

**Girlhood, Sport and Physical Activity: The
construction of young femininities in the
transition to secondary school**

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

This thesis deals with issues of sport, gender and identity within schooling. It focuses on six physically active girls as they made the transition to secondary schools in London and considers the social and educational contexts that framed their involvement in physical activity and sport over this period.

The research involved in-depth interviews with the girls, and their parents, teachers and friends, over a period of four years, beginning when the girls were in Year 5 and finishing when the girls were aged 13 and in Year 8. Over this period I also carried out ongoing observations at physical education lessons, after-school sports activities and a local youth running group.

The analysis explores the social and emotional processes and identifications that made girls' participation more or less sustainable over this period of time. It considers how girls who had once found immense pleasure and joy from physical activities came to feel disinvested in the PE curriculum, unsure of their physical abilities and unable to see sport as relevant in their bids towards academic or social success. I look in particular at the girls' schooling contexts, their relationships with friends and peers, their parental and class aspirations and their access to outdoor space. The findings suggest that social class and privilege were particularly implicated in girls' involvement in sport and that decisions around their participation were often made within the overriding context of an achievement-oriented education system.

I draw attention to the broader context of girls' participation in sport and to the particular ways in which the girls' gendered, classed and racialised identities mediated their participation. I suggest that girls' contradictory positioning within dominant discourses of health, ability, sexuality and academic success held particular connotations for their participation, often making sport and physical activity difficult to access at the secondary school level.

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Chapter One Introduction to Girlhood, Sport and Physical Activity

In a context of increasing concerns around young people's eating patterns and physical (in)activity linked to an ongoing 'obesity crisis' (Evans et al., 2008b, Gard and Wright, 2005) this thesis provides a nuanced account of the complex processes surrounding girls' participation in sport and physical activity. The research was based at a variety of primary and secondary schools across London, variously positioned within an overriding educational standards agenda. My analysis centres on issues relating to gender, youth, class, ethnicity, sport and identity by employing insights from both the sociology of sport and the sociology of education, with a particular feminist orientation. Drawing on the experiences of a group of six key girls over a period of four years, I trace their ongoing constructions of gendered identities as they made the transition to secondary school. My analysis complicates straightforward suggestions that women and girls' gains in sporting achievements are indicative of their newfound equality, despite acknowledging many of the benefits that might arise from this participation. Specifically, it questions the access and costs of this participation by exploring what identities are made available within current models of sporting engagement, and which are excluded.

Since the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Gender Reform Act (1988) in the UK, women and girls have made impressive gains within the fields of sport and physical activity. They have entered into elite competition in unprecedented numbers as well as comprising growing participation rates in a broad variety of amateur sports and physical activities both nationally and internationally (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, George, 2005, Roster, 2007, Wesely and Gaarder, 2004, Scraton et al., 1999). The much-celebrated victories of female British athletes in the Beijing Olympics served to highlight the impressive progress of female sports performances and might even be held up as examples of women's already-achieved equality and success in formerly male-dominated fields (Cochrane, 2008).

Yet despite early feminist calls for an emphasis on sociality and democratic participation, models of dominance and competitiveness seem to have been uncritically accepted in women's versions of formerly male dominated sports. The continuing association of sports such as football with masculinity had implications for girls' involvement as it delimited the practices associated with conventional masculinities and femininities in school. Moreover, although women's sporting images are now more widespread, the lean, young bodies of female athletes are frequently sexualised and are used to endorse a variety of commercial products. Such images maintain an emphasis on a female athlete's clothing and appearance over and above her physical performances. This form of prioritising was something the girls were well aware of as they struggled for attention in the heterosexualised hierarchies of their peer settings. Additionally, women's mass participation in activities such as aerobics, gym training and fitness classes are progressively tied in with weight concerns and a continuing refinement of 'plastic' bodies seen as reworkable and ever worth improving upon (Bordo, 1993, McCormack, 1999). Girls' take up of these discourses and the conflicting tenets of ability and health messages were important in defining their sports participation, though they often provided contradictory messages for young women to somehow work within and between.

It is these shifting, seemingly contradictory possibilities of sport that make it ripe for gender investigations and possible reconfigurations. Sport and other forms of physical activity act as sites in which conventional identity norms can be either confirmed or interrupted, and where the embodied capacities of individuals can be challenged and/or reinforced. As Cara Aitchison (2007: 1) explains:

The mutable nature of sport, of identity and of the relationship between the two offers possibilities for resistance, contestation and transgression of hegemonic gender and sexual power relations.

Within this thesis I consider sport to be a site in which girls might subvert dominant gender norms but at the same time reveal how these possibilities are inherently constrained within overriding discourses of ethnicity, ability, health, gender and achievement.

The research centres on a group of girls who were highly engaged in physical activity in primary school. Throughout the thesis I explore the ways in which this sporting engagement, constructed as part of the girls' ongoing gendered identities, shifted as they moved into the first two years of secondary school. The data are drawn both from an earlier study in which I acted as research officer and then from my PhD project, where I followed up with former participants from this previous study. In 2005 I acted as research officer on an ESRC-funded study into tomboy identities in primary school, directed by Professor Carrie Paechter¹. The research was conducted at two primary schools in London and I carried out interviews and observations with girls who were identified or identifying as 'tomboys' in Years 5 and 6 of their schooling. Our research suggested that these identities were strongly related to the girls' involvement in sports and the girls we focused on were thus particularly active or 'sporty.' The project finished while the girls were in Year 6 and I elected to follow up with them as they made the transition to secondary school. This 'follow-up' over the first two years of their secondary schooling formed the basis of my PhD study. The research thus traces the involvement of six particularly physically 'active' girls as they moved from Year 5 (9-10 yo) to Year 8 (12-13 yo) in schools at divergent locations across London. Over this period of time I was particularly interested in the overriding contexts and discursive landscapes surrounding the girls' involvement in sport and physical activity. To this end I conducted a longitudinal series of interviews with each girl along with her parents, friends, teachers and coaches, as well as carrying out detailed observations in the girls' physical activity settings both in and outside of their schools. The research is therefore both about the girls' involvement in sport and physical activity, as well as the ways in which this involvement was framed by the girls and significant adults invested in this sporting engagement.

Adolescence, and particularly the transition to upper secondary school, have been identified as key points at which girls are likely drop out of sports

¹ Tomboy Identities: the construction and maintenance of active girlhoods." ESRC project number RES-00-22-1032.

and/or to disengage in physical education and activity (WSFF, 2007, Green et al., 2007, Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Hargreaves, 1994). This research therefore provides important insights into the shifting, complex processes whereby girls' engagement in sport and physical activity might become more or less doable, thinkable and realisable over this key period. Girls' involvement in sport has been premised in a number of recent media and government initiatives which have focused increasing attention on the bodies of young people grounded in concerns around their physical well being. Disparities in girls' involvement in physical activity (as compared with boys) are thus seen as particularly problematic and are used as justifications for ongoing incentives in schools and sports programmes more broadly (Youth Sport Trust, 2007, DCSF, 2008a). These justifications include concerns around health as related to the ongoing 'obesity crisis' (Gard and Wright, 2005) as well as the drive to develop young people into elite athletes in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics in London. Such incentives and their focus on constructions of ability and health have taken on a growing importance in framing young people's involvement in sport and physical activity. Accordingly, schools and related adults often express a range of justificatory explanations around the 'problem' of girls' disengagement, many of which are keen to place the blame on girls themselves in targeting girls' lack of motivation for physical activity.

As I began the research I was often made aware of these explanations about girls' involvement in sport, which seemed overly simplistic and unfair to individual girls. Casual suggestions that girls drop out of sports because they do not want to get dirty or are too worried about what boys think of them seemed both trivialising and unreflective of the difficult situations many girls face in constructing their ongoing identities in relation to social, academic and sporting contexts. As a feminist researcher it was important to me to portray girls as competent social agents within wider social contexts that often made their continuing involvement in sports difficult and sometimes nearly impossible to sustain.

Rather than positioning girls' involvement in sport as a matter of concern from which girls have been passively disenfranchised, the research sees girls

as actively constructing gendered identities across a range of educational, peer and sporting contexts beset by ongoing structural inequalities. Importantly, I situate girls' involvement in sport in the broader context of schooling and the unequal differential access to schools variously invested in the overriding standards agenda. Girls' particular stake within this educational context and their construction as the ideal subjects of modernity are thus especially important in considerations of their sporting engagement.

Successful girlhood

Within post-feminist formulations, girls have been regarded as the new educational success stories and their achievement in school (particularly in relation to boys) has been used as evidence of this newfound equality (Francis, 2000, Epstein et al., 1998). This model of progression has often been attributed to the success of liberal reforms, which have led both to girls' educational achievements and to their unbridled entry into other traditionally male-dominated arenas such as sports. As the newly 'aspirational subjects' of neoliberal reforms (Harris, 2004b, McRobbie, 2009) young women are said to be poised to take up flexible positions within a risk society characterised by unstable demands in the economy. Leslie Heywood (2007) looks in particular at the iconography of the female athlete as applied in both advertising campaigns and programmes aimed at 'keeping girls active.' Such programmes, she argues:

wed the discourse of liberal feminism with that of neoliberalism, presenting sport as a space where girls learn to become the ideal subjects of a new global economy that relies on individuals with flexibility who are trained to blame their inevitable failures on themselves rather than the system their lives are structured in.

(Heywood, 2007: 113)

Within this formulation, girls are said to embody the new 'can-do, DIY, take-responsibility-for-yourself subject' (Heywood, 2007: 113). Such a subject is well placed within both the job market and the educational market where tenets of neoliberalism such as achievement and performance are increasingly pervasive (Ball, 2003b). Yet as Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) point out, social class continues to play a powerful role in positioning girls as able to take up such opportunities. Achievement

discourses that translate across academic and health contexts may be especially salient in middle class notions of self-actualisation and development (Evans et al., 2004). The work of Evans, Rich, Holroyd and Davies (Evans et al., 2008a, Evans et al., 2008b, Evans et al., 2007) has provided an important critique of the influence of healthism discourses within schools and their impact on young people's constructions of ability and achievement, particularly for young women. Their work suggests that the slender, toned female body has come to function as a particular marker of success alongside grades, extracurricular activities and other forms of achievement. The ways in which schools construct such models of success are thus particularly significant both to girls' involvement in sport and physical activity and to their academic pursuits. Throughout this thesis I explore relationships between these processes.

As I began the research my questions centred around whether girls whose physical activities contributed to the construction of 'tomboy' identities in primary school might be able to sustain such identities alongside their involvement in sport and physical activity into secondary school. However, I soon found that the construction of tomboy identities was less salient to girls' sports activities than, for example, their class backgrounds and school contexts, and my research questions developed into the following:

1. How do girls take up, resist and negotiate gendered identities between and within sporting and schooling contexts?
2. What contexts and processes held significant implications for young women's participation in sport and physical activity?
3. How do girls' relationships with peers, teachers and coaches mediate their sporting participation?
4. What overarching discourses framed girls' involvement in sport and physical activity over the transition to secondary school?

The aims of my research thus included the desire to attempt to understand girls' participation in physical activity both from their own perspectives and within the important contexts of schooling and the educational market. This marketisation of education is exemplified in the exchange value of credentials such as sporting and academic accomplishments. Thus although

the research is primarily about girls in sport, the findings have broader implications in their contribution to ideas about ability, bodies, achievement, gender and schooling.

Chapter two describes my theoretical orientation and outlines my understanding of key terms including identity, gender and the body. Drawing on Foucault, I discuss feminist uses of his work in relation to gender and physicality, in particular his ideas about ‘docile bodies’ and governmentality. I emphasise the importance of schooling in embodying subjects and as sites for the construction of physical identities.

In chapter three I detail my methodological approach as well as outlining the various methods of inquiry used in the study. I describe the process of longitudinal, qualitative research using interviews and observations. A key concern is my ongoing relationships with the girls over four years of research and I discuss these dynamics with particular attention to the girls’ development as ‘research savvy’ participants. Issues of access, consent and ethical conduct are also explored.

Chapter four provides some background to the study in explaining the girls’ participation in sport and physical activity at primary school. I then separately introduce each girl as well as the four divergent secondary schools the girls continued onto.

Chapter five focuses further attention on these secondary schools by considering the ways in which they are positioned in the educational market and the effects this has on their sporting provision and constructions of ‘successful girlhood.’ I trace a brief history of feminist perspectives on girls’ involvement in sport before considering the current construction of a ‘problem’ in relation to girls’ involvement in sport and physical activity.

Chapter six looks at the girls’ and their parents’ expectations of schooling and their understandings of ‘a good education’. I focus on the increasing emphasis on competition and performance within the current educational context and consider the particular and unfolding implications this has for girls’ involvement in sport. My attention here turns to the differential privileges that could be accessed through sport and how girls were more or

less able to take these up as well as the psychic and emotional sacrifices girls made to these ends.

In chapter seven I consider girls' constructions of young femininities within their peer and friendship settings and in particular the girls' take up of 'sporty', 'girlie' and 'clever' subject positions at their respective schools. I suggest that the construction of a 'sporty' subject position was more tenable at middle class schools where girls could simultaneously invest in positions of 'clever' and 'nice' femininities.

In chapter eight I discuss the overriding discourses of 'health', 'ability' and 'fun' as they framed girls' involvement in sport and physical activity. I look at girls' negotiation of these frameworks and the ways in which they sometimes created conflict and frustration for girls as they attempted to live out often opposing understandings of sports participation. I suggest that the shift in emphasis towards adult constructions of performance and elitism in secondary school from a model of fun and participation in primary school is particularly significant for girls' engagement.

Finally, chapter nine considers the spatial aspects of girls' physical activities in and around their local areas. I consider the construction of gendered space at girls' schools and the implications this has for their activities, as well as the ways in which constructions of girls' sexual vulnerability framed their physical engagement within outdoor space.

My final analysis suggests that girls are positioned amidst a range of conflicting discourses around their participation in sport that, while constraining girls' participation in various ways, often obscure the difficulties girls face and render them apt to accept personal responsibility for their 'failure' or 'success' in maintaining levels of physical activity and 'healthy' lifestyles. I further suggest that sport and physical activity form important sites in embodying schooled subjects and where social class holds particular implications for girls' engagement in sport.

As is common in feminist research, part of the impetus for my investigation and interests rests with my own sporting history and ongoing engagement in physical activities.

