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Push and pull in the classroom: competition, gender and the neoliberal subject

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In this paper I explore how learning strategies based on competition and zero-sum thinking are inscribed into the dynamics of classroom interaction shaping relations between high-achieving pupils, and link elements of these practices to market trends in British education policy discourse. A detour through the politico-historical negotiations shaping relations between neo-liberal governance and education is initially sketched out, bringing into focus how the proliferation of policy discourses of consumerism and marketisation aim to facilitate and shape the conduct of persons in classroom settings. Drawing on ethnographic observation data taken from a study of two London comprehensive secondary schools, I then outline how pupils are incited to behave as competitive strategists in the classroom and reflect on the gender constructions underpinning these performances and their slippery dynamics.

Keywords: gender; neo-liberalism; competition; pedagogy; schooling

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s the circulation of the concept of academic achievement has been subject to a number of important critical interventions from education researchers who argue that boys and girls of different social class and racial backgrounds tend to receive differential treatment from teachers, which impacts on their educational attainment (Garner and Bing 1973; Hargreaves 1972). More recently, education researchers have highlighted the extent to which pupils' experience of and 'success' in schooling is shaped by the structure and dynamic of school organisations (Smith and Tomlinson 1989), the construction of racist pedagogy in the curriculum (Gillborn and Youdell 2000), and the normative judgements informing teachers' expectations and attitudes (Nash 1976; Rist 2000), among other structuration factors. In particular, education researchers have been keen to emphasise the role of gender on educational achievement and the way in which the curriculum and pedagogical training and teaching institutionalise a pattern of gender ordering in schools that privileges boys over girls (Francis and Skelton 2005; Reay 2001). At the same time, the failure among some boys to adjust to schooling and achieve academically has sometimes been located in institutional changes thought to be effected and facilitated by the perceived feminised character of teaching practices and disciplinary techniques.

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In response to these anti-feminist charges, an educational discourse of 'failing boys' gained ascendancy in public debates, media coverage and education policy in the UK (Epstein et al. 1998; Francis and Skelton 2005), in effect facilitating a 'moral panic' over the increasing divide in attainment levels between boys and girls. Here, the discussion around girls tends to be marred by claims that the education system works to the detriment of boys since it engenders a set of norms and values that register forms of 'feminine' choice and behaviour (Carrington and McPhee 2008; Francis and Skelton 2005; Pollack 1999). In a *Sunday Times* article Minette Marrin (2010) reasoned in a similar vein, for example, arguing that the 'State' and feminism more generally are complicit in the concept of masculinity being made redundant in schools because of the uneasy fit between 'masculine' forms of behaviour and the 'feminine' character of pedagogic training and teaching. A number of researchers characterise this structure of feeling in terms of a 'feminist backlash' (Harris 2004; Kenway 1997) that is derisive of feminist gains in education for the way it supposedly contributes to the 'crisis of masculinity' – the idea that conventional 'masculine' forms of identification, in particular, working-class inflections of masculinity, occupy a liminal position in the domain of education.

In response to some of the above arguments, various education researchers have sought to uncover the supposed gendered nature of academic achievement. Specifically, feminist researchers have sought to undermine the feminisation thesis, arguing on the contrary that schools remain masculinist upholders of the traditional gender order (Francis and Skelton 2005; Reay 2001). To do this, education researchers have utilised and combined social constructionist, material feminist and post-structuralist analytic approaches in order to make explicit how the structure and dynamic of school organisations work on and through pupils, and, in a transitive sense, 'enact the [gendered] subject into being' (Butler 1997, 13). A particular foci of this research has been to study the way in which expressions and embodiments of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour are recursively generated and rendered culturally intelligible through the interaction between pupils and teachers, and how these patterns of interaction impact on the differential participation of boys and girls in specific forms of achievement (e.g. Archer and Francis 2007; Francis 2008, 2009; Jackson 2003; Read 2008; Renold and Allan 2006; Willis 1977).

This paper is intended as a contribution to some of these debates but also seeks to extend them by mapping the ways in which competition and autonomy are embedded in the learning practices framing pupils' relations to each other, to teachers and to the structure of school organisations more generally. In particular, I elaborate on the gender dynamics of these negotiations; specifically, how boys and girls engage differently and with varying success with the pedagogic tasks summoned through classroom practices. In what follows I trace the circulation of neo-liberal concepts and practices as a dominant narrative in British education policy discourse and discuss the implications of this for thinking about how high-achieving pupils and schools emerge as potential sites (or modalities) for the exercise and development of neo-liberalised governance.

