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a comparative case study of two classroom settings designed to
ameliorate boys' underachievement in English**

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ABSTRACT

Bernstein's distinction between instructional and regulative discourses provided an analytical tool for investigating the orchestration of two year 10 classroom settings in which teachers had introduced ameliorative strategies to address boys' underachievement in English. Bernstein's description of the pedagogic device has been used to compare how English was recontextualised in two classroom settings, one all boys' class, and one co-educational class. Moscovici's theory of Social Representation was introduced to account for how social structures become psychologically active for individuals as knowledge is recontextualised. Detailed classroom observations over a series of consecutive lessons were carried out. Empirical observations, interviews with teachers and students were analysed to demonstrate how classroom settings, made up of regulative and instructional discourse, influenced the way subject knowledge was recontextualised in a time of moral panic about boys' underachievement.

From social panic to classroom practice

The empirical study was conducted at a time when the moral panic about boys' underachievement was at its zenith in the UK¹. Extensive analysis of newspaper articles appearing in the tabloid and broadsheet press revealed a series of underlying yet connected themes. Fears that some boys would form an 'underclass' of permanently unemployed, unskilled men' (Times, 1994)² was linked to a deep anxiety about the disappearance of an industrial base in the UK. Right wing, tabloid newspapers such as The Sun and The Daily Mail argued that society was failing working class boys, firstly, through the removal of traditional career trajectories such as apprenticeship in coal mines and ship yards and secondly by forcing them into school practices for which they were 'naturally'³ unsuited. They argued that boys were being disadvantaged in comparison to girls by 'progressive' practices in teaching and assessment such as course work and continuous assessment.

By the late 1990s the broadsheet papers as well as many academics were expressing the view that the curriculum, especially in English, had become feminised (Arnot, et al., 1998). The 'back to basics' movement which arguably started as a right wing backlash against 'child centred' progressive teaching became part of political discourses. In 1991 the Conservative Prime Minister spoke in favour of traditional testing, and against teacher led assessments. By 1994 the coursework element of assessment had been limited to 20 percent. The Labour victory of 1997, did little to stifle such arguments and in 1997 the Literacy

¹ The study reported in this paper formed part of a wider project called Equity and the Curriculum funded by the Open University. Many of the conceptual ideas in this paper have been developed as part of a long collaboration between the author and Patricia Murphy who is the project director.

² Specific concern about masculinity resurfaces periodically in Western societies (Connell, 1995). Crisis tendencies may provoke a tendency to restore a dominant masculinity (Kimmel, 1987).

³ Bernstein described gender in the following way: 'Essentially national consciousness transforms a common biology into cultural specific in such a way that the specific cultural consciousness comes to have the force of a unique biology.' (Bernstein, 1996, p. 10) The translation from culture to biology and back relies on dominant ideas or discourses, that present so called differences between men and women as 'natural' biological facts (Harding, 1998).

Task Force was set up to tackle the need to raise standards in English. The Daily Telegraph (7/01/98) story headed 'Boys left behind by modern teaching' reported Stephen Byers, the schools' standards minister, as saying, 'Modern ways of teaching reading are causing boys to fall behind girls in English classes'. However, we have argued that calls for strategies such as those that advocated 'structured teaching' were underpinned by an essentialist view of gender and a representation that social order could be restored by recourse to traditional 'good teaching' (Murphy and Ivinson, 2002 forthcoming).

Moral panics become expressed through systems of ideas that a nation has available to itself and involves the need to make sense, to justify and to apportion blame. The drive towards actual and symbolic social order often involves a rhetoric about the 'control of women' (Yuval-Davis, 1992, p. 15). The *blame* for boys underachievement was pinned on the feminised curriculum and on 'a load of out-dated and impractical jargon' (Daily Mail 27/05/98) peddled by progressive, left wing teaching methods.

Teachers were made aware of the *problem* of boys' underachievement through a range of sources. The publication of test and examination results organised as league tables had made differential patterns of achievement widely accessible. The technologies of recording ensured that differential patterns of achievement between boys and girls according to subject were issues that no school could avoid. The drive to create local markets based on the argument that parents would judge the effectiveness of schools in their locale and choose to send their children to schools with the better examination results had started to impact on school practices.

