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Investigating the development of masculine identities in physical education

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Abstract

This research examines the masculine identities and experiences of males within the subject of PE. Specifically, it examines the masculine identities of two groups of boys in the Scottish secondary physical education (PE) context: Secondary 1 (S1: age 12-13) and Secondary 4 (S4: age 15-16). Drawing from Hegemonic Masculinity Theory and Inclusive Masculinity Theory, this research set out to explore how masculine identities co-exist and develop within the same context, building on previous research that has examined masculine identities in the Scottish PE context. To do so, guided by key principles of ethnography and using qualitative methods, S1 and S4 boys were observed in their PE lessons for a period of 3 months. In the third month, 4 pupils in each class volunteered to take part in semi-structured group interviews. The results from our thematic analysis indicated that both groups performed different masculine identities. The S1 boys that were observed and interviewed adopted inclusive masculinities, where they seemed able to display a range of gendered behaviours without fear of stigmatisation or marginalisation. Conversely, the majority of the S4 boys observed and all of the boys that were interviewed embodied an exclusive form of masculinity, using their bodies to allow them to enact a range of masculine behaviours, while maintaining their superior position in the social hierarchy. This article highlights the need for more research into the construction of masculine identities as pupils navigate PE and school. We also suggest that teachers can be more pro-active in maintaining broad, inclusive and critical conceptions of PE as pupils progress from the junior to the senior years.

Keywords: exclusive masculinity, physical education, identity

Introduction

Historically, PE has been male-dominated (Parker, 1996), as demonstrated through the curriculum, activity content, and teacher beliefs (Hickey, 2008). Importantly, with an increase in research exploring the experiences of marginalised boys in PE (Mooney, & Hickey, 2018; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011), these traditional ideas are being exposed as exclusive and even damaging (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012), highlighting the ways in which dominant boys police the behaviour of ‘others’. In the Scottish context, Campbell, Gray, MacIsaac and Kelly (2016) found that adolescent boys (ages 16-17) were able to perform a broader range of masculine identities in PE, even those more commonly perceived to be feminine. However, these behaviours were only permissible to the boys who exhibited a higher degree of physical and social capital. Highlighting the importance of context in relation to how masculinities are performed and policed, Campbell et al., (2016) call for further research in a variety of contexts, across and within schools, to better understand the construction of multiple masculinities in PE. Consequently, the present study explores how the PE context in a Scottish secondary school contributes to the construction of masculine identities with boys as they progress through school from S1 (age 12-13) and S4 (age 15-16). More specifically, we explored the PE experiences of S1 and S4 boys to understand how their different experiences shaped, and were shaped by, their own understandings of masculinity. This research is important in a climate where PE teachers in Scotland, and many other countries worldwide, are encouraged to create inclusive and positive learning environments (Scottish Government, 2009). In Scotland, for example, PE is located in the curricular domain of Health and Wellbeing, where PE teachers have an explicit responsibility to promote and nurture pupils’ mental, emotional and social health (Scottish Government, 2009). This may be difficult to do if PE teachers continue to reproduce a culturally esteemed form of masculinity that benefits the strong, able and heterosexual, creating an environment that can be hostile and troubling for ‘others’ (White & Hobson, 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity in physical education

Hegemonic masculinity is based on the idea that not all forms of masculinity are equal, that in different cultures and contexts, there is a particular form of masculinity that is dominant over others (Connell, 2008). This means that, in any given setting, there is a way of being a man that is associated with power and which ‘guarantees the collective privilege of men’. (Connell, 2008, p.133). In many western cultures, for example, masculine behaviours or characteristics such as strength, aggression or bravery are normalised and culturally valued.

Few males can fully embody these patterns of hegemonic behaviour. Instead, males attempt to position themselves favourably in relation to them, and – as a consequence perhaps as much as on purpose – simultaneously position selves in relation to subordinate ‘others’, for example women or feminised men. Importantly, there are some men occupying privileged positions in society (for example white able-bodied, middle or upper class) who perform ‘complicit masculinity’ (Connell 1995) without enacting a strong version of masculine domination. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlight that “masculinities exist[ing] in all local settings, [with] motivation toward a specific hegemonic version varying by local context” (p. 847). From this perspective, masculinity is not fixed, but subject to change according to gender relations in a particular social setting (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, ‘protest masculinities’ (Connell, 2005; 2008) can be found in social settings where males strive for a position of power, even when they do not possess the resources to achieve this. In these situations, marginalised men (for example, working class or ethnic minority) can feel threatened by those who possess valued resources and can resort to hegemonic behaviours such as violence or aggression to maintain their dominance over them (Groes-Green, 2009).

