate their bodies in order that they disappear metaphorically into the school body, allowing the focus to be entirely on the mind. However, for the two pupils featured in this chapter, school uniform often became an ironic signifier of a challenge to femininity. Both students at times wore perfect school uniform but subtly adapted it to enhance their

appearance as boys. Carol, for example would wear regulation boys' school uniform trousers. Often, the more perfect their uniform was, the more masculine and 'different' they managed to look!

I have great admiration for both the pupils who form the case studies for this chapter. While they 'failed' academically within the A\* - C economy of GCSE results, their achievements in developing and sustaining their masculinity in school, their refusal to give it up in the face of the massive contradiction of attending a girls' school, their determination to survive what were often highly adverse situations in school, demonstrates their strength of character and will power to create sustainable masculine identities. Unfortunately, the enormous amount of effort that had to go into the maintenance of these identities often compromised the possibility of academic success at GCSE.

The chapter will mostly focus on Carol. Nathan was a more elusive character and more cautious of conversing with adults. The data I have collected about Nathan consists of fieldnotes of observations of her both in and out of lessons and comments made about her/him by other students and staff. We did have a passing acquaintance and s/he consented to be part of the research but I didn't ask her for an interview. She always said hello to me on the corridor and there was a tacit recognition of my lesbianism as some sort of reference



point between us. I also worked very closely with her best friend, Ayani and she would sometimes speak to me through Ayani. In contrast, I would spend at least one hour each day working with Carol, or talking with her or observing her both in and out of lessons and she was quite happy to be interviewed for the research. Within the school Nathan was a figure in the shadows. In the metaphor of the dance used by Gordon et al (Gordon, Holland et al. 2000), Nathan was 'a wall-flower'. However, living one's life on the edge is also replete with suggestions of excitement and danger, as well as of isolation and disapproval. Nathan remained in the shadows until she was permanently excluded from school. Part of the shadow identity which she cultivated was remaining a mystery and being dangerous. I have decided to include Nathan in the study in spite of her elusiveness, because not doing so would be to exclude an important identity from the research.

### **Contesting the Constitutive Boundaries in a Girls' School**

Both Carol and Nathan had embattled existences in school and faced challenges around their gender identities every day. One of the most significant of these challenges was their right to be at Manor School at all. Girls' schools are for girls after all and to be a recognizable pupil subject within the school, demanded that one be a girl. Society has a deep seated

ambivalence towards single sex girls' education. Those in favour of it point out that girls' schools often have greater academic success and also that they protect young women from sexual harassment by male peers. However, in the popular imagination girls' schools are also more likely to produce lesbian adults, something to be much feared (Faraday 1989) and indeed policed carefully by pupil culture in the school.

When Carol started at Manor school in October of year 11 her right to be there was contested immediately by both pupils and staff. As the member of staff responsible for organising her timetable in school, other pupils in her year group asked me why I was working with a boy in school and why there was a boy in school at all. As the following extracts from my fieldnotes demonstrate, this contestation of her right to be there often turned her into a spectacle:

We (myself and Carol) had to walk down the corridor and heads were turning. A year 11 student asked me, 'Is that a girl?' ready to have a laugh about it.

I got the comment, 'Is that a boy or a girl?' Students seem to feel that they can speak about her in front of her – a bit like the experience of disabled people (Fieldnotes 30.10.01)

These questions often arose when pupils asked Carol her name and then disputed the validity of the response, contesting her right to a female name. Initially, some of the other pupils, who spent time in the Alternative Education room, said they felt uncomfortable being around her and one young woman refused to be in the room alone with her. A member of staff confessed to me that he had nearly removed her from the school site at break time as a male intruder, when her school jumper gave him pause for thought and instead he went and spoke with her to find out who she was.

Nathan was in the year group above Carol and left school therefore a year before Carol. However, the notoriety of her/his gender practice was still very much in pupils' minds and when Carol joined the school, it reignited discussion about Nathan amongst the other pupils. Pupils in Carol's year group for example, asked the Deputy Head teacher how a girl, who thought she was a boy (ie.- Nathan), could be allowed to attend a girls' school. The pupils, who were concerned about Carol's presence in the school, had decided to use the example of Nathan to discuss their anxieties. They were mounting a constitutive challenge to Carol's right to be there. They were much bolder than staff in their contestation but in a sense the question they asked was valid. Should girls' schools allow on to their roll, someone who refuses the category of girl and indeed adopts the category of boy? Neither

Carol nor Nathan could be understood as male in a girls' school logically or constitutionally and yet they were there and 'passed' as male. The effect of this was to destabilise the apparent stability of the category of gender, causing considerable anxiety for other pupils. If a girl could become a boy, then how could other pupils keep secure their own identities as girls? What Carol and Nathan did was make apparent the extent to which the performance of gender was 'masquerade'. For girls in the school it denaturalised their own performances of femininity and this was something that they found very threatening. It has been suggested by feminists that one of the good things about girls' schools is that they extend the repertoire of ways in which girls can be and do girl (see, for example, Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001: 183). However, there are clearly constitutive limits to this and the appearance of female masculinity into the repertoire of ways of doing girl was for some pupils simply an extension too far in the repertoire of permitted femininities.

Staff might have asked similar questions about the constitutive right of Carol and Nathan to be in a girls' school but they tended not to. This was because another discourse was available to them through which to understand both Carol and Nathan. They mobilised a discourse around adolescence as a time of emotional, hormonal and physical torment as a way of understanding

Carol and Nathan. Broadly speaking, the expectation was that they'd grow out of it as they grew out of adolescence. Generally they were seen as girls, who were currently confused but who would resolve the confusion. The more radical amongst the staff suggested that the confusion might need resolution through operative sex change. However, as far as I know, what was never even considered as a possibility was that these two pupils might want to remain 'in transition', with respect to their genders. Again this suggests that it is the exposure of gender as an unstable and constructed identity category which cannot be tolerated. It was more problematic for other pupils to have access to a discourse of adolescence as turbulent hormonal confusion, without also implicating themselves within it and this might in turn further have jeopardised their own sense of a stable gendered identity and certainly their sense of striving to be seen as young adults rather than adolescents.

Prior to starting at Manor school the previous school sent us her school records, which did not actually detail very much. Most of what was learned took place through a phone call between the Deputy Head teacher and a member of staff at her previous school. On the front of her file, however, deliberately placed under the clear plastic folder was a yellow post it note which read, 'Until recently, impossible to tell if Carol was a girl or a boy'. It

was unsigned. Within liberal discourses of inclusion, discourses of gender or sexuality are downplayed. We are all different but equal. However, Carol's difference was one of those differences that made a difference. The note on the cover of the file suggested that someone had decided that the observation was relevant but that it was, perhaps, unethical or too risky to expand upon this comment in the file itself, or perhaps did not know how to expand upon it. A poorly developed inexplicit policy around gender and sexuality meant that there was uncertainty about how to comment on Carol's gender which was I would argue the most salient factor in setting up strategies to ensure that Carol experienced success in school. I have mentioned earlier, Michelle Fine's (1988) observation that there is a missing discourse of desire in high schools but I would argue that also missing is the discourse of sex/gender as fluid or as socially constructed. I would argue that a lack of recognition of the instability of gender and of its embodiment effectively meant that it was impossible to support pupils' understanding of gender and give them, what we might call 'gender confidence'. The comment on Carol's file implied that Carol's gender might have to be managed in some way, or responded to by the school, or that she might have to be helped or supported in some way in the management of her gender, or against trans-phobic or homophobic bullying. However, developing that comment into something more useful

was not possible, because it was so inarticulated within official schools' documentation and culture.

### **Interactions: Finding a Mode of Address**

For Carol and Nathan the challenge to their right to be in the school meant that it was difficult for them to participate there. It wasn't simply that they were marginalised in the sense that Gordon et al. identify in their work (2000: 201-2). They were the opposite of what was to be included in the school. This meant that negotiating their interactions with others was complicated. Neither students nor staff were sure about how to address them during classroom or more informal interactions. The next section explores some of the issues around this in more detail.

### **Minimising Interactions: Benevolent Internment and Vocational Learning**

Carol's place at the school was also contested on educational grounds even before she arrived because of her appalling record from her previous school – one of spectacular failure. She had attended poorly while there, had often been in trouble and had been placed on a reduced timetable in year 10. All of this was evidence that the school thought Carol couldn't cope with the curriculum in school or perhaps that it was only just managing to cope with

her. She had also been in trouble with the police and had been told, following a second caution, that if there were any more trouble, she would be prosecuted. To use her words, the police had said 'they were fed up of me'. She also told me that she had been placed, for a short time, in a secure unit, although there was no record of this in her file. She had been brought to London to live with her father, firstly because she had been so badly beaten up by her mother's male partner that Social Services had said she could no longer live there and secondly, because her father wanted to try to keep her out of trouble. She'd left her school in Hampshire in April of her year 10, but no school in the London Borough to which she moved would offer her a place. In the end Manor school was instructed to take her at the start of the following October. I was asked to create an alternative timetable for Carol in negotiation with her. Owing to the constant nature of her 'disruption' at her previous school and the fact that by now she had missed so much of the GCSE courses, the head teacher decided she was not to be allowed to attend any lessons at all, at least until we had seen how she settled in. She was, from the outset, defined as alternative. The head teacher's motives were twofold. Firstly, he wanted to minimise disruption to classes and having read the file felt that Carol would create considerable disturbance and, secondly, he did not want her to experience any more failure and my instruction was to set up a timetable that would work for her. The effect of this was to minimise



Carol's interactions in school. It could be seen as a policy of benevolent internment. She also worked for two days per week in a garage on an extended work experience placement. Together these strategies ensured that Carol's interactions with other staff and students were minimised.

### **Minimising Interactions: Becoming Invisible**

Whereas Carol's visibility was curtailed through the management of her movements in school and by ensuring that some of her education took place off-site, Nathan's invisibility was more striking. This was graphically illustrated by an incident I observed, in a science lesson. I was working with another student, Deqa (see Chapter 4), in a science lesson. The member of staff taking the lesson was then head of science and had a reputation as a firm but effective teacher. She was questioning the class about an experiment she was going to demonstrate, when suddenly Nathan got up and walked out of the classroom. The teacher made no comment at all. About fifteen minutes later, Nathan walked back in and sat down, only to walk out again after about five minutes and not return. The science teacher made no comment at all, either to Nathan or the class about such behaviour and the whole group ignored the behaviour. Neither did she report the incident to anyone, as far as I am aware. As an example of tactically ignoring bad behaviour, which

teachers are often advised to do, it was brilliant. However, it was equally an example of a refusal to recognise Nathan, or to engage or address or respond to her/him in anyway at all. It was as if s/he was invisible. While on the one hand s/he appeared able to act with impunity on the other, nobody acknowledged any of her/his actions in this lesson at all and so all actions were rendered meaningless, because s/he wasn't counted as a social actor within the classroom. Part of the problem, I think, was the teacher's refusal to address Nathan as Nathan. To call Nathan back into the classroom would have meant using her/his name. On the register, Nathan was given her girl's name. Part of the problem was this teacher's insecurity about how to address her/him. Such a refusal to interact with Nathan made learning, I would suggest, virtually impossible for her/him in this instance. Had s/he participated, would that also have been ignored? Nathan, in fact, had had her/his hand up to answer questions earlier in the lesson but was never chosen to answer.

Nathan's invisibility was only achieved by placing her/him outside of any school rules. No other pupil would have been able to come and go from the science classroom. Yet, although this gave her/him a certain power insofar as the teacher would not counterchallenge the challenge Nathan made to her authority, it also meant that Nathan did not learn anything in that science

lesson, nor I suspect in many other science lessons. What so shocked me about this was that usually 'bad' pupils were increasingly policed by school rules. They were constantly challenged for breaking them. I was frequently involved in supporting Hester, Mercedes, Sonia, Tracy and Shane out of some difficulty for breaking the rules. Nathan, in contrast, was not interpellated within the rule system at all. It is obviously hard to learn if you are invisible or not recognised. Judith Butler has empathetically put across the dilemma facing Nathan. Butler argues that every person desires recognition of their identity but that this poses a dilemma for those whose gender is neither unambiguously male nor female and may makes their lives unviable:

If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced (Butler 2004: 2).

In this instance Nathan was undone because recognition of her/his gender was withheld. Because Nathan did not incorporate the gender norm in such a way as to make her/him fully recognizable, life became much harder to live.

In year 11 Nathan started to deal drugs in the girls' toilets. Toilets are a significant space of pupil power and it became, for a while, Nathan's kingdom. In the end s/he was excluded from school for this and only allowed in to take her/his GCSE examinations, after which time the police

were contacted and an injunction was taken out against her/him from coming within 50 metres of the school gates. Legitimate as this action may have been from the school's perspective, it worked to minimise Nathan's interactions with others in school and would suggest that part of the reason for drug dealing may have been not simply to do with obtaining money, but also to give her/him a clear way of interacting with other pupils in the school. It turned Nathan into the recognisable, albeit demonised, figure of the drug dealer. In an extract of Judith Butler's essay which focuses on the livability of a transgendered identity, she forecasts movingly what might happen to those who are not recognised within social norms:

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction.  
(Butler 2004: 3)

Nathan's estrangement from school as a consequence of her/his drug dealing, was itself a consequence of her lack of intelligibility within the school.

However, escaping the social norms involved her working outside and beyond the law, which furthered her exclusion. In the next section I want to explore what happens when recognition is not withheld but rather denies the

subject's subjectivity by recasting their identities through objectification and spectacle. It explores how the subject is undone, through recognition. Carol tended to be a victim of this kind of misrecognition.

### **Interactions: Objectification, Spectacle and Trans/homo/phobic**

#### **Woundings.**

On two occasions, girls asked a naïve younger girl and a girl identified as having SEN in the school respectively, to ask Carol out, by convincing them first, that Carol was a boy. They would then laugh at the girl they had persuaded to do this, by saying that she must be a lesbian and not know it. This was indicative of the anxieties felt around Carol place in a girls' school. Her performance of masculinity was so careful, that girls could be tricked into asking her out by falling into the error of thinking she was male. She could be read within a discourse of butch lesbian, even though she didn't identify as lesbian (though on occasions she was more ambivalent about this) and the fear of being attracted to a lesbian or even being attractive to a lesbian clearly motivated some of the anxieties of other girls. However, this incident involved objectifying Carol, making a spectacle of her in front of others and also mocking her in ways that were both homophobic and transphobic. It made her interactions in the informal pupil cultures of the school very

difficult. The only way she was able to survive was by building a shield of other students around her to mediate her interactions with pupils whom she did not know or who only knew her by reputation.

After a short while, Carol took to spending all of her time in the Alternative Education rooms when she was in school, unless she was accompanied by her younger sister in year 9, or later on by year 11 young women in the Alternative Education group. It was this group who became her protector and who mediated her interactions with others. The group became very protective of Carol, as the following extract from my field-notes reveals

22nd November

About a week ago Carol came to me after lunch to inform me that some year 10 girl called J\_\_\_\_\_ - a young Asian woman – had asked her out. She said it was embarrassing and she didn't know what to do about it. The matter was resolved and the student concerned was disciplined over her behaviour by a senior member of staff. Immediately she was asked why she had been bullying, she apparently knew what the member of staff was referring to. The member of staff felt it was clearly a case of deliberate homophobic bullying.

However, because Carol gains in status from working in room 64 with me – other students who use room 64 have become quite protective of her. In a bid to protect Carol, they have informed me, that they told J\_\_\_\_\_ in PE this afternoon, that if she was a lesbian, then she should get on and deal with it. They told me they had taunted J\_\_\_\_\_ all afternoon about being a lesbian – weirdly, in an effort to protect Carol from homophobia. The irony of this seems lost on them!

Carol made use of the room which the school had placed at her disposal in order to minimise the harassment she received from other pupils. However, this meant curtailing her use of school space. Carol could not simply walk down the school corridor like other pupils. She had to choose her times carefully or have protection. Surviving in school required ingenuity and took up time. For me, as the organiser of her timetable, this meant an inordinate amount of time working out her trajectory through the building over the time and space of each day, so that she would be safe and made welcome. As the following examples show, I often took her with me when I taught in order to ensure her safety:

Carol came to my English class - even though it was year 8 - I wanted her there with me to protect her from comments she might get if she was unsupervised in room 64. (fieldnotes 30.10.2001)

I have to go and teach and one of the support assistants apparently puts Hester even more on edge. I take Carol to work with me in the classroom. Hester's upset when I get back. She leaves obviously feeling very down. (fieldnotes 11.2.02)

### **Interactions: Recognition and Affirmation of Masculinity**

There were times/spaces where both Nathan and Carol experienced full recognition of their masculine subjectivities. For Nathan it was through her/his friends in particular, who always used 'Nathan' to address her/him,

rather than her/his female name. The first time I came across Nathan was one night after school when I was talking to Ayani in the Learning Resources Centre and Nathan came up to say goodbye to her. She replied by saying 'Bye, Nathan'. I queried the use of the name Nathan with Ayani and she informed me that this was the name Nathan wanted to be called by and that all her/his friends used this name, as did some of the teachers. There was an acceptance of Nathan's right to be Nathan and to not be questioned about that.

Carol sometimes used to experience a similar acceptance of her masculinity from her father, although it was less secure and on occasions he could also be abusive and even violent to her, because of her masculinity. In the following extract from an interview with Carol, she considered how her father responded to her masculine identity:

my Dad ... when my Dad speaks to me as if he wants a boy, cos he speaks about girls this that and the other to me - and when we're in the car whatever he'll whistle at a girl or whatever and he'll look at me as if to say 'what?' Cos I've had it, cos me step Dad used to do it and my step Dad used to do it to a load of people ... and we went out yesterday with cadets and all the PO.s were doing it. They were rolling up my sleeves cos I couldn't do it, cos I had me tin in me hand and they were rolling up me sleeves to make it ... they were whistling and growling at this woman and I was standing and they're going 'oh man'. It makes you laugh sometimes - I found it quite funny actually ... and when they were knocking on the doors and they were looking and they went - cos when people went to get their money - they'd stand there going 'woorrr' - and that just makes you laugh ... it's



quite funny actually - do you know sometimes I think my Dad prefers - would prefer a boy out of me and Katie - cos the way he speaks to me and - he speaks to Katie ... he speaks to us totally different so ... dunno ... cos he likes - I like going fishing, I like football

In this extract, Carol explained how her father addressed her as not only male but male heterosexual and would discuss women with her, which was very different from the mode of address he uses with Katie, her younger sister.

She was both amused and perhaps slightly ambivalent at the way in which he whistled at a woman and then attempted to make her complicit in it, treating her not only as though she were male but also a bloke like himself. She also talked here about the activities that she did with her Dad like fishing and football and these were clearly spoken of within the context of securing masculine identity. It was almost a description of a father and son bonding session.

Carol's masculinity was further recognised in her acceptance by the boys as a boy cadet. She was recognised as male and again encouraged to perform a particular type of masculinity about which she felt ambivalent. However, she was caught in terms of identity because although these interactions provided her with affirmation as a male subject, they denied her identity as transitional, or perhaps as the type of male she wanted to be.

In school Carol was more often struggling against astonishment by others at her masculinity. As I have said before, she had an embattled existence.

However, outside school, if her interview is to be believed, it appeared that she was able to move her identity work further forward, so that it wasn't simply about gaining recognition of her masculinity because this was given, but rather involved new dilemmas about the kind of masculinity she wanted to embody.

#### **Jobs for the Boys: Sustaining Recognisable Masculine Identities.**

For Carol, masculinity was sustained through masculine work. During the time she was at school she was particularly concerned that she had a work experience placement in a garage, to further her career ambition to become a mechanic. A placement was set up for her which was monitored by a youth worker who was working as part of the Alternative Education team. Carol worked in the garage two days per week, very successfully. After leaving, she went on to do a modern apprenticeship with 'Kwik Fit'.