A personal journey

Sport is something I began enjoying in my mid-twenties, far beyond the time when young people are expected to foster such interests and to hone their individual ‘talents’ in increasingly competitive training schedules (Sports Coach UK, 2004). Amidst a range of classes I had enjoyed in school, PE had been a dreaded subject and one that I dropped out of as soon as possible. I left school with very little confidence in my physical abilities and without much sense of the joy that camaraderie through team sports might present, an experience not uncommon for many young women (Williams et al., 2000, Williams and Bedward, 2002, Wright and Dewar, 1997). At university I dutifully went along to the gym, constantly aspiring to a body shape that seemed out of reach but somehow morally compelling. When I took up running after my first year of university, this ‘casual’ endeavour quickly became compulsive as it combined with restricted eating patterns, guilt and depression over the futility of a constant striving towards bodily validation. It was not until I joined a women’s soccer team during my Masters in Vancouver that I started to think about what my body could achieve physically (and the joys of this exertion) rather than seeing my body as a force to be struggled against. In the context of a soccer pitch, the thighs and bum I had so hated all those years allowed me to sprint towards the ball before my opponents got there. I loved soccer and could not understand why my father (who had coached a boys’ team) never thought to enrol his daughter in the sport. Three years later and now living in London, a knee injury forced me to give up soccer and to switch back to running. This time though, the motives were very different and the running took place in a participatory and supportive women’s running group that helped me to train for my first marathon in 2009. Therefore my new foray into running coincided largely with the research, something I explore more fully in the methodology chapter. My interest in sport is inevitably tinged with personal feelings of regret, injustice, humiliation, pain and joy that I could not help carrying with me as I began my research into girls’ involvement in sport. These both sustained my interest in the topic and inevitably shaped my

emotional and analytic engagement with the girls' ongoing experiences in sport and schooling over the course of the research.

Why does sport matter?

Many feminist and educational analyses might suggest that girls' involvement in sport and physical activity (or lack of it) is surely secondary to more consequential issues around girls' academic achievement and social equality and therefore that it represents a diversion from these more pressing matters. Indeed such critiques might point out that sport and physical activity operate as just another 'project of the self' in which girls are expected to maintain standards of physical achievement in line with a broader system of body fascism. While I am somewhat sympathetic to these claims (and certainly well aware personally of the potentially compulsive nature of exercise and physical fitness), I hope that my analyses might challenge this common conception and indeed the broader marginalisation of physical education studies within education more broadly. My findings demonstrate the important links between girls' academic and sporting achievements, as well as the salience of extracurricular pursuits within broader processes of educational differentiation and inequality.

On a more emotive level, I am concerned about girls' disengagement from sport and physical activity because of my observations of the girls in Years 5 and 6 at primary school. At that time I worked with a group of girls who took great pleasure in various physical pursuits that seemed to bring them joy, confidence and a sense of personal achievement in supportive settings. As the girls reached secondary school their engagement somehow shifted and many of them became convinced of the efficacy of discontinuing their sports involvement. Some of them believed that they were no longer 'able', others were told that they were not good enough, many shifted their motivations towards health and performance-related targets and sometimes they were informed that the space available was already being taken up by boys, many of them their brothers and male peers whose participation in physical activity was consistently identified as more important than the girls'. The reasons that girls may disengage from sports are complex and are

intimately situated within their educational contexts. This thesis therefore documents the processes whereby a group of girls' engagement in sport became more or less realisable as they made the transition into the initial years of secondary school.

Chapter Two The Development of a Physical Identity: Bodies, gender and identity

Introduction

This chapter outlines my theoretical approach and understanding of key terms including the body, gender and identity as they are applied within the study. While employing a Foucauldian perspective on processes of identity construction, I seek to expand this view by considering girls' and women's lived experiences of their bodies and the ways in which they might go about challenging particularly gendered habits of being. I make use of Connell's (2002, 1995) and Shilling's (2003, 2004) work to explain how gender can be seen as an embodied process of identity construction carried out in particular sites including sporting and schooling contexts for girls positioned by discourses of 'race', social class, gender and ethnicity. Such an approach seeks to capture the ways that the girls, as embodied subjects, act back on the world in processes not just of subjectification but of agency and capacity in reshaping their social contexts through a series ongoing and dynamic resignifications and negotiations.

Research exploring the relationship between schooling and identities has flourished in the past decade, with particular attention to class, 'race' and gender as powerfully constraining discourses in constructions of success or failure in education (George, 2007a, Bettie, 2003, Gonick, 2003, Shain, 2003, Benjamin, 2002, Frosh et al., 2002, Renold, 2005, Jackson, 2006, Youdell, 2006, Reay, 2001c). A central contention within much of this research has been the dual recognition that while identity is socially constructed and even 'under erasure' (Hall, 1996) it is also highly implicated in the differential, unequal access to current models of both school and social achievement. Concurrent with this growing interest in identity and schooling, a 'turn to the body' within sociology has emphasised the corporeal aspects of subject formation (Shilling, 1993, Turner, 1984, Young, 2005a, Grosz, 1994). This perspective has been critical of a perceived 'privileging' of the discursive aspects of subjectification and has emphasised the role of the body in terms of both agency and identity.

Despite this broader emphasis on the body and processes of embodiment, Shilling (2003: 19) suggests that the sociology of education has been insufficiently attentive to schooled bodies and to the ways in which the education system shapes and monitors such bodies. This inconsistency has created a situation in which children's schooled bodies continue to be an 'absent presence' (Shilling, 2003: 8). While theories within the sociology of the body are primarily taken up with *adult* bodies, much educational research with children has been inattentive to children's bodies, seeing children as 'semi-disembodied, gendered but not sexed beings' (Paechter, 2006: 122). These dual developments seem to present a theoretical 'gap' where children's bodies, and particularly children's bodies in school, are seldom considered. Yet young people's bodies are key to their experiences of schooling, particularly as they are defined through developmental models that posit normative progression along both physical and intellectual schemas:

Children are defined through their bodies, bodies that are seen to develop and mature in relation to externally derived conceptions of their social, intellectual, physical and moral competencies.

(Jenks, 2001 :68)

Schools act as strategic sites for the monitoring and proliferation of these models of development through technologies such as the National Curriculum, which measure specific levels of achievement along normative lines. More recently, a strong 'obesity' discourse has advocated the implementation of 'health' regulations that monitor indices such as Body Mass Index (BMI) and food intake among school children (Evans et al., 2008b). Bodies that are not seen to adhere to these normative models (and are subsequently defined as obese, pregnant, disabled) are thereby pathologised within schools and rendered problematic (Benjamin, 2002, O'Flynn and Epstein, 2005). Paechter (2006: 127) notes that an emphasis on the 'mental' aspects of education has led to an overall lack of attention to physical bodies in educational research where 'the corporeal turn in academia seems barely to have registered.'

Research within physical education (PE) has often placed more emphasis on the material body. This might be due to its central focus within the PE curriculum, which is explicitly concerned with the physical performances of young bodies. A range of recent research into young people's experiences of PE has implicated physical education in the production of gendered, classed and racialised bodies (Wellard, 2006a, Kirk, 2004, Oliver and Lalik, 2001, Garrett, 2004b). David Kirk (2004) draws attention to the differential statuses bodies in school are accorded, leading to differential outputs:

The body and the bodily or physical capital invested in it play key roles in the production of social inequalities [in which] school physical education and sport contribute significantly.

(Kirk, 2004: 53)

Yet it might be argued that the findings from research in physical education have often remained marginal to educational studies more broadly, thus limiting the opportunity for making connections between academic and sporting or physical education contexts. Recent work by Evans et al.(2008b) seeks to bridge this divide by making explicit links between educational and PEH (physical education and health) contexts. The authors contend that the circulation of performance and perfection codes across these contexts creates 'biopedagogies' in which academic and corporeal standards form increasingly narrow and compulsive ideals of achievement. This work places the schooled and 'healthified' body at the centre of its analysis. The links made within this research have been useful to me in suggesting that girls' involvement in sport and physical education and the outputs of this involvement are not solely related to these physical contexts but have broader implications within social relations and schooling. Indeed my research found that girls' decisions around their sports participation turned out to be strongly related to their academic trajectories and to the various forms of physical capital on offer to them.

Chris Shilling (2004) describes physical capital as being 'transferable' to other social fields through a process of cultural translation. In this view, the cultivation of specific bodily habits and dispositions are able to accrue value that may or may not continue to resonate in other social fields such as

education, employment, social networks and financial capital.

Extracurricular accomplishments (such as sports) can act as markers of ‘well-rounded’ subjects in a competitive educational context. Girls’ bodies and the meanings attributed to them are therefore not only relevant within physical activity settings and such meanings translate across contexts, including peer hierarchies and academic fields, as is described in chapter seven.

Girls in school

The girls in my study could be seen to be aware of their bodies both in the significance of the physical changes that occurred with adolescence and in the pleasure and skill such bodies could enact through their involvement in physical and other activities. Importantly, girls’ bodies also formed a medium of expression that conveyed key messages to others about their identities and girls were therefore concerned about the maintenance and appearance of these bodies. Judgements about girls’ bodies occurred in harsh peer evaluations where bodies were hierarchised along culturally coded lines of attractiveness, slenderness and ability. This was often brutally evident to the girls, even as they at times perpetuated these hierarchies. Various authors have suggested that the structure of PE settings, where girls’ bodies are ‘on display’ has made girls’ participation particularly problematic (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). My theoretical approach seeks to expand from this perspective through specific attention to broader educational and peer settings, which circulate discourses of achievement, ability and health in relation to girls’ bodies. Within this formulation, girls’ bodies can be seen both as personal resources in accomplishing socially acceptable selves and as social symbols that are inevitably caught up in relations of power.

Women and girls’ engagement in sport and physical activity has changed considerably over the years, though women continue to be less valued for their participation in most sports. Moreover, despite seeming ‘progress’ in their participation, women’s sporting bodies are still considered to be

inferior to men's and the spectre of the naturalised body continues to hold sway in popular thought around women's sporting abilities.

The naturalised body and sport

Naturalistic perspectives seek to premise the body as 'the pre-social basis on which superstructures of the self and society are founded' (Shilling 2003: 36). By privileging the biological, genetic and/or evolutionary aspects of individual agency and behaviour, such perspectives have tended to ignore or minimise the importance of cultural and social adaptations and organisation, thereby essentialising complex social patterns into biologically determined outputs². Essentialist theories of bodily difference have been overwhelmingly applied within the realm of sport both to justify male domination and to naturalise the performances of racialised bodies. These arguments inevitably draw on hierarchical binaries and the discursive distinction between nature/culture, male/female, subject/other, primitive/civilised (Fanon, 1986, Said, 1978, de Beauvoir, 1973). The alignment of the feminine with the body has itself served as a form of oppression, as Butler argues:

Reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject.

(Butler, 1999a: 48)

By attributing feminine selfhood to the female body, women were positioned as unable to transcend such bodies and therefore as constrained to live out the biological and reproductive 'destinies' of their bodies (de Beauvoir, 1973).

In Victorian England, an ideology of domestic femininity was celebrated particularly among the upper classes who could afford to promote 'an ideal of feminine weakness' (Fletcher, 1984: 9). In such a context, women were seen as being both innately geared towards the creation of children and as naturally nurturing, caring and supportive (Shilling, 2003). Sport and other physical activities were therefore viewed as both unsuitable to women's

² For extended critiques of these perspectives see Connell, R. W. (2002) *Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Head, J. (1999) *Understanding the Boys: Issues of behaviour and achievement*, Falmer Press, London.

physically inferior dispositions and as potentially damaging of a woman's reproductive capacities (Hargreaves, 1994). Such restrictions often served as self-fulfilling prophecies since tight corsets and lack of activity did in fact weaken women's physical abilities. The fainting and pallor that middle class 'feminine regimes' induced were then used to justify claims that women had naturally weak and fragile constitutions (Hargreaves, 1994: 47).

The development of women's colleges following calls for girls' education played a key role in both legitimating and promoting physical activity for girls in England (Fletcher, 1984). This linkage continues today with most girls' first experiences of organised sport taking place in educational settings (Williams, 1993, Williams, 1989). This was certainly the case for the girls in my research and it often meant that negative experiences in PE created an assumption that all such participation in the said activity would be similarly experienced.

Historically in England, girls' physical activities were initially taken up through the Ling system of gymnastics developed across England by Madame Bergman-Osterberg (Fletcher, 1984). The success of these programmes might be seen as paving the way for the social acceptance of moderate physical training and activities for women, leading to the adoption of team sports practiced across boys' public schools. Despite their appeal, traditional male sports were modified within girls' public school curriculums in order to account for girls' 'weaker' physiology (Scruton, 1992). Traditional boys' games were adapted or foreshortened into girls' versions such as netball and hockey in order to avoid physical contact and the appearance of 'vulgarity' (Scruton, 1992: 29) In English schools, netball continues to be seen as perhaps the girls' sport, par excellence, and both primary schools I researched at introduced this sport for girls in Year 6. Those girls who had been playing football but found this pursuit increasingly difficult to sustain readily took up netball, as I describe in chapter four.

While games such as netball and hockey have become more acceptable for girls, they continue to endorse biological arguments around women's lesser capabilities by suggesting that women are physically less suited to male

versions of sport. Hargreaves (1994: 68) suggests that in public day schools girls were further expected to maintain a 'ladylike' deportment off the pitch in order to compensate for their vigorous game-play

Physical education programmes continued to be highly divided along lines of social class in expectation of the future roles and orientations of working class and middle class girls. Programmes for working class girls revolved around discipline in the form of drill routines and were used to reinforce class hierarchy. Hargreaves (1994: 73) describes such physical training programmes as 'part of the structure of ruling-class hegemony' established through 'the ability to define and control the legitimate use of the body.' The differentiation in terms of the classed expectations of women's bodies highlights the role of physical education in maintaining social class distinctions.

The popularity of sport and physical education for women and girls developed into the 21st century despite institutionalised resistances such as the Football Association's ban on women's football in England for over 50 years (Newsham, 1997). In addition to such overt barriers, sport continued to be seen as masculinizing while female athletes struggled to prove their capabilities (Choi, 2000). Struggles over resources and opportunities in sports have often resorted to arguments of female physical inferiority. As Choi (2000:14) points out, it was not until 1984 that women were allowed by the all-male International Olympic Committee to compete in the 3,000 metre and marathon distance races at the Olympics because these were considered to be 'too strenuous'. Today such biologically based arguments continue to hold sway in our common sense assumptions about sport and gender such as in differential rules for men's and women's tennis matches (LTA, 2010).

Boys and men are often seen to be both more enthusiastic about sport and as naturally more talented, thus justifying the resources and funding that are put towards their training and performance. Justifications for male access to sport are often underscored by biological arguments that an excess of male testosterone means that boys are naturally more energetic and must release this energy through sport lest it bubble over into aggression. Certainly at all

the schools I researched at (and the ‘matched’ boys’ schools next to the all-girls’ secondary schools), space was set aside for football, regardless of other spatial restrictions and this was often justified through reference to boys’ energy levels. As John Head (1999) explains, similar arguments about male testosterone have been put forward in seeking to explain why some boys are struggling with academic work. Concerns over boys’ academic achievement have led to the adoption of football-oriented reading projects such as ‘Playing For Success’ where children study at football clubs in the expectation that this will maintain boys’ interest in academic study (Sharp et al., 2003).