Dominant forms of hegemonic masculinity are often reported in the PE context, where competition, aggression and homophobia are valued and desired masculine characteristics (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012). Those male students who do not, cannot or have no desire to reproduce such characteristics in PE can be subject to stigmatisation, marginalisation or bullying (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012). Research that has explored masculinity in PE highlights the impact that sport discourse has on the curriculum, pedagogy and conceptions of ability (Wellard, 2006). Gard and Meyenn (2000), suggest that the PE curriculum favours the development of sport-techniques as an indicator of ability over broader curricular outcomes, for example, social, emotional and mental wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2009). Indeed, many PE teachers (of both sexes) enter into the profession in large part due to their sporting ability and therefore reinforce the value and importance of ability and performance through their own beliefs and practices (White & Hobson, 2018). Furthermore, Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) found that those who embody traditionally masculine characteristics, for example, strength, ability and aggression, are more likely to be successful and popular in PE (Gard & Meyenn, 2000). Jachyra (2016) found that boys who did not embody traditional forms of masculinity in PE were victims of severe abuse by dominant peers.

Multiple masculinities

In recent years, there has been a shift in attitudes towards gender and gender identities, with greater acceptance of multiple ways of being. Reflecting this shift, Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory explains how multiple masculinities can co-exist in cultures where diversity is embraced, and homophobic attitudes and behaviours have diminished. To explain this, he applies the concept of homophobia. Homophobia is the cultural fear of being homosexualised (McCormack, 2011) and when homophobia is low, men can perform a wide range of behaviours. In this context, traditionally masculine, or 'orthodox masculinities' can still exist, but they can co-exist alongside other forms of 'inclusive masculinities'. Those men who adopt inclusive masculinities have increased social freedom to perform a range of behaviours and emotions that were once coded as feminine and subject to stigmatisation (Anderson, 2009).

Several studies in the contexts of sport and education support the emergence of inclusive masculinities among adolescent and young men. For example, Adams (2011) found an acceptance of 'feminine' behaviours such as hugging or wearing pink boots among a male college soccer team in America. McCormack (2011) found little evidence of homophobic discourse in a secondary school in England. In fact, the homophobic discourse was deemed unacceptable by many of the boys in his study. Where there was evidence of the use of terms such as 'gay' or 'that's so gay', this was not reported as homophobic or derogatory towards their peers. Magrath (2018) turns to the work of McCormack, Wignall and Morris (2016) and highlights the importance of cultural context, intent and effect to explain this complex use of homosexually-themed language. He suggests that when cultural norms are shared, for example, within friendship groupings, such homosexually-themed expressions can be understood as a joke, a way of releasing frustration or a form of male bonding. Labelling a person or an activity as 'gay' is contextually bound and can, in certain situations, be less likely to be perceived as offensive, especially in like-minded groups sharing attitudes about sexuality and gender (McCormack, Wignall & Morris, 2016).

One of the criticisms of the research framed by Inclusive Masculinity Theory is that much of this work has been carried out with the "sexually liberal", complicit, and middle classes' (de Boise, 2015, p. 326). Here, de Boise (2015) proposes that the middle-classes have not changed their masculine behaviours because of a shift in the cultural levels of homophobia. Instead he suggests that middle class men have always had this 'complicit masculinity', where they gain status not through exhibiting orthodox behaviours, but through middle-class patriarchy. Importantly, there has been a recent increase in studies that have

focused on masculinities and working-class males (Blanchard, McCormack, & Peterson, 2017; Roberts, 2013), with studies indicating that working-class males adopt attitudes and behaviours that align with inclusive masculinities. For example, Blanchard, McCormack and Peterson (2017) carried out an ethnographic study in a sixth form religions (Christian) college in the North East of England, and found that most of the young, working-class men embodied inclusive masculinities, while only a few embodied the orthodox archetype of masculinity. Nevertheless, this research into working-class masculinities has also received some criticism. For example, in the study carried out by Roberts (2013), although the young working class men appeared to exhibit more feminine behaviours in their work, and espouse more progressive views about domestic labour, these views did little to actually change the division of this labour within their heterosexual relationships (de Boise, 2015). Consequently, it is important to interpret these findings critically, as not all contexts afford the same behaviours for the same reasons. For example, Holligan and Deuchar (2014) illustrated that working-class boys in Scotland perceived their school as a place of conflict and threat and so performed more orthodox, or what might be perceived as ‘protest’ masculinities (Groes-Green, 2009) in school.

Another critique of the work that has been framed by Inclusive Masculinity Theory is the idea that masculinity is an internalised position that is either orthodox or inclusive. By contrast, Hegemonic Masculinity Theory suggests that masculinity is relational, where men position themselves in relation to that which is culturally valued and legitimated at that point in space and time. Consequently, men can perform different versions of their masculinity, in different context, at different times. Importantly, this is always in relation to social and institutional power and privilege. This is especially important in relation to those who embody complicit masculinities. These men can display a range of ‘inclusive’ behaviours, offering the impression of progression and change, yet still preserving the interests of the dominant group in a patriarchal society (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This patriarchal dominance is particularly evident in the context of sport and could go some way to explain the inclusive behaviours of the men in studies framed by Inclusive Masculinity Theory (Anderson, 2009; Adams, 2011).