This study was conducted in Monks Secondary School as it instigated an initiative called the 'Year of the Boy'. Subject departments were instructed by the headteacher to introduce strategies to address the 'underachieving boy'. In

particular, the school wanted to address a 20% gap between boys' and girls' achievement in English in public examinations at age 16. The strategy that was investigated was, first to create single sex classes for the 'higher achieving' boys' (class A) and, second to intersperse small groups of 'lower achieving' boys into mixed ability girls' classes (class B). In the mixed classes the ratio of boys to girls was 1-3 and a 'boy-girl-boy-girl' seating arrangement, referred to hereafter as *gendered seating*, was introduced to separate the boys from each other. The boys who were allocated to the top set were selected through records of their performance in Key Stage 3 SATs⁴ at age 14. The boys who did not receive a level 5 or above were divided up according to a strategy that appeared to be based on the need to 'control' the naughty boys.

In attempting to trace the effects of ideas circulating in press and policy documents into school and classroom practices and back, it is useful to recognise that some ideas carry more social weight than others. The following theoretical discussion is based on the need to examine gender as a hegemonic social representation or common sense discourse and the subject discipline of English as a specialist or scientific discourse. Teachers in Monks School recontextualised English knowledge according to social, political and institutional pressure to address boys' underachievement.

The pedagogic device

The pedagogic device provides an analytical description at the level of the classroom of a more general process, the recontextualisation of knowledge. Pedagogic discourse was described as a discourse without a discourse. 'Pedagogic discourse is not physics, chemistry or psychology. Whatever, it is it can not be identified with the discourse it transmits' (Bernstein, 1996, p. 46). Thus pedagogic discourse is:

⁴ Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) were introduced into English primary and secondary schools gradually, starting in 1992. Students were tested in English, mathematics and science at

...the principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relation with each other, for the purposes of their selective transmission and acquisition. Pedagogic discourse is a principle for the circulation and the reordering of discourses. (Bernstein, 1996, 46-47)

No discourse ever moves without ideology at play and therefore the pedagogic device dislocates and relocates other discourses.

The pedagogic device was made up of instructional discourse embedded within regulative discourse (Bernstein, 1996, p. 49). Regulative discourse was considered to be the dominant discourse because it captured something fundamental about a society's moral order in a Durkheimian sense. Regulative discourse was 'a discourse of social order' (Bernstein, 1996, p. 46). Instructional discourse was 'a discourse of skill of various kinds and their relations to each other', (ibid). The important point is that Bernstein did not draw this analytical distinction to translate pedagogic practice simplistically into the transmission of skill through discourse on the one hand and the transmission of values on the other. For Bernstein there was only one discourse: the pedagogic discourse.

Bernstein described two models of how knowledge was recontextualised that can be seen as two opposing forms of power (classification) and control (framing). Broadly, *competence models* were characterised by weak classification and framing and resulted in few explicit (instructional) structures. When knowledge was recontextualized according to competence models, surveillance was centred more directly on the intentions, attributes and individuality of the student, and less on the criteria attributable to specialist discourses. *Performance models* were characterised by explicit (instructional) structures and strong classification. Although fewer of the student's personal attributes, intentions and style were used as criteria for control, students became easily classified as successful and

three key stages corresponding to ages 7, 11 and 14 years.

less successful, precisely because the subject (discipline) criteria were publicly available. Within any classroom we would expect to find a patterning of practice which might tend more towards one of these modalities than the other.

The models for recontextualising knowledge outlined above refer back to a distinction between two forms of organic solidarity within the middle class, individualised and personalised. Throughout his work, Bernstein's main concern was with the principles of social control. His secondary focus was on the distinct forms of experience. In particular, he has been concerned with forms of social control in education, with the 'languages' that are used in schools and within class cultures and how these differentially position and structure pupils' experience of schooling. The languages that children acquire within their homes are influenced by how the family is located within a class structure and according to a class culture. The theory elaborates the movement and congruence of ideas between family, pupils and the school and shows how schools reproduce social class structures. The theory outlines a complex system of mediation between the three sites that takes into account factions within social class, dispositions towards learning and the culture of the school. Briefly, working class children, rather than middle class children, tend to have acquired codes that are less compatible with those required to be successful in schools. This is partly because teachers tend to be middle class.

Underlying teachers' classroom discourse is a representation of the 'ideal pupil' or the 'ideal citizen'. When pupils' ways of talking, acting and producing texts conform to their teacher's representation of the ideal pupil, they are less likely to experience reprimands. However, when their ways of behaving conflict with the underlying representation of the ideal pupil, they are more likely to experience reprimands. However the danger of this happening depends on the model for recontextualising knowledge that is prevalent within classroom practice.