Carol also worked during holiday time and sometimes in the evenings at the fairground. During her interview it became clear that her work at the fairground provided her with further opportunities to develop her

masculinity, in opposition to femininity, and that she enjoyed the power that this brought her:

I look like a boy cos ... you work on a fair, you work on a basketball, you look like a girl they think, 'oh that girl's easy to push over, this, that and the other. They think – this bloke trying to play with the basketball but cos they don't know, cos they think I'm a boy, I say. 'Oy leave it alone!' and they say, 'Yeah all right mate – safe' and then they walk away so ... that's why I say I'd rather look like a boy than a girl when I'm on the fair cos the girls that work in the kiosk – people come past and they start nicking the candyfloss but if they see a bloke in there they won't do nothing, they'll just walk by and say 'all right' to you and that's it. (interview Carol 19.6.02)

Carol clearly enjoyed the recognition of her as male on the fairground. She felt empowered by a sense of the physical threat embodied in that masculinity and saw women workers as more vulnerable and as needing protection.

Nathan used the identity of drug dealer to develop masculinity. S/he took to wearing a baseball cap pulled down over her/his face and a bomber jacket.

The beauty of this identity was that it was at once 'macho' but also an identity practised in the shadows, illicit and elusive but dangerous and not to be challenged. It did not require great physical displays of power or a sense of physical threat. Nathan was very slight and so s/he didn't have access to the more threatening physical embodiment of masculinity which was available to Carol. However, no-one was likely to go up to Nathan and

challenge her/him to a fight, so dealing offered power, warning others to keep their distance.

### **Becoming Superman: Violence, Heroism, Protector of Women**

Through her work on the fairground, it was also possible for Carol to develop a heroic masculinity, as protector of women. In her interview Carol told me that when she lived in Hampshire with her mother, she had a reputation for being violent. I queried this, insofar as the whole time she was in school, I never saw any sign of this. However, Carol presented me with a violent past in school and accounted for it through the violence she had seen and experienced in her home:

Carol: The teachers that knew what was happening at home (the violence), they used to say it was connected. Cos I'd seen violence there and I used to be violent at school. Cos I've grown up with it, I thought there was nothing wrong with it so...

Sarah: (*interrupting*) But you're not a violent person.

Carol: Not unless someone annoys me.

Sarah: But I don't think I've ever seen you violent. Like never.

I was glibly unaware here of the importance for Carol of a reputation of violence in order to sustain her particular version of masculinity. I was challenging her identity as one that was violent and out of control, because I had never seen it. Indeed, Carol was possibly one of the least aggressive or bad-tempered pupils within the entire alternative education unit. I meant to be complimentary. However, Carol perceived it as a threat to her

masculinity. In the continuation of this conversation she went on to give examples of her 'violence', which in both cases amounted to a sort of macho posturing, both examples outside school. They were both mobilised, here, to reassert her masculinity to me but also to clarify and shape it as a sort of virtuous violence:

Sarah: But I don't think I've ever seen you violent. Like never.

Carol: Not a lot of people have. My Mum has. Mark (her step father) has. Loads of me friends round me Mum's have. The police have. The police have seen everything. Sometimes I'd get really angry and I'd go loopy. I can do when I want to be. Someone really annoys me, I can just lose it and start massive fights. I nearly did on Friday as well. We were on the dodgems at work because we were on the fair, we get free rides on the dodgems. My cousin works on there. And when we got free rides some boy was on there and we were bumping into him and obviously bumper cars you're bumping into people, and he goes, 'Oh, you're bumping into me. I'm gonna whack you in the face'. He was leaning right over the car and I'm going, 'Go on then'. And he was, 'As soon as I get off these dodgems I'm gonna bang you up'. So I went over there and shoved him and said, 'you're gonna start on me are yer?' And he just ran off, so I'd say he was about seventeen, eighteen. But he wouldn't start.

In this extract, Carol presented herself as fearless and able to handle herself in the face of a challenge by a male, who is older than she is and who was threatening her. She presented herself as scary, as someone not to be messed with or challenged and as someone who could look after herself. However, this wasn't enough. She was determined to counter my impression of her as non-violent and she continued with a description of an incident of heroic violence:

Carol: (cont) But he wouldn't start same as Louise D. from this school. She got mugged. You know where Mitchingham carnival is? She got mugged by some boy. I knew who he were so I told the police and we went to do an ID parade and they stole her money and her phone and I went up to them. – Oh yeah, I seen them. They'd just come off the rocket and she said, 'Oh they nicked my money and my phone'. So I walked up to them and said, 'Are you gonna start on me?' And they said, 'What are you going on about?' So I said, 'You'll nick a girl's phone and that, but you won't have a go at me'. And as soon as I turned round to tell – to ask Louise what one it was, they'd all ran, so I had to chase after them and then the old Bill came.

Carol clearly constructed her masculinity through this incident. The boys were challenged as nicking a phone from 'a girl', but not being able to stand up to the challenge that Carol presented, as a man. Carol asserted and defined her masculinity here specifically in opposition to femininity, through violence in the protection of a feminine other. She also outdid boys' masculinity, in her performance of a kind of hyper-masculinity. She reminded me of Superman, protecting Lois Lane. The importance of the affirmation which followed this demonstration of her masculinity became clear when she ended the story with the following comment:

Carol: And then when I come into school to do my exams after she got mugged, she was telling everyone I was a hero and that. I was going red.

Sarah: Sounds like you were though.

Carol: Um – so then we had to go down and do an ID parade and see if we could see 'em. So's Louise. So we all found out yesterday. I was at work. I had to run down the pub and tell everyone.

In this part of the story, Louise had recognised and appreciated Carol as her hero. Carol was the model male student, coming into school to do GCSE

examinations, not looking for any trouble, but quietly defending the poor defenceless female subject. Interestingly, when she was summoned to the ID parade, she immediately self-publicised her role in the whole event by racing into the pub to tell everyone about it.

Neither of the incidents of violence that Carol spoke of involved actual violence. No punches were exchanged. The stories were about threat and posture. Moreover, Carol represented violence as permissible only when one was defending oneself and one's masculinity from attack or in the defence of a woman. Hers was not a masculinity that enjoyed the objectification of women. She felt very ambivalent when co-opted by other men or boys to whistle at or growl at women. This may be because it implicated her in sexual desire for women, about which she also felt ambivalent, or because politically it did not square with her beliefs about how women should be treated. As can be seen, Carol was involved in identity work around the kind of masculinity she wanted to embody. As a victim of male violence both from her own father and especially from her step father, she despised male violence, especially as it victimised those who were physically weak. However, the identity work about what kind of female masculinity to embody was work done outside school, in a context in which it was already accepted.

What was important for Carol in her two stories, particularly the second one, was that this was a key way in which she could bring a masculine reputation into school. One of Carol's initial problems in school was that she was unused to being in a girls' school. This meant that she could not consolidate her performances of masculinity through sparring against other males, because there weren't any. She had to develop her masculinity in contrast to the femininity of girls in school and she found a way of doing this by being their hero. More importantly, this was a way of beginning to assert or publicise the kind of masculinity which she embodied.

In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam (Halberstam 1998) explores the different articulations of female masculinity within western culture. She looks at female masculinity in pre-twentieth century articulations through the figures of the tribade, the androgyne and the female husband, as well as the discourse of inversion in the early twentieth century. More recent articulations of female masculinity can be seen in the figure of the stone butch, the transgender butch and in the stylised performances of the drag king.



Halberstam (Halberstam 1998) is anxious that masculinity is not made sense of in relation to a continuum with the female to male transsexual at one end and the androgynous female at the other. We can appreciate the complexity of this in relation to both Carol and Nathan. Female masculinity is not just about appearance. For example, Carol appeared much butcher than Nathan, who might fit into the category of androgynous in some respects, particularly because of her/his very slight figure. However, Nathan's use of a male name was an extremely powerful indicator of masculinity, whereas Carol sustained masculinity as much through acts of virtuous and heroic violence as she did through appearance. However, Carol also insisted on being Carol. She never gave herself a male name. Their articulations of masculinity were, thus, very different, but it would not be possible to place them on a continuum in relation to each other. However, in relation to other young women in the school, they clearly constructed oppositional identities to conventional femininity. There were other pupils who consciously employed aspects of masculinity, although less consistently, for example Anne and Shona (see chapter 8), but these were constituted through emergent lesbian identities, rather than as struggles around masculinity.

Halberstam (1998) also insists that female masculinity is not just masculinity cultivated in a female body. Masculinity is also learned through

poverty/wealth or in the UK context through class, and through ethnicity.

The dimensions of this are interesting for both Carol and Nathan. Carol's experience of violence, also meant that her masculinity was practised as a survival skill. In the following extract, she talked about the violence she experienced at the hands of her father:

Sometimes we get on very well and sometimes, most of the time, when he goes down the pub he drinks too much and he comes home and he gets violent and he starts punching you, kicking you, holding baseball bats up to you. It's just stupid. I dunno why he does it...I just sit there and look, sit on the settee – just sit there.

Carol's own use of violence was often to protect herself or other women from male violence and this became key in her own practice of masculinity.

Nathan's masculinity was nuanced by her/his identity as Asian, interestingly disavowed in her/his choice of male name. Whereas her given female name was distinctively Asian, s/he chose an equally distinctive non-Asian name, in the practice of her/his masculinity. Nathan's masculinity was, thus, woven out of a disavowal of her/his home life. In her/his penultimate year of schooling s/he had run away from home and had moved in with Ayani. Ayani informed me that even though Nathan had gone back to live at home, most of the time was spent at her house. Nathan's character grew out of the disavowal of the expectations put upon her at home. According to Ayani,

Nathan's family was very unhappy with the emergence of Nathan's masculinity.

In the next section I explore more fully, the ways in which Carol's masculinity was interpreted in school and her own practice of that masculinity within the context of school.

### **Gendered Learning or Learning Gender**

Carol had had a particularly disrupted education. By her account she had attended four different primary schools, as the family kept relocating, two secondary schools, as well as a secure unit for a short period of time. It was therefore hardly surprising that her literacy skills were quite weak and that she was quite far behind other year 11 pupils in terms of being able to access or complete GCSE courses. She came to Manor School with a determination to work and initially she was on a one to one timetable. The focus was on helping her to achieve English and Maths GCSEs. Initially, she strove hard for success:

30.10.01

Carol said she couldn't believe the effort she made yesterday with work. Her literacy skills are very weak and there's no hiding it in one to one sessions. She's somehow very innocent. As we were thinking about our crime story, I asked her about TV programmess she liked

watching. She said 'sometimes I watch horror films - the sort you have to stay up late for - like they start about 11.30pm'.

31.10.01

Carol worked so hard all day. Anything I asked her to do really and she was cheerful about it. I learn bits from conversations she has with her sister. She told her sister that she'd written two and a half sides and her sister gasped in shock.

Carol tried very hard at the start of her time at Manor High School to be studious. The fieldnotes suggested that this was not something she had tried to do in the past and her sister was very clearly shocked at the fact that Carol had proved capable of producing an extended piece of writing. Her own efforts also surprised her. However, it became very quickly apparent that even working with her in one to one sessions, there were areas of resistance and anxiety about learning:

Carol did some poetry work on a poem by Carol Ann Duffy. It was called Valentine. I asked her what she thought it would be about. She did little quote marks with her hands in the air and said in a mock sexy voice - but disparagingly - 'love'. Romantic stuff is a dangerous area for her. (Fieldnotes 01.02)

Carol found it difficult to engage with more stereotypically soft topics, such as love, partly because it threatened to force her to articulate her own gendered and sexual identity and partly because for her "*Valentine*" was immediately identified as a poem for girls. It was impossible to move her beyond this and get her to take the poem seriously. Her anxiety was not about her possible lack of skill at interpreting a poem but rather, what that

would say about her gender. The issue around Carol's gender and sexuality hung unbearably over both of us and she refused to engage with the poem in an effort both to protect and display her masculinity.

English proved to be a particularly difficult subject for Carol and it was difficult to know whether her poor literacy skills were as a result of missed schooling or a sort of gendered resistance which meant that she refused to engage with English teaching. By mid January I was becoming particularly concerned by this, as I had to prepare her to take GCSE English:

11.12.01

Carol is working on the English paper but gets discouraged very quickly when she feels she can't do a question - making snap decisions really before reading the question.

16.1.02

I am worried about Carol. She's started to get incredibly self-conscious every time we ever do English work. She just goes into her coat and pulls down her baseball cap.

It was not however, the English work per se that was problematic for Carol.

Rather, as in the poetry incident above, it was the interactions that English often demanded, which she found particularly difficult to deal with.

On the occasions when I left her to work at English without actually intervening to teach her, she became much more amenable:

Tuesday 26.2.02

There's a strange kind of atmosphere between myself and Carol and it's about her knowing that I'm a dyke. This leads to a real sense of trust, a certain informality. This afternoon I set her some English to do

and she then popped into the office and said 'Sarah can you come and check this out a minute?' - She's incredibly vulnerable about writing and so it seemed to me to show trust and informality as well, in the tone of the question.

It seemed that a tacit acknowledgement of gender/sexuality issues between us helped me gain Carol's confidence. The threat of being taught English, however, was too much in that it could expose her to having to discuss it. In this instance, it is Carol who was controlling the interactions around her what she was writing. I only became involved when I was asked to. In the end, this tended to be how we worked her English lessons. It was the most successful way of working. However, this meant that it was very difficult to teach her. I did suggest at one point that she attended GCSE English lessons but this met with absolute refusal. Carol preferred that her gender and her sexuality remained inchoate, a silent presence.

In contrast, Carol was much happier when working in maths, art or PE. She would happily attend maths lessons and, when she did not go to them, it was generally because she wanted specific support to complete maths coursework. This often used to involve her in nagging me to sit with her and 'go through it'. Interactions around the formulae for working out the relative value of mobile phone tariffs were much less threatening than those which forced a discussion of feeling, or intimacy or gender, or sexual desire, as English often did. Art also proved slightly more difficult. She would go and

fetch artwork to do but didn't like remaining in sessions where the Art teacher was talking to them as a class about Art. Her favourite subject was PE. Often she would not only attend year 11 PE lessons but also PE clubs and help out in the lessons of younger pupils or in clubs for younger pupils. She had played for Southampton Ladies' football team at one point and was eager to join a local football team in Mitchingham.

The subjects at which Carol experienced most success and which she enjoyed were those where she could perform her masculinity with the greatest ease and those which did not require her to articulate through language, feelings around gender or sexuality or which engaged primarily with feelings. In terms of pedagogy, English with its tendency to involve the self and to involve class or group discussion was much more difficult for Carol to negotiate.

Like many boys, Carol would also engage in show off behaviours, to cause a distraction from learning:

7.12.01

Carol is being very entertaining all morning. A constant stream of jokes, but she's lovely to have around. She doesn't even need to play the fool here but obviously wants to entertain.

However, whilst I perceived it unnecessary for her to 'play the fool', Carol clearly needed to do so. It was a way for her to cultivate a witty and entertaining masculinity, in front of the girls and women in the room, as well as providing a welcome distraction from whatever task needed to be done.

Nathan also tended not to go to lessons. However, s/he had been in the year above Carol, before the alternative education group had started. She did not have this space as a refuge. Nathan would often prefer to learn in the less formal spaces of the school and outside classrooms. For example, s/he would often stay behind after school in the library to study, having spent relatively little of the day actually in classes. Again I would suggest that the demands to interact in the classroom place female masculinity in the defensive position of having to account for itself. Alternatively, the classroom was also an arena in which female masculinity could be completely dismissed, as Nathan had painfully experienced in science.

### **The Struggle over Interpretative Accounts: The Haircut**

One of the most interesting struggles in school was around staff understanding of Carol's identity. This struggle became crystallised when Carol had her head shaved in the Spring term of her final year in school. For



Carol this seemed to be another way of consolidating her masculinity. She started talking to me about the possibility of the haircut about three weeks before it actually happened. Her father had said she could have the haircut if she was good, didn't get into any trouble and got all her coursework done. It was certainly a motivator. Carol worked hard academically to complete English and maths coursework. Everyday she would come in and tell me that it wasn't long now before she would be having her haircut, as she struggled over her English coursework or over her maths coursework comparing the value for money represented by various mobile phone tariffs. Finally she arrived one day, with her head shaved, wearing school uniform. I recorded the moment in my fieldnotes:

25.4.02

Carol has shaved all her hair off - a number one all over, I'd say. Teachers and non-teaching staff - except The Deputy I have to say - are doing that thing where they think it's a symptom of abuse - characterising it as self-harm. However, Carol has always wanted this since I've known her. She said to me about three weeks ago that if she was good her Dad was going to let her get her head shaved. She looks the 'perfect' 13 year old boy - really a stereotype of it you know - scruffy, football playing, jokey - laddish. She spent all day on Friday asking me when it would be time for PE. She does it perfectly.

Carol's haircut immediately caused consternation amongst staff, as my fieldnotes suggest. In particular, the youth worker who had been supervising Carol's work placement wanted to refer it as a child protection issue, arguing that it was a case of self-harm, as a result of her father's violence towards her.

It was true that at this point Carol was often coming to school with new injuries on her body such that we started to record events in writing and the head teacher asked for an interview with Carol's father to voice our concerns. Violence and gender identification were related for Carol and her masculinity, as I have suggested, was produced out of the violence in which her life was led. However, it was the violence she experienced which was the child-protection issue and not the shaving of her head. Her head shaving could not be interpreted within understandings of self-harm or as a child protection issue. It wasn't harmful for one thing, in the sense that cutting one's arms might be. Nor did Carol ever regret her shaved head. She was delighted with it and clearly experienced it as empowering. She regularly redid it. Whilst it might well have been a signal of further resistance to male violence, it also enhanced her masculinity and it was iconic. Yet it was the shaved head that made the youth worker want to make a child protection referral, rather than the fact that Carol was experiencing violence. She looked like Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens 3*, especially in her PE kit, vest top and track suit bottoms. For Carol, I think, it signified a more conscious stylising of her masculinity. It represented her first foray into the fashions of female masculinity.

The shaved head also caused shock for one of the more senior and butch lesbian members of staff in the school:

2.6.02

S (Senior teacher) says to me 'What's happened to Carol? What's she done? She's really gone overboard. I thought we had a boy on the premises - I really did. I thought 'oh well here we go and I was going to you know, get him off site and then I realised it was her. If ever there was a case for a sex change it's her.' I said 'yes I think it's deliberate'. S said, ' Nothing wrong - I mean she's really going for that particular image you know'. I said, 'Yes, she's come out to some of the other year 11s'. S said, 'Has she? Good for her'. I said, 'Yes, that's what they've told her too. I think they've been very supportive'.

In this context, Carol's toughening up of her masculine appearance seemed to be about an increasing confidence that she would be accepted by others. The other year 11 pupils on alternative education programmes had, by this time, grown very fond of her and at this stage one of them told me she had come out as a lesbian to them. However, Carol never came out to me and in fact, said that she thought she was straight in terms of her sexuality. Here, the teacher's description of 'overboard' testifies to the hyper-masculinity that Carol was engaged in. This teacher also suggested that Carol's self-presentation was indicative of transgender, requiring a sex change.

As can be seen, a gender incongruent performance was interpreted by staff within a discourse of self-harm or as indicative of transgender, which needed to be put right through a sex change. What seemed intolerable was to have

someone who was performing masculinity in a female body. It was seen as requiring some sort of intervention. Again, I would suggest that a missing discourse about gender fluidity or the embodiment of gender and no understanding at all of such a thing as female masculinity meant that other discourses were mobilised by staff through which to interpret Carol. Neither of these, in this instance, was likely to be particularly helpful to Carol. Carol herself never spoke of the possibility of a sex change. She was also very well pleased and contented by her appearance post head shave. Moreover, she would have been astonished if not a little bemused had it been put to her that she was self-harming through her hairstyle, not least because it would have constituted her as a victim, whereas she clearly saw herself as extremely tough. In fact, her head shaving enabled her to embody a masculinity which could endure attack and which threatened to deliver the final blow in any fight.

## **Conclusion**

Carol and Nathan lived in a world which had shrunk, in many ways. Their presence in school was minimised. Nathan was even invisibilised. They could not, in any uncomplicated sense, be in lessons and participate in a learning dialogue because they were unintelligible subjects. Staff and other

pupils would first have to take the time to recognise them and secondly, they would have to develop the confidence to articulate it. What was most apparent in these two case studies was that for both Carol and Nathan key individuals or groups of individuals recognised and affirmed their masculinity but these individuals were not necessarily part of school. Indeed they were more likely not to be or to be marginalised in the school themselves. The spaces that these pupils could use in school and the times at which they could use them, were strictly limited.