2. British education, neo-liberalism and the high achiever

Central to education policy and political narratives in the UK has been the veneration of a managerialist culture of 'testing, targets, and tables' (Department for Education and Skills 2004), coupled with a myopic focus on the twin discourses 'standards' and 'excellence' (Department for Education and Employment 1997a, 1997b; Department

for Education and Skills 2003). The politico-ideological dimensions of these trends in British education can be traced to the radical programme of economic and institutional reform articulated through the political practice and thinking of the 1980s' Conservative government (Keat and Abercrombie 1991). A particular feature of the architecture of governmental practice at this time was a model of welfare reform couched primarily in the language of economic liberalism and neo-conservatism with its concentration on competition, deregulation and a preference for the minimalist state (Clarke et al. 2007; Harvey 2005). These changes reflect the emergence of new political formations and new institutional forms that can be characterised through a Foucauldian analytic of governmentality as neo-liberal: 'a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance' (Larner 2000, 6) (also see Barry et al. 1996; Rose 1999).

In education, for example, neo-liberalism was omnipresent. The introduction of rate-capping on provision during the 1980s meant that schools were forced to secure allocated resources in part through attracting children and parents to their services (Jones 2003). In addition, the weight of power and authority typically exercised by local authorities was partially relinquished to make way for the introduction of local business interests to the management and finance of schools (Lowe 2005). Successive British governments (New Labour, 1997–2008, and Brown's Labour government, 2008–10) continued the politico-ideological work of sustaining a rhetoric of the superiority of market mechanisms over state monopolies as devices for structuring welfare institutions. This involved a renarration of public-sector organisation within a neo-liberal framing of conceptions of development, progress and 'modernisation', and an ideological shift away from a commitment to public ownership and ideas of democratic socialism or welfarist liberalism (Wilkins 2010, 2011). In this expanding neo-liberal imagery, schools are compelled to perform in ways that are attentive to market concepts of supply and demand, namely through addressing and educating parents as consumers (subjects with choice over where their child should go to school) and constructing pupils as active users or co-producers of education services (Hargreaves 2004). These trends in welfare reform have recently become intensified under a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government which is currently seeking to expand opportunities for more schools to become self-governing and autonomous (e.g. through extending the Academies Bill established under New Labour), as well as enabling parents, teachers, charities and other groups to set up their own schools as part of the Free Schools programme (Murray 2011), adding to further evidence of 'backdoor privatisation' of public-sector education (Beckett 2009).

In this context schools are encouraged to manage themselves in the role of devolved executives of their own provision, with new freedoms and flexibilities to enter into commercial partnerships with outside partners (businesses, voluntary groups and sponsors) so that they might operate independently of the management structure of local authorities and become administratively self-governing according to private school legislation introduced by the sponsor. Alongside league tables and the publication of raw performance data, these policy innovations and political interventions have been a feature of market trends in education, effecting and facilitating a climate of competition between schools, the construction of local secondary school markets (Lucey 2004) and the proliferation of the standards agenda (the emphasis on student performance in external examinations) or 'A–C economy' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Coupled with this has been the veneration of a managerialist approach to education in which schools are compelled to reorganise themselves according to 'a new regulative

ensemble, based upon institutional self-interest, pragmatics and performative worth' (Ball 2003, 218). The combination of these policy technologies effectively work on and through schools from a distance, with the aim to align the organisational culture of mainstream schools with the various forms of commodification, performativity and economisation that characterise private-sector management. In this way, the visibility of the high-achieving pupil represents a vital politico-economic adjustment to the corporate culture of schools in that it functions as a positive signalling device to the government and to other schools as evidence of the school's effectiveness, value for money and ability to meet accountability targets. The figure of the high-achieving pupil is not, however, a neutral social category, reducible to the individual psychology of the person who inhabits and performs it. Rather, as many perspicuous education analysts point out, it is imperative that pupils enact certain strategies of accommodation based on behavioural adjustment in order to succeed academically (e.g. Francis, Skelton, and Read 2009; Gillborn 1990; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Rist 2000). These strategies, I later argue, impact on pupil and teacher subjectivities as they become informed and guided by assessment procedures based on concepts and practices of individualised learning and competitive behaviour (see Broadfoot 1996; Reay and Wiliam 1999).

From this perspective, classroom practices can be viewed as regulatory mechanisms that aim to link the conduct of individuals to politico-economic objectives at the macro-level of school structures and policies, which have at their centre a conception of pupils as autonomous and responsabilised choosers (e.g. see Leadbeater 2004, 2006 for an outline of the policy and practice of personalised learning, which mobilises a view of pupils as active recipients of education services). This view of pupils as responsabilised users of education services (as consumer, as co-producer, as entrepreneur, etc.) can be traced to elements of New Right public choice theory where individuals tend to be characterised as self-regulating subjects, maximisers and rational actors (Dunleavy 1991; Finlayson 2003). In this framing individuals are thought to organise their actions and decisions through optimising preferences in a reflexive, consistent and predictable fashion and who therefore share the capacity to maximise the utility of their decisions in a rationally self-interested way (Giddens 1991; Rose 1999). It is this imagery of educational achievement, as exercised by an empowered, self-maximising subject in pursuit of success and autonomy, which sometimes results in low attainment being transposed or re-coded into a matter of personal sin (i.e. a private psychological propensity or 'attitude' particular to the individual), and therefore attributes social disadvantage to a lack of principled self-help and self-responsibility. Such a view is therefore problematic in that it de-socialises academic achievement and treats it as a kind of individual rational calculus, thus failing to take into account how structural inequalities pertaining to practices of exclusion and division circumscribe individual effort and affect educational outcomes.