Racialised bodies in sport

Despite a history of racist exclusion, the growing presence of black athletes in various sporting contexts has been held up as a symbol of democratic success that is often also backed by biological arguments around a superior black physique (Jarvie, 1991). Male and female black athletes are often considered to be ‘naturally’ superior in particular sporting events such as athletics, football (in the UK) and basketball (in the US). Such discourses can be linked back to associations between physicality and blackness set in racist ideologies. As bell hooks (1992) points out, the legacy of colonialism and slavery continues to assert itself in an ideological connection between blackness and corporeality in a belief that black bodies are somehow more passionate, stronger and hypersexual. hooks connects this construction of corporeality to the objectification of black slaves on the auction block when they were treated as property to buy and sell. Within contemporary discourses this connection continues to be played out in the association of black bodies with sporting prowess, sometimes backed by a biological claim that slavery bred strength and agility in developing a ‘black physique’ particularly suited to sporting achievement (Parry and Parry, 1991). However, the near absence or over-representation of racialised minority groups in specific sports such as cricket, tennis or boxing suggests that socio-cultural contexts of racism, poverty and familiarity are much better explanatory factors for sport uptake by particular groups (Woodward, 2007, hooks, 1992, McDonald and Ugra, 1999).

These critiques necessitate an interrogation of racism as it operates in the constitution of subjects within various sporting contexts. The experiences of black and Asian women within sport in the UK suggest that culture, gender and racism work in different ways on specific groups of women (Lovell, 1991). Lovell expands on the role of racist stereotypes in mediating women's experiences of sport. She suggests that sport has been more accessible to African-Caribbean women allowing them scope for enjoyment but contributing at times to stereotypical depictions of aggressive black femininity. For example, media representations of the Williams sisters in tennis have overwhelmingly relied on racialised depictions emphasising an aggressive physicality in contrast with their 'helpless' white opponents (Douglas, 2009). Concurrently, the depiction of Asian women as embodying a weak passivity has justified their non-participation in often impractical sporting arrangements that have failed to take into account religious and cultural requirements for participation (de Knop et al., 1996). Despite the presence of the Muslim Women's games, which have helped to raise the profile of female Asian athletes, the take-up of sport for many ethnic minority women is still low (WSFF, 2007). The girls' experiences of sport at school were necessarily mediated by their ethnic positioning and expectations around their achievement, something I look at more closely in chapter six.

The female adolescent body

Sporting inequalities continue to be reinforced by biologically determinist views around gender and 'race' but also age and particularly constructions of female adolescence. A powerfully naturalised discourse around adolescence and development seems to influence both adult and young women's views around girls' participation in sport. This is put across through understandings of puberty as somehow inhibiting or preventing girls' participation in sport. In practice, it was the comments and judgements made around their bodies that sometimes prompted girls to shy away from activity settings, rather than any physical impediment brought on by puberty. In chapter nine I describe the increasing regularity of sexualised taunts and harassment and their impact on girls' physical activities.

The sexualisation and hierarchisation of young women's developing bodies and the structuring of PE settings where such bodies are put on display are not prioritised within developmental discourses and instead are viewed as secondary symptoms of naturalised 'growing pains.' Nancy Lesko (2001) suggests that it is this 'development-in-time' narrative that most strongly constrains constructions of adolescence, acting as a regime of truth that governs adolescence and through which adolescents are 'known, consumed, and governed' (2001: 35). Such constraints seem to act particularly powerfully around girls' sports participation in constructions of 'developing young women' and the meanings attributed to their bodies.

Essentialist theories of identity have been used to justify the subjugation of racialised, gendered and sexualised 'others' through an alleged alignment with the physical body. However, the idea that 'race', gender, sexuality, age or social class represent something innate and biologically determined about individuals has been seriously challenged, particularly within post-structural theories of identity.

Identity

Broadly, the concept of identity seeks to describe the relationship between the individual and their membership in specific groups within society. It might be understood as the mediating link between subjects and the sociocultural categories and groupings within which they are said to 'belong.' the work of Stuart Hall (1996; 2000) and Judith Butler (1990), while challenging the essentialist connotations of 'identity politics' have simultaneously maintained an emphasis on the political and historical forces that continue to construct emergent identities. In his work on new ethnicities, Hall describes identity as 'declar[ing] not some primordial identity but rather a positional choice of the group or groups with which they wish to be associated' (Hall, 2000: 220). Similarly the girls' sense of themselves as 'Muslim' 'Pakistani-British' or 'white working class' was contingent on both their familial/community identifications as well as the ways in which such identities were recognised or defined within their school settings. Recent research has emphasised the resourceful and resistant

strategies of young people in constructing new and creative ethnicities that both draw from historicised pasts and reconfigure identities in multiple forms and contexts (Back, 1996, Dwyer, 1998).

According to Hall, new ethnicities combine the 'traditional' with mainstream culture and are based on choices and identifications rather than on a racialised biological essence. Such choices are nonetheless confined within available sets of meaning that are 'founded on exclusion' and therefore 'effects of power' (Hall, 2000: 234). This perspective emphasises the fluidity of identity which can be seen as 'points of temporary attachment [to] discursive subject positions' established through specific socio-historical processes and contexts (Hall, 1996: 6).

Judith Butler's work (1990) similarly challenges essentialist categories of identification, namely that of 'womanhood' and its specific usage within feminism. In Butler's view, such a category simultaneously excludes as it seeks to define itself, thereby setting up ongoing forms of oppression. Similar to Hall, Butler's theoretical formulation views identity as unfixed and fluid. However, Butler seems to go further in her interrogation of the ontological 'subject' or the 'doer behind the deed' who takes up identity scripts. In Butler's view, such a subject is a fantasy of modern thinking. Instead, gender is established through the particular deeds through which it is continually enacted.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.

(Butler, 1990: 43-44)

Like Hall, Butler emphasises the importance of discourse in limiting available performances. Such limits 'are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures' (Butler 1990: 13). The normalisation and thus dominance of certain discourses above others is established through historical processes and social contexts such as racism and compulsory heterosexuality, which regulates available identities

through their discursive boundaries. Such frameworks acted powerfully on the girls in my study in defining acceptable femininities.

Hall and Butler's work emphasises the creative and eclectic nature of identity as both an agentic strategy and a constitutive act that produces the subject. Butler's theory of performativity is particularly useful in understanding how gendered subjects are brought into being through interpellation within dominant and resistant gender discourses. In this view, identity is an ongoing performance, a stylization of the body that creates the sustained illusion of a stable identity.

The processes through which both dominant and resistant discourses around health, sexuality and other institutionalised forms of classification have come to 'make up the social world' is explored in the work of Michel Foucault, who emphasises in particular the role of power in constituting bodies.

Docile bodies

Foucault's work has been particularly influential in understanding the operations of power through individual bodies. Over the eighteenth century, he describes a shift away from the sovereign power of the state towards the targeting of the body as a direct locus of control in the production of the 'docile body' (Foucault, 1977, Foucault, 1978). This process invests the body with power in a process of subjectification.

The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.

(Foucault, 1977: 25)

Foucault argues that new forms of power circulate through regimes of truth such as the 'scientifico-juridical complex' wherein 'expert' discourses classify, analyse and define the body as a mode of social control (1977: 19). The obesity discourse, backed up as it is by a range of 'expert' opinions on young people's bodies, is a particularly powerful complex in contemporary Western contexts (Evans et al., 2008b, Gard and Wright, 2005).

Such discourses act to constrain what is both knowable and thinkable about a particular subject or subjects. The power of schools to inscribe particular versions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ onto schooled subjects suggests the particular reach of such discourses in perpetuating social inequalities (Youdell, 2006). The salience of achievement and performance discourses in girls’ constructions of ‘good’ studenthood acted powerfully to constrain their understandings of sports involvement and its role in their education. Furthermore, current models of participation in sport and physical activity work to include or exclude girls through dominant discourses of ability and/or health and fitness.

The power of these normalising discourses over-reaches social institutions to the practices of individuals through self-regulation. Foucault (1977) uses the metaphor of the ‘panopticon’ to describe the self-surveillance and internal monitoring of individual bodies in late modernity. This internalisation and constant self-monitoring is strikingly resonant of the ongoing social politics of peer cultures in secondary school where norms of behaviour, dress and appearance formed intensely monitored standards for the girls. Drawing on Foucault’s panoptical metaphor, Paechter (2007: 37) suggests ‘it is precisely through this ‘immediate, collective and anonymous gaze’ that teenagers expect to be judged as belonging or otherwise.’ This monitoring requires an ongoing vigilance that at the same time produces the subject through operations of power in the production of docile bodies.

Foucault (1977: 29) writes:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the function of a power that is exercised on those punished- and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home and at school, the colonised, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives.

Within this conception, power relations are written on the body and it is through investment in this power that individuals might achieve subjecthood through a form of compulsory visibility. Foucault (1978: 155) argues, bodily experiences are ‘always already inscribed on our bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures.’ This

formulation mobilises power at the level of the local and the intimate, thus providing an important insight into gendered practices of bodily management and self-perception. Girls are specifically implicated in such practices as both gendered and schooled subjects.

Gendered subjects

Feminists such as Sandra Bartky (1997) and Susan Bordo (1993) have both drawn on Foucault's analysis of bodily inscription to describe the processes through which women modify and train their bodies in accordance with idealised norms of femininity. This modification includes daily routines of tweezing, exercising, plucking, waxing, dressing, painting and dieting. The vast array of 'body work' women engage in to such ends is characterised as a set of 'disciplinary practices applied by the force of a coercive and pervasive male gaze' (Craig, 2006: 162). Research such as that carried out by Valerie Hey (1997) into girls' friendships has demonstrated that such a gaze was not merely a male gaze but was perpetuated by girls themselves in regulating one another's behaviour. Oliver and Lalik's (2001) research suggests that adolescence is a particularly key period during which girls increasingly take up this self-regulatory gaze.

Bartky's (1997) Foucauldian reworking sees the feminine body as a product of disciplinary power, subject to the enormous influence of diet, fitness and beauty industries. Using Foucault's metaphor, Bartky argues that women are similarly constrained by what she terms the 'panoptical male gaze' (Bartky, 1997:140). She argues that the distillation of power throughout daily practices, advertising and social standards serves to mystify the source of women's oppression, often making it appear that women themselves 'choose' these practices and situating their pleasure in these practices as evidence of a lack of coercion. Bartky contends that women are apt to 'opt in' to such routines both because of the immense pressure and the enticing pleasure of normative femininity.

To understand oppression requires an appreciation of the extent to which not only women's lives but their very subjectivities are structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices. (Bartky, 1997: 144)

She further suggests that the price of not conforming to feminine standards is high and the imposition of sanctions for non-conformity places women in a forcibly persuadable position. At the same time, such standards represent near-impossible ideals against which women are always seen to be lacking. Bartky's analysis centres on the disciplinary aspects of bodily regulation and seems to leave little space for women's resistances except to suggest that such resistances are usually only co-opted by broader normalizing discourses. According to Bartky's argument, it might be said that women make such choices under duress and without adequate alternatives for self-expression and personhood. Bartky's insights are important in understanding many women's ambivalent but somehow compulsory relationships with diet, exercise and other beauty regimes. However, the women she describes are without class, 'race' or sexuality (though these are inferred as White, middle class and heterosexual). Holliday and Taylor Sanchez (2006) suggest that the feminist association of oppression with beauty practices sets up an unfair juxtaposition between 'natural beauty' and 'fake beauty,' with cosmetic surgery fitting the latter category. The demeaning of celebrity figures such as Katie Price (aka Jordan) despite her commercial success can be seen as a form of working class denigration (Skeggs, 2010). This suggests that constructs of beauty continue to be delineated along class and ethnic lines where dualisms of passivity/agency and natural/fake regulate 'acceptable' standards (Holliday and Taylor, 2006).

Such dualisms tend to frame the gym and healthy eating as 'active' choices while seeing cosmetic surgery as 'passive.' This is problematic in the sense that it can be seen to condemn certain beauty practices (particularly those associated with black and working class women), while condoning others (Holliday and Taylor, 2006). What the condemnation of such 'passive' beauty practices seems to ignore is the specific sociocultural circumstances and discrimination from which women might make such choices and the usefulness of feminine beauty practices as a 'way out' of poverty and deprivation through routes such as celebrity. In addition, such a view seems

to position women as cultural dupes without acknowledging the possibilities of creativity and subversiveness in individual acts of fashion and make-up. For example, McRobbie emphasises girls' agency in describing their experimentation with dress and fashion as a site of play, creativity and self-expression (McRobbie, 1999).

Bordo's theorisation explicitly frames women's bodily practices and modifications within the overarching hegemony of the beauty and diet industries while paying attention to social class and 'race' as normalising forces. This perspective also draws on Foucault to describe the ways in which women take part in their own subjection, colluding in their own oppression through the operation of power and its construction of desire. The body is seen as being constructed as something to be controlled, managed and altered by individual women in ways that seek to manage women's contradictory relations with traditional femininity and the masculine public arena.

The ideal of slenderness, and the diet and exercise regimens that have become inseparable from it, offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of contemporary femininity (Bordo, 1993: 172).

Importantly, Bordo describes the ideal of the mastery of the body as a particular form of managing 'contemporary bourgeois anxiety.' Attempts to mold the body are cast within a model of cultural plasticity; the idea that we can reshape our bodies into any form we wish, though Bordo remains attentive to the classed, racialised and gendered hierarchies that structure such practices.

Bordo (1993: 29-30) insists that we recognise the dominance of certain cultural forms and set individual choices within an institutionalised system of values and practices. Contemporary bodily practices must be set within current socio-economic contexts and particularly within the circulation of regulatory discourses that value bodies and bodily aspects in hierarchical formulations. These normative discourses are simultaneously racialised, classed and gendered. Beauty standards are not uniform across groups of women, although the imposition of normative standards works to position racially othered bodies as 'lacking' (Oliver and Lalik, 2004, Craig, 2006).

Bordo (1993: 254) insists that women's choices are always mediated by 'a cultural history of racist body-discriminations.' Similarly, Bev Skeggs (1997) suggests that working class women's practices of 'glamming up' must be read in the context of bids towards respectability cast in the cultural denigration of a suspect working-class sexuality. Such work insists that health and beauty practices be set within a socio-historical context that pays particular attention to power relations through the imposition of normative beauty standards.

Taken as a whole, Bartky and Bordo's work describes a rather limited context through which women might experience pleasure or empowerment through physical activity and sport, constrained as these domains are by the overwhelming presence of normalising discourses advocating the pursuit of particular *kinds* of bodies. Despite their detailed and complex considerations of bodily practices around fitness and beauty, these are centred on the experiences of adult women rather than girls and young women who might still be wrestling with the various social meanings circulating around their developing bodies. Williams' (2002) research in the US takes a less sombre tone in suggesting that adolescent girls go through a process of 'trying on' adult feminine regimes, playfully engaging in diet or makeup without taking these too seriously.