The cases of Nathan and Carol demonstrate the demands that schooling places upon gender and the compulsion to learn genderedly, as well as the panic when faced with unrecognisable gender, or even the 'wrong' gender. Their subjectivities were created through structures, systems, interactions, and spaces which greeted them with embarrassment and confusion and sometimes even downright hostility.

Carol managed to move herself into a position discursively where she did actually get what she wanted from education. She was well aware of her difference and although I always felt that in some respects she was imprisoned in the alternative education room, she used it as a safe space from which to navigate her way to other safe spaces. Carol was taken on by a

Kwik-Fit under the Modern Apprenticeship scheme. She managed, therefore, to work with education to achieve in ways that allowed her to develop her masculinity. I think this was also one particular case where my own lesbian sexuality and my role as her tutor made it much more difficult for staff to articulate discomfort with her.

Nathan did not have this type of protection from staff, though Ayani was her/his stalwart protector. In fact, s/he further alienated staff through her/his use of drugs. Possibly Nathan used cannabis and/or cocaine as a form of self-medication to start with, a way of getting through relative social isolation. If trans-gendered or trans-sexual pupils are to achieve in school, I would argue that they need a very high level of staff/adult protection and understanding. This group is precariously placed in relation to learning because staff are often at a loss as to how to address them as learners. Before Carol started attending any lessons, I used to introduce her to the relevant staff and used to attend the lessons with her, mediating social interactions until at least some pupils became less wary of her and were happy to talk to her. Nathan did not have this facility available to her/him at the right time. By the time I was working there, s/he was already marginalised and protective of her space at the margins.

This chapter has demonstrated the extraordinary difficulties of attaining academic success, of learning, with an unstable gender identity and thereby also shows that learning is a thoroughly gendered process. Carol and Nathan had difficulties because other pupils and teachers did not know how to address them even as learners. 'Learner' is therefore a thoroughly gendered category, where only two genders are recognised.

In the next part of this thesis I turn away from those pupils whose performance of sexuality and gender has made academic success relatively inaccessible to them and consider the supposed success stories of education, those young women who achieve highly. However, for these pupils too there are costs in terms of the way in which they may or may not embody sexuality.

## Chapter 7

### Constructing Educational Success in the 21st Century

#### The case of Ms Darcy

...and it started getting on my nerves because everybody was just like wanting to know what score I got to see if they'd beaten me and then everytime if I had got a good score they'd be like 'oh of course she did'...and now in year 11 mocks, everyone would be like 'What did you get Darcy? What did you get?' and I said 'oh an A' and it'd be like 'oh yeah what'd you expect from Darcy?' and it kind of hurts cos you know, I'm not perfect...I could get a B and then what happens?  
Darcy July 2002

#### Introduction

Darcy (the name she chose for herself) was a young Asian woman, aged sixteen at the time of interview. She turned out to be spectacularly successful at GCSE, despite her fear expressed here, obtaining a mix of 10 GCSE grades at A and A\*. When I interviewed her she didn't know that she would be so successful. She had just taken all her GCSE examinations but the results would not be out until that August. Yet, she knew equally, she wasn't going to fail. The worst that was going to happen was a 'B' grade. Her dramatic 'then what happens?' was in reality not an issue. No-one was going to stop Darcy taking AS-levels, even with one or more B grades at GCSE. Yet here



we see she was beginning to feel her perfection was a lie. She was 'not perfect' but had become defined for staff and students alike by her achievement of the magical A/A\* grade. Other students asked her what grades she got, only to see whether they could beat her. In some ways she had no way of winning. If she obtained the highest grade, then the other students don't even bother to congratulate her, they simply remarked 'of course she did'. If she were to get a lower grade, then what would happen? Other students would probably relish her downfall, or be euphoric if they'd beaten her and her teachers would be disappointed. Throughout my interview with her, she was preoccupied with the 'problem' of her own success. Darcy's anxiety was desperate. She explained that the way in which she was perceived by other students and by staff 'hurts'. It was as if her value and self-worth could only remain intact as long as she continued to achieve A/A\* grades. Her 'hurt' was unlikely to let up after GCSE, as she began AS-level courses and the spectre of the B loomed large again. The truth was that at some point in her life, Darcy might get the B. 'Then what happens?' All Darcy's subjective investment in her identity as highly successful student might fall apart. She was unable, in the interview, to answer this question that she herself posed. It was simply too terrible to think about, even though for the majority of students a 'B' grade would be most welcome. The spectre of a B grade had been enough to cause her

anxiety to reach breaking point. She stopped eating throughout much of the time she was studying for GCSEs, except at night time, when she raided the cupboards for food. At the time of interview, she told me she realised that her eating pattern had 'got a bit out of hand'. She felt left out all the time, unable to fit in, in school. She described herself as 'an alien', around her peers. However successful Darcy was academically, she felt a failure in many respects. At some points in the interview she contemplated sabotaging her own success but then concluded that she was too deeply invested in herself as successful to be able to do this:

Darcy: Yeah - yeah - I know - sometimes it's scary - it's like sometimes, sometimes I get so angry I just think to myself well maybe I should just like not revise for this test and get a D and see what people - what everybody says about me - but then it's my own thing and I can't cos of myself, cos of the way I feel about it. Cos if I got a D I'd be disappointed.

Sarah: So that must be like really frustrating?

Darcy: It is. Very frustrating. It is extremely like - for revising and - and it's not even just the other girls, it's the teachers as well, cos they expect high achievement - well obviously - plus being head girl - you know I'm supposed to be getting the highest grades aren't I really?

The frustration is that there is too much academic pressure from pupils and staff. For staff the burden of proof that they can teach is carried by Darcy.

Given the right student, with the intellectual capacity and dedication to study, their teaching will produce success. Darcy is the product. The more she accrued rewards for good learning, the more she felt both pressurised to

continue to perform, invested in good performance but at the same time 'so angry' that this was being done to her.

### **The Personal Costs of Educational Success**

Spectacular educational success often has huge emotional costs for those who achieve it, as well as many rewards. In *'Growing Up Girl'* Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) explore the stories of many young women like Darcy.

They suggest that the will to perfection and the tremendous anxiety this produces is characteristic of middle class young women or those located as middle class and indicates desperation to maintain or improve social class position:

What is the huge psychic and economic investment, then, which goes into making young women into the bourgeois individual? Why must they succeed at all costs? Why is their emotional state at all times subsumed to rationality, to excellence, to brilliance? We suggest the huge investment in success covers over the terror of its opposite. That what is defended against is the fear of falling off the edge of rationality and into the darkness off those held to be in the pit of unreason, the dark forces of the masses and the equally dark forces of their own passionate desires, so easily projected onto 'the great unwashed'. (Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001: 185-186)

In contrast conversely, Benjamin (2002) has shown the costs to identity and material well-being for those that must fail in a system where the success of some is predicated on the failure of others.

Darcy's interview shows some of the difficulties which remain at the core of the government's drive to improve GCSE success rates amongst sixteen year olds particularly those living in London and attending comprehensive schools. Darcy's success, her 'excellence', is ultimately what the government says it wants for everybody, enshrined in slogans such as 'Excellence for All' or 'Excellence must become the norm' or 'The Excellence Challenge'.

'Excellence' is used liberally in government documents and speeches and is used in relation to both the quality of provision of public 'services' and the 'excellent' end 'product', in a simplistic formulaic assumption that one will produce the other. Teachers up and down the country are exhorted to try harder to deliver 'excellence' to students, with the aim of 'producing' as many Darcys as possible and every school, if it is not to be classed as failing, needs to show it can produce at least one Darcy a year. As observed by Kenway and Bullen (2001), the pupil is the product in the marketisation of education and as we will see in relation to Darcy, she also feels like one.

### **Ultimate Success and Ultimate Failure in the New Labour Project**

I focus on Darcy's story in this chapter because she exemplifies some of the most worrying aspects of the production of educational excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the UK, even as she represents the gold standard of the Standards Agenda. A focus on Darcy herself, rather than on her GCSE results alone,

shows that she embodies both the ultimate of success and the ultimate failure of such a project. Firstly, as she fears, consistent educational success at the highest level is unsustainable for virtually everyone and even for those who continue to be highly successful with each success comes a potentially even greater failure waiting around the corner. In the end, the rewards for success may simply not be worth the hurt to obtain them. And what does happen then, as Darcy so poignantly asks? She has not been helped by her education to develop realistic, sustainable versions of success. Secondly, while Darcy is pursuing the Cartesian fantasy of rational mastery of the universe, becoming evermore cerebral, her body is falling apart. She is developing an eating disorder.

I wouldn't eat in between meals at all and um my mum would be like 'why aren't you eating?' and um but then at times I felt like - cos my mum's always saying to me you should be good you should go - do some exercise but because I'm really over.. you know working all the time I don't have time to actually go out and exercise and then sometimes I felt like my mum did say like too much to me about eating too much because she felt maybe I should be losing weight or something and but then I think that by the time that year 10 came I was so fed up with it I just I had a really - I think it got a bit out of hand as well because I found that when everybody went out and I was on my own at home I used to get so hungry I used to just raid the cupboards and stuff and so I think when I realised that had happened that I thought no this has gone a bit far now – (Darcy)

Darcy is the archetypal 'product' of New Labour educational policy.

Learning is primarily an individualised experience, an intellectual endeavour for her:

I think - I think it has a lot to do with - like I want to be independent as well in myself - I don't want to have to rely on other people - you know - I think maybe that's a lot to do with stuff as well because I don't want someone to - just to attach to and I think I need them -

Darcy resists compulsory heterosexuality, in the sense that she does not intend that her identity will be made through or in relation to it. School work, study and academic success are key in that resistance. She has embraced the opportunities she has had and taken responsibility for herself and her progress, setting herself targets and understanding that society is organised as a competitive market economy, where she will need to be driven to succeed.

Darcy: Well being a high achiever isn't exactly the easiest thing in the world to do but it has been a struggle.

Sarah: So do you mean like the work? It's been a struggle to do it?

Darcy: Not the motivation - I think I have the motivation but to actually succeed in you know like - at the end of the day there's a grade isn't there? And if you can't get that grade then it's like - I think it's like aiming high as well - sometimes my mum says I aim too high and then I get disappointed about stuff - I mean I remember when I was in year 6 and I took a little test to go to W girls and um a lot - I didn't get in - but I think I got ten marks sort of less or something I can't remember and I was so disappointed, I really was um cos I really wanted to go which is so ironic cos now I really couldn't stand the thought and I'm glad I didn't get in but I know I remember how I was - how old was I? Eleven or something and I was so disappointed and ever since then - yeah I think since then I've been really scared

to fail - I have this - you know - I think it's - I think it's like a cause of mine - cos ever since then I've been really trying to push myself up a lot

These values are embedded in her whole approach to education and in that sense, not only is she an academic success but she is also a success for New Labour in that she reproduces within herself the core values and beliefs associated with New Labour's neo-liberalism. However, at the height of her success, Darcy has become lost. She feels that she doesn't fit in. When I asked her what sort of things were important to her outside of her educational success, she explained that striving for educational success meant that she had become completely 'unaware' of the world:

Sarah: Well what kind of issues are important to you would you say?

Are there any kind of issues that you -

Darcy: You know I don't know -

Sarah: Causes or anything like that

Darcy: I think - I'm just like - I don't have time to - I mean - I've done most of my life just studying and listening to music and watching films and I'm hardly like aware of the world around me as such.

Principally, she feels, to use her own words, like an 'alien' and this is a consequence of the way in which New Labour constructs educational success.

She is the academic front runner:

Darcy: I didn't think I was very popular and the people just thought 'oh yeah Darcy's the one with the As' and I think I did get stereotyped for awhile and now I spose because I'm head girl they still stereotype me - then I don't know if I'm stereotyped as

a boffin anymore - I think maybe I probably stereotype myself as that way. But I don't want to be like that. It's hard

Sarah: How do you want to be?

Darcy: But if you're in that circumstance, you feel left out all the time you don't - you don't feel like you fit in you know - you know you feel like an alien - sometimes you are like just - feel - the thing is when I do feel like I fit in with everybody I still feel a bit like 'do I really want this?' It's like so difficult. I don't know what I really want - I go through all these phases where you know sometimes I'm like oh I can't be arsed, I don't want anything to do with anybody

This then causes ambivalence in relation to others and to her sociality. On the rare occasions when she does 'fit in', she is unsure whether she wants to, perhaps missing or sacrificing her status as the one above the others. This however, only leads to a further retreat into the self, where she cannot contemplate 'having anything to do with anybody'. Of course, in terms of future leadership roles, being slightly apart from everyone else is seen as a valuable quality in new managerialist terms.

### **Alienating Success and Sexuality**

However, while Darcy most felt isolated subjectively, there was some evidence to suggest that she had the respect, at least, of other pupils even if she wasn't popular as such. She was one of six young women in the year group elected by the others to be on the year 11 social committee and staff endorsed this by voting her head girl. Yet I got the sense that Darcy was talking about something much more deep-seated than popularity with her



peers. Her 'alienation' from the society of which she is a part, can be seen as a Marxist/Althusserian alienation. In an important sense she doesn't own the means of production of her educational success, nor does she understand how she has come to have the values that she has, the success seems always precarious and has little intrinsic value. She revealed a sense of weariness with her existence, a sense of meaninglessness about her life.

Darcy: So - I spose at the moment cos everybody's doing stuff - everybody's got social lives and stuff and you feel like really weird that you're like at this age and your only concern is studying whereas like everyone else is enjoying their lives - sometimes you do feel like 'oh am I doing the right thing?'

Sarah: But you do have a social life.

Darcy: NO (*emphasis*) I don't

Sarah: Well you think you don't but like you've mentioned quite a lot of social things - I would call them social

Darcy: I don't think I do. I don't go out with my friends a lot maybe because I'm not close to them but I don't go out with my friends a lot

Sarah: And do they go out by themselves?

Darcy: Yeah

In this extract, Darcy is adamant that she feels the burden of the sacrifices she is making in order to become the high-flying academically successful student. Even after my attempts to construct some of her activities as social, she is adamant that this does not constitute a social life.

I would suggest that, even at its best, this version of success is liable to create individuals who have little ability at sixteen, to deal with the complexities of

living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. While the government's priorities have worked insofar as Darcy has achieved and has a strong sense of personal responsibility with regard to her educational success and a commitment not to rely on anybody else, she cannot care for herself, she has no concept at all of society or social responsibility or even the pleasures of society.

Darcy, as well as being a high achiever academically, is also a successful product for the government in the way she views sexuality. Government advice that pupils should be taught the value of 'delaying' first sexual experience has worked here (DfEE 2000). When asked about sexual relationships Darcy commented:

I don't think I'm ready for all that yet – I just feel like I – I have this thing I've got the whole of my life to do that, I've got a couple of years to study – I would like to... you know – Maybe in university.

The splitting of a sexual self from an academic self is endemic amongst school aged girls. This has been observed in relation to high achieving pupils, by Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody in their research. Of the high achieving girl they write:

She may also be made to feel that femininity is to be struggled over, sometimes renouncing sexuality because the onset of womanhood is too painful to contemplate when pitted against the extraordinary academic efforts she has to make. (Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001: 185)

However, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody do not see such splitting as an essential outcome of the logic of schooling within the context of the Standards Agenda. In this sense, at least, there is no 'may' about it. Heterosexuality will have to be sacrificed. What I found was that the suppression of sexuality amongst schoolgirls in the context of the Standards Agenda has become strengthened as an institutional demand. Whenever I asked about sexuality, or sex and relationships, they always talked about in the context of schooling, even by those young women whom one might describe as socially excluded. This was difficult because much of the time, they may simply have been responding to me as someone in authority, reflecting back at me the institutional demand of sexual delay. Yet every time this happened it did bring into focus just how much of a demand it was. For Darcy, the denial of sexuality or the possibility of sexual relationships now, while it may indeed be fruitful for academic success, actually also contributes to her feeling of disconnectedness from the social world.

### **Disowning Heritage**

Darcy was also unable to tell me much about her complex heritage; it wasn't important to her all absorbing identification as successful student.

Darcy: My Dad's a tool maker.

Sarah: Oh yeah

Darcy: So um he he - he started work when he was about 16 I think - my parents were both born in Africa and then moved to India and they came down here when they were about eleven -

Sarah: Which bit of Africa?

Darcy: South Africa - my Dad's from um - oh I can't remember now - sorry - that's bad - Namibia - yeah I think my Dad's from Namibia. Yeah I think so.

Sarah: And your Mum?

Darcy: I can't remember my Mum's - no no - they were both born in different parts and then then they moved to India - my Mum was really young when she moved to India - she was only like a month or something - and my Dad was a couple of years old or something -

Sarah: Oh right so they moved when they were very young then?

Darcy: Um - they don't remember Africa - they grew up mostly in India and then when they were eleven they came here.

For Darcy her heritage was more a dilemma about how much of it to put on, ethnicity in performance, rather than a way of expressing some authentic sense of selfhood:

Darcy: But I think I've never been into the culture anyway so it's never made much difference to me - it's never really mattered I don't think in a way - but then I know I should cos it is my culture and I know I should keep it going. That's another thing as well, growing up in this country in - you don't know what's expected of you - you know whether you should carry on the culture or whether you should be more British and -

Sarah: That's quite a dilemma isn't it?

Darcy: Yeah it is a dilemma. I mean I think when I was about 12, 13, I went through that dilemma and now I've come out of that and I've decided I don't want to be part of the culture cos - I dunno, I dunno why - because I don't listen to Indian music you know and stuff - I don't like dressing up in their - um dress because like I find it uncomfortable to wear

'What's expected of you', is very important for Darcy and indeed it is a very good question. What does the British government expect of its minority ethnic population in relation to identity? Throughout the interview it became apparent that suppressing her heritage was important to the creation of Darcy's educational success because even if she had wanted to, the pressure of her study simply did not allow her the time to invest in it:

Sarah: So have your parents always spoken English to you then?

Darcy: Yeah - and just maybe a few phrases in Punjabi - the thing with my mum - she's always been like 'oh I should speak more to you. You know you should learn it' cos like my um my Mum's mum is always like telling her to teach us and stuff but I think now we're at that age we don't have the time to do stuff like that any more and to learn - I think my mum's very keen on my sister to learn because like my sister's really into the culture part -

Darcy's younger sister might just have a little time to acquire Punjabi but Darcy definitely does not. Her ambivalence about what is expected of her could be interpreted as a direct result of government educational strategy, which has as its first aim, the creation of greater economic prosperity in Britain (at the inevitable expense of wealth creation in other less developed countries, such as Namibia and India, where Darcy's parents grew up). The government's educational agenda is primarily about the creation of more wealth in the UK. As a direct result of globalization, unskilled labour is no longer required by industry in the UK, which tends to opt for cheaper costs by setting up its manufacturing bases in developing countries and therefore

British education has to create a highly skilled workforce who can operate in a 'knowledge economy'. Charles Clarke was very clear about this in his foreward to the DfES Strategy to 2006. 'Economic prosperity' takes centre stage:

The work of the Department for Education and Skills is of central importance to the Government's agenda. We lead on a set of challenges that are crucial both to the economic prosperity of this country, and to building a fair, equal and inclusive society. This is a great responsibility, but also an enormous opportunity. (DES 2002)

It demands that we accept an implicit invitation to be part of and be loyal to a project of further wealth creation in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain and whatever our ethnicity or connections with other parts of the world, to develop a distinctly British nationalistic outlook on life. David Miliband (Miliband 2004) explained of education that:

excellence should be a resource for a more egalitarian system, not a threat. It can do more than set an example; it can be a locomotive for improvement across the system. (Miliband 2004)

He was writing about a context or a 'system' that is British. The 'egalitarian' part of it relates to Britain alone. This is important because taken for granted in the emphasis on excellence is the provision of excellence for all *of us*. While the government is eager to tell us that we are working in the context of globalisation, its interest is nationalistic and therefore in some respects, it creates boundaries between 'us' and them, where they are ultimately trying

to take money from us, to put it crudely. It is hardly surprising that in order to be a highly successful student, Darcy is unable to give any attention to her heritage and feels deeply ambivalent about it.

Darcy: I always used to feel really alien when they (extended family) were there cos they're all into the culture and doing stuff and they're all kind of so much older than me ...

Sarah: Do you think you're destined to be kind of like on the edge -

Darcy: It sounds that way doesn't it? It sounds that way but I don't want to be that way. I don't. I don't and I don't know how I can change that

The sadness of this is that Darcy finds herself in a situation where not only is she alienated from school but also from her own extended family, which might be an alternative source of support, sociability and pleasure.