Given the dominant role that sport plays in constructing hegemonic masculine models, that is, men who are skilful and muscular, it is perhaps unsurprising that PE is often perceived as a hyper-masculine space. Indeed, Connell (2008) suggests that sports within the wider regional or national contexts can define what it means to be masculine in schools and PE, and physical performances in schools can be seen to be emblematic of gender itself. This

is an important consideration given that PE is a compulsory subject in many western cultures, a place that must accommodate all forms of masculinity. PE, therefore, can be especially challenging for boys who do not conform to hegemonic or complicit norms. It can be difficult for them to perform a range of inclusive masculinities and those who do so successfully are those who embody high levels of both social and physical that represent the regional or national hegemonic norms that have been shaped by sport (Light & Kirk, 2000). Wellard (2002) refers to this as Exclusive Masculinity, where boys' physical, technical and/or social abilities give them the freedom to perform a range of inclusive behaviours while remaining at the top of the social hierarchy. Males adopting exclusive masculine identities in PE can take up more feminine behaviours such as dancing and hugging, but also exhibit social displays of power through bodily performance (Wellard, 2006).

The development of masculine identities

Highlighting the role of the social context in influencing masculine identities, Galambos, Almeida, and Petersen (1990) explored differences between childhood and adolescence masculinity. They found that younger boys adopted a more flexible, masculine-feminine identity compared to the adolescents, who demonstrated intensified masculinities aligned more closely to hegemonic ideals. Supporting this finding, Chepyator-Thomas and Ennis (1997) suggest that PE plays a key role in the development of masculinity. As pupils progress through school, they are likely to aspire to hegemonic models of masculinity and reinforce a hegemonic culture that empowers some, at the expense of marginalised or subordinate others. This could be especially damaging for the PE, health and wellbeing experiences for those consigned to the margins. Furthermore, Campbell et al. (2016) state that in the current policy climate of promoting inclusion, equity and positive wellbeing in Scottish schools, it is 'educationally significant and timely to explore how young males understand masculinity and how it impacts on their experiences in PE' (p. 2). Consequently, the purpose of this study is to understand how boys construct and experience their masculine identities in PE from S1 to S4. In addition, we explored the boys' masculine performances to understand the ways in which context affords different opportunities for action and its potential for dominant forms of masculinity to emerge. This research is necessary to understand the constant shifting and narrowing of students' masculinity (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014) and to highlight the ways in which PE teachers might be able to challenge hegemonic norms and create more inclusive contexts for learning.

Methodology

The research aim was to understand the construction of gendered identities and differences or changes in conceptions of masculinities as boys progress through school. Therefore, we focussed on S1 (age 11/12) and S4 (age 15/16) boys in PE contexts and conducted a form of ethnography centred around participant observation and focus group interviews. The lead researcher entered the field as a young student teacher of PE (aged 21 years) and became immersed in one school over a 3-month period.

Research setting

This research was situated in a state secondary school in a town in the South of Scotland (school roll of 1200). The pupil population was very diverse, with pupils coming from both the least and most affluent areas of the town and surrounding villages. The school, the town and the surrounding area has historical connections with the sport of rugby, with links to the elite team in the next village and ex-international players in their alumni. The school had three male and two female PE teachers, all having a background in team sports.

The curriculum content varied between year groups. S1 pupils experienced a wide scope of set activities, ranging from aesthetics (creative dance, gymnastics, movement appreciation), to team sports (basketball, volleyball, lacrosse, hockey and rugby). Classes were generally taught in mixed-sex groups, with single-sex classes for rugby union and creative dance. Contrastingly, S4 pupils experienced a 'choice' based curriculum which often resulted in inadvertent single-sex classes. For the duration of this study, S4 boys only ever chose three activities: rugby, football and dodgeball. Furthermore, differences were observed in how S1 and S4 were taught. In S4, the teacher was observed using traditional teacher-led approaches which focussed on learning skills or playing games. By contrast, the observed S1 teacher placed heavy emphasis on student-led learning, using approaches such as peer teaching, co-operative learning and Sport Education.

Participant observations

The study began with 'participant observations' where the researcher acted as 'participant-as-observer' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The lead researcher selected an S1 and S4 class to primarily engage with (S1=28 pupils; S4=23 pupils) and whom he was not timetabled to teach. Student teachers are often invited to observe and assist with classes to support their professional learning. Therefore, he had opportunity to be with the boys in a less formal

role than teacher and was free to observe, reflect and talk to them in a relaxed manor. Here, he engaged in conversations around a range of informal topics such as sport, TV, clothing and video games. This allowed him to build trusting relationships with the boys while learning about the contexts in which their gendered identities were formed and performed. These contexts included their PE classes, but also the PE department and school more broadly. Participant observation took place over the course of 10 weeks, allowing time for the boys to be comfortable with the researcher and facilitating a trusting environment for the interviews that were to follow. Notes were not taken during observations but were recorded from memory into a journal after lessons so that pupils did not have continual visual reminders of being under the researcher's gaze. The process of journal keeping was used to increase the researcher's understanding of class culture, relationships, friendship groupings and social groupings according to similarities in behaviours.