Previously, I have argued that representations of the citizen underlying teachers' classroom discourse are culturally specific and change according to the social anxieties present at any one time (Ivinson et al., 2000, p. 154). In this study, the moral panic about boys' underachievement heightened awareness of gender at the institutional plane of analysis and was realised as 'The year of the Boy'. At the departmental plane of analysis the particular set of ameliorative strategies that was introduced was both driven by this heightened awareness and yet exacerbated it further. It would have been almost impossible to imagine that the teacher of the all-boys' class would have been able to make sense of the comments, texts and behaviours exhibited by her pupils in non-gender terms. The other teacher, although confronted with a co-educational class was expected to deal with the 'underachieving' boys. Therefore these teachers had their already heightened representations of gender further exacerbated by the strategies they had introduced. The teacher of the all-boys' class was positioned to administer to high achieving boys and the other teacher had to administer to the low achieving boys. The intersections between representations of gender, 'ability' and subject knowledge were played out in different ways in each classroom setting, as we see later in the paper.

Two universes of ideas with different logics?

The move between the terms discourse, social representation and practice is not easy. Bernstein used the term discourse to indicate message systems of a more general semiotic nature than the word 'discourse' usually implies (cf. Kress, 2001). Social representations conceptually underlie discourses and are carried through them. However, because they refer to the psychic aspect of collective ideas they also describe the psychological understandings that individuals have available to them with which to make sense. It is through everyday practice that social representations are evoked, activated and made available.

In order to analyse what teachers were bringing to bear on classroom practice I turn to the study of common sense outlined in Moscovici's theory of Social

Representations (1976, 1984, 2001). According to Bernstein's description of the pedagogic device, instructional discourse is embedded in regulative discourse. That is, the instructions that teachers give as they induct students into subject discourse can not be dislocated from an underlying notion of the learner implicit within them. The underlying representation of the learner can be viewed as a social representation of the category of the person within a particular sociocultural and socio-political context. At the core of the pedagogic endeavour is the drive not just to educate but to educate someone – notably the ideal citizen. Therefore, a teacher's instructional discourse is underpinned by a social and political necessity to educate students *as if they will become* the teacher's representation of the 'ideal pupil/citizen'.

Social Representations Theory complements aspects of Bernstein's Code Theory in various ways. Firstly, Bernstein referred to semiotic systems in terms of discourse. This approach foregrounds the relay while placing the 'content' of the message in a secondary position. In order to account for how ideas become psychologically active for individuals, the emphasis has to be realigned to focus on the *content* of the message. Secondly, the term *discourse* places the emphasis on verbal interaction while I wish to place the emphasis on classroom practice more generally. Bernstein, of course, used the term *discourse* to cover both. It is through everyday classroom practice, which is messy and at times seemingly incoherent - if the focus remains on discourse - that codes are instantiated. Students receive messages through classroom practices, which often contradict what teachers say they are teaching. These two theoretical positions can be viewed as complementary: one starts from a sociological perspective, the other from a psychological perspective. Both are required if we are to account for how hegemonic social representations, such as gender, penetrate classrooms and are disrupted, reproduced or re-constructed in different guises through everyday practice.

Bernstein's Code Theory addressed a theoretical lacuna in Durkheim's work by recognising that different forms of collective representation could be found within the same society, in particular in complex modern societies. Throughout his work, Bernstein's main concern was with the principles of social control.

Whereas Bernstein accounts for different representations through an understanding of social structures, for example, factions of the middle class, Moscovici created a distinction between what he calls two 'universes of ideas', the *consensual* and the *reified*. Part of his rationale harked back to Durkheim's description of 'traditional' and 'modern' social structures, yet with the added argument that science has become the new religion. Instead of focussing on forms of social solidarity, Moscovici has been concerned with changes in social ideas as they occur within and between social groups where the power relations can not be predicted from social class differences. He has been concerned with how social groupings organised around common interest, shared ideologies, or religious beliefs create and recreate 'the other' by assimilating or projecting ideas.

In making this controversial distinction between the consensual and reified universe, Moscovici reached back to Lévy-Bruhl's ([1925]/1926) recognition of the difference between pre-logical and logical thought. He suggested that ideas that arise and are maintained within scientific communities 'order their content and represent man' through relations of 'distancing, authority, and detachment'. In comparison, ideas within the consensual universe order their content and representation of man through relations of 'trusting appropriation, even implication' (Moscovici, 2001, p. 143). Jodelet (1991) made a parallel point when she suggested that ideas that circulate in the consensual universe obey a *different logic* to ideas that circulate in the reified universe. The way ideas may be put together within the subject discipline of English suggests that it belongs to the reified universe. The way that ideas about gender can be put together and circulate within society suggests that they belong to the consensual universe.