The enterprise that is education in the UK is supposed to be underpinned by a sense of Britishness. Government attempts to bolster British identity and pride, for example in the introduction of citizenship ceremonies for new British citizens, are essential because in order to further the generation of wealth it needs to instil a sense of loyalty to Britain. A larger consequence of British economic success is poverty in the developing world. So Darcy is in a very difficult position with regard to her excellence. It might be 'for all' but when scrutinized how far can the all stretch? As we have already seen in chapter 4, the problem was more acute still for the Somali students I worked with in school. Although David Miliband's remit of course is precisely a

British one, in the speech above, the presumption of a univocal British voice means that the chances of a more egalitarian system are non-existent.

'Excellence for all' polices the boundaries of Britishness and deliberately excludes from success those other bodies who are unwilling to sign up to a project of British wealth creation. Miliband goes on to consider how difference can best be provided for within education and government more generally:

We need central and local government to speak up for the fragmented voice of the consumer, and make good the market failure that allows underperformance to continue. I stress the importance of local government: a Britain of a 100 strong, vibrant and challenging city governments would be a great place. (Miliband 2004)

The 'fragmented voice of the consumer', in an educational context, is the voice of parents and adult students. Yet however fragmented this consumer is in government rhetoric, it is always a consumer who buys into the project of creating more British success and British strength and vibrancy. During the data collection for this thesis I was in conversation with a young Somali woman, Nazrin, whose story is told in chapter four of in this thesis. We were talking about her life experiences and she was telling me about her time in Ethiopia. She explained how strange she found it that some people in Britain felt they had not enough, whereas most people in Ethiopia had literally nothing – no material possessions at all. For Nazrin, signing up to a project



of British wealth creation was an obscene project. It meant that in order to be successful within an educational system designed with exactly that project in mind, she would have to undertake some highly complex and painful identity work. Nazrin is an example of a young woman who, in the government's terms is at risk of social exclusion. She is a priority in its attempts to raise educational standards. The problem is that this aim, while appearing ethical in the sense that it has at its core the attempt to raise the economic well-being of the least well off is actually deeply unethical because it is at the expense of some of the poorest people in the world and Nazrin is not in a position where she can happily ignore this. She cannot produce the responsible selfishness of success.

### **Splitting Mind from Body: Producing Responsible Selfishness**

I would argue that the splitting of the mind from the body is a requirement of educational success, a body which is of course produced as gendered, sexualised, raced and classed and a body which causes the government constant anxiety. Why is educational attainment – the mind's achievement – so haunted by and dependent on the dimensions of the bodies in which those minds are situated and what strategies can be put in place to get around the problem of the body? Moreover, I want to suggest that this split does not simply split the mind from its own body but also from the bodies of others

and that in the globalised economy of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain this splitting constitutes an essential educational process, in the inculcation of the capitalist values of what we might call responsible selfishness –a determination not to be a burden to the State and therefore to accrue as much material wealth as possible. This responsible selfishness is key in the construction of successful academic identities at school.

The will to succeed produces the investment needed to undertake the mind/body split in individual pupils but it is a constant struggle, for those who succeed, for those who are committed to trying to do so and for those who don't. Darcy's education, apparently successful, meant she had become fundamentally disconnected with society. She feels acutely her commodification as 'the A student' (Kenway and Bullen 2001) and is made to feel this by others. The cost of this has been a radical loss of power for her as a social actor in and of the world.

There are further contradictions here. The consequences of 'splitting' the mind from the body secure a selfishness that is not perceived as stereotypically feminine and this means that the successful woman is often seen as sacrificing her 'natural' femininity and indeed sees herself as doing so. Darcy's mother, according to Darcy, is very anxious about her inability to

be sociable for example and to get on with people, which we might argue is one of the most prized qualities of middle-class femininity:

Darcy: It's probably the way I am because my mum's always telling me off 'oh are you going to make conversation?' and things you know -

Sarah: Do you think you do find it that hard to make conversation?

Darcy: Yeah - I think I do - I have like this image that like people don't want to talk to me and that makes it hard as well to actually talk to somebody and then sometimes I just don't want to talk to people you know - I can't - I just -

Sarah: Can't be bothered?

Darcy: Yeah I can't be bothered cos I know that whatever they're gonna say it's gonna not be really interesting - anyway yeah - I think that's a lot - but like my mum always says that I should make conversation because she's like scared I'm going to end up being a snob and she's told me that she thinks like people see me as a snob because like 'you do well at school and and you don't talk to people' - also you know I dunno - it felt really hurtful when she said that the other day but I spose it's true.

Sarah: I don't know that it's true - I wouldn't have said you were a snob.

Darcy: Because - I wouldn't say I'm a snob but maybe people view me that way - she said you're not a snob but people may view you that way cos you don't approach them and you make out they might take it the wrong way and think that you're not talking to them cos you're better than them not because you can't talk to them and she's scared that people are going to think that when that's not the case

Sarah: Um

Darcy: But then I said well then people can think what they like of me because I am who I am - and if people don't like that then they have to accept it - I don't care - so I don't know. I don't know what to do half the time because I do try - I mean - no I mean I don't try but -whenever I go somewhere I think ok maybe I should talk to this person and then I get there and I just I dunno find it difficult and everyone seems so close to each other and stuff and you just don't fit in.

Darcy's sense of her own social ineptitude worries her. Neither can she secure her femininity through heterosexualising interactions with men because that would mean risking her educational success. Darcy is quite clear about this. In the course of the interview she expressed her horror about what had happened to her older brother, once he had acquired a girl friend.

My brother has a girl friend - my parents don't know. I mean my mum doesn't really know - oh I don't know maybe they do know cos ... but she's a really strange person and she has really turned his head the other way cos um, his GCSEs, he didn't really do too badly in them. He's never worked hard like me and my sister have but he hasn't - he's an average student. He got Bs and Cs for his GCSEs but last year he failed his AS's and I think it was because of this girl cos you know he got so hung up with her and stuff and it's - I think it's put me off a lot as well cos I think well if someone's gonna do that to me I don't really want that to happen

Her brother's failure in examinations and his sexual relationship with his girlfriend are inextricably linked for Darcy. He failed his AS levels 'because of this girl', who turned his head away from study and towards his own pleasure. Darcy took it as a warning. There are of course, other ways in which to interpret this. He might have been too lazy to revise, regardless of his girlfriend. It is a little harsh to scapegoat his girlfriend as being entirely responsible for his academic failure. However, Darcy was convinced the two were connected, perhaps because that is the constant official message of government advice on sex to teenagers and in fact, constitutes a more widely

held morality about sexual relationships before marriage. The effect was, as she says, 'to put me off a lot'. Sexual relationships are capable of causing one's academic downfall.

## **Conclusion**

It is hard to underestimate the effect of the government's Standards Agenda. It is the driving force in compulsory education. A school cannot develop any educational aims, which function outside of or in contradiction to the need to improve pupil performance. For example, one might argue that it would be more ethical, in Darcy's case, to spend curricular time re-engaging her with society, with her culture, giving her a sense of purpose in life, and perhaps as a consequence of that, sacrificing the A/A\* grades. However, that would be seen within the Standards Agenda as simply, 'lowering expectations', which is not acceptable. Furthermore, it is an agenda that is unscrupulous about how success is produced. Public humiliation of failure is routine, from 'naming and shaming' tactics, through the publication of league tables or individual students' results. The shame in failure also dominated Darcy's interview.

Much of the government's educational agenda verges on the indoctrination of young people and indeed of their teachers. It is an educational agenda that

does not ask young people or their teachers to contribute to the content of lessons, values nor increasingly the pedagogy of what is to be learnt. These are already set. They are constructed as consumers of knowledge, rather than producers of it. This can be seen most clearly in the scripted lessons produced as part of the Key Stage 3 Literacy Strategy but also more generally in curriculum documents, policy documents and advice documents, particularly for example the advice produced on Sex and Relationships Education in schools. What is more subtle however, is the way in which the values embedded in this education are reproduced. I have already suggested it is about developing a 'selfishness' in young people and a sense of allegiance to furthering British prosperity. The Standards Agenda marks out educational achievement and the process of educating as the teaching of Cartesian rationality. Education has become the space of fantasies about the power of reason coupled with new technology and its capacity to generate wealth, health and the eradication of poverty in this country:

Access to learning and services through information and communications technology is vital and must be available in new and creative ways for learners of all ages. We must prevent a digital divide where those who cannot use or afford new technology are disadvantaged. (DES 2002)

Embedded in its success is a process of disembodiment, both of one's own corporeality, and from the body of society as a whole. It is the form

successful education must take in the west to further the aims of global capitalism. In relation to the FE sector Carole Leathwood explains:

It is easy to see, then, the discourses of marketization, managerialism, individualism and new technology as whole heartedly post modern. Yet I want to argue that there are clear linkages between these discourses that represent a unity of underlying philosophy and, indeed, that incorporate assumptions and trends that have been evident throughout the history of Western thought. Far from disrupting notions of the unified rational subject, the effect is to reinforce the humanist ideal...a common feature is the denial of the body and the reification of the mind, of reason and rationality, and that this binary division is inevitably hierarchical, a division based on domination and subordination.(Leathwood 1998: 258)

We can see the same processes at work in compulsory education today. In another recent speech '*Personalised Learning: Building a New Relationship with Schools*' given in Belfast on 8.1.04, David Milliband, the minister for schools, outlined the key factors of effective education for 'raising standards' as 'personalised learning'; 'intelligent accountability'; 'the single conversation' and 'information and data management'. What he presents us with is a system of education in which the key aim of raising standards in terms of GCSE and Post 16 qualifications is achieved by subordinating emotions to 'intelligent accountability' in a streamlined 'single conversation' through rationally given performance indicators and a concept of learning as an individualised experience of rational progress through carefully defined targets, set by close analysis of information and data relating to prior attainment. It is a scientific system.

It is also a cruel system and one which involves young people in a constant process of self-surveillance and self-monitoring. Perhaps one of the most exhausting aspects of the interview with Darcy was her constant need to turn over everything she said or did or thought to qualify it and refine it such that sometimes there appeared to be no opinion and no Darcy left at all. Darcy was completely traumatized by her inability to form friendships and at one point in the interview, when we were talking about her move to a local sixth form college the following September, she hinted at this difficulty and I tried to reassure her:

Sarah: I'm sure - you know - I think probably - you know once you start doing classes and stuff you will find that you will make friends and meet people and that it'll be fine. But are you quite worried about it really?

Darcy: I am - I'm terrified actually.

Sarah: So do you want like - would you like to have a close circle of friends?

Darcy: Yeah I would because like I've never had that - I would so yeah I'd really like that but I don't know how um - but then I spose it's me as well I mean ok - I don't know what image people have of me but I'm a very quiet person and my mum tells me that a lot and I s'pose I'm really bad at like making conversation and stuff so I s'pose it's like me as well it's not just like other people not wanting to be friends with me but it's probably because ...

The constant turning inwards to the self, the self-monitoring and self-critique were present throughout the interview. This anxiety was the by-product of



Darcy's success. Success is never achieved but it has to be constantly sustained and new targets set. Her success was never enough.

This chapter has shown how the pressure to be successful was managed by one young woman, through a punishing process of disembodiment, in the attempt to create the unified rational subject. Not only did that mean not having a sexuality but also limited any social interaction where she would have to play an embodied role. As a consequence of this she found herself feeling like an alien in society. Her knowledge and her success were not owned by her. The danger for Darcy, was that the constant pressure to live outside of her body, would become unmanageable and that she would suffer mental health problems as a result.

## Chapter 8

### Crushing News: 'You're not going to like to hear this...I love her'

#### Introduction

The quotation which forms the title of this chapter is taken from an interview with Ann, a sixteen year old white woman. In this chapter I explore the dynamics of young women, emergent lesbian sexuality and success at school. Ann is talking to me about her 'crush' on one of her female teachers. Here, she makes the incorrect assumption that her 'love' for this teacher is not something I am going to want to hear<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, what emerged throughout the interview was that Ann was ashamed of her feelings and experienced them as abnormal. She was troubled because these feelings were for a teacher and for a woman and she found both aspects of her desire problematic, although the fact that her desire was for a woman was distinctly more troubling to her. Ann made a very serious attempt at suicide in her final year of school because she found the crush so difficult to deal with. She took an overdose when her parents and brother had gone out for the evening

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<sup>1</sup> In fact it was relief I felt at the time, as I was worried she was harbouring a plot to kill, kidnap or harm the teacher concerned.

and was only discovered unconscious because her brother returned unexpectedly early.

### **Learning about Crushes**

This chapter aims to explore, through Ann's words, how and why this crush developed and the purposes it served. 'Crushes' hold both pleasures and dangers for those that experience them and for those who are the recipients or objects of them. I want to use Ann's crush as an example to make two points. I suggest that good teaching often incites such desire in pupils and students, whether they are of school age or adults, but because of the political and social context of compulsory schooling in the UK today, teachers have to quickly disavow any responsibility they may have had in creating desire in their pupils if it takes the form of desire for them. In the process of this disavowal, I suggest, they are actually responsible for an unintended callousness towards pupils which, in effect, causes significant damage to pupils' sense of well-being and educational progress, and thus signifies a far greater abuse of power, than any spurious accusation by pupils, parents or staff which might result from a more thoughtful recognition of and response to the 'crush' or indeed, 'crushed' pupil concerned, on the part of the teacher. Finally, I argue that for young women who are developing non-heterosexualities this callousness is even greater in its effect. Indeed I show that in

Ann's case this was a very significant factor in her suicide attempt, leading her to become one of the statistics for young queers attempting suicide.

### **Telling the Story of the Crush**

Ann's story was one that she was eager to tell. As Ken Plummer (Plummer 1995) has pointed out stories have an historical truth and a narrative truth. It is the narrative truth that concerns me here, what the story meant to Ann, the work the story does in helping Ann to constitute her identity in the present. To start with Ann suggested her 'crush' – a term she didn't like especially, was motivating of her attendance, her progress and her enjoyment at school:

Ann: Um year 8, I liked the teachers, I liked the atmosphere and the work wasn't too difficult; and a lot of the time I just didn't really want to get out of bed. I just really didn't want to come in. Um, year 9 I got more into my school work, spent more time um actually working and being in school but basically I still didn't want to be going to school. In year 10 it completely turned around and I started to really like coming to school and I got on and I actually enjoyed being in school.

Sarah: And what do you think made you change in that way?

Ann: Um I don't know, um, there was a situation with a teacher that might have changed my view...

Ann then proceeded to tell me about her feelings for this teacher. At this stage her crush was positive. What is equally interesting is the fact that although Ann suggested she liked school up to this point and found the work relatively easy, she was much more attached to the idea of staying in bed in the morning. This is dis-affection. Ann came to school, though she implied

here that her attendance was not good, in years 8 and 9. She liked the teachers and liked the atmosphere but it held no affective pull for her. It was her feelings for the teacher which eventually provided that pull.

### **Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Crushes**

In her psychoanalytic inquiry of learning '*Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*', Deborah Britzman (1998) shows how education works on the assumption that 'learning proceeds by way of direct apprehension' (page 4), and that it rests on a fantasy that 'There must be – a certain knowledge and a certainty in knowledge, that can be recognized, developed, examined, and urged through incremental measurement, grading schemes, age distribution, and diplomas' (1998: 2). We can see this very clearly in many Western education systems today. In the UK the standards agenda, obsessively measures, grades, records, sets targets, sets more targets, for LEAs, for teachers and for learners. Britzman (1998) argues that pedagogy is the new object of incitement and work on pedagogy, on constructing the ideal, incrementally staged curriculum, where pupils pass through levels smoothly and logically, taught by preferably, advanced skills teachers, is at an all time high in the UK. Britzman suggests however, that in reality, 'development is in fact unruly and fragile' (Britzman 1998: 2), that there are deeply unconscious processes going on in the learner and teacher and that not paying attention to these is

unethical. She suggests that 'pedagogy might begin with the assumptions that identities are continually being made and not received, and that the work of the curriculum is to incite libidinal identifications, not close them down' (Britzman 1998: 76). In this case, we have Ann, for whom all the pedagogic work of the Standards Agenda was nearly lost, because the effort of getting up in the morning appeared to be too much for her. Getting to school and making progress happened when her crush developed and a new object of incitement emerged.

Britzman draws on Freud's comments on the way in which students vie for the teacher's love and observes that 'it seems as though the student must pass through the figure of the teacher on the way to knowledge'. Freud named this passing moment "transferential relations of love" (Britzman 1998: 40). As Ann discussed her crush further, these transferential relations certainly seemed to be occurring.

The narration of Ann's first meeting captured the moment of the birth of the crush. Ann chose to retell it several times in the interview. Here I explore one of her later retellings of the first meeting story. This first meeting took place in an ICT lesson. The teacher concerned had temporarily taken over the group for one lesson a week, because the head teacher who usually took the

class had a weekly meeting at this time. Ann told me of her efforts to deny her feelings for the teacher and in this context brought up the notion of 'love at first sight'. She drew upon a discourse of romance, to make sense of her feelings:

Ann: People always ask me do you believe in love at first sight and I always say no but when they hear about ...those that know...hear about this, they sort of think well isn't that the same thing?

Sarah: Was it love at first sight?

Ann: Um, when I first met her I was absolutely petrified, um, I'd just been talking to my friend and she started talking to me so I just – my friend's just sitting there laughing ... I dunno ...through that night – it was last lesson and all that night I just couldn't stop thinking about her – and it's been the same since.

Sarah: What did she say to you?

Ann: I think it was something about the key channel for the...  
*(We both collapse into laughter)*

There was a deliciousness in Ann's narration, a pleasure in recalling and retelling how it happened. When the teacher first spoke to her, Ann was petrified – frozen to the spot – and fearful – and from that moment on she wasn't able to stop thinking about this woman. We were both evidently complicit in the understanding of this grand moment when love struck because we both laughed aloud when it emerged that the teacher was discussing nothing more intense than a particular IT skill. The lesson was brought sharply into focus, almost as an inappropriate intrusion. However, it is through the explanation, the discussion of learning, that the crush is formed. In Anne's mind at least, this is the point beyond which she has no

control over her thoughts or emotions. She is possessed. It is the moment at which she passes through the figure of the teacher on the way to knowledge.

### **Closeting the Crush: Managing Anti-Lesbianism**

It also became clear that Ann's feelings helped her explore a possibly emergent lesbian sexuality. Ann's friends were very important to her. In the following extract she described telling them about how she felt and then defined more carefully how exactly she did feel.

Sarah: How did they (friends) react?

Ann: Um, some of them once they sort of – I didn't say I'd got a crush on her or anything. I just said I felt something. The majority of them acted – just seemed fine with it. Um mainly, I've only told people this year how I felt.

....

Ann: I spose it's different things that are sort of there about the whole thing that gets in the way. Changes it.

Sarah: What do you mean?

Ann: For the most part if you say that to somebody then a lot of people wouldn't react very well. They'd be really cautious.

Sarah: What if you told someone you loved them?

Ann: No. If you told someone that you loved someone of the same gender, then some people would act pretty strangely about it, um, and some people would stop being friends with them or they'd just change the way they'd behave round them. Stuff like that.

Ann identified several problems here. She did tell her friends about her feelings before she understood what they were but that meant she was still unsure about their possible reaction to her new understanding. Subsequent



reflection on these feelings produced a different understanding of their meaning and this was probably Ann's clearest statement about what she actually did feel. Ann's feelings, although enjoyed at times, more often troubled her. Here, what specifically seemed difficult for her to deal with was the fact that she had these feelings for someone of the same sex, rather than the fact that she was a teacher and what was troubling about that in turn, was the reaction of her female friends.

When we began to explore further the reaction of Ann's friends, what emerged unsurprisingly, was a mixture of those who were fine about it and those who were not and yet there was a partly paranoid and partly real fear that others, who Ann knew less well, would react badly to it:

Two of my friends who I told it to were – both of them were fine about it. Both of them support me over it, um but er, at least one of my friends, I asked her what she would do if one of the gang came in one day and said that they were les... fancied someone of the same gender and she, she sort of said that she felt she would probably stop being friends with them even if it was someone she'd been friends with for quite a while.