The dominant figure of the high-achieving pupil is therefore shaped in part by the disciplinary knowledge systems and technologies of the self inscribed in the scaffolding of neo-liberal governance and advanced liberal governmentality. In this framing, the figure of the high-achieving pupil tends to be characterised as a neutral social category since it trades on a narrow utilitarian assumption concerning the equal capacity and willingness of all children to operate within a standard asocial rationality which is preponderantly individualistic in its political coloration. Consequently, the rise of neo-liberal concerns and prerogatives in the realm of education has provisionally secured the predominance and continuation of the sovereign character of competitive behaviour in classroom settings (see Lacey 1970 and Best 1989 for earlier discussions of

competitiveness in the classroom). This is not to assume, however, that the logics and market forms of calculation flowing from the global diaspora of neo-liberal ideas translate directly and uniformly to particular institutions, communities, spaces and subjects. Instead, it is important to remain circumspect about the general applicability of grand claims concerning the productive power of neo-liberal governance to constitute the subject (Barnett et al. 2008; Newman 2007) and instead attend to questions around how 'control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects' (Clarke 2004, 3). In the analysis that follows I take up some of these ideas and perspectives through a consideration of the role of gender on educational achievement, with the intention of making explicit the impact of gender concerns and values on boys' and girls' participation in classroom practices.

3. Research methods and data collection

The data discussed in this paper is drawn from a study with Dr. Barbara Read that focused on using ethnographic observation methods in two different schools in the south-east of England (hereafter referred to as Constable House and Ashcroft Close) to track two groups of Year 8 high-achieving pupils over a period of one week at each school. At each school a top set class was identified, and two boys and two girls chosen as a particular focus of the research. This research was a follow-up study to a previous research project conducted by Francis, Skelton, and Read, in which the authors explicated the ways in which high-achieving and popular pupils 'maintain their academic achievement while simultaneously remaining popular with their peers' (2009, 3). In conducting this follow-up study we were interested in analysing during a longer time period (one week rather than one day) the intricacies of the friendship dynamics of high-achieving and popular pupils of different social class and ethnic backgrounds. Coupled with this was a critical focus on how, if at all, these dynamics are negotiated alongside other, less informal, relationships with the teacher and the pedagogic demands summoned through the learning experience. The study therefore focused on young people with evidence of high attainment and who were regarded by others as popular within (and potentially outside) the classroom. The criteria used for identifying popular and high-achieving pupils involved two processes (both of which were used in the previous study first and found to be effective). First, questionnaires were distributed to a class of Year 8 pupils located in the top stream group, with the aim of establishing which pupils were identified by others as popular. The class was chosen by the Head of Year who acted as a liaison during the fieldwork. Of the 26 high-achieving pupils observed from the top stream group at Constable House (14 boys and 12 girls), 18 answered Martin and 10 answered Luisa to the question 'which student is most popular', with a large proportion (six) identifying Luisa as 'the pupil they would most like to be like'. Of the 30 high-achieving pupils observed from Ashcroft Close (17 boys and 13 girls), 17 identified Radhak and five identified Jaina as the most popular student.

Second, details of the pupils' Key Stage 2 (KS2) SATs results were privately evaluated by the researcher in order to ascertain which specific pupils would be targeted and observed during the classroom observations. The combination of these methods enabled us to select pupils who appeared to combine and juggle academic achievement with popularity. The empirical sections that follow draw on a small selection of classroom observations to outline the behavioural patterns of different pupils as they engage

with demands and pressures summoned through the classroom. A particular focus on the behaviour of popular pupils Martin and Luisa (and, to a lesser extent, Radhak and Jaina) is offered, combined with a wider analysis of pupils who were not identified by others as ‘most popular’ but whose behaviour captures the slippery dynamics of the interplay between gendered valuations and attitudes and competitive orientation. Pseudonyms have been used to replace their actual names and the names of the schools involved.

The study was confined to two London co-educational secondary schools: Constable House and Ashcroft Close. These schools were identified using Ofsted reports and school website and brochure information with the aim of ensuring diversity in the sample across both schools in respect to categories of social class and ethnic mix. Both Constable House and Ashcroft Close are described in recent Ofsted reports as comprehensive (mixed gender) and foundation schools (proxies for ‘diversity’ in a choice-driven school system) and therefore share particular characteristics as education providers. In 2010 Constable House received overall a good inspection report from Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, achieving above-average inspection grades (good to outstanding) and consequently was removed from the special measures category (schools providing provision judged by the government to be below acceptable standards). In contrast, Ashcroft Close achieved overall a satisfactory inspection report from Ofsted in 2009, mainly due to the low-average level of attainment achieved by pupils at Key Stage 4 (KS4). Both schools were commended by Ofsted for their commitment to ‘community work’ (establishing outreach programmes aimed at creating links with local people) and shaping the curriculum to meet pupils’ needs or interests.