Bernstein's primary concern was with social structures that provide the grounds for consciousness. In comparison Moscovici's primary emphasis has been on the *content* of collective ideas, social change and recovering psychic aspects of collective representations. In order to emphasise the *dynamic* and *active* processes by which representations are transformed and take new shapes through communication he changed the name from collective to social representations. Social representations provide people with the resources to interpret and make sense of social situations and can be defined as:

system(s) of values and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and second to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii)

The term 'social representation' designates both the structures that allow communication to take place through inter-subjective shared meanings and the process whereby shared meanings are created.

By drawing on social representation theory, it could be said that the pedagogic device offers a means for investigating the extent to which ideas that belong to the scientific universe are embedded within common sense ideas as teachers recontextualise knowledge. The paper draws on the parallels between Bernstein's and Moscovici's theories to investigate how gender as a hegemonic social representation (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990; Lloyd and Duveen, 1992; Connell, 1987) was instantiated in the classroom practices of two English teachers.

The Research Stance

The pedagogic device determines the way that ideas relating to English subject knowledge are embedded within the social representation of gender. The ameliorative strategy instigated by the English department set up this equation differently through the interaction of English with an all boys' high achieving group and with low achieving boys and mixed 'ability' girls. These strategies predisposed teachers to find some aspects of the social representation of gender more salient than others. Teachers have to make sense of the classes that they find themselves in front of when they come to instruct. They **read off** students' behaviours, remarks and texts and make sense of them according to the social and symbolic tools they have available to them. It has typically been found that teachers read behaviours such as shouting out, moving around, and not writing at length according to their social representation of gender. That is, if boys behave in these ways, teachers interpret these acts as positive and describe them in terms of risk taking, being actively engaged and conforming to the hegemonic social representation of gender. Such behaviour exhibited by boys is tolerated and made sense of according to social expectations about boys. We continually hear the phrase, 'boys will be boys'. When girls shout out, move around and fail to write at length, teachers also have to make sense of such behaviour. In these cases the hegemonic social representation of femininity that privileges quiet, conforming, conscientious and demure behaviour is in conflict with girls' behaviour and teachers experience this as tension that they have to resolve. The resolution can involve reprimanding the girl to bring her in line with the hegemonic social representation of gender. When investigating classroom practice moments of tension or critical incidents provide privileged insights into the way that specialist subject discourse was mediated by underlying social representations of gender. (For a fuller description of the analysis of classroom practice and discourse observed in each setting see Ivinson and Murphy, 2002 forthcoming)

Design

Prior to observation teachers were asked to select an activity that had an identifiable end product. The activity they chose was to write three different types of novel openings that would be submitted together as one piece of coursework to be assessed as part of the public examination in English at age sixteen plus. We applied our methodology to the two parallel year 10 (students aged 14/15 years) English classroom settings in the same school, one single sex boys' class and one mixed class in which gendered seating had been introduced. Both teachers agreed to teach the same three lessons to their classes. We observed three consecutive lessons in each setting as students undertook a similar creative writing activity.

Lesson 1 - Introduced literary techniques relating to different genres. Extracts from novel openings were read out in a whole-class forum from a booklet (an 'in-house' production) on creative writing. Exercises from the booklet were discussed in pairs and /or groups. Feedback from group work was discussed in whole-class interaction.

Lesson 2 - More exercises from the booklet. First, novel openings were drafted and read out in class. Teachers provided feedback and students continued with their individual writing. Less group work than in lesson 1.

Lesson 3 - Most of the lesson was spent doing individual writing.

Methods

We employed non-participant classroom observation and used fieldnotes to record: classroom layout; seating arrangements; movements around the classroom; peer group interaction; material culture and samples of classroom discourse. The second lesson in the series of three was video recorded and a sample of students was radiomiked to capture their discourse as they undertook the task. Examples of texts used for instruction were collected. We collected and photocopied all the texts submitted as assessed course work by students in each classroom.

Analysis

In this paper we focus on the critical incidents that provided insight into teachers underlying social representations of gender and of the subject as they instructed their classes. The aim is to demonstrate how instructional discourse was embedded within the regulative discourse. In this study, therefore, we focused on how practices that revealed aspects of teachers' social representation of gender interacted with instructional discourse of English.