Though illuminating in terms of women's bodily regimes, Bartky and Bordo's work seems to be less able to capture girls' experiences and is strongly centred on adult women's bodies. The analyses leave little space for girls' enjoyment of physical activities without these being fully co-opted into fitness, beauty and health incentives. As Connell (2002: 39) writes:

Bodies may participate in disciplinary regimes not because they are docile, but because they are active. They seek pleasure, they seek experience, they seek transformation.

This view seems to be much more resonant with the girls in my study, whose experiences of physical activity, particularly in primary school, were apt to be framed within a discourse of 'fun' anchored in interpersonal relationships. Recent research into adolescent girls' involvement in sport

(Kelly et al., 2005, Pomerantz et al., 2004, Theberge, 2003) has also disputed this view of female physicality, suggesting that girls may take part in male-dominated sports both to challenge perceptions of their abilities and to refine their skills. In fact, far from taking up skateboarding as a means of attracting male attention or conforming to feminised bodily regimes, girls in Kelly et al.'s study (Pomerantz et al., 2004, Kelly et al., 2005: 237) disassociated themselves from an emphasised femininity associated with girls they deemed 'the bun girls'. The 'Park Gang' as they called themselves, took to developing their skateboarding skills in secret as a means of avoiding accusations of inauthenticity in taking up skateboarding as a means of attracting male attention. Similarly, girls who played ice hockey in Theberge's (2003) research resented female-specific rules that prevented their engagement in a more physical form of the sport. Both studies challenge to an extent the calls for physical feminism as a means of female empowerment by suggesting that girls may have very different motivations for taking part in sport.

Versions of physical feminism have recommended sports participation as a means of challenging women's learned bodily capacities. Such a view advocates participation in specifically male-dominated sports as a means of both developing physical power and resisting feminine bodily inhibitions (McCaughey, 1997, Roth and Basow, 2004). Such participation is often deemed to be 'empowering' and even 'liberating' (Roster, 2007). However, as Butler (1999b) has argued, bodies and pleasures can never exist outside of the discursive contexts that frame them. And as the research with girls detailed above suggests, girls may not necessarily identify with the feminist aims of physical empowerment, even as they enjoy its benefits.

While arguments for physical feminism often stem from a radical feminist perspective as a means of challenging male dominance, they also allude to a model where the body is not merely a canvas for cultural inscription but also a mode of agency that is both shaped by and shapes culture. This implies an interactional relationship between the body and culture in a process of social embodiment.

Active bodies

Both Bordo and Bartky's work draws on a Foucauldian framework in which the body is a kind of surface that is inscribed through cultural discourses caught up in relations of power. Shilling (1993) insists that such a view continues to see the body as passive conduit of culture rather than as an active participant and that it ignores the body as biological phenomenon.

Shilling's perspective seeks to capture the way in which the body is both a socially constructed project and a material basis of agency and sensual experience. As Bourdieu (1990) writes, 'the body is in the social world and the social world is in the body' (quoted in Shilling, 2004: 474). In this view, the body is not merely inscribed upon by culture but also acts *back* on culture and is in turn shaped by cultural processes that are inevitably caught up in a nexus of power relations (Shilling, 1993). Social structures such as 'race', class, and gender can be said to both embody subjects and to provide forms of identification through affiliation and experience.

Connell's (1995) formulation of 'body-reflexive-practices' provides a particular elaboration of the gendered body and some of the processes that lead to this gendering. According to Connell (1995: 54), gender as a social relation is 'both realised and symbolised in bodily performances.' These performances take place within localised gender regimes where their repetition over time inculcates the body towards specific habits, dispositions, shapes and contours. Physical activities and sports that men and women engage with are often organised around varying practices designed to produce gendered bodies (Theberge, 1991). Keep-fit classes and weightlifting respectively both condone and shape idealised bodily forms around a toned slenderness for women and muscularity for men. The shaping of male bodies through practices such as body-building becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the creation of muscular bodies reinforces men's superior strength (Connell, 2002). As Connell explains, such practices provide a 'circuit' or loop of recognition in which gendered meanings, bodily activity and physical shapes interact and reinforce one another.

Body reflexive practices...involve social relations and symbolism [wherein] particular versions of masculinity [or femininity] are

constituted in their circuits as meaningful bodies and embodied meanings. (Connell, 1995: 64)

Social institutions such as schools are strongly implicated in the gendering of bodies and affect the way that such bodies are experienced, shaped and situated. Physical education in particular continues to be organised around a gendered curriculum operating within a notion of ‘complementary difference’ between boys and girls (Wright, 1996). Physical education can be seen to condone specific gendered performances that construct young masculinities and femininities in schools (Paechter, 2003). Wellard’s (2006a: 108) research suggests that such gendering processes might be seen as the production of ‘sexed and gendered bodily based performances’ that are paramount to notions of ability whereby bodies are judged and valued within PE and sport more broadly. Thus young people’s ability to perform an ‘exclusive masculinity’ based on physical assertiveness and power was key to accessing physical activity in the research setting (Wellard, 2006a). Such constructions of ability were dominant in girls’ narratives around accessing physical activity and sport into secondary school, as is detailed in chapter eight which explores different discourses of sporting participation.

The lived body

The impact of sociocultural processes on individuals’ gendered lived experiences can be illustrated in the different bodily spatial relationships men and women tend to have with the world, with women taking up a more restricted spatiality in their ‘modes of being/moving in the world’ (Bartky 1993: 455). These modes of being might be enacted, challenged or reinforced through sports participation including physical education (Paechter, 2003). In primary school, the girls’ involvement in playground football was often constrained both by being placed solely in defensive positions on the pitch as well as in what seemed to be a bodily lack of ownership within the game as related to space, rules and time on the ball (Clark and Paechter, 2007). As I noted in this earlier research, this bodily inhibition was strongly reinforced by a male propriety over the game and a

strong sense of investment as many boys sought to construct their masculinity through football (Swain, 2000, Skelton, 1997).

Iris Marion Young's (2005b [orig.1980]) groundbreaking work was one of the first to make explicit links between a woman's position in a patriarchal society and her embodiment of an 'inhibited intentionality' manifested in sports participation. This suggests that the achievement of feminine subjectivity within the patriarchal gaze is necessarily structured around an embodied fragility and immobility, reinforced by the constant threat of sexual intimidation and invasion. Young argues that feminine subjecthood is thus restricted due to her positioning as both 'object' and 'subject.'

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention (Young, 2005b: 153-154).

These insights are useful in that they address women's lived experiences of their bodies, rather than the aesthetic presentation of femininity. They suggest that women are both socially constructed as less physically capable than men (Choi, 2000) and are also persuaded to live out this fragility through an inhibited intentionality, a restrained physicality that is often less than they are actually capable of. However, rather than seeing such positioning as inevitable, it might be read as both situational and subject to interruption. Evaldsson's (2003) research in Norway with low-income, immigrant girls playing foursquare suggests that girls altered their playing styles and skills depending on the specific gender and game context. Whilst the girls would occasionally 'throw like a girl' they could also 'slam' the ball in demonstrations of aggressive physicality. Evaldsson therefore contends that physicality varies according to game contexts and cultural and institutional frameworks.

While Young's analysis situates bodily performances within dominant power relations it might also be seen as deterministic in suggesting that women necessarily remain held back from a full sense of their physical capacities and occupation of space. It therefore fails to account for the

ongoing construction of identity and bodily experience through which women and girls might contest such restrictions. In chapter nine I examine the ways in which discourses of sexual vulnerability constrained girls' bodily capacities as well as the ways in which engagement in physical activities might challenge girls' experiences of their bodies.

The role of schools and physical education lessons are important in such processes. Schools can be seen as key in embodying subjects and in providing spaces where young women can enact their embodied identities.

Schooled subjects

Schools, and specific school curriculums, act as important sites for the construction and perpetuation of normative discourses around sport, health and physical activity and are therefore key in embodying subjects towards particular dispositions. In addition to the varying sporting/extracurricular opportunities and facilities at each school, schools also acted to construct particular versions of 'successful girlhood' in their expectations of student comportment, as is more fully explored in chapter five.

As significant social institutions, schools are heavily implicated in disciplining bodies by creating raced, gendered and classed student subjects (Kirk, 1993). Physical education in particular, as a highly gendered curriculum area, has the capacity to shape bodies and physical identities by constructing distinct forms of masculinities and femininities (Paechter, 2003). The upholding of performance and perfection codes is one way in which schools act as regulatory sites for governing the body (Evans et al., 2008b). The construction and perpetuation of discourses around health and physical activity comprise the 'pedagogical work' of schools, which may include the making of healthy citizens (Tinning and Glasby, 2002). The enforcement of these norms becomes self-perpetuating as individuals gradually take on modes of self-surveillance in a process of governmentality.

Governmentality consists of a multiplicity of interlocking (although not necessarily synergistic) apparatuses for the programming of various dimensions of life which form a 'force field' through which

we are urged, incited, encouraged, exhorted and motivated to act (Rose, 1990 quoted in Tinning & Glasby 2002).

Issues of power and control in the school are therefore key to understanding school sports participation since schools establish social hierarchies and peer relations that both constitute bodies and constrain participation (Hills, 2006, Evans, 2006).

John Evans' (2004, 2008b) research with colleagues demonstrates the powerful ways in which schools and the physical education and health curriculum are heavily implicated in constituting bodies through what they term 'body pedagogies'. Body pedagogies consist of messages around health and physical activity that take on status as 'regimes of truth,' backed by media claims and government health incentives; entering schools as 'frameworks of expectation' (Evans et al., 2008b: 390). Within the performative, hierarchical and achievement-based milieu of schooling, such regimes can have particularly devastating consequences for young schooled subjects, as is suggested in my research.

Conclusion

Within this chapter I have set out my theoretical framework using a range of insights in order to outline my understandings of 'the body', 'gender' and 'identity' as they relate to girls' involvement in sport and physical activity. The chapters themselves employ a wide range of theoretical insights that are not necessarily taken to be completely synergistic or without contradictions, but are rather used as heuristic tools that best allowed me to explore the data at hand. Where contradictions have arisen, I have attempted to address these and to explain my rationale in choosing a particular perspective. As Evans and Davies (2004: 11) have argued, theory can be seen as a critical tool that allows us to ask difficult questions that can take us beyond common sense assumptions, 'a vehicle for thinking otherwise, a platform for outrageous hypotheses and for unleashing criticism.' My outlining of relevant theoretical perspectives has highlighted some key issues in relation to girls' bodies, sport and schooling.

Despite widespread attention to the interlinking processes of identification and exclusion in schooling, less attention has been paid to the schooled body and its impact on constructions of educational success and failure. Feminist analyses of sport and physical activity have often advocated girls' involvement on the basis both of equity and as a means of challenging girls' bodily inhibitions in a process of physical empowerment.

Yet as theories of late modernity suggest, forays into sport and physical activity are easily taken up in ongoing projects of the self wherein 'liberation', 'compulsion' and 'pleasure' are so intimately entwined and sometimes indistinguishable. The translation of achievement codes across sporting and academic contexts as well as the ongoing incitements of the 'obesity crisis' towards healthy behaviours complicates sporting and physical activity practices even more so. Links between 'successful girlhood' and particularly embodied forms suggests the ongoing importance of social class in mediating girls' engagement in physical activity.

Within a maze of competing discourses, experiences and significations, girls' bodies can be seen as both personal (unfinished) resources and social symbols that grant them a kind of normativity within the competitive peer hierarchies of both secondary school and their sports clubs. Their negotiation of these discourses through their embodiment of gendered physical identities is the subject of the remaining chapters.

Chapter Three Researching Young Women and Sport

The research for this study entailed a longitudinal, qualitative investigation (McLeod and Thomson, 2009, Thomson, 2009) into girls' participation in sport and physical activity in contexts both in and out of school. As a research methodology, qualitative longitudinal research may be particularly attuned to capturing particular phenomena such as the transition into adolescence in its recognition of 'movement, exchange and dynamic processes' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 5). The research involved tracing the sports participation of six particularly physically 'active' girls over a period of four years as they moved from Year 5 (10-11 yo) to Year 8 (13-14yo) in schools at divergent locations across London. The focus on these girls and my attention to their sporting engagement developed out of an earlier study in which I had acted as research officer.

Between 2005 and 2006 I carried out research for an ESRC-funded project on 'Tomboy Identities' in primary school girls directed by Professor Carrie Paechter³. I had moved to London six months earlier after finishing an MA in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Canada. My MA research had looked at girls' identity constructions in Vancouver youth culture and I was pleased to have the opportunity to somehow apply what I had learned. My new role involved observations and interviews based in one classroom at two different primary schools and focused on girls who were identified (by themselves or by others) as 'tomboys' during Years 5 and 6.⁴ We found that these girls were often also particularly active or 'sporty' and that this was important to their construction of tomboy identities.

The project finished when the class were in the winter term of Year 6 and I elected to follow up with the girls as they made the transition to secondary school. I was interested in the girls' ongoing sporting participation and gender constructions over this period and decided to make this topic the focus of a PhD in Educational Studies. As they approached the end of Year

³ Tomboy identities: the construction and maintenance of active girlhoods. ESRC project number RES-00-22-1032.

⁴ See Paechter and Clark (2007) 'Who are tomboys and how do we recognise them?' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30 (4), pp. 342-354.

6 I visited the girls and asked which ones might be interested in continuing the research with me as they went on to secondary school. Of the original eight girls we had focused on in primary school, six agreed to continue with me. Their decisions seemed largely to rest upon the trust and friendship we had developed over the previous year of research, which is something I explore later in this chapter.

It was hoped that particular and ongoing attention to the experiences of these six girls over four years would highlight the complexities of wider issues around girls' sports participation (Reinharz, 1992). As Thomson and McLeod (2009) point out, longitudinal research can allow us to gain insights into the unfolding processes of young people's lives, thus providing a broader 'snapshot' than is normally possible over more limited research periods. Such an approach may be particularly suited to the study of identity construction in 'captur[ing] something of the process through which the self is made over time' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 61). The girls' experiences also provide insights into a period of time (adolescence) when many girls disengage from sports. Since the premise of the original 'tomboy' study focused on girls who were already quite sporty, the girls might in fact be seen as exceptions amongst their classmates for what their teachers termed a 'go-getter vivacity' and enthusiasm towards sports, embodied in unconventional, resistantly gendered 'tomboy' identities (Paechter and Clark, 2007). This seems to render the girls' experiences more compelling as research findings since one might expect them to be more resistant to the pressure to discontinue their sports participation and conform to conventional gender prescriptions towards inactivity and passivity.

Over this period of four school years I carried out richly detailed observations and interviews with the girls, their parents, friends and coaches at their primary and secondary schools as well as various sports clubs. This long-term and intimate involvement in the girls' lives allowed me to gain important insights into the shifting, complex processes affecting girls' investments in sporting and gendered identities. The process of research is also bound up both with my relationships with the girls and with my own involvement in sport. Thomson and McLeod (2009: 77) note:

Qualitative studies that follow individuals over time have a particular quality that undermines distinctions between the documented life of the research subjects and the subjectivity of the researcher. As researcher and researched walk alongside each other, they come to share a common timescape and grapple with issues of synchronization and differential tempos.