Interviews and participants

During the third month of participant observation, the boys in each class were invited to volunteer to partake in focus group interviews. Four S1 boys and four S4 boys volunteered to be interviewed. Out of these eight participants, six boys played rugby at either school level or club level. One of the S4 boys also played for his national team. Two S1 boys did not play rugby but participated in football and hockey out of school. All the participants consistently brought PE kit and participated in every lesson. Field notes suggested that the S4 boys interviewed held a dominant position in their class, exhibiting exclusive masculinity behaviours. They were positioned in a class where most boys seemed to embody orthodox masculinities, except for four who seemed to exhibit oppressed masculine identities and who are described later in this article as the 'small boys'. In contrast, field notes suggested that all boys in the S1 class held very similar and inclusive masculinities, apart from one or two boys who at times would portray an orthodox masculine identity. The boys who volunteered to be interviewed were not necessarily representative of their respective classes. However, they were able to offer additional perspectives that would not have been accessible merely by observing their behaviours.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with participants in order to facilitate a relaxed environment and to help trigger thoughts, ideas and experiences that may not be accessed in one-to-one interviews. An interview schedule was created based on key themes presented in literature and the observational journal notes. In this schedule, there was an emphasis on asking open, indirect questions related to the main themes of

masculine identity, valued behaviours in PE, and how PE has influenced constructions of masculinity. After each question, the researcher summarised the responses as a form of member checking to ensure an accurate interpretation, to ask for any additional comments and to ensure that all voices were heard. We acknowledge that when conducting focus group interviews in research of this nature, there is potential for some participants to feel influenced by more dominant members of the group. As such, consideration was given to power relations exercised between the boys interviewed whilst conducting the interviews *and* whilst analysing the data. Both focus group interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and took place in a room with no distractions. They were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse both the interview transcripts and expanded field notes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Within this approach, the aim was not to find ‘the truth’ around what participants thought or how they interacted, but to use the data to construct patterns of shared meaning that provide insight into, and a story of, participants’ experiences and perceptions of masculinity. Transcripts and notes were firstly read several times to get a ‘feel’ for the data. The whole data set was then coded using a combination of inductive and deductive analysis so that units of meaning were created which summarised and explained portions of data. Codes were initially descriptive, for example including: ‘reference to ability’ and ‘supportive behaviours towards others’. As the coding process continued, codes were refined and became more inferential, for example: ‘not caring about appearances’ and ‘curriculum forming identities’ and theoretical, for example: ‘evidence of inclusive masculinity’. Codes were grouped carefully into categories to identify broader patterns of meaning and information irrelevant to the research questions was discarded. Codes and categories were then analysed, compared and contrasted to make connections between them. Here, there was a special focus on comparing data attributed to S1 and S4 boys as distinct groups. This facilitated the development of overarching themes which were continually refined and checked with raw data to ensure that they were fitting, were telling a credible story of the data, and had a clear scope and focus (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These themes did not just ‘emerge’ from the data but were actively created when following the processes outlined above. Therefore, the themes were constructed at the intersection of the data itself, the prior coding process and the researchers’ subjectivity and insight. In particular, knowledge relating to theories of masculinity and inclusive

masculinity theory was influential to how data was organised (e.g. with theoretical codes such as ‘evidence of inclusive masculinity’). Supporting this process, the researchers engaged in reflexive conversations in order to question and critique assumptions made when interpreting and organising the data and when telling the story of each theme.

Ethical considerations

Permission was granted by the ethics committee of the University that the researchers were affiliated to. Informed consent forms were signed by the participating school, interview participants and their parents/guardians. Participants were informed of the research aims, the nature of their involvement and details of how data would be used and disseminated. Participants were told that details such as their age, gender and descriptions of them and their actions would likely be referred to in findings but that nothing alluding to their personal identity would be included. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used throughout. Ethical considerations around focus group interviews were also important, especially since participants knew each other and socialised together. Therefore, participants were made aware at the start and end of each interview that any information shared within that setting should remain confidential and were encouraged to treat one another sensitively and respectfully (Denscombe, 2010).

Discussion

In our analysis, it was clear that both year groups enacted different and varied masculine identities and we suggest that this is largely to do with the powerful rugby culture that permeates the school and the community more widely. However, we also suggest that the PE curriculum and pedagogy have some role to play in reinforcing orthodox norms as the boys’ progress from S1 to S4. S1 pupils adopted inclusive masculine identities. Similarly, S4 pupils did exhibit a range of behaviours, some of which could be identified as inclusive. However, their dominance was still maintained around their hyper-masculine rugby identities which we suggest as evidence of exclusive masculinity (Wellard, 2006).