To study the empirical data, which consists in the main of classroom observation data collected over a period of one week at each school (five days at Constable House and four days at Ashcroft Close), I utilise the dialogic approach of Holland and Lave (2000). Combining elements of social constructionist and post-structuralist theory, the dialogic approach is useful for tracing the movement of subjects as they negotiate the difficult terrain of being ‘addressed’ (interpellated, solicited, called upon, etc.) and ‘answering back’ (actively taking up, resisting or refusing the positions offered to them). This is important for showing how subjects stand at the intersection of multiple positionings (or ‘identities’) framed by competing sets of values, orders and motives.

4. Competitive learning and behaviour in the classroom

Integral to the way in which Year 8 teachers at Constable House encourage high achievers to learn concerns facilitating conditions in which pupils come to view themselves and others as autonomous and self-maximising subjects competing for symbolic rewards (teacher approval, peer acceptance, etc.). As the following examples indicate, teachers at Constable House appear to structure aspects of learning and teaching with the vocabulary of competition and autonomy at their centre:

The teacher instructs the pupils to match geographical definitions – abrasion, biological weathering, physical weathering, erosion, etc. – to their proper descriptions. The teacher asks the class ‘who has scored five out of five’. Mostly boys raise their hands. The teacher then expresses disappointment at the high number of girls scoring less than five on the test. She exclaims: ‘come on girls’. (Constable House, Day 1, Lesson 4, C14. Subject: Geography)

The teacher instructs the class to complete a task in French in 90 seconds or under. This generates competition, with each pupil aiming to finish the task before the rest of the class. Glenda exceeds the highest score of 32 and parades her 'success' rather shamelessly. She then goes to the trouble of attempting to remove all other (previous) scores from the whiteboard. This frustrates the teacher, who insists Glenda sit down. Martin and Luisa refuse to participate or show any interest in competing. (Constable House, Day 2, Lesson 2, C22. Subject: French)

Each pupil is given 10 words to spell, which they must write in their exercise book. The scores are then marked by the pupil to their left while the teacher reads out the correct spelling to each word. Everyone is instructed to stand up. The teacher then asks pupils to sit down in order of the number of words they spelt correctly. Tom is left standing with four others, scoring 9 out of 10 respectively. Despite being a high achiever, Luisa appears happy for those pupils who scored highly, showing little disappointment at her own moderate score of 7. (Constable House, Day 4, Lesson 1, C41. Subject: English)

We might infer, but not generalise, from these observations that ideas and practices concerning what should constitute learning and personal development are sometimes formulated and evaluated within a field of judgement that privileges competitiveness and adversarial tendencies based on attitudes of point-scoring, one-upmanship and entrepreneurialism. In each case teachers guide pupils' orientations to learning and personal development according to a certain logic or rationality, where pupils are encouraged to engage in pedagogic tasks as autonomous, competitive subjects. Through their participation in these educational practices, pupils in effect are incited to calibrate their behaviour on the basis of enterprising tendencies and formulate success in narrow utilitarian terms as the outcome of competitive behaviour (Jackson 2002). Such behaviour constitutes a particular mode of user engagement with education services, with pupils hailed (or solicited) into locating themselves and others through the exchange and intersection of 'winners' and 'losers'. This designates an orientation to learning motivated by market-driven prerogatives, values and incentives in which one person's 'success' necessitates another's relative failure.

Each of the observations above thus illustrate how educational tasks are sometimes constructed in terms of an implicit entrepreneurial norm in which participation necessitates the strategic assessment of probable costs, benefits and outcomes of success (Johnson and Johnson 1999; Martino and Meyenn 2002). In this way educational tasks are presented to pupils as means to an end rather than an end-in-itself; or rather, the weight of 'success' attached to such performances is framed with the self-interested and possessive individual in mind. The allure of these trends in classroom management stem from the fact that they fit with and compliment the kinds of neo-liberal concerns and prerogatives shaping British education policy discourse; trends which necessitate the visibility of 'enterprising' pupils as potential valuable assets to be co-opted or conciliated by the school as evidence of success.¹ But how do pupils respond differently to these solicitations?

Competitive learning enables teachers to call upon pupils to demonstrate what they know on the basis that such participation will be satisfied through forms of recognition and tangible rewards; rewards which pupils can draw on and invest in as evidence of their 'ability' and showcase that ability to other pupils. The seductive power of this technique is reflected in the self-congratulatory way Glenda 'parades her "success"' (see example C22). Such showboating can be read in two ways. First, it points to the strong inclination among some girls to adopt forms of behaviour that are suggestive of socially ascribed masculine attributes, namely behaviour characterised by a possessive and ruthless individualism coupled with a competitive 'macho' bravado (Francis