The activity

The English examination comprised a course work element that is assessed by the teacher and a written examination that is externally marked. Each student was required to produce a coursework folder comprising a set number of written pieces covering a prescribed range of styles. Producing this kind of course work was a novel experience for these Year 10 students. However, many of the procedures that led up to producing a piece of course work, were familiar to them from previous years. These involved: learning about a specific genre or writing style; analysing examples of work from established authors; brain-storming ideas; drafting written work and producing a final product that was, first, self marked and then submitted to the teacher for comment and a final mark. Before describing two critical incidents, I summarise what pupils chose to write about in each classroom.

The first session

During the first lesson in each class the creative writing activity was introduced. An in house booklet containing extracts from famous novel openings representing a range of genres was used. The teacher read out passages and asked pupils questions about characterisation, description, atmosphere and writing style in general. The sessions were conducted with the teacher addressing the class in general and choosing various pupils to answer specific questions about the extracts. There were no noticeable differences in the way

each teacher conducted this introductory section. Students were next instructed to draft their first novel opening. In class A, the teacher suggested that pupils write about 'someone you know well'. In classroom B, the teacher instructed the boys to write a novel opening in a genre of their choice. In both classes students were encouraged to work in pairs or groups, to share ideas and to discuss their ideas with neighbours. In the boys' class, pupils fell easily into discussion with the boy(s) sitting beside them. The atmosphere was noisy, there was much laughing and a general level of excitement prevailed.

In the mixed class, the gendered seating arrangement set up a range of forms of interaction. Some groups of boys and girls discussed ideas with ease, while in other parts of the room no discussion took place in groups or pairs. For some pupils the seating arrangement positioned them beside pupils who they did not feel easy talking to and we noted a number of individuals who failed to talk during this 'group work' session. For others, the seating arrangement was empowering. For example, one boy adopted a pedagogic role towards the girl beside him and through the following lessons he could be found explaining passages, presenting ideas and reading her drafts. We also found some boys asking girls to repeat the teacher's instructions for them, to remind them of page numbers they had forgotten, and asking them to explain the activity to them.

Research has often pointed to the containing, helping and civilising role that girls take up when paired with boys in classroom activities (e.g. Noddings, 1984; Walkerdine, 1988, 1989). The point I wish to stress is the variety of forms of interaction found in classroom B in comparison to classroom A. The realisation of active, on-task interaction in classroom B did not seem to happen in any systematic way, and involved a complex range of issues including, for example, a history of friendship between partners, family links, outgoing personalities and shyness. Pupils discussed these issues with us during interviews. In classroom A, all boys were expected to interact with all other boys. We interpret this from an instruction given by teacher A, at the beginning of the session. She stated,

‘By the end of the term I expect that each one of you has worked with every other boy in the class’. During the first lesson we observed, the teacher asked boys to change places in order to work with a different boy three times. In classroom B, pupils had been given their seating position at the beginning of the term and they were not invited to change seats during the three lessons observed. Indeed, part of the strategy involved controlling pupils’ movements. The practice of asking pupils to move and interact with any other in classroom A was strikingly different to the practice of controlling movement in classroom B.

Contrasting patterns of movement between the two classrooms can be interpreted as realisations of an underlying social representation of gender. The ‘naughty’ boys were physically constrained by the allocation of a seating position, usually between two girls. The higher achieving boys were given the opportunity to move and choose their next working partnership. Thus the ‘naughty’ boys were restricted and the ‘good boys’ were encouraged to exercise autonomy. The instructional discourse in this session relied on pupils discussing English ideas. Opportunities for boys to discuss creative writing ideas in each classroom were therefore markedly different. Confronted with the ‘good’ boys, teacher A extended autonomy, responsibility and freedom. Confronted with the ‘bad’ boys, teacher B controlled and limited movement. As it happened, in classroom B, there were many unintended effects that resulted in a wide range of interactive outcomes.

Teachers were confronted with boys prejudged to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Their respective classroom practice manifested different realisations of the social representation of gender brought about, I would argue, by being confronted with the two different audiences. Boys in classroom B, had little opportunity to exhibit any ‘bad’ behaviour during the lesson or since they had met their new teacher. However, they had been pre-judged as ‘bad’ and in consequence were being delivered a different version of English to their peers in the other classroom. The pedagogic device refers to the way instructional discourse – English - was

embedded in the regulative discourse (gender as a social representation). At the level of classroom analysis, clearly pupils in class A and class B had different experiences of English.