While Ann did not want to identify as lesbian at this point, she was eager to explore how friends would react to lesbian desire. It is interesting, here, that whereas she could tell two of her friends about her feelings of love for the teacher, she was less able, while also wishing to consider the possibility that these feelings might not be simply towards the teacher but also indicative of

lesbian desire or identity. The hypothetical question and answer did not go well. The friend confirmed Ann's worst fears: she would stop being friends, even if it had been a long friendship. Not all was bad news however. Ann recounted two much more positive responses.

In this next account, Ann took both aspects of the troubling nature of her feelings and explored them: firstly that they were for a teacher, which she could deal with first and more easily; secondly, and more significantly, the fact that she had these feelings for a woman. In the following extract there was also an interesting slippage from her feelings for her friends to her feelings for teachers. The extract here is split into two parts:

Sarah: Does it make you feel like you're different from your mates?

Ann: Sometimes, yeah.

Sarah: Because you've been through it all and they haven't?

Ann: Um not so much that it's – the way I usually put it is that their feelings are normal.

Sarah: Ok so you feel your feelings are not normal.

Ann: Usually yeah.

Sarah: How are your feelings not normal?

Ann: I fell for a teacher for one thing.

Sarah: We're not so bad

*Laughter*

Ann: Urrrr – teachers I usually see as friends, as people I respect, colleagues.

Sarah: Yeah.

Ann: I never think of them sort of as that way ... relationships.

Sarah: OK

Ann's perception of teachers generally is that we are people she respects. We are also 'friends' and 'colleagues', but ones who are off bounds for romantic relationships. However, for Ann, her female friends are also off bounds for romantic relationships and one wonders at this point, whether Ann was displacing more general feelings of lesbian desire onto a teacher, because she can take the place of a 'friend', where those feelings might simply prove too difficult to negotiate with her actual friends. The confusion about her relationship with teachers reminds us of Gill Valentine's 'Ode to a Geography Teacher' (Valentine 1997) where she remarks how easy it is for a lecturer to use a sympathetic student as a confidant, especially as some students, usually the more talented, befriend staff. Valentine argues that staff can take advantage of student crushes and use them to feel good about themselves. The confusion, therefore, can work both ways in a crush.

The conversation continued to deal with her feelings for the teacher:

Sarah: But you feel like your feelings are abnormal when compared to everybody else's?

Ann: I usually feel like that when my friends are asking me what is it about the whole thing that bothers you. One of my friends, we had a conversation whereby – they um – she was saying if it was a male teacher would it bother you so much or if it was just a woman not a teacher would it bother you so much?

Sarah: Good question. What did you say?

Ann: Um, first one, if it was a male teacher I said I spose it wouldn't bother me so much, um, but when she asked me er, if it was

another woman, if she wasn't a teacher, I said it would probably make things worse.

Sarah: Worse? How worse?

Ann: It's never really been something that – it's not really something I've been taught that's acceptable. I mean my brother, the way he used to always talk about it, he just made it sound like it was completely no go and it's always seemed like the idea of two people of the same gender wasn't something that was socially accepted. It wasn't something that was meant to be, so ...

Sarah: And do you think that would stop you?

Ann: If it was just...(seeking clarification)

Sarah: No, I mean because it's not socially acceptable, would that, would that – because I know this myself, because families can react very badly and that sort of would that – would that initially stop you having those feelings? Would it actually make you say right ok there's no way I'm going to do this because it's just too much shit.

Ann: If it was someone that it could actually form something with, then, I would definitely keep clear of it. I dunno how ...just get away from it.

Sarah: Would you? Even though that thing might actually give you a lot of happiness?

Ann: Um, the main point is my family. I don't – I don't know but I don't think they would accept the idea, but mainly it's my own acceptance. I don't know that I'd accept it.

Sarah: And what's your problem with it?

Ann: I dunno. It's the idea of two people who are the same gender.

Sarah: Yeah

Ann: Seems strange. You know the thought of it usually scares me.

In this extract, it was clear that Ann had discussed her feelings in some detail with at least one of her friends. The hypothetical situation that she might love a woman who was not a teacher was terrifying to Ann. As far as she was concerned, it was triply unacceptable. More widely, she understood lesbianism as something that was socially unaccepted and secondly she felt also that her family would not be able to accept it and would reject her. Her

older brother provides the most overtly homophobic views as recounted by Ann in the interview, but he is also the victim of homophobia himself. Finally, she identified lesbianism as being both strange and scary, so much so that were she to be in danger of becoming lesbian, she would have to escape, although she confessed she didn't know how she would do this. Her heightened anxiety about this suggested its extreme importance to Ann. Her feelings had to be split off from herself and contained elsewhere – somewhere safe – in a female teacher, where there was no danger of them ever being able to bite back. It is ironic that Ann appeared more willing to consider a relationship with a male member of staff than with a woman who was not a teacher. For her, a relationship with a male teacher was much more 'normal' than a relationship with a woman and we see clearly here the power of compulsory heterosexuality in her life, as potentially abusive relationships (with male teachers) are rendered normal, whereas legitimate lesbian ones with an out of school friend cannot be countenanced.

### **Sex and Desire in the Family**

Ann had further observations to make both about the social unacceptability of lesbianism particularly in school, and a great deal about the homophobia which circulated in her family as a regulatory discourse for monitoring social behaviour but also as a condition for a positive relationship with her father.

Ann was able to recount several anecdotes which centred on the portrayal of lesbian and gay people on TV, which her family would watch and ridicule. However, Ann also explained her own use of homophobia to consolidate a positive relationship with her father and, in the competition for his approval, this also allowed her to put down her brother. The jokes also had the effect of putting the issue of homosexuality at a distance. When we explored the relationships in her family more carefully, what emerged was a strongly possessive relationship between Ann and her father, such that Ann's sexuality seemed to her not to be even a consideration for her father; whereas he seemed obsessively worried about his son's possibly gay sexuality, his daughter's sexuality did not feature in his anxieties as recounted by her. It became very apparent that feelings of love were associated with feelings of possession. Ann felt very clearly that she belonged to her father, was 'Daddy's girl'. Ann seemed to feel very trapped/suffocated by her father. He restricted her behaviour. For example, Ann felt she was not allowed any sexual relationships, so channelling sexual desire into someone as unattainable as a teacher was a way of avoiding the pain that any sexual relationship might bring in terms of its costs to her relationship with her father. The intensity, power and uniqueness of Ann's feelings for her teacher, however, provided a challenge to her father's possessiveness and took her away from him, at least psychically.

It also emerged that Ann projected a sense of her own failure to become heterosexual, her disappointment, on to her dead great grandmother.

Ann's great grandmother featured at an earlier point in the interview when it emerged that one of the reasons she thought she was attracted to the teacher was that she reminded her of her great grandmother. Given the admiration Ann felt for her great grandmother and her apparent closeness to her up to her death, and the fact that she felt her feelings for the teacher would be letting her grandmother down, then it becomes very interesting that the teacher is identified as someone who reminds Ann of her.

Partly I see a connection between her (the teacher) and my great gran who died when I was seven and sometimes I used to think ...when I remembered my great gran, I could just see some sort of similarity to the way Miss xxx acts.

Possibly the figure of the great grandmother functions as an aspect of the crush to allow Ann not to be outcast from her family. After all she cannot be excluded and outcast, if the person she has fallen in love with is somehow identified with the family itself in the figure of the great grandmother. It is also possible that, because her great grandmother seemed to believe in Ann in a way that she never talked about in relation to the rest of her family, this sense of affirmation produced an erotic charge that became something that is subsequently a trigger for Ann, in her terms of sexual desire. Affirmation from someone produces sexual desire for them.

Ann's crush, therefore, seemed to fulfil several purposes for her; it enabled her to explore lesbian desire in relative safety in the sense that it was unobtainable; and it enabled her to explore identifications with her great grandmother and the conditions in which feelings of love emerged for her. Furthermore, while she used homophobia to consolidate a relationship with her father, one of the functions of her crush was to set someone up as powerful enough to present a challenge to his possessiveness, which was becoming burdensome. Issues of transference and projection are apparent here, in the image of her beloved great grandmother. The effects of the crush, initially at least, were to improve Ann's attendance, progress and commitment to her education. Her suicide attempt within six months of acknowledging these feelings was actually an effect of the social context within which these feelings were understood and the inability of schooling to address that context. It is to this that we now turn our attention.

### **The Negative Impact of Teacher Anxiety about Pupil Desire**

The UK government makes a cynical use of teachers as inspirational in its recruitment policies. In so doing they draw on an image in popular culture, through literature and film and in adults' personal stories of teachers who changed their lives. Key texts in this genre would include *'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie'* (Spark 1962), *'Dead Poets' Society'* (Weir 1989), *'Dangerous Minds'*



(Smith 1995) and more recently '*Mona Lisa's Smile*' (Newell 2003). In these texts, teaching is to do with love, inspiration and the power of one individual to change the lives positively of a group of young people. Epstein and Johnson argue that 'good teaching is inherently seductive in a metaphoric sense...it can be said to carry a kind of erotic charge' (1998: 135). They explain that they are using the term 'erotic' 'in a much broader sense of excitement, passion and love' (1998: 135). This view of teaching is one that is fraught with danger for teachers, however. To even suggest that teaching is or can be erotic or that pupils can be seduced into learning seems almost taboo. Policing the boundaries of pupil-teacher relationships has intensified, such that teachers in secondary schools are advised that any touching of a pupil is inappropriate. The new Sexual Offences Act 2003, for the first time, explicitly criminalizes sexual relationships between pupils between the ages of 16-18 and staff, with a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment and, if convicted, being placed on the sex offenders register. I am not advocating or even condoning sexual relationships between staff and pupils. However, there are differences between relationships between staff and pupils which use an erotic charge in a way which is exploitative of power and inequality and those that use it productively and positively to help pupils to learn. The dangers for teachers are huge. A crush by one's pupil leaves one open to a charge of exploitation and the penalties are now so high, that teachers can be

forgiven for turning their backs on these pupils and running away from the situation.

One of Ann's greatest concerns, for example, involved a rumour, spread by her friend, that there was actually something going on between herself and the teacher on whom she had her crush:

Ann: Well um, when we first met it was just something, I just didn't really know how to relate to the teacher. It was just a feeling that there was something about them, um, so um, tried to inform the teacher and my friends found out about it and one of them thought she'd use it as an opportunity to make my life difficult, so that's why I ended up splitting up with her cos one of them thought it was fun to make my life difficult, cos there was something...that was the problem... you might as well know what I'm talking about; the way I felt to do with the teacher.

Sarah: And how did you feel to do with the teacher?

Ann: To be honest in the beginning I wasn't sure it was just something.

Sarah: Do you mean like a sort of crush thing?

Ann: That's what I realized it was later but first there was just something about the teacher I just couldn't work out what

Sarah: Maybe love?

Ann: (*emphatic*) Yeah, that's how I felt about it.

Sarah: And so some horrible little friend ...what did she do?

Ann: Um, she thought it was funny to make jokes and put rumours round the school. Um get everyone thinking that there was something going on between me and the teacher.

Ann was worried. She hadn't intended any accusation of improper relations between herself and the teacher and these 'rumours' about her and her teacher could affect both their reputations in the school as 'good' pupil and

'good' teacher respectively. Ann was also in the iniquitous position that, in the event that these rumours were taken seriously, she would feel solely responsible for them. Indeed she explained that her suicide attempt stemmed from the possibility that these rumours had got back to the teacher concerned or even worse, that she might have been disciplined because of them:

I spose that (the suicide attempt) was mainly...I thought...I mean at one point she (the teacher) seemed pretty on edge and I thought that it was because of something I'd done. I was so paranoid about the whole thing that I just thought I'd done something to upset her or – or – because a friend of mine had told me that um, she thought the rumours had got back to the teacher. I thought, my God, oh shit! I just really thought that she wanted me out of the way, so I just thought get out of her way.

When she came round in hospital, Ann asked her parents to apologise to the teacher on her behalf. They failed to do so and Ann continued to be plagued by feelings of guilt about what had happened, or what she imagined had happened. Once she went back to school, one of Ann's friends told the teacher concerned that Ann had tried to commit suicide over her. According to Ann the teacher asked her if this was true and Ann confirmed it. Ann continued her narration of what happened next:

Ann: Er, the following day I didn't go into school, um more my parents' choice than mine but I spose I didn't really want to go in. I'd seen her that afternoon cos my friend phoned me to meet, um, and the following week she was acting casual. She (the teacher) asked me a question which I thought was pretty strange, cos she'd worked something out, but I dunno, she just left it at that. It wasn't discussed properly.

Sarah: What did she ask you?

Ann: She asked me why did I go to school so early every morning which I mean... a lot of the teachers had asked me why I go in so early, but I was just shocked that she asked that, after she'd been told and I sort of wondered if she was waiting for me to say cos I wanted to see her or something stupid like that but I just said 'cos I prefer being in school'.

Ann found this question deliberately demeaning and humiliating. It was seen by her as an attempt to disown any responsibility for Ann's crush. As Ann wondered if it was something the teacher had already 'worked out', 'been told' in fact, the question appeared designed to force another confession from Ann and nothing was ever 'discussed properly'. This meant that Ann never got any sense of closure, nor any acknowledgment that these things do happen in teaching and were not simply a feature of her 'abnormality' as she saw it. The effect of the teacher walking away meant that Ann had to take responsibility for all of it and had eventually to accept the construction of herself by her parents and the school as having a significant mental health problem, requiring psychiatric attention. I am not suggesting that Ann did not have any mental health problems or that she did not benefit from psychiatric interventions, even though she resented them.<sup>1</sup> I am suggesting that Ann is not to be held solely responsible to account for her feelings

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<sup>1</sup> However, I am reminded here of Sedgwick's article 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay' Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay. Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. W. Michael. Minneapolis London, University of Minnesota Press: 69-81., in which the homophobia of psychiatry is explored.

because they were created in the dynamics of the classroom and had the potential to be and indeed were, for a time, positive. Neither can we blame the teacher concerned for evidently being unable to deal with Ann's feelings. There is scant attention paid in staff training to sexuality, outside of the prohibition of touch. The teacher can have had little notion of the functions the crush fulfilled for Ann and probably felt it inappropriate to find out. Given the culture in which secondary school teachers work in relation to sexuality, it is hardly surprising that the teacher concerned wanted Ann out of the way, as Ann so poignantly put it.

Epstein and Johnson (1998) suggest the need to distinguish the erotics of teaching which work in a good way and those that are exploitative. Tellingly, they comment:

The failure to have such a debate (in schools) serves to (re)produce the closeting of sexuality in school contexts and, thereby, to increase the danger of exploitative erotic dynamics through a failure to recognize them. (1998: 127)

In the end, Ann was asked not to come into school after her examinations, as the teacher concerned was beginning to find her presence very difficult. The sense of rejection here must have been overwhelming. Ann was rejected not only in the terms of her 'crush' but also because of her sexuality and even as a learner. The failure to debate or even acknowledge the intricacies of what

Ann felt and what was happening in terms of the relationship between teacher and student, increased the exploitative erotic dynamics of the situation and not only made it difficult for Ann to be in school but, as noted above, led to a very serious and nearly successful suicide attempt.

One of Ann's greatest difficulties was that this crush had enabled her initially to begin to deal with the complex homophobic dynamics at home and to consider lesbianism and the idea of lesbian identity. The paucity of any information about gay sexuality in school, or any groups which young people might attend or any opportunities to place themselves in gay situations to experiment, meant that the crush became Ann's invented way of doing this, of attempting to open up a lesbian/gay space. This was closed down for her as well.

### **Finding Safe Gay Learning Space**

At the end of our interview Ann told me very confidently that she knew that she was going to attend University and she knew which one. When I asked her about this she said that she was going to go to South Bank University because she knew one of the professors there. She then qualified this by saying that she didn't exactly know him, but she'd seen him on the TV and it said that this was where he worked. I asked who that professor was and she

told me he was called Professor Weeks<sup>1</sup>. I asked what he was talking about on TV and she said that he had been on late at night talking about sex and the media. I asked her what she wanted to do at University and she told me that she wanted to do Business Studies. I said that I didn't think she'd be seeing much of Professor Weeks if she did Business Studies and she said that did not matter because she would still be able to see him walking down the corridor and around the place. Whilst I admire Ann's insightfulness in choosing Jeffrey Weeks as her mentor, is it really a good idea to plan one's future academic career on a chance meeting with him in a corridor? What Professor Weeks represented to her was a confident gay use of space. It was as if he made South Bank gay as he walked through its corridors. He opened the space for talk about sexuality and knowledge and his reputation and sheer academic clout meant that he afforded protection for those who needed that space. For Ann that meant that she would be able to walk and talk there as well, in a way in which she could never do in school. It was just poignant that she had been so crushed by what had happened to her that she needed to imagine Jeffrey Weeks on her side when contemplating university.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Weeks is one of the foremost researchers of sexuality in the UK. His work includes, *Sex, Politics and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality since 1880* Weeks, J. (1981). Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1880. Harlow, Longman.; *Sexuality and Its Discontents* Weeks, J. (1985). Sexuality and Its Discontents. London, Routledge. and *Sexuality* Weeks, J. (1986). Sexuality. London, Tavistock.

## **The Marginalisation of Issues in Lesbian and Gay Achievement**

The standards agenda in schools marginalizes sexuality issues and this adversely affects lesbian, gay, bisexual and other non-normatively heterosexual or 'queer' teenagers. The following information is taken from a document produced by the Connexions Service in England, which replaced the Careers' Service. The Connexions service was a high profile government funded initiative, designed to be exemplary of New Labour's 'joined up thinking' in relation to public services, dealing with each young person through a holistic approach. However, Connexions workers have been so concerned about the stories told to them by young lesbian, gay and bisexual students, that together with the Terence Higgins Trust, they have started to set up LGB youth groups, as so few are in existence.

### **4.1 Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health**

Discriminatory attitudes to homosexuality, and the invisibility of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals within society can have a profound effect on the emotional health and well being of young people. For many young LGB people coping with a sense of 'difference' within a youth culture which is based on 'fitting in', the sense of isolation experienced and the rejection by family and friends takes its toll. Young people who are victims of bullying or harassment face additional stresses. Research suggests that young lesbian, gay and bisexual people are particularly affected by mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.

- One in five young LGB people have attempted suicide.
  - Those young LGB people who have experienced bullying at school are more likely to be affected by poor mental health.
- (Connexions Service 2003)



### **4.3 Academic Achievement**

Young LGB people who experience homophobic bullying are likely to truant or drop out of education. Recent research has shown that 75% of young LGB people bullied at school have a history of absenteeism and truancy, despite being academically proficient.  
(Connexions Service 2003)

In one respect it is startling to me that there is nothing on the Standards website relating to lesbian, gay or bisexual pupils. Given that the information reported in the Connexions document here, means that the government is aware of this situation and that its number one priority is said to be improving educational achievement, one might have surmised that this might be a high profile campaign. It would be a new strategy which could potentially raise the achievement of a significant minority of pupils and yet there is not a word about it. Why is it then that sexuality is off the agenda? What is so unsayable and awful that a government, who will consider almost anything in order to raise educational success, will not consider sexuality? Clearly, further support structures could have been in place for Ann, which might have enabled her to at least kept herself mentally healthy. I would contend that the reason for the absence of concern for queer pupils on the Standards Website, in contrast to a concern with patterns of gendered achievement or minority ethnic achievement, or the achievement of the pregnant school girl, is that academic achievement is incompatible with sexualities that are not closeted and are not heterosexual. They present a

challenge to the standards agenda because implicitly embedded within it, are not just standards for academic achievement but also standards for socially sanctioned acceptable sexual behaviour. Embodied non-heterosexual subjects and subjectivities are constructed as unsuccessful, insofar as they are developed sexual subjectivities. It is almost acceptable to practise lesbian asexuality, to escape compulsory heterosexuality by suppressing sexual desire and abstracting the body but it is not permissible to articulate same-sex desire for someone else. One then becomes defined as irrational, emotional, pre-occupied with bodily pleasure and mentally ill. This importantly has the potential to devastatingly affect the possibility of achieving academically. The 'charmed circle' of sexuality is made up of those practising 'good sex' and the social and economic rewards attached to it.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the case study of one young woman, 'Ann' who experienced intense same-sex desire and had a 'crush' on one of her female teachers. The chapter dealt with two aspects of Ann's situation. First, it explored her own identity construction as a gendered and sexualized subject. I argued that her immanent lesbianism was key to many facets of her life: her relationships with friends and their recognition of her; her use of school

space; what school came to mean for her; and her imagined future. At the same time as Ann was creating a space for herself in school, she came under increasing pressure from homophobia at home and the chapter explored how these aspects of her life were linked. Second, the chapter considered the school's response to Ann's 'crushing news' and the lack of any structures within schooling to help it as an institution support an emergent lesbian identity. Finally, I explored how real sexual desire articulated for a teacher of the same sex, could not be contained within the site of the school and how consequently Ann was removed from school and seen as being in need of psychiatric help.