2000; Skelton 2001). The inclination among boys and girls to be competitive appears to be different, however, and can be treated as context sensitive. Martin, for example, is of mixed heritage (self-described as Black British), charismatic and athletic, and is well-liked by both boys and girls in his class. His behaviour echoes and redeems what Gillborn (1990) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) identify as elements of a 'strong' or 'authentic' expression of masculinity – a popular form of 'acceptable' masculinity that celebrates macho- or laddish-based constructions of identity. As illustrated in the above observation (C22), Martin behaves differently to Glenda, choosing not to participate in the competitive spirit spurred on by the teacher. The following example, however, demonstrates Martin's strong inclination for competing with boys:

The class is asked to write down five English words and translate them into French and then to translate five French words into English. Martin begins copying the answers attempted by the girl sitting next to him. He then tries to pass these answers off as his own in order to successfully complete the test ... One boy mispronounces a place name in French and Martin corrects him, shouting across the room 'you're wrong' and embarrassing the boy. Martin does not in fact give the correct answer but rather stifles other pupils' attempts to answer. He is very competitive and takes pleasure in other pupils', in particular boys', inability to answer questions correctly, even though on occasion I suspect he doesn't know the answers himself but feigns having such knowledge. He is never patronising towards girls, however. (Constable House, Day 4, Lesson 2, C42. Subject: French)

This is not an isolated incident. On several occasions I observed Martin denigrate the intelligence of other boys, typically close friends. Ironically, though, these brash and unprovoked attacks served to strengthen rather than weaken Martin's social distinction as popular (among boys at least), precisely because it works to preserve an image of someone who is ruthlessly individualistic and competitive. This demonstrates how competition and popularity are powerfully interconnected and inflected through gender concerns and values. At the same time, girls can be captured adopting a similar set of attitudes. Glenda, for example, values competitive behaviour for the way it individualises success and reduces 'ability' to a function or reflex of the individual. She relishes the opportunity to showcase her 'ability', as demonstrated in example C22. It might even be considered misplaced criticism to denounce such behaviour as products of the 'interiority' or psychology of the individual. Instead, it is important to consider how such behaviour is implicated (promoted, legitimated, recursively generated, etc.) through the structure and dynamic of school practices themselves, with their emphasis on competition and individualism. In other words, Glenda's compulsion to celebrate her 'success' in unreserved terms can be said to be inscribed into the system itself. Observe how in example C41 'success' is celebrated in narrow utilitarian terms as the outcome of individual effort. Pupils are instructed to stand in order of the number of words they spell correctly, with the last pupil standing declared the 'winner'. Such techniques make it possible for gaps in performance to be measured and specificities according to individual effort to be determined and fixed, as well as made visible to others. This captures how 'ability' is sustained both as a discursive and material reality.

The evident lack of humility or modesty in Glenda's behaviour should therefore not be translated into a matter of personal sin, a private psychological propensity particular to Glenda. The pedagogic tasks summoned through these classroom practices, and the implicit demands they carry, arguably engender such behaviour as much as it secretly promotes it as incentive for participating. The private desire among some individuals to

feel special, unique or superior to others is thus mirrored by the kinds of authorised positions and dialogical capacities made available through competitive learning. This may explain in part how popular activities of jockeying for power and recognition become performatively re-inscribed at the level of classroom practices.

Viewed from this perspective, competitive learning invokes a field of possibilities and sites for discursively and materially constituting subjects as ‘self-governing’, but self-governing within a standard rationality that champions the economisation of the calculating self (as entrepreneur, as consumer, as active user, as co-producer, as prudential risk taker, etc.). This is precisely because such pedagogic techniques and strategies evoke and promote a formal rational view of subjects as somehow autonomous and self-maximising. More important, however, is the way in which a competitive orientation to learning functions as a dividing practice for reinforcing difference and anchoring subjects in groups, making it possible for teachers to identify potential gaps in performance and to render the differences useful by aligning them to group-based measurements of effort and work levels. These potential gaps in performance are sometimes translated into gender gaps, as evidenced in example C14. Clearly dismayed by the lack of female high scorers (or the disproportionate number of male high scorers), the teacher exclaims ‘come on girls’, with the intention of rousing competitive rivalry between boys and girls. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the extent to which school practices operate as technologies of the self implicated in the reproduction of a gender ordering in classroom settings, pointing to the cultural complicity of teachers/schools in perpetuating gender discourses and myths (Francis 2008; Skelton 2001). On the other hand, it illustrates the importance of gender as an incentive and device for naturalising and affirming the take-up of competitive behaviour among pupils. Here the teacher is captured invoking the discursive category of gender as a device for soliciting and naturalising a compulsory competitive behaviour.