The content of social representations

Once pupils had completed the introductory exercises teachers instructed pupils to work on an initial draft of a novel opening for their coursework files in a genre of their choice. In each classroom pupils were instructed to work in groups or with a partner and patterns of interaction similar to those described above ensued.

When pupils had worked on their draft for a set period of time each teacher asked for pieces of work to be read aloud to the class. Practices for selecting pupils to read out their work were markedly different between the two classrooms. In the boys' class, teacher A started at one side of the classroom and systematically invited each boy in turn to read. They read out horror, war, crime, adventure, science-fiction, humorous, fantasy and action oriented novel openings. One boy read out a story of a deformed banana to the hilarity of his classmates. The teacher commented positively after each boy had read his piece. It was difficult therefore to work out, from her comments, which stories she considered to be better than others. Her even-handed approach, by allowing all boys to read and through her generous praise of their work, provided clues that implied that every boy was equal.

In the mixed class, the teacher selected who would read out work. During the observation it became apparent that she was choosing more girls than boys to read out texts and most of the girls read 'romance' novel openings. In our interview with the teacher after the lesson, she told us that she had made a point of circulating round the class, as the pupils were producing their first drafts, in order to read what they were writing. She had deliberately selected the pieces to

be read out to the class. Through this practice she modelled what she considered to be an acceptable piece of creative writing. Although it may have been an unintended effect, she established an emergent subject culture in which the romance genre had high status within classroom B. During interviews with pupils after the lessons it became clear that both boys and girls had read this classroom practice as a clue about what teacher B considered to be good creative writing. Both boys and girls informed us that girls write romance better than boys. In extensive discussions during interviews pupils told us that romance was something that girls did, and that boys did not write romance (cf. Ivinson and Murphy, 2002 forthcoming). There may have been a desire on the teacher's behalf to use the girls' texts as a way to provide the boys with messages about what she considered to be good creative writing. In classroom B, the pedagogic device recontextualised English according to a feminine social representation.

No boy read out a romantic piece in the single sex boys' setting. The teacher did not discuss the romance genre with the boys as a possible writing style. Indeed, she seemed to accept the implicit consensus that boys were not expected to realise English through the romance genre. In the boys' class, romance was neither visible nor explicitly legitimated and therefore did not acquire a high status. In classroom A, the pedagogic device realised English according to a neutral, or arguably a masculine social representation.

The two critical incidents described below were observed in the mixed classroom. The boys in the mixed classroom had been provided, through the teacher's practice and discourse, with a model of high status English knowledge. It seemed reasonable that, if they had read the clues correctly, they would be motivated to reconstruct this in their own texts. The first critical incident occurred when Adam experimented with writing romance.

Critical Incident 1 - Adam experiments with Romance

Our observational work in the mixed classroom setting placed Adam on the periphery of English subject culture. At one point he called out to the teacher, “I don’t write”. However, after the section in the lesson when pupils had been asked to read out their drafts, we noticed that Adam suddenly started to write. While he was writing, the teacher leaned over his shoulder and said,

“Make sure it doesn’t get into an X-rated sort of thing”.

Adam started to experiment with romance writing after he had heard the pieces that the girls had read out. His romance story was based on an incident that one of his friends, Tom, had recounted to him. Tom was also in the class, so we were able to confirm Adam’s account of what he had been writing. The story was set in Tom’s house and recounted an event when Tom invited his girlfriend, Anna around purportedly to play chess. Tom however, had other intentions and the story recounts how Tom managed to dispose of the chess set in order to initiate other activities with Anna.

Features of the romance genre are that it is written in the first person singular in order to create an atmosphere of intimacy, it involves descriptions of personal feelings, an emotional encounter and has a ring of authenticity. It was evident that Adam was not reconstructing romance in the style that was conventionally recognised by pupils and by teachers. His was a more action-oriented account that included humour.

In the interview afterwards Adam said that he was trying to write a piece of romance, yet with a number of provisos. He explained that his story was based on a friend in order not to implicate himself and, secondly that it involved humour. Along with many of the boys who spoke about romance writing in interviews, he said that he would not even have considered writing a piece of romance if it did

not include some humour. He said that he had been, “actually getting into it” before the teacher came round and made her comment.

In an informal interview after the lesson, teacher B suggested that Adam had started to write romance because he had found out that he could write ‘naughty things’. However, during the same lesson Katie was chosen to read out her romance novel opening which the teacher described during feedback as “A rather steamy Mills and Boon piece”. However, this comment was not presented to us or indeed to Katie in feedback in front of the class as a negative feature of her writing. Katie’s, ‘steamy’ romance writing was tolerated, while Adam’s action oriented romance writing was not. Later, Katie handed in her romance piece as part of her assessed coursework. In the end, Adam did not submit a romance piece to be assessed.