Masculine Values

Learning vs competition

Observations highlighted that both groups valued PE for different reasons, and these values appeared to influence their masculine identity in PE. For example, the S4 boys viewed

competition as the main purpose of PE. Similar to the findings of Braham (2003) and Parker (1996), the S4 boys believed that their game-orientated curriculum was an avenue to win and show dominance over others:

Callum (S4 interview) ‘I want to play games and try to beat other people’

Similar views were echoed by Dennis during the S4 interview who suggested that dominating and beating others in competition brought enjoyment:

‘I would have more competition ... it’s always good fun playing against the guys and trying to skin¹ or beat them’

Contrary to Tischler and McCaughtry (2011), who propose that competition creates an environment that allows males to publicly demonstrate traits such as aggression and strength, we found competition was more strongly linked to success, status, and personal achievement, irrespective of whether the performance involved aggression or strength. Unlike Parker’s (1996) ‘hard boys’, these boys showed no evidence of unprovoked physical aggression towards any other pupil. Instead, they maintained their hierarchical dominance by striving to win and be awarded ‘player of the lesson’ rather than performing physical aggression.

The notion of being competitive was reflected when the S4 boys spoke of their participation in the beep test. They rejected calls of it being an ‘individual marker’, and instead described it during informal conversations as a ‘battle’ to be the best. Aligning with the work of Wellard (2006), this highlights that success in competition can be viewed by some as a “rite of passage” (p. 113) for boys on their way to becoming men.

Further support that the S4 boys identified with an orthodox and privileged form of masculinity came from their view that, unlike competition, learning had no value in PE. They viewed PE fundamentally as a practical subject:

Callum (S4 interview) ‘[I] cannot be bothered when a teacher tries to teach me, I want to play games ... listening to the teacher is for gimps²’

¹ To ‘skin’ someone often refers to team sports (such as soccer or rugby union) when someone in a 1v1 situation dribbles past an opponent, sometimes in a way which embarrasses the opponent.

² Gimp is used (in Scotland at least) as an offensive slang word to imply somebody is lame.

In line with research carried out by Braham (2003) the S4 boys were observed not paying attention when the teacher was explaining something. Instead, they positioned themselves at the back of the class and competed with each other to see who could do the most 'keepie-uppies'. Parker (1996) suggests that 'orthodox' boys see learning or being academic as a characteristic of weakness, of someone who needs to improve.

Conversely, the S1 boys that were interviewed understood PE as a site for their learning and development. For example, behaviours such as answering questions and mastering skills were frequently observed and when discussing if boys valued competing against others, Alistair (S1 interview) replied:

'Nah, I don't care how anyone else is, I like to improve my skills'

The views of the S1 boys that were interviewed were much more focussed on their own learning and the intrinsic value and pleasure associated with their own learning. Critically, unlike the S4 boys, there seemed to be no stigma associated with this. Indeed, opportunities to demonstrate learning were valued and rewarded in the S1 class, with observations highlighting moments when classmates praised others for good answers, giving high-fives and picking people for teams because 'they have good ideas' (Alistair, S1, informal discussion).

Effort vs ability

Contradictions between groups were also evidenced in relation to how the boys spoke about effort and ability. For example:

Kyle (S1 interview) 'It doesn't matter what they look like, as long as they are taking part'

In this case, effort seems to be valued over, for example, ability or physique, and reflects a softening of male behaviours. A number of observations were made that highlighted boys who applied effort were not ridiculed, but were praised for trying hard, regardless of their ability.

By contrast, the S4 boys spoke about effort in PE in pejorative terms, identifying and marginalising weaker boys in their class for appearing to display high levels of effort. For example, labelling some as 'keenos':

Dennis (S4 interview) ‘Keenos are people who try hard, they look stupid’

Kris (S4 interview) ‘In fitness sessions keenos would burst themselves ... I mean come on it’s just PE’

Here it can be argued that the S4 boys are performing a form of ‘protest masculinity’ (Connell, 2005), where they reduce the threat of the ‘keenos’ by belittling them and thus maintaining their position at the top of their social hierarchy. Instead, they valued perceived ability – made more desirable by an apparent lack of effort in achieving such feats - and used this to increase their hierarchical standing, with events such as choosing teams based on perceived ability frequently observed. In fact, during the S4 interview Kris spoke about his ability in terms of human quality and manhood:

‘Having that ability proves how good you are ... I guess it shows you are a better person ... or man’

Research informed by hegemonic masculinity theory highlights that ‘ability’ is one of the most effective ways of gaining status in PE (Jachyra, 2016) and can permit those more able to discipline others who are less able. Indeed, observations frequently demonstrated instances when the ‘more able’ boys seemed to discipline, or bully, the ‘less able’ boys. For example, the following situation was a regular occurrence in the lead researcher’s field notes:

(S4, Field Notes) Three of the boys with high footballing ability (Frank included) in football form a triangle around Josh (who is weak at football), they pass the ball round him, taunting him to come and get it, when he tries they pass it away and shout ‘Wheyyy’. At one point one of the high ability boys stops the ball and every time Josh lunges for it he pulls it away from him with this foot, Josh’s leg swings into fresh air and they all laugh at him.

All of the S4 boys agreed during the interview that low-ability boys had little purpose in PE. The consequence of this exertion of disciplinary power in the form of bullying was that the low-ability boys were often observed disengaging from tasks during lessons, something that the more able boys seemed to take pleasure in.