This may be contrasted with a model of collaborative learning in which elements of team-work, group-learning and interpersonal skills are championed and rewarded. The following examples offer a snapshot of some classroom observations taken from Ashcroft in which the individual is supplanted with the group as the architecture mediating and supporting concepts and practices of learning:

Now they have to work as a group on a problem and nominate a person to make sure everyone is working together. The teacher says she’ll be assessing how well they work in a group. The problem is in an envelope – one problem per table. At Sachet’s table, Radhak, Sachet and Stacey are talking and not talking to the others on their table, namely, Padmal, Ellie and Morris. Teacher tells the two boys at Jaina’s table that they’re being lazy, sitting back and letting the girls do it. (Ashcroft Close, Day 1, Lesson 1, A11. Subject: Mathematics)

They now have to get into groups and create a ‘still’ tableau scene of what their characters were doing 2 hours before. Sachet will then go round and question them. Chaos ensues. Stacey is chasing Haraksa round the hall. The only people attempting a group are Uditah, Gandha, Eila, etc. The ‘popular’ group is running around. Teacher brings them all into a semi-circle to tell them off. (Ashcroft Close, Day 1, Lesson 3, A13. Subject: Drama)

Teacher asks people to go to the 100 metre track outside in groups of three to five. ‘Your behaviour needs to be perfect’, says teacher. Jagavi is pointing to Aakash and Radhak. Padmaj slaps Aakash’s shoulder. They’re jostling around trying to form groups. Aakash’s talking to Stacey and they’re laughing. They’re creating all the noise. Hasit, Stan, and Morris have formed a group. Three ‘nerdy’ boys (Ojas, Babala and another)

form a group. Radhak says 'Eeshwar, come in ours! Come in ours!' (Ashcroft Close, Day 3, Lesson 3, A33. Subject: Science)

In each of the above contexts, pupils are encouraged to engage with education services as members of a group and to process and synthesise opinions and knowledge through the shared enterprise of group participation and evaluation. In this framing, rewards or recognition are assigned to individuals based on their group performance, team planning and organisational skills (for an analysis of these terms, see Johnson and Johnson 1999). When comparing the impact of models of competitive and collaborative learning on classroom behaviour, it is evident that the dynamic inscribed in the model of collaborative learning, with its concentration on processes of consensus building and joint problem solving through co-operation between members of a group, opens up contexts in which tensions built around existing inter-group relations reveal themselves and become crystallised. In example A33 pupils are witnessed 'jostling around trying to form groups' while in example A13 the 'popular' group resist and evade the classroom task altogether, with the 'nerdy' boys sustaining their group membership. In the same way that the model of competitive learning runs the risk of overstretching and pandering to the efforts of more confident and willing pupils, thereby further individualising the concept of academic achievement, the model of collaborative learning runs the risk of framing learning principally as a socialising mechanism for integrating individuals into particular groups and rendering those differences useful by fitting them together (i.e. linking 'ability' to group performance).

There is also strong evidence from Ashcroft Close to suggest that some boys possess a strong inclination for engaging in forms of competitive behaviour, such as answering questions put forward by the teacher:

They're reading out a news article about an island made entirely out of plastic bottles. Sachet says 'can I read next?' Teacher says 'no, I've already picked' ... Teacher asks 'what are the problems with the plastic island?' Aakash says 'can I say two things?' Teacher replies 'if it's sensible'. At the same time Lakshin says 'I'd like to say something good about it' ... Ellie's table is in silence. Then they start chatting about something quietly. (Ashcroft Close, Day 3, Lesson 3, A33. Subject: English)

The above extract demonstrates the tenacity of some boys to pursue formal teacher (and informal peer) approbation. Similar to Martin, these boys actively position themselves in contexts that necessitate competitive behaviour, contexts which force them to confront (and resolve) potential problems about not 'fitting in' and being perceived as somehow 'lacking'. In contrast, the girls at Ellie's table choose instead to sit and behave 'quietly' and therefore might be considered to be enacting certain risk-avoidance strategies in order to extricate themselves from the entanglement of competitive behaviour and the kinds of tensions, anxieties and uncertainties it gives rise to. As Jackson (2010) recently observed in her study of pupils' experiences of schooling, girls tend to experience disproportionate levels of test anxiety and a fear of 'failure' compared to their male counterparts (or, at least, girls appear more willing to voice their experiences of school-related anxiety and stress) (also see Gilligan 1993 for a fuller discussion on the gender dynamics shaping individual expression and orientation).

Building on these analyses of how high-achieving pupils experience and enter into the roles and dynamics opened up by the terrain of competitive learning, the following section further unpacks how participation in these practices is powerfully inflected through interconnected discourses of popularity, 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

5. Push and pull: competition and the seduction of popularity

It is evident from the data collected at Constable House and Ashcroft Close that boys and girls engage differently and with varying success with the kinds of pedagogic demands summoned through classroom practices. Martin is 'clever' but lacking motivation, according to some of his teachers, and his orientation to learning appears to echo and redeem certain elements of the dominant sensibilities that characterise 'acceptable' forms of masculine behaviour (Gillborn 1990). The following extract demonstrates why and how Martin's behavior might be interpreted as hyper-masculine, as well as competitive:

The pupils are invited to repeat French phrases spoken by the teacher. Again, the teacher sets up competition between male and female pupils. She devises a point system on the whiteboard with girls on one side and boys on the other. Martin complains 'the girls will win' and 'it is sexist'. The male pupils seem anxious that the female pupils might be more capable, making it an unfair contest. Martin then accuses one boy of being a 'failure' for mispronouncing a French phrase. Addressing the female pupils, Martin says: 'We will beat you at football, rugby, basketball'. (Constable House, Day 3, Lesson 3, C33. Subject: French)