Because the classroom setting in the mixed class made romance visible, a space was opened up for boys to experiment with writing romance. However, once beyond the provisional phase of drafting, Adam, along with the other two boys who experimented with romance, chose not to submit these pieces for assessment. Adam had read the teacher’s message that romance writing was not for boys. He reverted to realising English according to the hegemonic social representation of gender that associated boys with action and horror, and girls with romance.

How did the teacher interpret Adam’s attempt to write romance? Her comment to Adam while he was drafting suggests that she was experiencing a tension due to one of the ‘naughty’ boys experimenting with a genre that is primarily concerned with intimate relationships.

Critical incident 2 - Martin writes Romance

Martin was also in the mixed class. During the lesson he had drafted work on a war story and a children's story. During interview he explained that he had been a bit stuck for a third novel opening and that his mum had suggested he write a romance. He had asked her for a book to help him with the writing style and she had lent him one of her Jackie Collins⁵ novels. He submitted the piece as coursework after his mum had read it. His piece led to an extreme reaction from the teacher who showed it to two other members of staff. They all agreed that it was 'pornographic' and the piece was torn up.

Martin had broken a number of implicit codes that were at play in the mixed classroom setting. The teacher in the mixed classroom setting had chosen girls to read out Romance pieces of writing as exemplars of good pieces of writing. She had cautioned one boy, who had started drafting a piece of romance, not to write "X-rated sort of thing". This signalled that the boys were inappropriately using concrete, action oriented styles of writing. Later these boys had excluded themselves from submitting romance pieces because they had come to recognise that the feminine gender valence attached to romance in other social settings - such as peer groups and in the cinema - was being maintained within the mixed boys' and girls' classroom setting.

In the teacher's view, boys only wrote romance to be 'naughty'. Therefore it was safer to categorise Martin's writing as 'pornographic' and tear up his text, than look for another motive to explain why he had appropriated a feminine genre. Indeed, had more boys been encouraged to write romance pieces the teacher could have challenged rather than reinforced the feminine gender marking of the romance genre.

The need for control

Teacher B read Martin's intentions and implied that he had set out to be provocative and naughty. Other pupils in the mixed class, including boys, did not recognise this interpretation of their behaviour.

The teacher described Martin's romance writing in terms of a personal attack that was intended to challenge her authority. In tearing up his texts, teacher B demonstrated a projection of her fear of [sexual?] attack onto the boy's behaviour. The strategy implemented in classroom B was intended to constrain lower achieving boys. Underlying the strategy were aspects of a hegemonic social representation of gender that associated constructions of 'low ability' with a form of masculinity on the verges of 'going out of control'. Many of the strategies aimed at addressing boys' 'underachievement' refer to forms of control.

Teachers in Monks School spoke about the need to provide boys with, 'writing frames', 'structured instructions', 'information presented in small, manageable chunks' and the need to 'segment lessons into small time intervals'. Although forms of control these were strikingly evident in the mixed classroom where the seating arrangement operated, the teacher of the boys' class explained how she had structured her lessons to provide control for the higher achieving boys. Teacher A described how she applied 'pace'.

I think mainly the emphasis has been mainly on pace, pace and rigour that's what we wanted. English is an exciting subject lets make it exciting and high expectations and in order to get high expectations the output has got to be high. And you can't get that if you are not well planned, well resourced, if you're not pushing them through. It is also a () control. Today you saw it when I said you have 20 minutes with your partner to build up those stories 'can't we have 5 more minutes?' 'No' that is your time limit and they've produced within that time limit. If you gave them an extra 5 minutes they would take it but not produce anything more and sometimes it takes guts to stick with your time limits because you think, oh

⁵ Jacky Collins is a popular novelist who writes about adult relationships. Martin explained to us that he tried to "tone down" the descriptions he read in the book when using ideas in his course work essay.

what if they don't finish – but they always do. Always, especially boys who hate missing a deadline. (Teacher A – all boys class)

Teacher A spoke also as head of department and explained how the department had been using writing frames. In the passage below she described how the use of writing frames benefited 'lower achieving' boys:

I have just thought of the third one [strategy] which is the inability of a lot of boys to break a task down into manageable chunks. We have actually been using a writing frame for quite some time whether it be a writing frame with boxes. We have discovered that less-able boys, middle to less-able boys, love a box. Give them a box and they will fill the box and they will actually shape and extend writing quite dramatically as a result of the box and writing frame. We have been giving writing frames in an ad hoc way, prompt questions on the board for example, for years. I think we have always done it and boys do respond very well to that sort of stimulus actually. (Teacher A - speaking as head of department)

Reapplying structure can be interpreted as an antidote to the free flowing, unrestrained ways of progressive pedagogies. Returning rigour, structure, boxes and dead lines to classroom practices can be seen to repair the damage to boys caused by a *feminised* curriculum. Teachers described how such strategies provided appropriate stimuli for boys. Teachers spoke very little about the effects of the new strategies on girls.

[Higher achieving] boys are not really naughty

Differences between the higher and lower 'achieving' boys were explained in terms of different attributes and intentions. Thus in the passage below, teacher A described how [high achieving] boys who while being 'naughty', were actually expressing a desire to please.

T2 The boys are naughty, that they lack concentration that they are messy they are casual about their homework, casual about bringing books, presentation of their work and pride in their work and they are not really interested in pursuing the -----pursuits of language and literature study they have to be made interested by all singing all dancing Teacher

and I actually think a lot of that is complete myth. I don't believe it at all and that what we don't do enough of is focus on what boys do have the success of and term what we deem as disruptive, for example, a boy making a lot of noise - means he is disruptive, could actually be twisted around to the boy because he is making some witty, articulate contribution to the conversation or to the discussion that is already taking place. This desire to please this desire to....

Over-coming the in-built prejudice found in the press and the media about boys had become a focus of attention. The solution was to explain away boys' poor presentation skills through an argument based on compensation. Poor presentation skills were linked to 'disruption' and this in turn could be explained in three possible ways. One solution was for the teacher to compensate by becoming an 'all singing all dancing' entertainer and thus hold the boys' attention. Secondly, the disruption could be interpreted as a 'witty, articulate contribution', or, disruption could be interpreted as a desire to please (but please who??).

Concluding remarks

I have described differences in the patterns of classroom practice as a way to extract the teachers' realisations of an underlying social representation of the learner from the surface features of classroom life as we observed it. First, I wish to suggest that although teachers shared a hegemonic social representation of gender, they realised this in different ways depending on whether they were confronted with an all-boy or a mixed audience. I have suggested that teachers *read off* different aspects of the social representation of gender depending on the audience and projected this onto boys' behaviour depending on whether they were confronted with 'higher achieving' or 'lower achieving' boys.

Teacher A realised aspects of hegemonic social representations of gender that granted boys high status. However, the picture was complicated by whether the boys were assigned to the class of 'clever' or 'naughty' boys. Clever boys do not conflict with representations of masculinity that privilege the mind over the body. Therefore, as the 'clever' boys in classroom A, presented ideas to the teacher, she valued each offering with reverence. She attended to their every word and

did not disallow any of their ideas. She even accepted the deformed banana story. As it happened, the teacher was greatly disappointed with the first pieces of writing that the boys handed in to be marked.

The girls in the mixed class received little positive feedback from their teacher. The 'naughty' boys, meanwhile, were controlled through the gendered seating and virtually excluded from presenting their ideas in the semi-public space of the classroom. The 'naughty' boys, I wish to argue, provided a particular difficulty for the teacher because they were perceived to reside too much in their bodies and not enough in their minds. Thus, boys who were not pre-judged as 'clever' needed to be doubly restrained and controlled. Because their ideas were in danger of being too much mixed up with action and, therefore with bodies, teacher B questioned Adam's attempt at writing romance and disallowed Martin's realisation of romance.

Instructional discourse was embedded within regulative discourse. Regulative discourse has been presented in this paper as a hegemonic social representation of gender. This comparative case study has demonstrated the power of the analytical distinction between regulative and instructional discourse. The effect of the teachers' realisation of hegemonic social representation of gender literally disallowed some students from having access to an adequate instructional discourse in English. Finally, I wish to suggest that a gender driven regulative discourse had come to dominate instructional discourse in these two classrooms because a social panic fuelled by media hype had heightened awareness of gender. A hegemonic social representation of gender rather than knowledge about pedagogic practices had gained the upper hand. Instructional discourse in creative writing is concerned with skills such as how to create atmosphere, describe emotion and portray scenes. Had teachers been given the freedom to concentrate on instructional discourse they may well have ended up developing pedagogic strategies that help boys (as well as girls) to write better.

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