Popularity

The S1 boys associated popularity with behaviours such as being supportive, showing empathy and getting along being valued. Instead they possessed a wider range of behaviours within their inclusive masculine climate. For example, observations and field notes revealed this supportive behaviour by how the S1 boys interacted with a peer with autism during a PE lesson.

(S1, Field Note) Without the teacher saying anything the team (Consisting of Alistair) with Luke (A pupil with autism) would pass the ball to him, the other team would not intercept the ball if it was going to him and give him more space to pass the ball. If Luke did make a mistake (not being able to catch it or throwing a bad pass) the team would support him regardless. As the class walked out I heard a few boys tell Luke how much he was improving.

This was supported by Alistair and Harry (S1 interview) when they talked about the above event:

Alistair (S1, Interview) ‘Yeah of course we did [include him] ... he should play just as much as us, I always try to get him involved’

Harry (S1 Interview) ‘It was cool from Alistair’s team’ (Harry gives Alistair a fist bump)

It is impossible to say how the S4 boys would have behaved in the same context. However, further evidence to suggest that the S1 boys associated lack of popularity with orthodox behaviours was noted during the interview when the boys discussed an incident in a basketball lesson:

Ryan (S1 interview) ‘He pushed me over in basketball because I missed a shot’

Researcher ‘... you don’t appreciate that behaviour?’

Kyle (S1 interview) ‘Yeah, the rest of the class don’t really like him because of this’

Again, this was in contrast to the ways in which a number of the S4 boys, including all those interviewed, gained popularity, where physical dominance over others allowed you to become ‘top of the pack’ (Frank). They mirrored what Parker (1996) called ‘hard boys’. They embodied hegemonic values and oppressed any boys who did not conform. Interestingly, it appeared as though, once you gained access to the popular group, a wider set of behaviours were legitimised and group members could adopt alternative behaviours without fear of dropping down the hierarchy. As demonstrated through field notes:

The boys skip and jump into the hall, sometimes singing, sometimes stopping to dance, often they wrestle each other to the ground, rolling around on each other.

Supporting Wellard’s (2006) theory of exclusive masculinities, the boys’ bodies allowed them to adopt a fluid identity that only they could get away with:

Frank (S4 interview) ‘We’d definitely laugh at them [non-popular boys dancing], one of them did it yesterday when he scored and we ripped³ him, only we can do it’

Similarly, the S4 boys showed some emotion when they stated that they were proud of their friend Kyle when he was selected to play Rugby for Scotland. Thus, these ‘softer’ aspects of their personalities are legitimised through their hyper-masculine identity as able and successful rugby players.

The inclusive and exclusive body

The ‘tank-ish’ body

Hierarchical status in PE is attained by boys who possess strong muscular bodies (Connell, 2005). Throughout the study, the S4 boys referred to their bodies as ‘tanks’:

Callum ‘Somebody who is ripped and has a strong body, walk about like a tank’

³ Ripped- A slang word for teasing somebody about the way they act or behave.

To some extent, this conflicts with Wellard's (2002) premise that true masculine embodiment is unrealistic for school-aged pupils. However, the boys in this study had 'privileged' access to a rugby strength training programme both within the school and the local club, enabling them to build their hyper-masculine bodies. This highlights the way in which local context can influence masculine identities and builds upon the work of Connell (2008) by conveying that the dominant sport – in this case rugby – can define what it means to be masculine. This is reinforced by the fact that those boys that did not play rugby, but were elite athletes in other sports, did not have the same status and privilege as the 'rugby boys'. They were highly able, competitive and ambitious, but their bodies, whilst athletic, were not 'tank-ish'. However, the extent to which their marginal status was solely based on the body is not entirely clear, as these boys were outsiders to this high-status rugby culture and its associated privileges.

Furthering the notion of the boys seeing themselves as 'tanks', the students used the game of rugby as a way to detach themselves from their bodies and to see themselves as machines (Light, 2007). They also appeared to emphasise the size of their bodies by wearing tight-fitting t-shirts and rugby shorts in PE, common attire among professional rugby players. They also referred to other rugby players when describing masculine bodies:

Kris (S4 interview) 'Someone like Stuart Hogg⁴, he is muscly and strong but can run around'

Dennis (S4 interview) 'They are all ripped and built like rocks, none of them are big or fat, and none of the wingers are skinny'

They referred to the bodies of boys who did not play rugby, and who participated in other sports such as athletics, as 'useless at PE' and stated how they would 'snap' them in games. Boys who did not fit the 'tank-ish' body were labelled 'small boys'. They were categorised as:

Dennis (S4 interviews) 'Boys who have no muscles, are thin in build...often wear[ing] baggy clothes'

⁴ Stuart Hogg- One of the top rugby players in Scotland.

Interestingly, these ‘small boys’ were observed sitting slouched in the corner of the gym during PE and had limited social interactions with others when around the dominant bodies. The following field-note depicts how these ‘small boys’ were targeted by the ‘tanks’.