In the next chapter I will explore the case of another high academically achieving pupil who managed her sexuality as part of her quest to become an intellectual, in ways that were more conscious than either Darcy or Ann.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Transforming Sex: From Body to Mind to a Personal/Political Practice**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I explore more fully the varied uses to which sexuality can be put. The chapter uses the case study of Mataia. As an able student, like Darcy she had learnt to keep sexuality at bay. Unlike Darcy, she had a school record of poor behaviour, resulting in exclusion from school. The chapter explores Mataia's project of personal transformation, from a very poor achiever in school to an intellectual. It shows how this transformation operated through her performance of sex/gender/sexuality in the context of her appearance, social interaction and behaviour in school. The chapter explores the links made between sexuality, behaviour, intellectualism and religious practice.

#### **A Project of Personal Transformation: Becoming an Intellectual**

Mataia's parents were Muslim, from the State of Manipur in India. Mataia had been born in the UK. Her family was relatively poor and Mataia had free

school meals. At the time I interviewed her, Mataia was in her final year of schooling. She was an able student who went on to achieve four A\*/A grades at GCSE and a clutch of further grades C or above, ending up with 10 GCSEs. She was not the outstanding high achiever that Darcy was, but nevertheless she was a high achieving student. She was eager to be recognised as intelligent and put herself under the same pressure as Darcy to achieve high grades,

You see I don't just want to be brainy. I want to be very brainy and then yeah, an A grade or a B grade won't do me. It has to be an A\*. If it's a B, I'll know something is wrong.

However, unlike Darcy she did not feel that there was an expectation on her or the same assumption that she would 'of course' achieve high grades. In her previous secondary school and her primary school in fact, she did not achieve good grades at all and had been excluded from her first secondary school. She left this secondary school by mutual consent. She told me that the deal was that she left voluntarily or face permanent exclusion. With that in mind, her father had decided to remove her from the school and she had joined Manor High School at the start of year 9, following a period of about eight weeks at the end of year 8, when she had no schooling and had sat in her bedroom, 'depressed – I used to sleep in the day and then just watch trash on TV throughout the night'. For Mataia, this new start had become a project of personal transformation from the outset:

Mataia: I'm telling you, if you were to phone up L. (previous school) they would tell you I was a completely different person. That's why as soon as I came into Manor I was like, 'Hey. No-one knows why I'm here. I'm gonna try my best and then I will...'

Sarah: Are you pleased with the way things have turned out?

Mataia: Very. Everyone started calling me brainy the first thing in year 9 and that was something that I wasn't used to and then my head got big and I started thinking, 'Right. I have to keep on being brainy or else people won't think I am and I don't want to go back to L. (previous secondary school) or G. (primary school).

While there was no chance of Mataia being sent 'back' to her previous schools and indeed it would have been legally impossible for her to be sent back to her primary school, what she meant by this I think, was the risk of finding herself again in a space, where she was misrecognised as not clever. Her personal project, then, was to reconstruct her identity as academic and intellectual. It was a project which involved very careful monitoring:

Sarah: I get the impression that that's [being intelligent] quite important to you.

Mataia: Very - because first I feel as though I've wasted all of my life until year 8 and I have to catch up, because that is the case.

Sarah: And so being intelligent is important to you?

Mataia: It is.

Sarah: Really important?

Mataia: Really, really, really important.

Sarah: Why is that?

Mataia: It's - I get my drive on it, yeah? It's fuel.

Sarah: It's fuel?

Mataia: Yeah, it's fuel. I need it to live literally.

Sarah: Right.

Mataia: And if I'm not intelligent - if there's something not in my face like proving I'm intelligent - like at the moment it's the internet website - I can look at that for probably two months - actually probably not even two months - the half-life of me thinking I'm

intelligent is probably really short and I'll probably get tired of that in like three weeks and...

Sarah: Move on to something else?

Mataia: Yeah - a new challenge - I need my GCSEs but they seem so far away.

Sarah: A month

Mataia: Ahhhhh –  
(laughter)

In this part of the interview, Mataia began by identifying the personally transformative aspect of her identity project. Her life, up to the point where she had had a rethink in year 8, was identified as a waste. This wasn't just a feeling, as far as Mataia was concerned, it was the truth. She emphasized the personal importance to her of being 'intelligent' and went on to speak of its effects almost in the way in which one might talk of a drug. It was so vital to her it was a life 'fuel'. However, what she also needed was continual proof and affirmation of her intelligence. At Manor School, the Head teacher had decided that the best way to keep Mataia from causing trouble was to give her lots to do. With that in mind, he had put her in charge of creating and maintaining the school website, supervising a team of students, to which Mataia refers in the extract above. Mataia's interview suggested that this had worked insofar as she felt temporarily affirmed by creating the site. However, her belief that she was intelligent decayed, or had a 'half-life' and she was already looking for her next fix.

Unlike most of the other students I interviewed, Mataia was much more aware of herself as an agent in the construction of her identity and of the need to manage identity. It was not that she was taken by surprise or confused or defeated by how others saw her. Rather, she put a great deal of energy into consciously manipulating others' perception of her in an attempt to retain control of how she was perceived. This was perhaps because she had changed schools and this had brought about very positive change in her life, in terms of her academic achievement. At the end of her primary school in year 6, she had achieved SATs (Standard Achievement Tasks) scores of level<sup>1</sup> three in English and maths, and level four in science. For English and maths this is a score below 'the expected level' and for science, at the lower end of the expected level. However, at the end of year 9 she had achieved remarkably improved scores in her SATs; a level five in English, a level six in maths and a level seven in science. It is expected that between year 6 and year 9 (between the ages of eleven and fourteen), students' scores will increase between one and two levels. Mataia had managed to improve on this and as she herself identified she had become 'so motivated' as a result of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Standard Achievement Tasks are assessed using levels from 1 – 8. Pupils are expected to achieve a level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2, a level 5 or 6 at the end of Key Stage 3.



A month before I interviewed her, Mataia had won a national competition set by The Guardian, to write a piece about the meaning and relevance of multicultural Britain today. The competition had been set by *The Guardian* to celebrate the Commonwealth Games in Manchester and the prize was two VIP tickets to the Games, as well as being a flag bearer in the opening procession. Mataia entered the competition, writing an essay on the meaning multicultural within the context of globalisation. The essay was highly critical of America and of Western Capitalist economies. She had given it to me to read through and had asked me if I thought she would be arrested for her views or whether she could enter it. It was a beautifully crafted piece of polemic and I wasn't surprised that she won the competition, although she herself was astounded. It served as another instance of affirmation of intelligence for her, although she was then particularly exercised about what she should do about the prize!

Because she had such early success in her personal change project and because it was so dramatic, Mataia exuded a sense of personal power. One of the more difficult aspects of this for me was that her interview also became for her a project of 'image'. Mataia did not believe in an authentic 'real' self but a self that was managed and manipulated in specific ways for particular audiences. This came across particularly in her views on Islam and in the

versions of homophobia presented towards the end of the interview. Giving me an interview was a chance for Mataia to present a particular version of herself to me but also potentially quite exposing, since she had to be careful that there were no glitches in this presentation of self. It was unusual for me to interview someone so consciously aware of the interview process in this way, in terms of a chance to construct rather than deconstruct identity. At times it felt like a project of the fictionalizing of the self (see chapter 2).

### **An Islamic Intellectual**

Unlike Darcy, Mataia's brand of intellectualism took a critical stance to the system of which she was a part. At the end of her interview she argued that she needed good grades because, 'I don't like the society ...I don't want to be part of the society'. Mataia's interest in Islam was politicised and was particularly presented as an alternative to Western capitalist economies:

...also Islamically things like the IMF, democracy, freedom, all these issues that cause problems - that's all they cause – problems. Interest, the stock market wouldn't survive without interest and Islam doesn't allow interest so therefore we don't have to have gambling from stupid things like stock markets. You're gonna say obviously that's what the world businesses survive on but what these major corporations do is not Islamic, it's not right. Sort of all the profit comes from third world, because that's where all the resources are being drained out of and that's purely not Islamic. So therefore if there was an Islamic state and it didn't comply to the rules of western economic capitalism stock markets, then we wouldn't have these problems and more countries would go towards an Islamic state because therefore their people

would be treated right in such a system ... .. And - social status in Islam is not judged by your money, your wealth, your education, it's more judged on your Islamic knowledge and how much sort of Qu'ran, politics, prayers that you know. So therefore the people that can get at the top may not be truly pious but they certainly have a lot of knowledge, so therefore they deserve to be at the top. It's not because of their money and you probably get the people which are struggling to be as intelligent as those scholars which are at the top, but it makes sense because if the people at the top, the scholars, scholars - all the intellectuals - they deserve to be at the top because they haven't got there by money, like it was inherited from their fathers or something - that's - Islam is a completely different, different - you have to look at it from a completely different angle.

For Mataia, Islam presented a robust alternative to capitalism. Also, notably, her version of an Islamic society was fair, because it was a meritocracy based on 'intelligence', not one based on wealth, and where presumably, she could achieve. It meant that if she could establish her identity as an 'intellectual', she could achieve social status. Mataia's Islamic beliefs were presented so as to endorse her project of intellectual transformation.

Mataia was much more explicit in her interview than any of the other students with whom I worked, about developing a critique of globalisation. Again, this placed her nationally at odds with the aims of the education system of which she was a part. Unlike any of the other students, she had managed to develop an intellectual persona, which established her as successful but politicised about that success. She was also extremely cynical about taking what she wanted from education:

Yeah, you see I'm not in a Muslim country and someone will probably turn round and say, 'Well if you're so damn religious go to a Muslim country because we don't want your religion over here,' and fair enough. I probably will after I get my education. I'm in this country for the education system because it's quite good and that's why I'm taking my education seriously.

She went on to explain to me that there were many students in school who regarded western capitalism as critically as she did:

Sarah: And do you think that other - do you think that's a - and do you know other girls in school who feel the same way as you?

Mataia: Yeah. In fact if you talk to some of the African girls about coming to this country

Sarah: Somali?

Mataia: Somalian and Christian ones. They would feel the same way about America. They would feel the same way about Britain and they would feel the same way and they ... and it's really weird, 'cos when you talk to persons who've been brought up in this country for a long time, for all their life, they'll be like, 'yeah yeah...' - they're kind of naïve if you know what I'm saying. And when you talk to these girls from foreign countries they're a lot, lot more sort of intelligent when it comes to current affairs and thinking about the world

Sarah: Because they've been in it more?

Mataia: Because they've been in it and they've experienced more.

Again what's interesting here is that overseas students and overwhelmingly at Manor these were asylum seekers and refugees, were regarded by Mataia as 'a lot more sort of intelligent', because they were politicised about society.

In addition, Mataia presented the Western world as preoccupied with enjoying itself, as decadent. She felt that this was fundamentally not what life was about:

Sarah: So you're trying not to be interested in things like music and stuff?

Mataia: Yeah - they're just distractions.

Sarah: You see it as distracting and a bit frivolous?

Mataia: I don't see the point of it. I mean people say, 'Yeah but you're enjoying yourself, you're having a good time'. You don't have to have a good time. Life should be serious.

What was apparent in this extract was that her life as an Islamic intellectual was likely to affect her social interactions with others and her attitude towards the expectations of female adolescence as interested predominantly in music, boyfriends and clothes. The next part of this chapter explores how such a personal project of change involved outward appearance, social and cultural interactions and sexuality or the presentation of a gendered, sexual self.

### **Keeping Up Appearances**

Very early on in the interview it became clear that, for Mataia, the transformation of herself from bad girl to intellectual had also involved a change in outward appearance, a change in the way in which she managed social interaction and a change in attitude to sexuality. Mataia recognised that a change in her presentation of girl would be important in creating the new her and so her project became a project of gender transformation as well.

Throughout the interview, femininity was implicitly a significant problem for Mataia and one that she didn't know how to resolve.

She started by talking about her time in primary school where she had been very unhappy. She talked with venom about 'just hating primary school'.

She referred to one teacher in particular as 'cruel', 'sick in the head' and as 'a bitch'. She seemed to have felt that she was being deliberately picked on and

bullied by this member of staff in her final year of primary school. Although she didn't make a causal link between these feelings and her subsequent

behaviour, she did give a quick pen portrait of what she was like at the end of primary school:

I was always scruffy. I never cared about my appearance. I don't care what other people thought of me. They probably thought I was the class tramp or something. Honestly. And obviously I wasn't but I just wasn't careful about my appearance. I wouldn't care about my handwriting. I really would not give a shit about anything in G (primary school) and then that carried on in L. (previous secondary school) until year 8, when I buckled up but they threw me out.

There are several points of interest here. Firstly, the apparent disregard for appearance is often associated with those who are intellectual. The image of the mad professor springs to mind. However, that clearly does not work here in that Mataia explains that she didn't 'give a shit about anything'. As we will see, she did go on to talk about the fact that she tended only to associate with boys in school and so the lack of care of appearance might also be an

attempt to fit in with stereotypical masculine appearance, as a kind of 'tomboy'. We might also consider that this lack of care was also indicative of the depression and defeat she felt as a result of possible bullying by her year six teacher. Interestingly, she then moved on to a consideration of her handwriting. Her lack of care about her handwriting is taken by her as another key indicator of lack of care for the self. It is unclear whether 'handwriting' is a metonym for an academic self, about which she did not care, or whether it stands for a feminine neat self, about which she did not care. It is unclear, therefore, whether she wanted to eschew the stereotypical 'neatness' of the good schoolgirl but nevertheless present herself as clever, or alternatively, whether she was explaining to me that because she did not care about her handwriting she didn't care about being clever either. Not caring about anything at all, suggests she was unprepared to accept boundaries in terms of her identity either as a girl or as a learner at school, or in terms of an understanding of 'cleverness'. The contradictory interpretations here perhaps themselves reveal the difficult discursive positionings for Mataia, in constructing her identity. Even the term 'buckled up' uses a clothing image, doing up buckles, smartening appearance, to help suggest an improvement in attitude to school and learning. However, her attempts to show this new positioning in year 8 of her secondary school, were to no avail as she had to leave anyway.

At the end of year 10 in Manor school, Mataia decided to start wearing Muslim dress. Initially that involved simply wearing the hijab, but after a short time, she took to wearing a jilbab. Prior to this transformation of appearance, she tended to wear school uniform in the form of black trousers and black school jumper, or sometimes a fairly trendily cut skirt above the knee and her black school jumper. It became clear that for Mataia it was important that she maintained congruence between her sense of identity and her appearance. I asked her about her decision to change to more Islamic dress codes:

Mataia: I felt worsen when I wasn't covering because that...at least I can actually say I do have an identity now and you can clearly see it and I've chosen Islam. I haven't chosen your society and that's all I can say. Actually, no I'll say more on that but before I did have a problem with my identity because I would talk out, would say all these Islamic concepts but I was dressing and looking completely different so people never took me seriously.

Sarah: Who didn't take you seriously before?

Mataia: No but when I mean taken seriously you can't go to a mosque dressed like that no matter how much you know so therefore you have to fit into one community - and I'm sick of girls going 'yeah I know so much - I go to mosque on weekends' and then acting like a tart at school -

Sarah: Who said that to you?

Mataia: No-one said that to me. That's ... no one said that to me yet - but then it came up in my mind and I thought you better start covering before someone says that to you. Not only that, I formed a split personality anyway. You see ...[Interruption - tape switched off]

Sarah: So you said you formed a split personality.



Mataia: Dressing, acting, speaking completely different but at the same time my views were totally Islamic and I found them hard sort of to not - I found them hard not to think about and it really really did pull me apart because I couldn't exactly fit into a religious ceremony well - without thinking, 'look at you. You're a tart at school', and I couldn't exactly go to school and think, 'Well why are you dressing like a tart when you're sposed to be a Muslim?' I'm sure a lot of other Muslim girls are feeling that as well but at the end of the day the main reason I did this was because I do believe in God.

Sarah: I wouldn't have said you were a tart before

Mataia: I felt like it

For Mataia appearance is clearly linked to sexuality and that in turn is linked to religious and political belief. Her use of the word 'tart' to describe herself prior to her change of clothing is significant. It tells us that she associated her dress to a particularly sexualised form of self-expression. This she also regarded as Western. Her transformation to Islamic dress served several purposes. Firstly, it allowed her to feel less hypocritical in terms of her Islamic beliefs. Significantly, she began to wear Islamic dress shortly after the twin-towers attack. As a result of this there were particular tensions in school. Islamophobia increased and Muslim students were aware of this and protested. I found graffiti daubed all over one toilet cubicle just before prospective parents' evening, praising Osama Bin Laden for example. Mataia's decision to change her dress was partly a protest against Islamophobia and also represented a more generalised political protest

against Western society values and especially against globalisation, about which she felt strongly.

She also went on to give another reason for the transformation of her appearance:

Mataia: Really - and I don't like excessive male attention.

Sarah: You don't like excessive male attention. You haven't got much danger of that here have you? (In a girls' school)

Mataia: Yeah - no (laughter). Obviously, but it was other places and I just got annoyed thinking, 'you're always complaining when black boys approach you,' not being racist but I used to get a lot of attention from them, 'but you're always complaining when they approach you but you dress like it - provoking it'.

Sarah: That's what you used to think - you were provoking it?

Mataia: I clearly was anyway

Sarah: How do you mean?

Mataia: I was provoking it. What's the point in dressing like that? Obviously I don't get attention like that now and I feel good about that.

Mataia explained here her discomfort with male sexual attention. Her use of Muslim dress allowed her to escape this attention which she was finding difficult to deal with as a young woman and in the process, it also allowed her to confirm and display her religious beliefs. I would suggest that this process also allowed Mataia a way of escaping the pressure of heterosexuality placed on adolescent girls, which might have felt particularly acute given her previous determination to 'do' boy. While eventually, it would also make demands on her to be heterosexual, at that moment in time

it allowed her to put off or suspend sexuality and do it in such a way so as not to be discredited within her peer culture. It also allowed her to protest against Islamophobia in school, partly because even at that time schools and Local Authorities were reacting against the wearing of the jilbab, ostensibly as an infringement of school uniform.<sup>1</sup> Having said that, nobody much seemed to mind at Manor School and to my knowledge she was never questioned about it.

### **Sexualising Behaviour**

At the start of her secondary school career, Mataia explained how she both identified with boys and also argued with them. Manor school was a girls' school. Mataia had not opted positively for this school. It was the only one, which would offer her a place, after she left her first coeducational secondary school. While she mentioned male friends at her previous school, she never mentioned any female friends and I formed the impression that starting at Manor school had been daunting for Mataia, because of the lack of a male peer group. She told me she had found her first few days in the school 'weird' and that she had mistakenly asked someone where the boys' toilets were. However, because of her relative success in Manor school

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, fifteen year old Shabina Begum, took her school to the High Court when they refused to allow her to wear a jilbab. She lost her case. Halpin, T. (2004). Heads welcome ruling on Muslim dress ban. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>. London..

subsequently, she had at the time of interview, opted to join a single sex sixth form the following year:

Mataia: No, no, no. I don't get on well in mixed schools. That's shown in L. (previous secondary school). I was distracted all the time. And I'm very argumentative with boys.

Sarah: Right.

Mataia: Extremely argumentative. But all we used to do in L. is sit on... it's like there's me and six other boys and we used to cuss, cuss, cuss, where, 'Oh your Mum was this, your Mum was that uuuuurrrrrrr'. That's how we used to spend lesson time.

Not only was Mataia 'doing boy' at her previous secondary school, she was also involved in particularly sexist and macho type behaviours of adolescent boys. 'Arguing' with boys, was not about critiquing this type of male behaviour for Mataia, but rather outdoing the boys at it, being the best boy that she could be. Like Carol, who was addressed by boys as a boy, it helped to consolidate her identity, but unlike Carol, she didn't express discomfort or ambivalence about the way in which she was being positioned. In this section I want to explore more closely the behaviour which this type of identification led to. Mataia was excluded from her first secondary school, L., at the end of year 8. She explained how this happened:

Sarah: Right. Ok tell me a little bit about L. and when you left and how you left and why you left.