This was certainly true in my research and as the girls made the transition to secondary school, I moved from being a research officer on an ESRC study to a PhD student following up my particular interests in both gender and sport. The girls' trajectories through sport and schooling rested alongside personal decisions around my own sports involvement; first in football and then in competitive running.

In a strange encounter that brought my 'research' and 'personal' lives together, I found myself running a cross-country race (my first) in the same league as some of the girls in my study. As we stood in our vests and running shorts waiting for the starting gun, arms bared and goose pimples in the cold, I looked over to see one of the mothers (also an assistant coach) standing next to me. 'How long have you been running?' she asked. Somehow I felt that my credentials as a researcher rested on my running abilities and I sought to 'prove' myself to the members of a club where I had thus far felt awkward and intrusive. When the gun sounded I set off much too fast, only to find myself wheezing and sick at the end of the race, disappointed in both my folly and my race strategy. This was a self-imposed pressure but one that might be said to stem from my ongoing discomfort at the club and the difficulties of establishing myself as a 'credible' researcher there amidst the demanding middle class parents and performance-oriented coaches. My own running coach is a kind, grandfatherly type who is never anything but encouraging and reassuring. His approach to coaching could not be more unlike the girls' coaches who expected personal bests at every race and felt no qualms in shouting out their disappointment at the girls' performances. I find it difficult to imagine running under that kind of scrutiny and would surely have given up at this point under similar pressure. Feminist researchers have often been critical of sanitised research accounts, suggesting that methodological accounts should reveal the intricacies of the research process in all its messy complexity including self-disclosure and

positioning on the part of the researcher (Kelly et al., 1994, Maynard and Purvis, 1994, Oakley, 2005). Such an approach seeks to problematise the idea of the ‘objective, value-free’ observer and in so doing to expose (and perhaps weaken) the power differential between the researcher and the researched. Despite stressing the importance of situating the researcher within her research account, recent methodological insights have problematised the practice of self-narration as a straightforward ‘telling’ of the self that can somehow accomplish both credibility and research validity (Walkerdine et al., 2002, Skeggs, 2002, Paechter, 1996). Both the idea of a coherent self and that one might arrive at a closer approximation to the ‘truth’ through such telling remain problematic concepts within a post-structuralist framework. Drawing attention to the constructive, narrative process of self-confession, Skeggs (2002: 349) argues, ‘it is therefore the method that is constitutive of the self, not the self of the researcher that always/already exists and can be assumed in research.’ Indeed, the self-narration of my own sporting history is necessarily constructed through the intellectual insights I have developed throughout the research and in my relationships with the girls.

I first met the girls when they were in Year 5 and were between 9 and 10 years of age. Each of the girls was involved in a number of sporting pursuits that contributed to the construction of a fluid ‘tomboy’ identity. Over the course of the research I spent a great deal of time with each girl and became personally invested in their various pursuits and both the joys and disappointments these provided. My research ‘sites’ included playgrounds, physical education classes, sports clubs and after-school activities and involved varying degrees of participant observation. Throughout the research I watched as they chased each other around the playground (often joining in their playtime games), cheered at their tournaments, sat on the sidelines of their PE lessons, ran muddy cross-country courses with them and held conversations with their families, teachers, friends and coaches about the girls in particular and girls’ engagement in sport more generally. I often wondered whether I had become too involved with the girls and indeed when one of them dropped out of the study at the end of Year 7, it

somehow seemed like a personal rejection. Having watched them grow in confidence and ability in their brief forays into sports including running, karate and football during primary school, I could not help but feel disappointed when finding a team or club (and the means and motivation to take part) became too difficult for most of them as they made the transition to secondary school. One girls' participation in the intensely scrutinised and highly competitive running club described above seemed hardly more positive an outcome.

My relationship with the girls was never straightforward and I was always wary of imposing my experiences onto theirs in my interpretations of their sporting 'joys' and 'disappointments.' Inevitably, our mutual engagement and my ongoing interpretations of their interpretations were intimately related to my classed, racialised and gendered expectations of sport. As Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2002: 181) suggest, such historically specific subject positions require methodological attention to the ways in which the 'relations, conflicts and contradictions between them [are] experienced both by the subject and as producing the subject.' As elaborated earlier, the process of research coincided with my own (late) sporting engagement in football and then running. Having 'discovered' the joys of sport late in my twenties, I felt both puzzled and resentful that such opportunities had been restricted to me from an early age. Such restrictions seemed to relate both to negative experiences in PE and to my parents' divorce and our subsequent 'disenfranchisement' from the forms of middle class capital my peers continued to enjoy. My mother could no longer afford to enrol my sister and I in lessons and nor would/could she devote the time or effort to ferry us to after-school activities, having returned to higher education herself. I gave up on running early into my adolescence, despite having been identified as 'talented' within this sport.

Years later, much of the literature on girls' PE and sporting experiences reinforced the view that my own sporting disengagement was not merely a personal misfortune but that it represented a commonly gendered experience. Although much less was said about social class and the sporting opportunities this might afford. Despite my attempts to remain 'neutral' and

unbiased in the initial stages of the research, I can now see that I began the research with the unspoken assumption that girls' ongoing sporting participation represented a 'positive' outcome and that girls' disengagement, however much I tried to mask my disappointment, represented a lost opportunity. Over the course of the research, however, I came to see sport as representing not merely the 'empowering' practice I had personally envisioned and experienced in my late twenties. I came to see girls' sporting participation as caught up within a range of (often contradictory and disabling) discourses around health, ability, appearance, achievement and individualism that related strongly to girls' schooling outcomes and often echoed the inequalities therein.

The research is focused primarily on the stories of six physically active girls in primary school and it details their participation in sports over the transition to secondary school. The methodology weaves together critical feminist and post-structural perspectives and as qualitative, longitudinal research, it brings together a variety of methods including interviews, questionnaires, observations and a photo project that involved the girls taking pictures of 'places they liked to be' (Gonick, 2003, Thomson, 2008b). The detailed, empathetic attention to the girls' lives over a period of four years provides a hopefully compelling and insightful glimpse into the complex processes surrounding their engagement in sport and in schooling. Such a portrait is grounded in the lived realities of the girls in a mutual process of meaning making and interpretation. A commitment to feminist politics insists that the account premises the girls' agentic decision-making or 'subjective realities' (Sparkes, 1992: 3) amidst a broader set of social, political and economic contexts that often rendered their participation in sport difficult to sustain.

A Feminist Epistemology

An understanding of knowledge as grounded in our interpretations of reality interrogates the 'deep philosophical assumptions and commitments' underlying our research (Sparkes, 1992: 14). As Letherby (2003: 3) explains, such a grounding affects both the questions we ask and the

answers we come up with. Stanley and Wise (1990: 26) define epistemology as ‘a theory of knowledge which addresses questions such as: who can be a knower, what can be known and what constitutes and validates knowledge.’ Within a feminist perspective, such questions are inevitably set amidst power relations and constructions of the ‘Other’ in research (Stanley and Wise, 1983, Scott, 1985).

An interrogation of epistemological claims arises from a critical awareness that much of what has passed as ‘objective’ knowledge in social research has in fact been defined from a masculine bias that has positioned men as rational ‘knowers’ and women as the irrational ‘known’ (Letherby, 2003: 21). Feminist critiques have suggested that early research by male sociologists tended either to leave women out of the equation or to position them as marginal or secondary to men’s social roles within the research setting (Smith, 1987, Oakley, 2005). Sociological knowledge based on research with men or boys was then transferred onto explanations of girls’ behaviour as though commensurate. Ensuing analyses often rendered girls’ practices as ‘less than’ or abnormal in their failure to conform to male models. The early development of youth studies as based almost entirely on the experiences of young men attests to this bias. McRobbie and Garber (1991b: 1) note the resounding absence of girls from the ‘classical subcultural ethnographic studies’ that made up youth studies as an early discipline. Even critical perspectives such as that taken in Paul Willis’ important ethnography of working class youth positioned girls as the girlfriends and ‘hangers-on’ of boys’ subcultures, rather than as agents in their own right (McRobbie, 1991c). McRobbie’s (1991a: 11) ethnography of working class girls involved in youth clubs represented an early attempt to remedy this absence by looking at the ways in which girls created ‘a distinctive culture of their own’ in various settings. To some extent, the marginalisation of women continues to be the case in traditionally male-dominated areas such as sport and physical education research. Although important shifts have taken place in terms of female participation, sport continues to be an overwhelmingly masculine pursuit and research within sport often echoes this inequality. Clarke and Humberstone (1997: xiii)

highlight the failure in much of sport sociology to 'address women's experiences of sport, physical activity and PE.' Noting the traditional marginalisation of women's experiences within the sociology of sport, Hargreaves (1994: 3) suggests that even where gender is considered, such analyses fall short in their failure to treat gender as a relation of power rather than as a mere variable among others. More recently, Wellard (2007: 1) has suggested that the wide attention paid to the 'problem' of girls' sports (under) participation has ignored various other factors including age, sexuality, class and ethnicity, as well as contributing to the assumption that all boys benefit from sport in undifferentiated ways.

The identification of male 'bias' in social research initially led to an effort to remove said bias through attention to women's lives and perspectives with the goal of producing 'better' and more accurate research (Letherby, 2003: 44). This approach, termed 'feminist empiricism,' continued to be grounded in a positivist framework that sought to arrive at a greater understanding of reality through an approximation of scientific methods. Sparkes (1992: 19) attributes physical education's alignment with 'scientific,' empirically validated means of testing, measurement and statistical analysis as a means of enhancing its status. However, as Dewar (1987) noted in her research into PE undergraduate understandings of gender, the status associated with such 'expert' scientific opinions which stressed physiological differences between men and women often served to undermine feminist attempts to challenge gender dualism in sport.

Ann Oakley's (2005[orig. 1981]) questioning of traditional interviewing techniques served alongside other critiques to chip away at positivist social research approaches by suggesting that researcher aims of objectivity and distant expertise contributed to women's exploitation rather than their emancipation. Such critiques suggested that an ethical focus on reciprocity and understanding within a methodological approach was just as important as the production of 'good data' through 'objective research' (Stanley and Wise, 1990). Contrary to an empiricist approach, advocates of standpoint epistemology argued that women's oppression could not be combated by

‘masculine’ research techniques and that feminist research required a radical new perspective.

Standpoint epistemology

Feminist standpoint theory begins from the premise that traditional sociological perspectives were based on a ‘male standpoint’, which claimed objectivity through its capacity to exclude other perspectives. But rather than attempt to correct such biases, standpoint theory suggests a radical reversal whereby women’s experiences should serve as the key starting point from which feminist theory and analysis proceeds (Smith, 1987).

Advocates of this approach argued that women’s position as an oppressed group allows them a better understanding of the world and therefore that female experience is a more valid basis for knowledge (McLaughlin, 2003).

However, the privileging of gendered experience as a sufficient (or advantaged) basis of understanding between women is undercut by such critical social categories as class, ‘race,’ ethnicity, sexuality and ability (among others), all of which may have significant effects in structuring women’s lives. In a refinement of standpoint theories, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) asserts that shared experiences of marginalised groups can provide a basis for resistance against oppression. She writes that African American women ‘have a distinct set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality,’ which constitutes ‘a distinctive Black feminist consciousness’ (Hill-Collins 1995, cited in McLaughlin, 2003: 64).

Standpoint epistemologies seem to hold serious methodological implications for research both on and between women. Taken to their logical conclusion, such perspectives might suggest that a privileged or distinct point of view amongst marginalised groups precludes a basis of understanding between women (including researchers) from divergent backgrounds. Thus my position as a White, middle class researcher working with girls from various backgrounds (including British Asian Muslim), might be seen as highly problematic. Kaye Haw (1996), in her research with Muslim girls, suggests that the equation of a perceived social category and a distinct way of knowing does not take account of the multiple and often contradictory ways

in which we are positioned through discourse (Haw, 1996). Indeed I was often ‘read’ in different ways by both the girls and their parents and my ostensible credentials did little to secure a position of authority with various middle class parents who sometimes positioned me as a ‘naïve’ female researcher who could even be criticised for a ‘failure’ to match feedback with the purported aims of the research. Similarly, Walkerdine et al. (2002: 191) noted middle class fathers’ propensity to ‘interview’ the interviewer, thus re-establishing their position of authority and allaying any feelings of vulnerability related to the research process. Haw (1996) stresses the need for critical and reflexive practice required to carry out research with sensitivity and respect for participants. Although this positioning by parents does not allay my responsibilities to the girls it certainly provided an ongoing mediating impact in my relationship with them and in our mutual constructions of the girls’ involvement in sport. A combination of linguistic, practical and other factors meant that I never met Lindsay or Deniz’s parents (who were British Pakistani and Turkish Muslim), despite my ongoing research and involvement with their daughters over a number of years. I did, however, speak with Lindsay’s father over the telephone in arranging to take her home after our final ‘goodbye’ over pizza after school. I found it hard not to be disappointed when, despite travelling over an hour by bus to accompany Lindsay to her front doorstep, no one came down to greet us and the door was swiftly shut behind me upon Lindsay’s arrival home. In contrast, Nirvana, Lucy and particularly Spirit’s parents (White British, middle class) were often overwhelmingly accommodating, offering me lifts home alongside personal insights into the research and the official ‘version’ of the story they wished to have told.

Critiques of a standpoint epistemology have drawn attention to the ensuing competition for legitimacy based on various ‘standpoints’ grounded in women’s differences. Harding (1987) asks whether this creates a ‘hierarchy of oppression’ laying claim to particular forms of expertise. A more philosophical problem lies with the ‘equation of being and knowing’ (Skeggs, 1997: 26) in that it assumes an automatic political awareness borne out of oppression (Kelly et al., 1994). Despite its limitations, standpoint

theory provides a key acknowledgement of the importance of difference and power in structuring women's experiences. During my research, the girls' stories often evoked memories for me of my own negative feelings about my body and abilities as a young woman. While I was wary of imposing my experiences onto those of the girls, at the same time my own politicised awareness and commitment to the research topic was sustained through my early and ongoing experiences of sports participation. These might be said to have fostered a particular sympathy with the girls' own difficulties in negotiating bodily and sporting contexts and constraints. Nonetheless, I could not assume that my own sporting experiences were comparable with those of the girls and indeed it has been almost twenty years since I made the transition into adolescence, thus presenting a likely gulf in understanding. As Punch (2002: 325) writes: 'As adults we were once children but we soon forget, unlearn and abandon elements of our childhood culture.'