Whilst running around the field Callum (‘Tank’) moves behind David, a much smaller boy, and trips him up. At the end of the lesson I ask Callum why he chose to trip David to which he replied: “he’s a small boy, what’s he going to do about it”.

This highlights another example of the condoned bullying that took place in this PE context, where the rugby boys were provided with the power to embody, maintain and control the dominant values of the school. Furthermore, the dominance of these localised ‘rugby’ bodies over other bodies was not exclusively visible in the PE context. In discussing how other boys looked, Frank stated:

‘They’d [the small boys] look ridiculous, they could never pull off what I wear, we’d take the piss out of them for it, only the boys in this group can wear clothes like that’

Thus, it appears as though Frank’s masculine identity allows him to act in almost any way he pleases, surveilling the actions of others to maintain his masculine status, including what they choose to wear.

The inclusive body

The S1s did not see the body or body image as important in PE. In fact, no observations were made by the researcher regarding oppressive bodily-practices. Results from the interview suggest that boys adopt an inclusive masculine identity by rejecting orthodox, or in this context, rugby bodies:

Researcher ‘...What would they look like? Like their body? Think body shape, are they ripped or are they big?’

Ryan (S1 interview) ‘I don’t think it matters, we all look different but we can all be good at PE’

Similar to Adams, Anderson, and McCormack (2010), these findings suggest that the S1 boys have no desire to be a ‘a tank’ and are comfortable creating their own inclusive bodily identities. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that the S1 boys understood that, in their current pre-pubertal state, it is unrealistic to achieve or desire this tank-like body. However, this would not limit their capacity to display their dominance in other ways, for example, through skill, aggression or stereotypical-gendered concepts of men being dominant over women and weaker individuals in adult life, yet these other orthodox behaviours were rarely observed during the S1 PE lessons.

Homosexually-themed language

Traditionally, homophobic discourse is used to make sure men maintain a narrow range of masculine identities (Connell, 1987). This appeared to be the case for the S4 boys, as can be seen in the field note below, there was some evidence that the boys directed homophobic language towards the ‘small’ boys:

When deciding choices, a group of ‘small’ boys go to play badminton, as they do this, Frank shouts across the hall “they’re away to play with each others’ cocks!⁵”

Although the above account was the most public, as well as demeaning, display of homosexually-themed language towards others, calling boys gay, or a derivative, was very common in the S4 class. This could be one of the reasons why the ‘small’ boys disengaged from physical tactility and emotional intimacy (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). However, it was difficult for these boys to hide in PE and if they performed skills inadequately, they would often be labelled as gay:

Kris (S4 interview) ‘[the small boys] get called gay because they play crap’

⁵ Cocks- Although in this example the meaning is homophobic, as to have sexual relation with another man. The originality of the discourse derived from the idea that the boys were playing badminton with a shuttlecock.

Here, the term 'gay' may not have been used literally to question the sexuality of 'the small boys', but to highlight, rather pejoratively, their lack of sporting ability. This highlights the complexity of homosexually-themed language and how it can have different meanings in different contexts. For example, this was also evident in the way that the boys who possessed exclusive masculinities talked to each other. The researcher often witnessed the members of this group jokingly calling each other gay. In line with Magrath (2018), these jokes between friendship groups are not necessarily homophobic - they are made between two parties that have shared norms. In this case, the rugby boys can be called gay by other rugby boys, without it impacting their social status. However, de Boise (2015) suggests that this is still problematic. He looks to the work of Foucault (1985) to highlight that historically, homophobia is not a fear of others who have same-sex partners, but a fear of blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity by 'acting like women'. Therefore, the rugby boys' use of homosexually-themed language towards each other and towards the 'small boys' may not indicate that they are consciously homophobic. However, it may be a way in which they can reinforce and exert their own hyper-masculinity. This is important to understand because, at times, this behaviour may result in negative experiences, either directly or indirectly, for 'others' in the PE and the wider school context.

By contrast, and more in line with previous research in the school setting (McCormack, 2012) the S1 boys rejected homosexually-themed language, whether implicitly homophobic or not, and in doing so, created an inclusive PE environment. For example, they scolded a peer in their class when they suggested that dancing was gay:

Alistair 'We all told him to stop being silly, nobody in the class is gay, and who cares if they were, he understood and got on with it'

This again reflects their more inclusive masculine identity which appeared to create a culture of low homophobia in their PE class. Importantly, this was evident both from what the boys said during the interviews and from what was observed during lessons.