Mataia: Alright. Started L. in year 7 and started off as the class clown and then it got worser. Towards the end of year 8 I started doing my work but the reputation got in the way, so therefore the teachers thought it would be best if I left ... and I also started terrorising a teacher calling him gay and sort of really,

yeah, giving him a lot of abuse, so they thought that it would be better if I left.

Sarah: What teacher was it? What subject?

Mataia: He was a science teacher but he was young and he looked gay. It was only a joke but it got a bit out of hand.

Sarah: Why did you do it?

Mataia: I don't know. You know what, I took out all my stress on him.

Sarah: So you would say you were stressed?

Mataia: Yeah, I would say I was stressed yeah, but I thought it was funny. Everytime I saw him I would go 'ughhhh - the batty man. Ughhhh ...' - yeah I was crazy.

Sarah: Mataia, I'm shocked.

Mataia: Didn't you know about that?

Sarah: No I didn't.

Mataia: I called him a gay ????? (word obscured) in his face and making all these jokes about Vaseline in science lessons.

Mataia gave various reasons to account for this homophobic behaviour. First of all, it was minimised as a joke that got out of hand but one which apparently helped her to sustain her image as 'class clown'. Later she referred to it as a way of alleviating her stress. She was insistent on this when I labelled it as homophobia later in the interview: 'I wasn't homophobic. I was just taking out my stress on him'. If we are to believe Mataia about this, then we have to question exactly what her stress was about and we could, perhaps, interpret this within the context of her attempts to outdo boys at doing boy. The stress is the stress of doing an incongruent gender performance, of operating outside the heterosexual matrix, in which gender has to 'follow' from sex and the practices of desire from sex and gender (Butler 1990: 24). One of the key ways in which adolescent males consolidate

their masculinities is precisely through homophobic performances (Nayak and Kehily 1997). When used by a twelve year old girl, however, it has a different effect, though it is still an attempt to do masculinity and to gain status within a male peer group. Later in the interview, she circled back to her stress, when I commented to her that she seemed to me to be quite an angry person:

Mataia: Yep, yes I'm very angry.

Sarah: From inside you?

Mataia: Yes, from inside me ...yeah it's not about my religion at the end of the day. It's something I have to work on definitely.

Sarah: Where's the anger come from? Cos you're quite angry about a few things, you know what I mean? Your school history and stuff.

Mataia: Yeah I'm angry about a lot of things.

Sarah: You come across as someone who's quite angry. Where do you think the anger comes from? Not that I want this to become a therapy session.

Mataia: All right then - um -um I don't know. I asked my Mum that and she goes, 'Well I don't know but you've got it so deal with it'.

Sarah: You don't know what you're angry about fundamentally?

Mataia: Fundamentally no. And the motives change. Like when I was in year 8 it was gay people. I never had a problem with gay people and I watched 'Queer as Folk' and I loved it. I recorded it and I thought it was really wicked but I really like that on the same side and then I thought, 'ok', so I thought, 'leave gay people alone'. Two of my best friends are bisexual and I still talk to them.

In this context, Mataia seemed to suggest that her homophobia in school was connected to this anger and that she used gay people as an outlet for that anger. It was clearly something she had thought about before because she

had asked her mother what she should do about it. Her homophobic performance in school, might have also provided a source of entertainment for the group of boys with which she associated. Later on in the interview, she reflected more on the group of boys she was friendly with at L.:

Sarah: Two of your best friends are bisexual?

Mataia: From L. The boy J \_\_\_\_ who used to sit next to me in French yeah in L. yeah he always used to draw pretty pictures and go 'ooh I love your nails'. I'm not stereotyping him but he used to go I like your nails and he ... and then - yeah and he was nice and there was another boy called R\_\_\_\_ and he was Scottish and he was really cute and small and he was gay as well apparently.

Clearly, apart from being dangerously close to arguing that her best friends are gay, in order to deny her homophobia, we could extrapolate from this that something more complicated was occurring within Mataia's male friendship groups in L. Her male peers were using homophobia themselves in quite complicated ways; camp performances could either be used to confirm or deny homosexuality. Mataia herself was constructed by her male peer here as a 'fag hag' or straight female friend, being sexualised as feminine, through attention to her nails. This suggests that her tomboy identity was becoming quite precarious as she moved into adolescence and that possibly the result of this was more homophobic performances by herself in an attempt to confirm her place within the group<sup>1</sup>. Her homophobia must

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of attitudes to tomboyism in childhood and adolescence see Halberstam, J. (1998). Female Masculinity. Durham and London, Duke University Press.

clearly have tormented the member of staff concerned because it was identified by Mataia as the reason the school finally asked her to leave. She may have been the 'class clown' up to that point but her homophobia against staff was the defining moment for permanent exclusion.

Mataia's poor behaviour in school was situated within a context of specifically gendered and sexed behaviour. In order to be one of the boys, she decided not to be a girl. This meant not caring about dress, not being neat or tidy, developing a male peer group and demonstrating that she belonged to that peer group, through her performance of gender. It led her to the extreme in the repertoire of these performances, in order to outdo the boys. By homophobically bullying a male member of staff, she was using masculinity to challenge authority. The problem was that her doing of boy in this way as a girl also potentially verged on parodying masculinity. Her poor behaviour was not a refusal to accept authority in any simple sense. She did not hate the teacher to whom she was homophobic, 'It was only a joke but it got a bit out of hand'. It involved her own investment in gender and sexuality through her bad boy performance and was much more about her own status and identity within a male peer group. Her insistence that it was stress which was responsible for her homophobia is in this sense correct. The stress was the personal cost of doing this. As she got older, the costs were



potentially greater and the risks more apparent. The demands to conform within the sex/gender binary would possibly be greater within her peer culture, as the identity of 'woman' became more available and the identity of 'child' less so. It was interesting for example, that Mataia liked to refer to herself as 'a little girl', perhaps in an attempt to keep adolescence at bay. The possibility of being a tomboy was perhaps less easily accessible at secondary school and boys were as likely to see her performance of masculinity as a threat to their own masculinity or even a ridiculing of it, rather than an attempt by Mataia to consolidate her friendships in a male peer group, as one of the boys.

Later in the interview Mataia displayed other homophobia, in addition to anti-Semitism (see chapter 2). On this occasion it was bound up with her identity as a young Muslim woman. Mataia's interview demonstrated how homophobia was used in different ways to confirm different aspects of her own identity.

At Manor school, Mataia did not seem to have a peer group of friends. She socialised and talked to a wide range of her peers and particularly those students who were asylum seekers or refugees. She was regarded as eccentric by many of her peers but her opinion was valued. Generally she

didn't seem to want a peer group, being happy to talk to lots of different people without particularly forming close friendships. She was critical of many girls' preoccupation with appearance, especially those who were Muslim and her talk tended to be about knowledge based subjects. She would be most at home, for example, talking at great length about the technical problems she had experienced and resolved in relation to the design of the school website. In this respect she once more interacted more stereotypically like a boy than a girl. In their research on the differential interactions of boys and girls in the informal school in their study of citizenship and difference in schools, Tuula Gordon, Janet Holland and Elina Lahelma observed:

Though boys tend to emphasise that they are all mates and move in crowds, in observations there are a lot of examples of boys controlling each other. (2000: 119)

In Manor, Mataia moved very much in the crowd but was also preoccupied with not being seen as one of the crowd. Rather she wanted to be the best of the crowd and she wanted her intellect to be seen as not only the best but also perhaps as a challenge to authority.

## **Being Clever/Being Sexual: The Mind/Body Split**

### **The Attraction to Maturity**

None of the other young women whom I interviewed spoke as explicitly about sexuality as Mataia. I have fieldnotes of groups of young women talking explicitly about sex. For example, Hester and Tracy talked about penile infections in heterosexual partners and what to look out for, in the greatest detail and with much ribaldry but this was within their pupil culture, at which I was a guest. Mataia spoke explicitly about sexual fantasy throughout the interview and about the place of sexual fantasy in her life.

For Mataia, sexual fantasy and the willingness to talk about it, was also a central part of her project to present herself as intelligent. This became clear when she spoke of 'fancying' older men. In this context she was insistent on establishing why this was important:

Mataia: Uhhhhhh - basically I started off fancying boys when - in year 6. Then as soon as I got into year 8 I started fancying older men - disgusting and I don't know why, but that's one thing I feel that makes me think more intelligent -

Mataia: Yeah and then - because I'm only a little girl obviously but why do I go for older men? Would you say it was because I was brainier than most girls to be dealing with petty relationships?

Mataia deployed fancying older men to confirm her intelligence, primarily to herself. Her reference to the 'petty relationships' of her peers suggested that she placed an importance on intimate relationships established on intellectual compatibility, rather than similarity of age and life stage. Indeed, she appeared here to exaggerate the difference between herself and adult men in terms of age by depicting herself as 'a little girl'. This was quite misleading in the sense that she really was a clever, streetwise fifteen year old. Its function in this context was to give her intelligence a sense of precocity. It also suggested that she had an agenda in this interview, which was the construction and confirmation of her identity through sexuality as an intelligent subject.

### **The Place of Fantasy**

Mataia also invested considerable time and effort in contrasting a past life for herself in which she had sexually fantasized and her new identity as a Muslim woman, in which she did not. In this way she was able to present herself as at once sexually knowledgeable rather than naïve, but also as a sexually innocent good Muslim woman, with regard to sexual practice:

Mataia: Urghhhhhh (disgust) - I used to like watching gay men have sex but no, not anymore.

Sarah: You used to like watching gay men have sex?

Mataia: Yeah and that's before I realised that it's actually quite disgusting and we were given a vagina for a reason

Sarah: Well, why do you think you like to watch gay men have sex?

Mataia: I used to right? Stress on the used to. 'Cos it was nice boy, they were nice!

Like many boys, Mataia presented herself here as gaining knowledge about sex through watching pornography (Holland, Ramazanoglu et al. 1998:75–78). In this respect she was atypical of a young woman. However, her pleasure in watching gay male sex was latterly policed by a religious imperative to see heterosexuality as the morally and perhaps 'naturally' right course. Also, it was possible to sense here, unhappiness about her own exclusion from the scene. At a more subconscious level, it was perhaps 'quite disgusting' because there was no role for her within homosocial and erotic culture. In a different way, it amplified what had happened to her status within the male peer group with whom she associated at her first secondary school. There was a sense of wanting to belong and of being excluded.

Being Muslim meant not indulging sexual fantasy and, in admitting to sexual fantasy, she felt that she was embodying a contradiction. At one stage of the interview she pointed to the incongruity she felt about talking about sexual fantasy to me while wearing the jilbab. However, she was also using

occupatio<sup>1</sup>, talking in detail about that which she said she could not talk about. As part of her project to be recognised as intellectual she could not afford to appear un-knowledgeable, yet she also wanted to present herself as a practising Muslim in a politically radical way. In order to achieve this she welded sexual fantasy to Western corruption and decadence. In relation to sexual fantasy she also talked about Freud in anti-Semitic terms, as someone who encouraged an indulgence of fantasy. In contrast, following Islam meant repressing sexual thoughts and pleasure would be achieved through, 'seeking the pleasure of Allah ...Then you would see the difference in how I would spend my time, how I would try to be happy'. Her Muslim faith was presented as a form of disciplining of the self.

Mataia: Basically I should be truly Islamic. I should ?????????? but at the same time I can be turned on by all of this (pornography/erotica).

Sarah: What does Islam say about fantasy?

Mataia: It's bad - it's bad for you obviously - it really is. I can see why it's bad for you.

Sarah: Even just fantasy - not doing ...

Mataia: Your concept leads to action

Sarah: I'm not sure that that's always true

In our discussion here, sexual fantasy became westernised as the epitome of its freedom, as did the 'choice' to be gay later. Mataia felt that her personality

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<sup>1</sup> A figure of rhetoric where a writer explains that he or she will not have time or space to say something but then goes on to say that thing anyway, possibly at length.

had been split because she was living as she said, 'at the centre of Western society' and that this meant that she risked, 'contaminating' her faith.

### **The Place of Sexual Knowledge**

Later on, having spoken about her fantasies around 'bondage', Mataia went on to talk about a book she had read:

Mataia: Have you heard of a writer called Anais Nin or something?

Sarah: Yes

Mataia: You have?

Sarah: Yes

Mataia: Oh she's my favourite writer or she was.

Sarah: OK

Mataia: Have you read any of her stuff.

Sarah: I don't think I have actually.

Mataia: Read 'The Delta of Venus' that's probably one of my favourite books of all.

Sarah: Ok I'll have a look at it - but is that anything to do with bondage?

Mataia: No but she reflects my - she reflects me as in sexuality terms - her work

Sarah: Her work reflects your sexuality? You've given me a challenge now - I'll have to go and plough through it

Mataia: Oh no. Honestly, once you read it you're gonna think, 'oh what happened to this girl?'

Sarah: Why?

Mataia: Because it's just a bit extreme. I'd say extreme - not even physically extreme - mentally extreme.

Sarah: In what way?

Mataia: In ... basically that's what I do. I push my brain to the limits.

Sarah: In what way - in what way is it mentally extreme?

Mataia: Too many emotions involved - and it's really complex ... and I like that. That's why I like older men

Mataia was ostensibly very conscious of what I was going to think of her here. However, she very consciously directed my attention here to perceive her in a particular way. Her identification with a French intellectual writer of erotica was also part of her project of transformation to intellectual. 'Delta of Venus' is a collection of erotica about female characters. Mataia emphasized the intellectual aspect of her identification with this, 'basically that's what I do. I push my brain to the limits'. She referred to this book again later in the interview, when we were discussing her sexual identity:

Sarah: But you would define your sexuality as straight

Mataia: Lesbian sex turns me on

Sarah: It does?

Mataia: Yes (definite tone). But I just don't watch it now

Sarah: So .... There's the older men ...

Mataia: And all of it's in that book

The book was used by Mataia as a way of talking about and intellectualising sexuality, which was an important part of her identity project. It also allowed her to talk about her sexuality very explicitly, without making her vulnerable to the identification of 'tart' or 'slut' which she was anxious to avoid.

There were other examples where Mataia intellectualised sexuality, through famous work or cultural icons. She spoke about genetic cloning for sex and about Simon Le Vay's work on the gay gene. She was also interested in transvestism and in this context spoke about 'Lady Boys' in Bangkok and



'Dana International' a transvestite, who had won the Eurovision Song Contest the previous year. Mataia made use of wide and varied sources of information about sexuality, in order to intellectualise it and use it as a resource in her own identity project.

It is interesting to consider this knowledge base against the paucity of knowledge presented to young people in sex education in the UK. It is unlikely that sex education would involve critiquing the work of Le Vay, or using the Lady Boys to discuss the sex/gender/sexuality matrix, or to explore the history of erotica. Students are then left to do this work for themselves if at all.

## **Conclusions**

Mataia worked hard to bring her identity into existence. By the end of year 11 she had transformed herself successfully into the intellectual she wanted to be. However, throughout her education, the stumbling blocks had centred on the way in which she did gender. Indeed, while I can fully appreciate the headteacher at her first secondary school excluding her for her homophobia, it might have been more helpful to work through with Mataia the tensions and contradictions of building a sustainable gendered identity. As it was, she

left that school with the same internal gender contradictions in place and with no opportunity to analyse them. I am not arguing that these were contradictions that required some sort of resolution but rather that Mataia needed better support to identify and live with them. However intellectual Mataia made herself, there were always costs to gender and sexuality, broadly speaking because in order to become intellectual, she tended to do masculinity in ways which were not always coherent and importantly were hardly ever recognised by herself as such. She wore the jilbab partly because this disguised her gendered body and desexualised her, in ways that she found empowering, as well as confirming her Islamic identity. Her partially successful transposition of sexuality into a discourse of intellectualism and as a sign of her intelligence (at least in the interview with me) would prove difficult to sustain once she left Manor school and the demands of compulsory heterosexuality became more pressing as an adult Muslim woman.

Mataia opted to attend a single sex sixth form in the borough in which she lived. It was a very prestigious school and her GCSE results meant that she obtained a place. I had queried with her this choice of school because I felt that she would find it oppressive. It was a very white school, with an uncompromising discipline regime. However, she was determined that

getting a place at this school would prove she was intelligent. Unfortunately, she ended up leaving this school and doing AS levels in the local College.

When I met up with her two years after her interview, she was at the College but seemed socially quite isolated. She apologised for the homophobia and anti-Semitism she had shown in the interview and said that I would be glad to know that she no longer felt any of those sentiments. The precariousness and instability of how she did gender had again had a negative impact on her ability to thrive in a school.

For Darcy, Ann and Mataia high academic achievement had costs to identity and to their physical or mental health. On the occasions where the suppression of their gendered and sexual selves lapsed, when they became more fully embodied such as when their performance of gender or sexuality was not appropriately feminine or appropriately 'heterosexually asexual' then they too found themselves excluded from school. Ann's out of control lesbian desire in the form of her 'crush' on her IT teacher ended up leading to her exclusion from school. Mataia had had considerable experience of exclusion and her new found success was carefully and consciously crafted to incorporate and contain sexuality within a discourse of intellectualism. Darcy did manage to suppress a gendered, sexually embodied identity with

absolute ruthlessness, only to find herself anorexic and disconnected from the rest of the school community, her cultural heritage and indeed wider society.

In the final chapter I return to the questions I posed at the beginning of the thesis to draw out the interconnections between sexuality and academic success.

## **Conclusion**

### **Testing Times: The Construction of Girls' Desires through Secondary Education**

#### **Introduction**

In chapter one I explained how I was concerned by the ways in which gender and sexuality seemed to come into play in individual success or failure in school. I noted in particular that where a performance of gender or of sexuality was overt or failed to conform to dominant expectations of femininity or heterosexuality, it often led to academic failure.

I asked the following research questions:

- How do young people and young women in particular use sexuality and sexual practice in the construction of their identities as successful or failed learners?
- What are the dominant discourses of sexuality in school, how are these linked to education and how do these constrain the agency of young people in producing themselves as successful?
- Why is it that overtly (uncloseted) sexual or promiscuous behaviour in young women should so often lead to academic failure?

- What sexuality may be tolerated in young women, as compatible with academic success?

In this thesis I conclude by drawing out the following key arguments. Firstly I argue that learning and managing sexuality as a pupil in school today is hard work and that it is unavoidable identity work. Secondly, I suggest that sexuality is sometimes used by pupils in order to resist schooling and in particular what schooling offers them in terms of access to courses. Thirdly, I argue that the figure of the disembodied learner is central to educational success today and that for those whose cultural worlds or practice of sexuality are marginalised by this, that being successful becomes more difficult. I note however, that there are also costs to those who succeed in becoming the disembodied learner. Finally, I show that the punishment through exclusionary practices of pupils who perform overtly inappropriate forms of gender or sexuality (lesbian/gay/bisexual/or heterosexual) is comprehensive and represents a key inequality in education.

### **Learning and Managing Sexual Identity As Hard Work**

One of the most important findings that I hope I have established in this research is the sheer hard work of identity management that young women do in relation to their sexualities in the process of making their identities as learners. In a large part sexual self regulation is done to please us, the adults,

people in authority in schools and at home, to meet our expectations. Mostly in schools we pretend that we don't even notice it going on or we maintain its irrelevance to the real business of education. We often maintain that not only is it irrelevant but it is not even there. Childhood innocence is a pervasive discourse in relation to society's understanding of children's and young people's sexuality. Darcy, for example, is exemplary of this. She has been entirely co-opted into the process of sexuality as irrelevant to her now and yet in all sorts of ways as we have seen, she is involved in the suppression of sexuality often by isolating herself from others and by retaining a child like lack of knowledge about the world around her. The production of her asexuality however, still constitutes the management of sexuality. It isn't that it doesn't exist. When young people fail to manage their sexualities as we would wish by suppressing them, then they are variously seen as the objects of turbulent adolescence, or going as through 'a difficult phase'. What is clear from this research I think is that education operates disingenuously in relation to young people and their sexualities because sexuality is not something that young people can choose to manage or not. By acting as if it is by, for example, suggesting it can just be advantageously 'delayed' (DfEE 2000) we place a burden on young people to manage their sexual selves in ways that we approve of but without our support and if they fail, then we

ensure that the education system punishes them – the very system that ought to be offering support.