Post-structuralism and feminist research

Post-structuralism poses a serious challenge to standpoint theory in its interrogation of the humanist 'authentic self' as 'endowed with a set of static characteristics' that might be said to offer an ongoing and fixed identity (Lather, 1991: 5). Such a critique questions the notion of experience as a basis of knowledge and political action.

Many feminists assume that women's experience, unmediated by further theory, is the source of true knowledge and the basis for feminist politics. This belief rests on the liberal-humanist assumption that subjectivity is the coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of 'reality.'

(Weedon, 1987: 8)

Post-structuralist critiques have pointed to the discursive processes whereby naming subjects also constitutes these subjects in relations of power. Bev Skeggs (1997: 28) suggests that rather than seeing experience as the 'foundational basis of women's knowledge,' female subjects are in fact constituted through discursive processes and thus in continual production. This criticism seems to follow on from Judith Butler's (1990) critique of the second wave women's movement, which questioned 'woman' as a category

of representation, leading to contestation over categories of membership and belonging. Butler suggests that the process of categorisation is inherently exclusionary and discursively inventive of that which it seeks to represent. 'The feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation' (Butler, 1990: 4). The idea that representation (a key aspect of research) is simultaneously constitutive raises serious dilemmas for feminist research. By deconstructing the category of 'woman', the subject of feminist political struggle seems to become a non-entity, a discursive construction of the movement itself. This raises multiple issues around discussing women's rights and therefore in seeking to end their said oppression. The post-structural critique of 'grand narratives' simultaneously questions the notion of patriarchy so central to feminist critiques of the social order. Becky Francis (1999: 381) argues that a 'pure' post-structuralist perspective might be seen as incommensurate with emancipatory research since it does not allow the staking out of 'principled positions' from which to make feminist claims and instead aims to deconstruct such positions. Patti Lather (1991) suggests the adoption of an 'ambivalent' relationship between feminism and post-structuralism in which post-structuralism serves as a self-reflexive form of critique for emancipatory research. As Francis (1999) and others point out, in practice post-structuralism is rarely used in 'pure' form and despite claims towards the relativism of alternate 'readings', such expositions tend to remain grounded in anti-oppressive perspectives. Letherby (2003) points out the intriguing practice whereby avowed post-structuralist researchers tend to continue to collect 'evidence' through empirical research, even if such evidence is alternatively analysed and validated. Although Alison Jones (1993) characterises such compromises as 'wanting to have their cake and eat it too' this seems to be an all or nothing perspective in which proponents of various theoretical paradigms must accept the tenets of this paradigm to the most extreme extent. I agree with Lather that post structuralism can serve as a critical gaze with which to guard against our own assumptions and constructions within research. Despite suggestions that post-structural analyses are overly relativist, a grounding of these in socio-historical contexts including the 'heterosexual

matrix' (Butler, 1990) and post-colonialism maintain a critical social justice perspective.

Methodology

Social research situated in a 'post-positivist' era calls into question politically neutral methodological stances that seek to foreground objectivity over political bias (Sparkes, 1992: 9). Drawing on a postmodern perspective, Lather (1988) argues that the deconstruction of knowledge and the ways in which such knowledge is legitimised has uncovered the historical and political construction of all knowledge bases. She therefore argues that 'openly ideological, advocacy-based research has arisen as a new contender for legitimacy' (Lather, 1991: 52).

As described earlier, the research uses a qualitative, longitudinal approach in attempting to capture the experiences of six girls over four years of study. This approach is both intensive and detailed in its attention to the complex processes surrounding girls' sporting engagement. The political intent of the research is feminist in its attempt to challenge many of the assumptions often made around girls' sporting (dis)engagement over the period of adolescence. Indeed, 'disengagement' as a term seems to accuse girls of a lack of staying power rather than attempting to understand the various factors surrounding girls' sporting participation. As Mcleod and Thompson (2009: 63) point out, qualitative longitudinal research has a particular capacity to capture dynamic processes of change (often associated with adolescence) and can address questions of process rather than simply outcome. Similarly I was interested less in girls' final sporting attrition/participation rates than in the processes surrounding their participation including peer cultures, schooling and differentiation along lines of social inequality.

The research follows the girls as they move from primary school into the first two years of secondary school and is thus able to provide insights into the changes and shifts that occurred over this period of time. In documenting this transition, sequential research such as this may be better able to 'articulate the temporal and the spatial' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 5) thus capturing the importance of broader contexts including

schools, policy agendas and social class processes. As it provides insights into girls' experiences over this period of time, so too does this methodology serve to capture the broader social dynamics that frame girls' decisions.

The notion of 'voice' has become a popular concern in research with young people following calls for greater recognition both of their capacity as agents and of their rights to a say in matters pertaining to their welfare (The United Nations, 1989, Thomson, 2009, Rudduck and Fielding, 2006).

The issue of voice simultaneously raises multiple questions around authorship and ownership; namely who can speak for whom, who is represented in academic texts and whose views are ultimately 'heard' (Currie et al., 2007). Currie and Pomerantz (2007: 377) comment on the abundance of recent texts that have attempted to represent the voices of young women, often documenting their inner lives and experiences in intimate detail. They raise the important issue of the translation of such voices, making the distinction between listening to girls and explaining what they have said in some kind of theoretically significant analysis.

Postmodernism has similarly presented a serious critique to the notion of 'voice' through its exposition of the fragmented and contradictory nature of all voices (Ellsworth, 1989). This poses difficult questions about the longstanding claim that feminist research means research 'by women, for women, about women' (Lather, 1991). Spivak (1989) suggests that the foregrounding of oppressed 'voices' presents a naïve assumption that simply broadcasting the voices of the dispossessed will somehow lead to their empowerment. She further draws attention to the politics of representation by asking to what extent the subaltern truly 'speaks' or is 'spoken for' by the authorial narrator (Spivak, 1989). These are not questions that are easily resolved. Alison Dewar writes:

The problem as I see it now is not how to give voice but to learn about different voices, hear what they have to say, and work to become allies and friends in our struggle to take on oppressive formations.

(Dewar, 1991: 71)

While I am sympathetic to this claim, I remain cautious about the extent to which it implies an already politically conscious and empowered research subject who can act as an equal ‘ally’ in the struggle against oppression. My research with the girls, while firmly situated in a feminist critique, did not explicitly seek to ‘empower’ girls, even if our mutual insights and understandings perhaps shifted over the process of both enunciation and interpretation.

Methods

The research design involved a set of repeat individual interviews (McLeod and Thomson, 2009) with each girl in successive school years as well as interviews with parents, coaches and friends. These were complemented by observations in PE lessons, after school clubs and extracurricular activities. In Year 8 I also distributed a questionnaire (N = 54) in each girls’ PE lesson in order to locate girls’ individual responses in the broader classroom context (Silverman, 2006: 48). I also designed ‘photo projects’ with the girls. These involved the girls taking photos of places they ‘liked to be’ on disposable cameras and then explaining the photos to me in a later interview where they became prompts for further discussion (Thomson, 2008a).

Accordingly, the experiences of the six key girls are set amidst more general observations and interviews with a larger group of girls in PE lessons and after-school activities and at the running club. After carrying out multiple semi-structured interviews in Years 5 and 6, I continued to interview the girls into Years 7 and 8 and in total have had up to eight interviews with each girl, lasting between thirty minutes and an hour each time and held either at school or at the girl’s home. Contingent to school schedules and holidays, I attempted to carry out these interviews at intervals, once at the beginning of the school year and once near the end and this was usually possible. In Year 7 I interviewed the girls in groups with friends of their choosing. This involved nine other girls, three of whom (Erica, Rhiannon and Danny) went on to do individual interviews with me (a schedule of the girls’ interviews is provided in Appendix 2). Interviews in general explored issues around the girls’ sports involvement including reasons they had left

or joined clubs and teams, their experiences and feelings about PE and sports, and their relationships with coaches and teachers. Earlier interviews were more structured in format but these became less so as the research progressed and I would simply ask girls to 'catch me up' on events and/or pursue issues that had arisen in previous interviews. Interviews thus allowed me to explore specific topics in a conversational style that allowed the girls' insights and experiences to come through in what might be described as a 'collaborative' approach (Silverman, 2006: 112).

Interview data was analysed both as insights into ongoing events and specific perspectives or discourses around sport and physical identities. In their research into young masculinities, Pattman, Phoenix and Frosh (2005: 556) describe their interviews not as 'fact-finding missions on what it is really like to be a boy,' but rather as, 'particular contexts where boys were performing, displaying and experiencing aspects of boyhood.' Rob Pattman, who carried out the interviews, thus describes the importance of his position as an understanding adult male who was willing to listen to the boys and not criticise their opinions or behaviours. Similarly, my position as a woman in her late twenties who played football seemed important in mediating the relationships the girls formed with me and the way they chose to present themselves to me in particular performances of girlhood. Our initial focus on 'tomboys' and my own sports involvement perhaps swayed the girls to offer up 'sporting versions' of themselves and I worried that they felt they were letting me down in some way if they decided not to try out for a team or attend training. I had to work hard to reassure the girls that I respected any and all decisions they made and was simply interested in understanding the context of those decisions. My ongoing interest in them regardless of any sports participation was perhaps somewhat reassuring in that sense.

As a research group, adolescent girls are seemingly ideal in their enthusiasm and loquaciousness (McRobbie, 1991c) and the girls in my research were both accommodating and eager to speak with me. While I sensed that the girls looked up to me as an older female who was not in a position of authority in relation to them, I simultaneously had misgivings about their ongoing accommodation. My misgivings are echoed in Angela McRobbie's

writing about the ethics of interviewing research subjects who are rarely 'taken seriously' and thus eager to share their stories in confined circumstances (McRobbie, 1991c). Conducting interviews at school was often a welcome excuse for them from lessons, although I tried to weigh this up with alternative times. I was always aware that my relationship with the girls was key to my research and this seemed both enabling and problematic. Pattman (2005: 558) suggests that his friendly, non-judgmental approach to interviews facilitated the boys' willingness to share, even opening up spaces for 'new kinds of relationships between men' that involved caring and listening. Reading these comments I am moved by how unproblematic it all seems. In contrast, I agonised over my relationships with the girls and was often plagued by guilt that I was not doing enough, was not at their schools, even that I might be manipulating our friendly relationship for the sake of data (Kirsch, 2005). Sometimes when I had not been at their school for a while and came in for an interview a girl would say that she missed me and ask when I would be returning and this affective dimension seemed to blur the lines between what I was 'getting' out of the research and how the girls saw the exchange. Kirsh's (2005) distinction between 'friendship' and 'friendliness' in feminist fieldwork seems useful here, particularly as it relates to young women who are often eager to please. While the girls often positioned me as friend and confidante, I was always aware that their accounts were the basis of my PhD research, despite also being very fond of them individually. Fears about 'exploitation' have recurrently surfaced in reflections on feminist research (Maynard, 1994). However, during our discussion Gazza seemed surprised at my suggestion that I was somehow in her debt for all her help with the research and told me that she liked talking to me since I was so 'nice.' This 'niceness' and my 'girlish' preoccupation with things like clothing often seemed to facilitate our relationships and was a familiar way for the girls to construct their friendships, for example through the exchange of gifts and compliments. However, it did not negate my status as adult and was perhaps less helpful in establishing credibility with teachers.

My anguish over our relationships was also a reflection on the difficulties of establishing a 'role' that was both honest and useful. Epstein (1998) describes her adoption of the 'least adult role' in her research at a primary school, which facilitated her presence but also somewhat masked her ultimate 'authorship' of her young subject's lives. Other feminist researchers have also been reflexively critical of the 'friendly' approach advocated in early feminist research, self-consciously aware of the power laden differences between an adult researcher and young women in school (Currie et al., 2007, Bettie, 2003, George, 2007a). Rosalyn George (2007a) describes attempting to forge relationships or friendships with the girls and 'never quite getting there'. She writes:

Throughout the research process I was constantly struggling with the re-emerging obstacles that come with the authority of age. I never quite achieved putting these and other differences aside, and, as a result, I had a sense that some things were always just out of reach, leading to potential misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

(George, 2007a: 40)

Similarly I was always aware that as much as the girls tried to include me in their friendships and social groups, my status as an adult woman meant that I never truly fitted in. My distance from the girls was similarly emphasised by my ability to come and leave the school as I chose. As girls described disruptive classrooms, freezing PE lessons, ostracisation and bullying at school I was always thankfully aware that I was now free from the surveillant, compacted setting of school friendship politics.

I was able to interview the girls at least once in each school year, and usually twice. In later interviews I attempted to follow up with themes that seemed important both to the girls and to my research in a cyclical process of concept refinement (Strauss and Corbin, 2005). An important procedure for developing full reciprocity in emancipatory research involves the negotiation of meaning through 'recycling descriptions' based on emergent analysis over sequential interviews (Lather, 1991: 61). Along these lines, I was able to use multiple interviews in order to go back and check things

with the girls, ask whether they felt the same about certain issues and gain their insights into some of my ongoing analyses of their experiences.

This meant that I was able to develop a relationship with the girls alongside a good knowledge of their backgrounds and experiences but also that the girls became much more familiar with me and with the research aims. The girls simultaneously developed an understanding both of me personally and of what they thought the research was about. When I asked what they thought about being interviewed, Nirvana and Britney laughed and said ‘it’s just normal for us’ whereas their friend Sara relayed some apprehension and uncertainty – ‘I don’t know, I wasn’t really sure. I was just wondering’ (Group Interview, Year 7, 19/04/2007). The girls’ familiarity with me and with the research process perhaps has both drawbacks and benefits. In the following excerpt, Lucy tells me how she has come to open up in interviews as we have gotten to know each other better. Here I am trying to explain to her friends why I might want to interview them a second time on their own.

Sheryl: But then as we get to know each other better, you might say things that were more on your mind.

Lucy: That’s what I do now. Like on the first one I didn’t tell you much. Then I realised that on the first one I didn’t tell you much. Because I thought that, I didn’t know you very well. So it helped that it was in a group first.

(Group Interview, Year 7, 06/2007)

By confirming my statement, Lucy is both reassuring her friend and reflecting on her own experience of being interviewed repeatedly. My reflections on the interview also noted Lucy’s articulacy and direct critique of perceived gender discrimination in her school. In our first few interviews Lucy had seemed shy and often gave one-word answers. Her newfound confidence indicated both that she was more comfortable with me and that she had developed an understanding of what she thought I might be interested in. The fact that she was willing to criticise her school (including the head teacher) and admit acts of resistance during the interview also suggests a high level of trust on her part. The girls’ growing confidence may have also been a reflection of their growing maturity, though this was not

always accommodating to the research. At the end of Year 6, Nilay related her choice to discontinue the research to her maturity and desire to concentrate on her schoolwork.