Through the articulation of the phrase 'We will beat you at football, rugby, basketball', Martin makes clear how performances and embodiments of 'acceptable' masculinity can be indexed through values and expressions that engender 'laddish' or 'macho' constructions of behaviour. Here, 'masculine' ways of thinking and behaving are rendered homologous with physical prowess and amendable to processes of 'physical domination, aggression and a competitive "macho" bravado' (Smith 2007, 184; also see Jackson 2002). The emphasis on 'football, rugby [and] basketball' functions to legitimise competition within a 'masculine' framing that privileges physicality and brute force, albeit a version of masculinity that ascribes cultural intelligibility to the physicality and aesthetics of sport (Skelton 2001). Interestingly, Martin rarely competes with female pupils for teacher approbation, as discussed above, and instead spends a lot of time courting their acceptance through talking and listening intently and flirting romantically. On more than one occasion I witnessed Martin offer to help a struggling female pupil complete the classroom exercise (though, these seemingly selfless acts could be construed as methods for disguising work-avoidance, making Martin an opportunist). As the above extract illustrates, Martin perceives male pupils differently as potential competitors, and chooses to undermine rather than assuage their (failed) attempts to answer questions correctly. Ironically, however, it is precisely this aggressive attitude that renders his behaviour compatible with 'acceptable' forms of masculinity and engenders respect among some of the male pupils. In this way Martin is required (by virtue of his popularity, assuming he wishes to sustain it) to oscillate between these competing and conflicting framings of gender friendship (loose and amorphous, boys; close-knit and intense, girls).

Martin can therefore be captured enacting conflicting and opposing expressions of friendship when situated in the company of boys and girls, and this relates in part to how Martin attempts to sustain his social distinction as a popular person. Among boys, for example, Martin personifies someone who is aggressive, unapologetic and ruthlessly individualistic, and will often rehearse and practise playful or serious confrontation with other boys in order to achieve some form of peer approbation. As a consequence, friendship among boys appears to be made intelligible when it deflects associations of negative value attributed to 'feminine' values and sensibilities,

namely practices of physical closeness, orderliness and intimacy (Jackson 2003; Smith 2007; Skelton 2001). Friendship between boys, then, is not typically defined by a fear of loneliness or abandonment (the possibility of rejection) but, ironically, appears to be structured according to a logic of play and indeterminacy whereby the very fabric of those relationships are contested and resisted. Among girls, though, Martin registers behaviour that is polite, agreeable and selfless (or other-oriented). In other words, when situated in friendships with girls, he submits to socially ascribed attributes that often define the character of female friendships (Renold and Allan 2006). This undermines the view that while girls are more likely to practise behaviours that may be considered masculine *and* feminine, boys, in contrast, 'seem reluctant to broaden their repertoire to include "feminine" choices and behaviours' (Hutchings et al. 2008, 148). On this account, popular boys might be far more inclined to juggle and combine socially defined attributes of masculine and feminine behaviour, pointing to the complexities of these attachments within peer friendship group dynamics. What example C33 demonstrates, however, is how these complexities collapse when boys and girls are brought under pressure to submit to the gender norms and rules. When the teacher instructs the class to split into two groups consisting of boys and girls, Martin complains that the arrangement is 'sexist'. One of the discursive accomplishments of this arrangement is the reinforcement of gender difference, resulting in Martin's desire to affirm his ascribed social position as male: '[addressing the girls] We will beat you at football, rugby, basketball'.

This may be contrasted with Glenda (see example C22) whose behaviour appears to epitomise an individualised conception of success and competition. Indeed, there has been some suggestion that the prevalence of success stories in the UK about the performance of girls in schools is often presented by the government and media as evidence of the efficacy of neo-liberal programmes of individualism, autonomy and self-responsibility in education (Ringrose 2007). Luisa, on the other hand (see example C41), will often resist competing for teacher approbation in the same way that Glenda does, despite her evident academic achievement. Unlike Glenda, however, Luisa is regarded by her peers as a popular person and as someone people aspire to be like, as indicated in the questionnaire results. As the following extract illustrates, Luisa's bodily adornment and bodily movement registers elements of feminine 'coolness' and 'fashionability' (Francis 2009), as well as embodiments of physical attraction and maturity, while her behaviour signifies attributes of politeness, care and compassion:

Luisa enters the class and says hello to most of the girls before sitting down. Her expression is warm and inviting and demonstrates (or projects) a genuine concern for others, which the other girls clearly appreciate and value. She wears a purple head band, carries a stylish red leather bag and sits cross-legged (unlike many of the other girls who do not). (Constable House, Day 1, Lesson 2, C12. Subject: Mathematics)