### **Disembodiment, Successful Learning and Hetero/sexual Diversity**

Morley and Rasool (Morley and Rasool 1999) describe the learner within the school effectiveness discourse as disembodied:

School effectiveness is based on the notion of a universal subject. Students, teachers and headteachers are a homogenized ungendered, non-racialized or social classed group. They are disembodied players in a larger project ...The 'child' has become an undifferentiated cognitive unit (1999: 122)

I have shown that pupils invested in striving for success in school have generally understood this requirement to produce themselves as 'disembodied players', regardless or not of whether they were eventually successful in the A\*-C economy. Within Western culture, sexuality and education sit at opposite ends of a metaphorical see-saw. The mind/body split is still ever present. As we work on educational outputs and as this intensifies in the constant drive to raise standards, the need to suppress sexuality is also implicated in the process of disembodiment. Government insistence on the advantages to young people of 'delaying sexuality', their determination to reduce teenage pregnancies, their general silence on the issue of support for lesbian and gay youth are all therefore a logical part of driving up educational standards. They are not disconnected from it.



Nadjma and Nazrin worked to make themselves 'hard on the outside', to put sexualised identities on hold. Darcy was quite clear that sexual practice must be delayed until university. Mataia wore a jilbab in order not to have to deal with heterosexist harassment from young men and instead made sexuality part of her project to become an intellectual.

One of the consequences of school effectiveness practices and the standards agenda is that schools do not take account of the ethnically and culturally diverse value systems in relation to sexuality and the imagined futures of pupils. Darcy repelled any intrusion of her cultural heritage, precisely because she needed to work so hard to achieve and her heritage was seen as irrelevant to her future success within the school effectiveness value system. Indeed she became remote from her wider extended family. Deqa felt she had to closet her family's polygamous structure as something that would not be acceptable or understood in school. Mercedes imagined her future through a marginalised form of heterosexual practice that would bring her greater status within the local Traveller community. In these instances, Mercedes, Deqa and indeed the other Somali pupils were structurally subordinated because of a refusal within the education system to acknowledge their sexualities within the cultural mainstream of secondary school contexts. As I showed these pupils were completely mis-addressed

by various government policies, because their sexualities and their ambitions for their sexual futures were developed against Western globalised capitalism and the heterosexual and familial relationships privileged by that. These young women had to do the best they could in the sense that they had to find strategies to work through the minefield of their cultural difference. Ayani, on the quiet, was desperately trying to find a future husband she could live with, running to a tight deadline of 6<sup>th</sup> June 2001, while publicly ensuring that she was dressed in the latest Reebok jumper and at least looked like a citizen of a global capitalist economy. This is the point at which inclusion fails. The knowledge and desire brought to education needs to become more important than the attempt to squeeze GCSE success. Mercedes, for example, would have been more successful and more empowered if we had worked with her on the importance of her Traveller culture and identity and the assumptions about her future embedded within that. I don't mean by this to necessarily endorse every aspect of that culture as she presented it, nor indeed of Somali culture. However, if we are to make minority culture subject to critique, then we need to subject global capitalism to the same treatment, recognising its economic investment in particular forms of sexual and familial relationships.

### **Sexuality as Resistance to Learning**

Sometimes when we try to push young people academically or in terms of their future careers in directions in which they do not wish to be pushed, we are surprised when their sexualities are suddenly made starkly visible to us, as they are mobilised against us and what we want for them. Hester, in chapter 5, mobilised sexuality in this way. A career for her in the caring profession was practically assured and yet she 'chose' to throw it away and in order to convince everyone that it wasn't after all right for her, she set about re-making her sexuality, so that it was the very antithesis of caring femininity. Schooling does not have to shoulder all the responsibility.

Hester's life at home and the area in which she grew up also had a significant impact on the decisions she made about how to be sexual but the type-casting of her as a future carer, certainly had an impact on her sexuality as well. This was further exacerbated by the larger vocational drive in government policy on 14 -19 education. As much as I tried to support Hester to gain GCSEs, to encourage her to think about how to be an MP and as much as she wanted to do this, there was always this big plan for Hester waiting in the background: the training scheme, the vocational work-placement, waiting to take her on, because she would make a good carer. Hester was already a good carer. She used her sexuality as much to unmake a carer identity, as she did for her own pleasure. Indeed, her own pleasure was not really ever achieved and there

were considerable costs to her sanity. If we look at it in this way, then we might argue that in Hester's case at least, the stereotype of the adolescent at the mercy of libidinous energy and hormone imbalances is here produced by and through her education. It was her education which conjured it into existence. Her sexuality was socially and institutionally produced as well as being a psychological production by Hester. It was not her body and the out of control hormones running round it that caused her to behave in this way, it was a psychological resistance to what schooling offered her, which mobilised sexuality as resistance. This became evident in her use of a discourse of scorn towards education and the educational aspirations that the school had for her.

### **Punishments: The Treatment of those Embodying and Overtly Performing Non-Normative Gender or Sexuality**

With alarming regularity anyone who was overtly sexual or who 'did girl' in inappropriately and unfeminine ways, or who did not do heterosexual girl, found themselves excluded from school or displaced from school or confined to certain spaces in the school; effectively marginalised.

Ann, Mataia, Carol and Nathan were all excluded at various times from a school and in each case their exclusion centred around sexuality or their

performance of gender. Even though Ann had been a good girl in the simple sense that she had never been in trouble in school before, her lesbian desire for a teacher simply could not be managed by the school. She had to leave. Her desire was distressing for the teacher and because there were no strategies in place to manage such an event, Ann could not remain in school and was deemed to be mentally ill. The fact that she attempted suicide did merit psychiatric support but lesbian desire is itself here in danger of being constituted as a psychiatric illness. Mataia was excluded for homophobia, as a result of trying to do boy. Though her homophobia was inexcusable, there was no attempt to engage her on the uses to which it was being put, or to work with her to find more ethical ways of doing boy.

For those not excluded, exclusion was avoided through internment or displacement, as in Carol's case. Like Mataia, Carol had been excluded from her previous school for doing boy through fighting and violence. Her benevolent internment at Manor School did allow her some success but although it protected her from a trans-phobic and homophobic school population, it also protected them from her. Even more extreme was the treatment of Nathan who was rendered invisible, denied even the most basic acknowledgement of existence and then excluded. Whilst researchers have observed that 'sissy' boys – those boys whose studiousness aligns them with

forms of femininity - experience considerable homophobia in school (see, for example, Epstein, 1998) no-one seems to have noticed that the treatment of pupils who practise female masculinity is also punitive or ostracising, marking them out as different and again making it difficult for them to participate in school successfully.

Conversely for those who got sexuality right, there were also costs. Darcy experienced social isolation and alienation. Mataia was perhaps the most successful in managing her sexual self but did so through a process of intellectualisation of sexuality and by creating a boundary in her head, which created a sexual past of desire and a present where sexuality was disciplined through Islam. This meant she could to some extent manipulate sexuality, acknowledge desire albeit through a past and much more consciously decide where its place would be in her identity and how it would function in relation to her identity as 'really really clever'.

### **Making a Difference**

While the standards agenda and the school effectiveness discourse are so dominant in schools and in government policy, it is difficult to envisage any positive change for young women. They are learning in 'testing times'.

However, some strategies do suggest themselves.

To start with it would be useful to have a more honest and open discussion with pupils of the difference sexuality makes to success, allowing them to open the space for dialogue between their community value systems, their own imagined sexual futures and their learning. This would entail not only a sexuality education in which there is room to acknowledge the missing discourse of sexual desire (Fine 1988) but also where knowledge of the genealogy of sexuality is explored (Foucault 1976), so that pupils are introduced to the different discourses through which sexual identities have been and are constructed. At the moment sex education does not add to knowledge about sexuality, but rather transmits dominant messages about safer sex, the terrors of pregnancy and the need to embark upon sexual relationships in long term monogamous heterosexual contexts and only after leaving school (see chapter one of *Silenced Sexualities in Schools and Universities* for a more thorough discussion of this 2003). This would allow for the greater possibility that marginalised sexualities would be tolerated in school spaces and those embodying them, be allowed to learn. One of the most interesting parts of this research was young people as their own sex researchers. Mataia, in particular, had used the internet, literature and television to develop her understanding of sexuality. Ann clung suicidally to a programme she had watched presented by Jeffrey Weeks, as if it would be her salvation. Hester used experiential learning about sexuality, learning

through body-reflexive practice but needed opportunities to discuss sexual experience. The writing of a new sexuality education programme for teachers and for pupils would provide the logical pragmatic sequel to this research. When writing about postmodernism Steven Seidman expressed the hope that a postmodern take on the world would be:

...less "the end of domination" or "human liberation" than the creation of social spaces that encourage the proliferation of pleasures, desires, voices, interests, modes of individuation and democratization. (Seidman 1993: 106)

An extension of the range of 'modes of individuation' in schools by pupils by taking sexuality seriously, would help produce a more sustainable version of the educated subject, one who could be supported in the making and the having of a life, through sexuality, rather than one involved in expending energy in closeting it..

As was seen in several instances in the research, teachers are not sure either how to talk about sexuality or gender nonconformity in school in relation to pupils or their own practice. This became clear, for example, from the note left on Carol's file and from the response of the teacher who was the recipient of Ann's desire. Better teacher education around sexuality and in particular around the psychoanalytic processes involved in learning and teaching, would enable strategies to be evolved with greater confidence, which might



increase these young women's well-being and their educational success at school. At the moment teacher education programmes pay very little attention to sexuality within education. The Teacher Development Agency Website details 48 key professional standards which a teacher must meet in order to gain qualified teacher status (QTS). Nowhere is the word sexuality, or sex, mentioned even once<sup>1</sup>. This, in turn, makes it very unlikely, that trainee teachers will ever have lectures or seminars on the importance of sexuality to learning or to teaching. It is unlikely that even minimally, young people's sexuality will be acknowledged. Clearly teachers are to be allowed to continue to proceed as if sexuality does not have an impact on what they do, whether it be their own or that of their pupils or anybody else's.

Finally, I would argue that more research needs to be done to make visible non-normative heterosexualities, lesbian sexualities and non-normative practices of gender both by young women and those moving away from the identity of woman to develop transgendered identities. Currently, feminist research tends to show how femininities are installed through schooling, rather than exploring the implications of cases where that does not happen and especially where versions of masculinity are taken up instead. This is

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<sup>1</sup> See Teacher Development Agency Website, accessed 30.12.06:  
[www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards/currentprofessionalstandards/qtsstandards.aspx](http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards/currentprofessionalstandards/qtsstandards.aspx)

possibly because of feminist disapproval of women who behave like men, Margaret Thatcher being the prime example here, in order to gain social or political power. However, I have shown even in this very small study that where masculinity is practised by women they are subject to serious processes of marginalisation and exclusion. It is only one particular form of masculinity – the rational Cartesian presumed ‘male’ subject - which is accorded power and success and which, girls have access to only through a precariously sustained processes of disembodiment.

By focussing on girls who ‘do girl’ very differently or present sexualities that are not normative, or who don’t do girl at all, we would be able to give a fuller account of the range subject positions taken up by young women in school. By making these visible we could also provide a more detailed account of the ways in which gender and sexuality make a difference to educational success. My research has begun to do this.

The young women who formed the case studies for this thesis were innovative in the uses to which they put sexuality and the ways in which they managed their sexualities. They gave me an insight into the relentless pressure that sexuality and indeed gender exerted in their worlds. Their desires and their hard work to achieve both success and sustainable sexual

and gendered identities, demonstrated constantly that we are indeed living in testing times.

Appendix One

Table Showing Ethnicity, religion, free school meals and GCSEs obtained by students who took part in the research

Name	Ethnicity	Religion	Free School Meals	Number of GCSEs achieved										Comments mobility
				A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U		
Year 11 Students interviewed in Summer 2002, who formed part of referral group I worked with intensely in school														
Carol	White	-	Yes							1	1			Arrived at the school in year 11 from Southampton. Had been out of school for 8 months
Mercedes	Traveller		Yes							3				Housed Traveller
Hester	White		Yes				1	1			1			Missed 6 weeks of schooling when ran away from home. Family dream of moving to Devon
Students not interviewed but who formed part of fieldwork and were part of the referral group I worked with in school														
Shane	White		No							3	3	1		
Lauren	White		No				1	2	3	1	1			
Sonia	White		No				1	1	1					
Heidi	White		Yes											No GCSEs – self harming – had to leave school
Jayne	Black British		No					1	1	2				Drug Misuse – crack. Excluded from school from Feb 2002 but allowed to take exams
Tracy	Traveller		No					1	2	3				Housed Traveller

Appendix One

Table Showing Ethnicity, religion, free school meals and GCSEs obtained by students who took part in the research

Name	Ethnicity	Religion	Free School Meals	Number of GCSEs achieved										Comments mobility
				A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U		
Michelle	Traveller		Yes								1			Housed Traveller
Sam	White		Yes											
Carlie	White		Yes									2		Parents/carers took Carlie on holiday over exam period so in fact she didn't get to take them
Sandra	White		No				2	1	1	1	1			
Andrea	White		Yes						1		1			
Sarah	White		No					2	2	1	1			
Susan	White		Yes					1	1	3	1			
Year 11 students recruited through other means in school, who agreed to be interviewed in summer 2002														
Darcy	Asian	Sikh	No	4	5		1							Darcy achieved a C in Music which she taught herself. Moved to neighbouring, more affluent Outer London Borough in Summer 2002
Mataia	Asian	Muslim	Yes	2	4	1	1	1						
Ann	White		No		3	3	2	2						
Year 11 students recruited through other means in school, who agreed to participate in research – some gave interviews separately or in groups														
Stacey	White		No			1	3	4	1					
Louise	White		No			1	4	4						

Appendix One

Table Showing Ethnicity, religion, free school meals and GCSEs obtained by students who took part in the research

Name	Ethnicity	Religion	Free School Meals	Number of GCSEs achieved										Comments mobility	
				A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U			
Chloe	White		Yes			1	4	4							
Abbie	White		No				1	6	1						
Lucy	White		No			1	2	3	2			1			
Joy	Black African	Christian	Yes			4	4	1							Arrived from Zimbabwe in 2001
Charlene	Black British		No			2	4		2	1					
Akila	South Asian	Hindu/Tamil	Yes				3	4	2						On Child Protection Register. Spent some time as Looked After child in Foster care
<b>Somali Students in year 11 in 2001 interviewed</b>															
Nazrin	Black African	Muslim	Yes												
Nadjma	Black African	Muslim	Yes												
Ayani	Black African	Muslim	Yes												Lived with grandmother and sometimes, with older sister
Asha	Black African	Muslim	Yes												Arrived from Somalia via Italy 2000
Deqa	Black African	Muslim	Yes												Housed in Bed and Breakfast Accommodation
<b>Other Somali students who participated in fieldwork in 2001 and 2002 (year 11 in 2002)</b>															
Kaltuma	Black African	Muslim	Yes									1			
Farhiya	Black African	Muslim	Yes					1	2	1	1				
Maryam	Black African	Muslim	Yes					2		1	2	1			

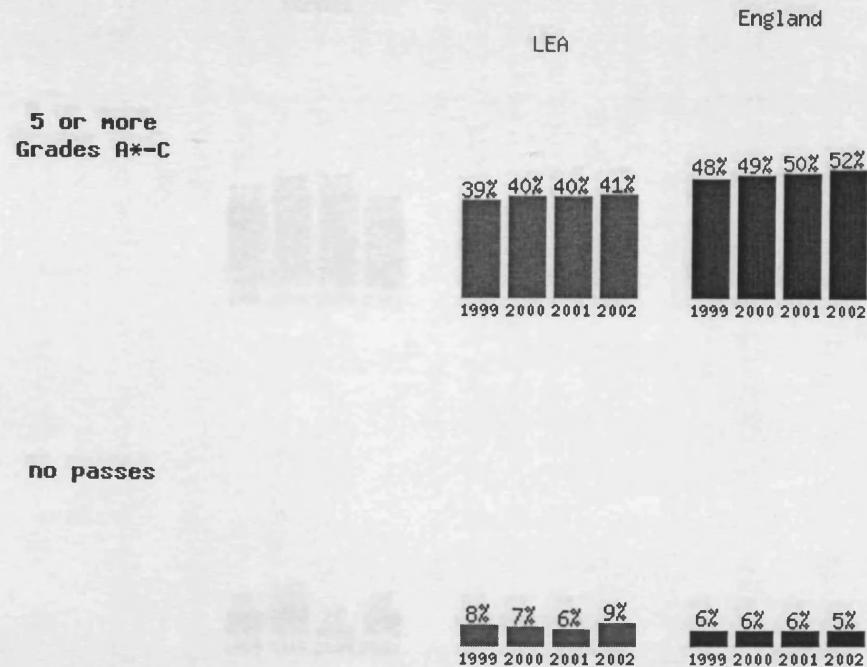
Appendix One

Table Showing Ethnicity, religion, free school meals and GCSEs obtained by students who took part in the research

Name	Ethnicity	Religion	Free School Meals	Number of GCSEs achieved										Comments mobility
				A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U		
Nazra	Black African	Muslim	Yes								3	3		
Samira	Black African	Muslim	Yes					1	2	2	2			
Year 11 Students in 2001 who did not attend school but who participated in fieldwork														
Marina	White		Yes								1			Moved out of parental home in 2000 to live with boyfriend
Kelly	White		Yes								3			
Natalie	Dual Heritage - Irish/Caribbean		Yes				1				3			Moved from Walthamstow to Northampton and then to South London in 2000
Kaley	White		Yes								2			
Annette	Black British		Yes											None Housed in mother and baby unit in South London
Students who participated in field work in 2001 and 2002 but were not interviewed														
Nathan	Asian	Muslim	Yes											Ran away from home in 2001 . Housed by Ayani's grandmother

**APPENDIX 2**

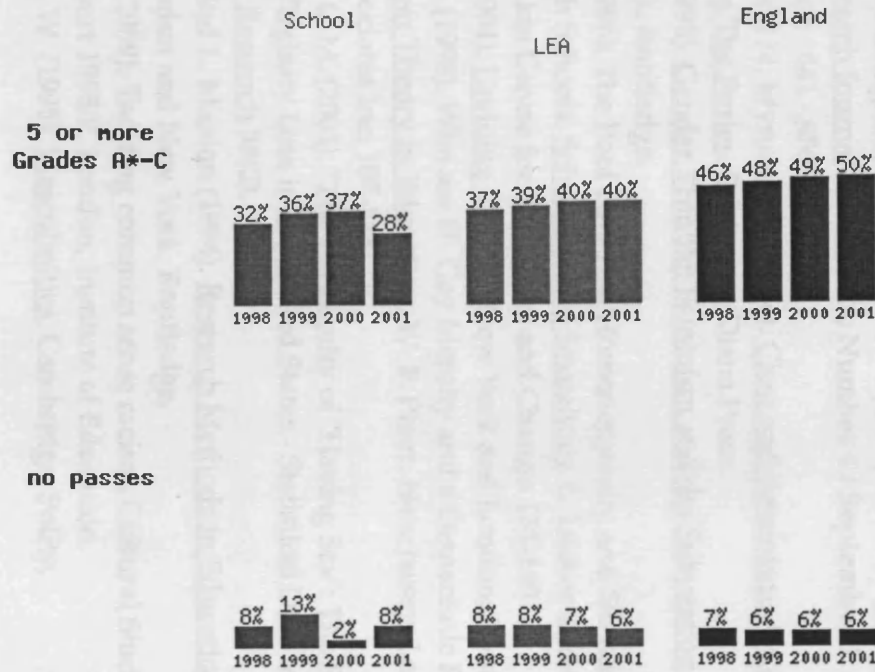
**GCSE Results 2002 (Source DfES; Standards Website)**



Because the school was closing, in the sense that it was amalgamating there was, according to DfES rules, exemption from the publication of GCSE results in performance tables. Percentage of pupils gaining 5 A\*-C grades or better was, as I have worked it out, 33%. Percentage of pupils gaining no passes, as I have worked it out, 3%.



**GCSE Results 2001 (Source DfES; Standards Website)**



(DfES 2002)

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