As Lucy observed, the ongoing interviews have meant that the girls may be less reserved or shy than they were originally but also that they have made assumptions about what I am looking for and may be more prone to give it to me. I noticed that Lucy, Nirvana and Gazza all selected very sporty friends for their group interviews – girls they perhaps saw as tomboys. This suggested to me that the girls (whether consciously or not) were trying to ‘help’ me by selecting girls they thought I might be interested in – girls who were very active and showed a strong resistance to conventional gender norms. Just as the girls who were initially part of the ‘tomboys’ study often pointed out things that seemed to relate to tomboyism and were more likely to identify themselves as such, in secondary school the girls began to identify with the ‘girls in sports’ label that I arrived at. Despite thinking this would be a neutral explanation of my research, sometimes girls seemed to interpret from it that I was only interested in ‘sporty’ girls and were either keen to emphasise this for themselves or to identify other girls as sporty – unlike them. These are my notes from one of my initial visits to Deniz’s PE lesson.

Alicia has just hit the ball and run to first base. I have been trying to figure out everyone’s names but when I ask Alicia’s name the other girls seem to think that I am interested in her because of her abilities in PE. Without my prompting, Beatrice, a slight blonde girl who was moved off of first base, tells me she is ‘terrible’ at sports and the other girls joined in the assessments of their abilities. Rascha claims that she’s ‘good’ and Zadie tells me ‘I’m alright.’ I’m a bit worried that they think I’m ranking them or something and am only interested in the athletic girls. Wen spells out her name for me and tells me ‘I really like sports, it’s really good.’

(Fieldnotes, Blythevale School, 13/6/2007)

It was not just girls who thought to point out the ‘sporty girls’ to me. Teachers and coaches were often keen to point out the ‘most talented’ girls in their lessons, seeming to assume that these girls would be the subjects of my study. It is possible that just as I found the girls were often trying to please their teachers, parents and coaches, they were trying to please me.

Punch (2002: 328) notes that young people's accounts are often discounted because of this perceived tendency to want to please adults. However, I am wary of describing the girls' responses as framed around the desire to please, since it seems to deny their intelligence and independent thinking. Instead I want to describe their 'research savviness' as an adaptation technique that suited both the girls and myself. Just as they became more aware of the types of questions I was likely to ask and how best to answer these, so too did they become more confident in their own responses and in the validity of their accounts as descriptors of their personal feelings and opinions. Girls sometimes even helped out in interviews with their friends by rephrasing questions in a process of 'translation' between my 'researcher speak' and their youth cultural milieu. This simultaneously shifted girls to the role of 'expert' within the interview and helped me with the direction of the questions. In retrospect, I might have drawn more on the girls' expertise and even had them conduct group interviews on their own. They certainly would have been more than capable of doing so but my feeling at the time was that this might add to the 'burden' of mediation. Perhaps some girls might have been more keen to conduct interviews than others, based on their friendship positions and relationships with teachers.

Over the years I have also interviewed several of the girls' parents (two fathers & four mothers) as well as met with teachers and coaches. The longitudinal nature of the research has meant being able to develop a rich and empathetic understanding of the changes and decisions over time as the girls matured and shifted schools, friendships and interests. After our Year 7 interviews I noted how much the girls had grown physically, suddenly shooting up in height, developing spots or wearing their hair down in a new, more mature style. Over the years I have watched their transitions and choices with admiration, fondness and sometimes dismay, often set off by inevitable reflection on my own schooling and sporting experiences.

Interviews with the girls were complemented by observations at their respective secondary schools and sports clubs throughout Years 7 and 8. My observations at the girls' secondary schools lasted over two terms from April 2007 when the girls were in Year 7 until December 2007 when they

were in Year 8. These involved visits to each school once a week where I would attend the girls' PE sessions and then stay afterwards for any sporting clubs or activities taking place. I also attended the school Sports Day and took notes there.

When the girls were in Year 8, I gave them disposable cameras and asked them to take photos of places they liked to be and go (Thomson, 2008a). This type of 'partnering' research method where young people take a more participatory approach by making images that they help to analyse has been described as a means of both increasing participation and interest for young people (Thomson, 2008a: 13). I hoped that this activity would give me a better understanding of the spatial aspects of the girls' activities and sports participation and I later held interviews with the girls where they described the significance of each photo. Girls also kept copies of these photos, which may have influenced their choice of subject/location.

In response to requests from the schools for some kind of 'practical' feedback, I also carried out questionnaires in the girls' PE lessons when they were in Year 8. This was done in order to protect the original six girls' confidentiality, since findings would inevitably otherwise be traced to their personal accounts. Questionnaires were anonymous and were distributed to each girl's PE group at the three schools (N = 54). The questionnaires consisted primarily of open-ended questions (Denscombe, 2003) and covered topics that had arisen in interview around physical activity participation in primary and secondary school, trying out for school teams and overall enjoyment in PE (see Appendix 3). Questionnaires responses were coded similarly to other data in Nvivo and were treated as qualitative data that was complementary to other findings.

Data Analysis

Observations consisted of detailed itineraries and insights taken each day during my visits to schools and clubs, which were subsequently written up as fieldnotes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Interviews were transcribed and included personal reflections on the general tone and setting of each interview. This data, alongside the questionnaire responses, were

stored in Nvivo and were systematically coded using this software. The data was analysed thematically where codes and concepts emerged from the data and evolved into general themes (Strauss and Corbin, 2005). Emergent themes and concepts were subsequently 'checked' and further explored with the girls in further interviews. Analysis thus involved a process of 'funnelling' by refining the topic and concepts over the course of the research (Silverman, 2006: 94). Themes that arose within the data eventually evolved into the various chapters that make up the thesis.

Reciprocity and Ongoing Consent

Given the intense focus on their activities and decisions, it would be fair to say that each girl was extremely generous in allowing me into her life and sharing so much with me. However, when I attempted to describe my indebtedness to them, they often shrugged this off and said that they enjoyed talking to me. My attempts at reciprocity often seemed inadequate and trivial in comparison to what they offered. In our Year 7 interviews, I attempted to reiterate to each girl that her story would form one of six narratives that would provide the basis of my PhD thesis. I asked Lindsay how she felt about this.

Sheryl: You know how I started out with eight girls, but now two dropped out? So I'm mostly going to be focusing on these six girls, and one of them is you. And it'll be sort of like me telling your story about your transition to secondary and the friends you've had...

Lindsay: Who are the other girls? [I tell her]

Sheryl: So I mean how do you feel about that? Having me write this story about you.

Lindsay: Fine.

Sheryl: Is that okay?

Lindsay: Yeah.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/10/2007)

Debbie Epstein's (1998) concerns about being able to obtain truly 'informed' consent from young people who had no exposure to academic texts resonated strongly with me. I often worried that I had not done enough in explaining the extent to which I would be relying on the girls' accounts of their transition to secondary school as the basis of my thesis. Here I can only believe Lindsay when she tells me she is 'fine' about it, knowing that it is her trust in me and my reassurances to her about confidentiality and intent that support this. I only hope that my account in some way lives up to the belief and trust the girls held in me.

Access

After gaining consent from the individual girls in continuing the research with them, it was then my task to negotiate access through the four secondary schools they continued onto, as well as one running club. This proved to be a frustrating, time-consuming process that illustrated all too well the bureaucratic and paternalistic frameworks that often constrain girls' agency and decision-making abilities. Three of the four schools eventually agreed to take part, except for Folkestone, a private girls' school, which decided that it would be too difficult to supervise my visits.

This setback illustrated one of the contradictions of consent and access within my research in that although it was initially the girls and their parents that I sought permission from and who agreed to take part in the research, it was then the head teachers and other adults at the school with whom I negotiated my ongoing presence. Initially this meant letters and discussions with head teachers and heads of year, but eventually it was the PE teachers at each girl's school who facilitated my visits and allowed me to sit in on lessons. In her methodological account of feminist research in physical education, Sheila Scraton (1992) describes relatively 'unproblematic' access to PE teachers and departments in a Local Education Authority (LEA) where she had previously worked and could therefore relate to them as another, former PE teacher. Yet despite this ease of access, Scraton describes the difficulty of 'coming out' as a feminist to sometimes sexist and authoritarian teachers she interviewed (Scraton and Flintoff, 1992: 181).

As a non-PE teacher and outside researcher, my relationship with PE teachers always seemed forced and even slightly deceitful in the sense that my allegiance ultimately rested with the girls, rather than their teachers. Like Scraton, I attempted to adopt an ‘acceptable, inquiring, almost deferential manner’ in order to maintain access to the classes (Scraton and Flintoff, 1992: 181). Despite this attempt, the potential conflict in my allegiances was reinforced on my first day of observations at Wellington Gardens School. Having only recently met me and agreed to have me sit in on her lesson, the teacher introduced me briefly to the class, several of whom I knew from the previous research project. After taking the register she spent five minutes telling off a girl I had been close with, suggesting that the girls’ excuse from the lesson that day was not acceptable. I waited until we were en route to the fields and the teacher was ahead of us before ‘catching up’ with the girl and expressing my sympathy over her teacher’s strictness. Similarly after holding my first interview with Deniz at her school, her PE teacher took me aside in the staff room in order to ask why Deniz no longer took part in PE and what this teacher could do about it. While I could not break Deniz’s confidentiality and trust, at the same time I was completely dependant on this teacher’s graciousness for my ongoing access at the school and sympathetic with her desire to involve more of the Muslim girls in her lesson.

Delays in interviewing and access related to layers of bureaucracy, diffusion of responsibility and the low priority my research agenda held in schools taken up with many other pressing issues. Similarly, George (2007a) describes difficulties in accessing schools, particularly mixed-sex schools where research on girls was perhaps deemed less important. Research with young people in schools often involves multiple levels of gatekeeping that can act both as ‘safety barrier’ for young people and negate their decision-making abilities (McCarry, 2005: 95). Negotiations at the girls’ schools often involved contacting multiple ‘gatekeepers’ through delayed and protracted attempts to collect permission forms from the girls. In two instances, a girls’ permission letter was signed by parents but then lost and had to be re-sent. During our interview Deniz explained what had happened.

Deniz: I gave my permission form to the teacher but then she lost it.

Sheryl: I know, I'm really sorry about this. She told me they lost the permission form.

Deniz: Not Miss Singh, this other teacher. She's so forgetful.

(Interview with Deniz, Year 7, 15/05/2007)

My concern here is not so much with the teacher's 'forgetfulness' as with the ways in which girls were often asked to 'mediate' on my behalf for the sake of the research, here by taking home multiple permission forms to parents. Deniz and Lindsay were both of Asian Muslim heritage and their parents declined to be interviewed. Given Lindsay's parents' reaction to her wish to play football, I was unsure how a letter about their daughter's sports participation would have been interpreted. In this and other instances, the girls acted as mediators of my research – explaining and justifying it to other people (parents, peers, coaches, teachers). I would argue that this is one potentially negative effect of procedural requirements for parental consent. Researchers in a survey on informed consent also commented on the potentially exclusionary effects of required parental consent for young people and they described situations where young people forged parental signatures or were unable to participate in research altogether (Crow et al., 2006).

Although I tried to avoid this mediation as much as possible, it was often impossible to overcome. Since I had no access to the girls' classrooms, it was the girls themselves who asked their friends whether they would take part in the interview, which meant having to explain what it might entail. After Spirit's private school refused my access, Spirit agreed that I could attend training sessions at her local running club. When I introduced myself at her running group, I did not mention Spirit at all and simply said that I was there to observe all the girls (which I was). Still, Spirit seemed to feel a sense of responsibility for my presence and when I inquired about it, she referred to her friend. I expressed my concerns about her potential discomfort in my fieldnotes that day.

We are chatting in the change room before training. I ask how Spirit feels about me being at the club and carrying out observations.

Spirit: I'm just used to it. [to Suze] Do you think the older girls mind? They were asking 'who's that lady?'

(Fieldnotes, Champions Running club, 12/7/2007)

Teachers and students alike, who were used to having various observers around at any time, often overlooked my presence in schools, along with my notebook. At the running club, however, the use of a notebook seemed to add to the already intense surveillance in perhaps uncomfortable ways and I found participation in some running drills and a 'helper' role as more suited to the context than overt note-taking. My own running pursuits and recent membership in a local club perhaps proved useful here in accompanying the girls on their warm-up runs and proving my 'credentials', though I could not keep up with them in their sprint sessions round the track. In fact I never really found a comfortable 'role' at the running club and felt anxious each week as the hour approached for my visit. At the time I credited this to my failure as a fieldworker in establishing rapport and access. Later I began to reflect on the pressure, surveillance and defensiveness of the environment that was not conducive to hospitality and acceptance as its overriding ethos. The overt competitiveness of the club made both parents and girls suspicious of one another and the relentless pressure to achieve running results made it difficult to relax or be friendly to newcomers and perceived outsiders. Some of the coaches even (half-jokingly) accused me of being a spy for another running club, something that only reinforced my 'out-of-placeness' at the club. I carried out observations at the club once a week over a period of five months in the summer of 2007 but did not continue there into the autumn and winter months, as I did at the secondary schools.

The difficulties of access at the four secondary schools in some ways echoed the dynamics of my ongoing relationships with the girls. As they made their way into the four different secondary schools so too did our relationships change, arguably becoming less intimate in the larger and often more guarded settings of their schools. As McLeod and Thomson (2009: 64) point out, longitudinal research is particularly 'driven by the relationship between the researcher and the researched' and I found that this

relationship was intensely related to the research setting. While the girls were in primary school I was able to visit each school twice a week for the full school day, sitting in on each lesson and often participating in after-school and playtime ventures. This allowed me to form very close bonds with the girls and the familiarity and openness of each school classroom facilitated this intimacy. However, at secondary school such opportunities for trust and openness were perhaps restricted by the diffuse structure of the group, the varied schedule of classes and the newfound guardedness that seemed to accompany peer relations with a new set of girls from different primary schools. Intimate research encounters such as that described by Mary Jane Kehily (2004: 366) where she rolls around on the floor with a group of 10-year old girls ‘pinching our fat bits’ amidst ‘shrieks of laughter’ became less possible in my research as we entered the regimented settings of each girls’ secondary school. For example, whilst in primary school I had often accompanied the girls into the changerooms, there exchanging friendly forms of ‘body talk’; this was not permissible in secondary school and PE teachers warned me off entering change rooms, for fear of accusations of impropriety (Fieldnotes, Wellington Gardens, 07/06/07). The shift to the more guarded and dispersed settings of the secondary school inevitably impacted both on field relations and the types of data I had access to. Informal exchanges in private settings were less possible and accounts of bodily dissatisfaction, romances, fears and other ‘intimacies’ that such settings might facilitate were restricted to the more formal settings of one-to-one interviews.

Ethical Considerations

A central concern of feminist research has involved the power differential between researchers and their research subjects. Young people might then be considered multiply marginalised in the research process due to their position both as minors and as research participants (McCarry, 2005: 88). The research was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) ethical guidelines and the research protocols of The University of London. BERA’s (2004) ethical guidelines define young people as a ‘vulnerable’ category of research participants, thus

requiring that due care and consideration be taken in assuring confidentiality and informed consent. As both minors and as research participants in longitudinal research, special consideration was taken to ensure that the girls involved in the research continued to provide their consent and to feel comfortable with the research.