On this view Luisa appears to echo elements of Whitelaw, Milosevic, and Daniels' (2000, 98) figure of the 'successful girl': someone who, through utilising a range of behavioural strategies and a degree of flexibility, achieves in both 'academic and social arenas, with peers *and* adults', skilfully inhabiting and performing the kinds of discourses and practices that position learners as active and competitive (as opposed to passive and disinterested). Luisa's reluctance to engage with forms of competitive learning (in the same way that Glenda does, for example) might be explained in part

by the technologies of the self inscribed in these practices and their incommensurability with 'acceptable' representations of femininity, in particular, a heterosexualised hyper-femininity (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2009; Renold and Allan 2006). Some education researchers have observed how girls will often perceive high achievement negatively because of the way in which it supposedly undermines projections of feminine popularity and sexual attraction (Renold and Allan 2006), where 'working hard' is understood to be risky business with high social costs attached. We therefore might surmise from these observations that boys and girls participate differently in the norms and practices summoned through competitive and individualised learning. In the case of some girls, competitive orientation to learning threatens to undercut the preferred image of an 'acceptable' feminine subject. We might also remain circumspect about media stories which portray education institutions as vehicles for promoting feminist sensibilities and values (Marrin 2010). As outlined in the observations above, the prevalence of techniques and programmes of neo-liberal governance in education, with its concentration on measured outputs, competition and performativity, feeds into and is a product of a discourse of masculinity (see Reay 2001).

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined the regulatory frameworks through which pupils are solicited into performing and embodying concepts and practices of competitive behaviour, and linked these strategies to trends of neo-liberal governance in education. Through explicating the relations between neo-liberal ideas of marketisation and individualism and education trends of competition and managerialism, I have highlighted the politico-economic importance high-achieving pupils carry as modalities or sites for the continuation and intensification of these exercises in governance. Moreover, I have mapped the gendered patterns in the ways in which pupils engage with forms of competition and autonomy differently and with varying success in the context of competing pressures and seductions. These observations should not be taken as definitive or exhaustive descriptions of the relationship between gendered patterns of behaviour and the willingness for and orientation to competition among boys and girls. Rather, they represent attempts to posit this relationship in relational terms as an unstable formation in which contradictory trends and tendencies collide. Practices based on competitive behaviour can be considered risky business, for example, because pupils who volunteer incorrect answers or who have their relatively low attainment made 'public' are often berated and laughed at, which can cut a deep wound in the psyche and collapse feelings of self-worth (Jackson 2002). As demonstrated in this paper, the discursive framing for male and female responses to competitive behaviour is always a situated performance, however, subject to pushes and pulls sustained by the interactional demands of the immediate context and the gendered attitudes and valuations that constrain and structure (but rarely determine) those interactions.

The scope of this paper has therefore been concerned with exploring how boys and girls are drawn into constellations of ways of thinking and behaving which might be considered neoliberal. I also tentatively outlined how these pedagogic demands are lived and negotiated by boys and girls in the context of gender discourses and myths. What emerges from the observation data analysed in this paper is that gender discourses are not static, fixed or unchanging, but rather intersect with and become transformed through other discourses (of popularity, competition, individualism, sexuality and friendship, for example). Gender can therefore be conceptualised as something

which is always mutating and porous in the context of other ‘intersecting’ and ‘articulating’ axes of power and identity (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2009). We might surmise from the observations offered in this paper that boys appear more interested in competing with each other, especially with individuals from their own friendship groups, and therefore tend to frame competition within an intra-group dynamic. At the same time, teachers and the formal curriculum itself complicate these tendencies by reinforcing gender difference as a site for power struggle and recognition, and willing boys and girls to compete with each other. Girls, on the other hand, appear to resist or reject elements of competition (or at least, the ‘masculine’ form of a zero-sum game of competition which necessitates the visibility of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’). Glenda, however, complicates this distinction between competitive boys and co-operative or passive girls, pointing to the seduction of competitive learning for the way it individualises and isolates ‘success’.

This has implications for research that attempts to make sense of the differential level of participation of boys and girls in classroom practices. What needs to be further conceptualised and made explicit is the push and pull between agency (the creative and inventive capacity of subjects to move in, between and through discourses) and the structuring effects of discourses and practices that work to guide and shape the behaviour and orientation of subjects. This paper brings into focus some of these issues and the complications that underpin any mono-dimensional reading of gender which posits gender formation as unchanging and static. In particular, it points to the incomplete character of the interpellative effects of discourses to constitute subjects (i.e. the failure of discourses to constitute the subject it names). Conversely, the observations presented in this paper highlight the seduction of discourses and their ability to seduce the subject through conferring advantage and social distinction. More research that attends to the interplay and dynamic of discourses of popularity, friendship, gender and competition in the context of the classroom is therefore desirable.

Note

1. On the noticeboard in the staff room at Constable House, for example, were photographs of six pupils, with a caption in bold lettering instructing teachers to ‘track these pupils’. These pupils in effect became targets of incentive and control – subjects to be promoted as measures of productivity or output, or displays of quality or worth.

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