The role of the curriculum

The results of this study support the notion that multiple masculinities can co-exist within the same setting, or in this case, the same school. Additionally, as the boys progress from S1 to S4, there are social processes in play that appear to lead boys to construct orthodox and exclusive masculinities. Observations did reveal that there were some S4 boys in PE

who did not exhibit such masculinities, a minority who were at times policed and ridiculed by the more dominant. Given that the same behaviours were not observed in the S1 class, we suggest that for many of the boys in this school, their masculine identities intensify towards hegemonic norms with age, and that PE is a prime site of this construction. Hickey (2008) highlights that the PE curriculum, what is taught and how it is taught, will contribute to the construction of pupils' identities. Thus, we consider that the diversity of activities taught in S1 plays a role in the widening of acceptable behaviours within this year group. The S1 pupils experienced pupil-led, problem solving, aesthetics and decision-making activities, encouraging a wide range of roles and supporting a range of masculine behaviours without fear of stigmatisation, marginalisation or oppression. This was in stark contrast to the S4 curriculum, where the boys chose to take part in a narrow range of directly competitive team sports. Hence, we can argue that the boys are not exclusively culpable, but that the contextual environment is somewhat forcing them to adopt these behaviours due to the risk marginalisation if they do not conform.

Furthermore, the teachers appeared to be less creative or less concerned about the way these games were taught, either presenting teacher-led skills practices, or simply allowing the boys to play. This provided a platform for the performance of orthodox behaviours by some, and negative or avoidance behaviours by others.

Kris (S4 interview) 'In S1 I tried hard, but now I come to PE for a muck about ... and beat people in whatever we are doing'

These contextual characteristics of S4 PE show the way in which the curriculum can support the transition from the 'inclusive boy' to the 'orthodox-man' or, in this case, 'rugby-man'. This transition also appears to have been reinforced by the attitudes and behaviours of the teachers who saw PE in S1 as a place for learning, whereas PE in S4 was about 'letting the boys play' and that 'boys will be boys'. In addition, the school itself had a role to play in relation to the value it placed on the game of rugby and the privilege this offered some boys, with one boy stating in an informal conversation with the researcher that the 'school revolved around rugby'. This meant that those boys who played rugby held a dominant position in the school hierarchy, and not only in the PE context:

Dennis (S4 interview) 'I get away with murder in French because the teacher knows I am good at rugby'

This was supported by evidence from informal discussions with teachers (both PE and other subject teachers) who claimed there had been cases when colleagues would alter their behaviour management strategies specifically when dealing with rugby players. This hints at a school-wide hidden curriculum, where teachers both consciously and sub-consciously favour the hyper-masculine rugby players over others. In fact, this contextual characteristic was one of the most important factors in creating the hierarchy between the rugby boys and the rest of the school.

Concluding comments

This research provides an insight into the construction of boys' masculine identities and experiences by analysing an S1 and an S4 class in a Scottish secondary school. Like Campbell et al. (2016), this article supports the views that both inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009) and exclusive masculinity (Wellard, 2006) are prevalent in contemporary PE in Scotland. In addition, this research highlights a shift in masculine identity for some boys as they move from S1 to S4. Supported by Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell, 2008), we found that the majority of the S4 boys observed and all of the boys that were interviewed embodied an exclusive form of masculinity, using their 'rugby' bodies to allow them to enact a range of masculine behaviours, while maintaining their superior position in the social hierarchy. This highlights that, although men can perform a range of masculine behaviours, it is always in relation to social and institutional power and privilege, and in this case, a local form of social and institutional power that values and privileges rugby bodies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The value placed on the game of rugby in this context has resulted in both a discursive and structural form of power that appears very difficult to challenge, especially as the boys develop their rugby, tank-ish' bodies and abilities. Consequently, while this research has identified that multiple and inclusive forms of masculinities can co-exist in one school setting, it also highlights the ways in which bodies, behaviours and discourse interact with, and are influence by, local contexts. This is important because research that does not take account of these interactions has the potential to portray the enactment of inclusive masculinities as simple, unproblematic and without risk.

This research has also highlighted the ways in which the practices of the PE teachers have been shaped by their local context which has, in turn, resulted in a PE curriculum, pedagogy and practices that reinforce and reproduce the privileged of the rugby man. The strength of this 'rugby-culture' within the school and local community is likely to make

change very difficult. However, given the current focus in Scotland, and other countries worldwide, to create inclusive learning environments that impact positively on pupil wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2009), we argue that change in this school is necessary, especially as the boys progress through the curriculum. For example, consideration could be given to the type of curriculum offered in S4 and the way it is offered. It may be beneficial, for example, to continue to offer a broad range of diverse and/or less traditional activities with an explicitly educative focus. A continued focus each year on pupil-centred pedagogies that develop problem-solving and decision-making, as well as skills and attributes such as listening, respecting and valuing difference may also be useful in this context. Perhaps a more challenging shift for the teachers would be to move towards the use of critical pedagogies that actively address and challenge social issues around, for example, gender, identity, conflict and the body (Pringle, 2008). This can be difficult for some teachers as they firstly have to critique their own practices and biases to understand the ways in which they unknowingly perpetuate social injustices in PE. For example, the teachers in this study would have to be more aware that the toleration of homosexually-themed language during PE may be resulting in negative experiences for some pupils. The same holds true for the practice of pupils selecting teams based purely on orthodox ideas such as ability and strength. PE teachers must be able to recognise and value different forms of masculinity. Only then are they in a position to challenge dominant forms and create a learning environment 'where inclusive masculinities can thrive and pupils' social, emotional and mental wellbeing can be supported' (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 12).

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