Girls were initially given letters of consent/information relating to the nature of the research project, their rights as participants, how the data would be used and whom to contact should they have any concerns or questions about the research. Each girl was able to choose her own pseudonym in order to remain anonymous and I chose pseudonyms for the schools and one sports club involved. As the research evolved, girls were continually consulted on any changes and on the course of the research. Consideration of consent took place through thoughtful attention to their wishes (including the right to withdraw from the study at any time), as well as consulting the girls on the ongoing course and analysis of the research findings.

Each girl in the research provided verbal consent to her participation and written consent was obtained from each girl's parent or guardian at multiple points within the research. For example, when they made the transition to secondary school, parental consent was again sought out and girls were given an opt-in clause that allowed them to passively withdraw from the study should they choose to do so. Indeed when Spirit decided to leave the study at the end of Year 7 she did this via her mother and I did not pursue the issue further with her, even though it was a setback to the study. Adults who were interviewed as part of the research also provided verbal consent for their participation and were given similar informational letters about the research.

Permission for classroom observations was sought via the schools each girl attended, which meant the head teacher in each case. Each girl was individually consulted before contacting the school or club that she attended in order to ensure her comfort and consent in my attendance at these sessions. Observations of the lessons and sports sessions were generalised so that they did not focus explicitly on the participation or performance of individual girls and individuals were given the opportunity of reading over notes that pertained specifically to them in order to check their

accuracy/interpretation and to request that certain details or observations were omitted or changed. Girls were also consulted on details of their interviews and transcripts were discussed in subsequent interviews. Analysis was ongoing and girls were involved in discussions on my ongoing interpretations of their experiences in sport, physical activity and schooling. Since schools requested feedback on the findings of the research, special attention was given in generalising the results so that individual girls would not be identifiable to the schools and girls were consulted on the nature of this feedback. Feedback to the schools was therefore generalised to the extent that individual girls were not recognisable or attributed with any particular complaints or issues. Requests from girls that specific issues or incidents not be included in the final report were respected and details relating to these were omitted from my final report.

‘Coming out as a feminist’: dilemmas in transformative agendas

In conventional terms, reciprocity might be described as ‘giving something back’ to participants through the form of sharing information, establishing relationships or providing material benefits from anything as small as coffees to interview ‘incentives’ such as book tokens. In my own research I have found that engagement with participants is both pressing and potentially problematic. I have been involved coaching girls’ games, taking them to practice outside of school and volunteering in community sports programmes designed for girls. While I acknowledge that such active engagement might be perceived as ‘interfering’ I am also aware of its strong role in sustaining my passion and commitment to my research subject, and of its benefits to the girls involved.

In its most basic form, reciprocity involves a sharing of the self through researcher and participant interactions. Oakley’s (2005) early interviewing techniques established that in practice, interviewing women should be a two-way process that involves sharing and giving on both sides. While the girls sometimes asked me about my relationship or sports involvement, they most often inquired about the status of my PhD. Sometimes I felt like they were being polite and other times I felt like they used this as a strategy to

deflect attention away from awkward questions. In either case it was clear the girls felt that the conversation should not be one-sided just as Lather's (1991: 73) research participants 'insisted on interactive, reciprocal self-disclosure.' In this excerpt from our Year 7 interview, I am asking Deniz about her involvement in football. She has already answered my question and shifts the emphasis by asking about the ongoing progress of my research.

Sheryl: You don't think you could just play for fun and not want to be a footballer eventually?

Deniz: No.

Sheryl: You don't think that?

Deniz: Sheryl, how is your work going?

Sheryl: Should I tell you about it? I've been asking you so many questions haven't I?

Deniz: Yeah.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

I had had trouble accessing Deniz's school and when this interview did happen it had been over a year since I'd last seen Deniz. We spent some initial time catching up but I also interpreted from this interjection that I had launched too quickly into a barrage of questions. Lather (1991) endorses a dialogical approach that includes self-disclosure on the part of the researcher as fostering a sense of collaboration between researchers and researched. Here Deniz's interjection seems less an invitation for me to discuss my own sporting experiences than a strategic attempt to divert attention from an unwanted question and even a desire that our relationship should involve questions on both sides. The idea of self-disclosure perhaps does not sufficiently take into account age and experience discrepancies. Despite my feeling that my own sporting opportunities were 'hampered' from a young age and the resentment this has brought, I refrained from sharing this with the girls. I wanted to respect and understand their decisions around sports participation rather than implicitly suggesting (through my own positive adult experiences), that they should continue to participate, should push through and not 'drop out' as many of their peers were doing.

However, critical approaches to research insist that reciprocity must involve more than reciprocal dialogue, in the form of sharing analysis and even co-authorship through a 'mutual negotiation of meaning and power' (Lather, 1991: 56). An emancipatory approach is often described as transformative and a process of co-authorship is endorsed. Robyne Garrett (2004b) describes the process of 'co-construction' she engaged in with her participants in constructing narratives of the girls' physical identities.

Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2007) are more explicit in exploring the meaning negotiation that took place in their research. Their distinction between 'what the girls said' and 'what the researchers heard' belies some of the idealism of 'praxis-oriented' research. They describe the discursive strategies girls employed to avoid identification with denigrated categories, such as that of feminist. Regardless of their rejection of the feminist label, the girls' actions and beliefs often revealed a feminist sensibility and critical orientation. Rather than attempting to affect change in their participants, the authors attempt to justify girls' self-positioning and to highlight their already critical stances towards gender inequality or stereotyping.

Although emancipatory research endorses the value of overt political bias in research, I was reluctant to initially identify myself as a 'feminist' to the girls. Initially I told the girls that I was interested in their ongoing sports involvement. I did call myself a feminist when it seemed relevant though. For example, when a girl finished the questionnaire she anxiously asked what I would say if I found that 'girls aren't doing enough sports.' In response I said something along the lines of 'I wouldn't say that, I'm a feminist and I'm more interested in how girls see their participation.' In retrospect I might have rephrased this since the link to a Year 7 girl between feminism and advocacy seems less obvious than my comments suggested.

The girls also knew about my own involvement in football and running and often asked me about it. Despite not describing myself as a feminist, I suggest that the girls were aware of the inherent political intent of my research and picked up on comments and perspectives of mine without the need for explicit detailing of my feminist sensibilities. This was evidenced through their reporting to me of racist and sexist incidents and patterns they

perceived in their schools and clubs. This also stood in contrast to the interpretations of my research by their coaches or teachers – especially the male coaches who seemed to interpret my research agenda as ‘coach in training’ who was soaking up their expertise.

Lather’s (1991) endorsement of feminist ‘praxis’ argues that research must be liberatory in changing both the researcher and the researched and thus inspiring participants to question their current situation. I am unable to say whether my research ‘changed’ the girls, but I do think it provided some space for reflection. McRobbie (1991c) asserts that while we must acknowledge the power differentials between participants and ourselves, it may also be patronising to assume that we can *do* something for participants. It is therefore more important to foster an atmosphere of respect and equality with such participants.

Nonetheless, sharing my findings and initial analyses did sometimes lead to further discussion. During an interview with Nirvana, I suggested that the school might be hypocritical in claiming to be a ‘healthy school’ but not providing them with outdoor space to run around on at break time. The idea of hypocrisy seemed to ‘click’ with her.

Nirvana: Yeah, I think that all makes sense. Like you’re telling me things that I didn’t actually realise. Yeah, that’s really interesting.

Sheryl: Like what?

Nirvana: Like they’re being hypocritical. I didn’t see it that way, I just thought they were being really mean. But yeah, that makes sense.

(Interview, Year 8, 03/2008)

I note later that I felt slightly uncomfortable, ‘probing’ Nirvana for responses to my initial analyses. If she did not agree with me, would she say so? The imposition of a particular analysis seemed to demand of her an enlightened response to my criticism of her school’s practices. Later Nirvana reflected further on the notion of hypocrisy, relating the situation to the wearing of inappropriate school kit on a cold day.

Nirvana: 'cause last week we had this substitute and we were doing sprinting on the pitch, which didn't make much sense but, you know. And it was freezing cold and we were out there in like shorts and a t-shirt and it was so cold. And then she said 'I've never heard so much moaning!' And she was in like, a t-shirt, a jumper and a tracksuit (laughs).

Sheryl: Yeah.

Nirvana: And it was just like, 'what?!'

Sheryl: So she had loads of layers on?

Nirvana: Yeah, and we were just stuck out like little penguins.

(Interview, Year 8, 03/2008)

The issue of girls' PE attire and the cold weather picks up on a concern many of the girls expressed, but it also highlights the power differential between the girls and their teachers, who can wear what they need to protect themselves from the cold. Yet despite my desire to point towards structural and institutional issues around their involvement, the girls were often keen to accept personal responsibility for any decisions they had made. In Year 7 Gazza had decided to drop out of football, although she played and enjoyed it in primary school. Early on in the interview I suggested that her decision might relate to her school's poor organisation and commitment to girls' football in Year 6. She conceded this might be true but later emphasised her own role in decision-making.

Gazza: But I wouldn't like to blame it all on Sensei that I quit karate or all on my coach that I quit football.

Sheryl: No.

Gazza: 'cause it ain't his fault. It was nobody's fault and I kind of went on my own.

(Interview, Year 7, 14/03/2007)

Here I am faced with my own interpretation of the situation being at odds with Gazza's desire to accept responsibility, and perhaps thereby assert her

agency in the decision-making process. Put another way, Acker et al. (1983) write:

The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality?

(quoted in Lather, 1991: 74)

My own analyses, while attempting to highlight girls' 'choices' as agentic subjects, often prefaces the overriding contexts and discourses that limited and constrained those choices. In their process of joint analysis with girls, Lalik and Oliver (2000: 33) describe their attempts to respect girls' views 'even when they were quite different from what we had hoped they would be.' As their account of the research process entails, the negotiation of meaning is never simple or straightforward. Similarly, Skeggs (1997) emphasises the ultimate authority and responsibility for the feminist text as remaining with the researcher. Attempts to discuss ideas and interpretations with her participants led to new insights and understandings but were also divided by differential access to an academic framework, which she describes as a form of 'cultural capital.' As Skeggs concedes, the women's interpretations did not always accord with her own and she could only approach the negotiation of meaning through an ethical stance anchored in 'honesty' and 'humility.' (Code, 1988 quoted in Skeggs, 1997: 30). My attempts to 'feed back' findings to the girls are also marred by multiple levels of gatekeeping and concerns that it is not only the girls themselves who will be reading this feedback but also their parents and possibly teachers, thus posing a potential conflict between constructive and honest feedback and the girls' confidentiality.

Conclusion

The outlining of my methodological approach to the research can be seen as an attempt to render more 'transparent' the process through which I arrived at my findings and interpretations of these. As post-structural critiques have pointed out, such interpretations are both constructive and constitutive, thus creating the illusion of a somehow tangible and straightforward research process even as they construct this account. This construction necessarily

involved a process of selection and differentiation. Over the four years of research I amassed great quantities of fieldnotes, transcripts, photos and research memos that were ultimately my responsibility to sift through and make some ultimate ‘sense’ of. I found that it was largely through the process of writing that I was able to analyse my data and thereby translate it into a readable form, processing the accounts of ‘what girls said’ into analytically grounded arguments around girls’ involvement in sports.

My analyses attempt to balance girls’ insights within my own theoretically oriented understandings through a process of interpretation and ongoing meaning negotiation.

Although girls’ contributions were sometimes difficult, frequently insightful and always generous, the decision of how to present these insights and the resulting arguments I made around them are my own interpretations based in both my feminist sensibilities and long-term involvement with both the girls and their secondary schools. In the next chapter I more fully describe these settings as well as the individual girls who took part.

Chapter Four An Introduction to the Girls and Their Schools

As outlined in the previous chapter, my research focuses primarily on the experiences of six girls, who named themselves Spirit, Nirvana, Lucy, Gazza, Deniz and Lindsay when they were in Year 5.⁵ This chapter outlines the girls' experiences in sport and PE at the primary level and then moves on to separately introduce each girl and her particular interests and family background. I finish by briefly describing each of the four secondary schools these girls continued onto (a summary of the girls and their primary and secondary schools is also provided in Appendix 1).

Each girl had been a key participant in the 2005/2006 'Tomboy Identities' project. The girls' tomboy identities were found to be strongly constructed through their participation in sport. The girls we focused on were all seen as particularly active and willing to take part in a variety of activities including tag rugby, football, tree-climbing, cross-country running and outdoor adventure sports. Teachers often noted a particular determination and enthusiasm in the girls' engagement in physical tasks and new sports. As Lucy's Year 5 teacher noted, 'She's willing to get stuck in more physically than some of the others' (Interview, Spring 2005).

For Gazza, Lindsay and Deniz, a tomboy identity was particularly associated with each girl's involvement in playground football. These girls attended Benjamin Laurence Primary School together, a culturally and racially diverse inner city London school. Parents at the school did not tend to enrol their children in a wide range of extracurricular activities and so the activities children did were primarily facilitated by the school, which had worked hard to develop good relations with parents. The school itself had limited playground space and most of the concrete play area was taken up by two football pitches continuously dominated by the older boys. In Year

⁵ The girls chose their pseudonyms when they were in Year 5 and these do not necessarily reflect their ethnicity or even the current way in which they might choose to represent themselves. For example, Gazza chose her name based on a schoolgirl 'crush' on Gareth Gates, which she had long since grown out of by Year 8 when I finished the research. Unfortunately, I felt that I could not change girls' pseudonyms at later points since I had already published and presented work using the earlier names the girls chose.

5, their class teacher had initiated a girls' pitch time in order to encourage their involvement. The girls who participated grew in confidence and gradually moved to playing with their male classmates on other days. The development of a girls' football team and a Year-wide 'big match' facilitated by an adult further supported this involvement. Mr. Mansfield, their Year 5 teacher, described the girls' engagement in football.

We've got Deniz and Nilay⁶, who play with a passion... Gazza who's in there all the time. And she is absolutely in the thick of things. She gets balls in the face and in the belly and it doesn't bother her at all. (Interview, Year 5 teacher, Summer 2005)

Gazza was also involved in karate lessons held at the school and described her sense of achievement in moving through the belts and working closely with her instructor. Both Lindsay's and Gazza's accomplishments in running competitions won them accolades and recognition from their classmates.

In Year 6, staffing issues and structural repairs to the playground made girls' involvement in football increasingly tenuous. The girls' participation in a local authority football match (for which they had had no training and arrived late) was shambolic and resulted in a fight with another team. The school focused its attention on netball, and the formerly footballing girls moved to this sport, enjoying attention from a devoted female coach.

Nirvana, Lucy and Spirit attended Holly Bank School, which was located in the leafy outskirts of London and served a more racially homogeneous and middle class population. Children at the school were often enrolled in a wide range of extracurricular activities both in and out of school ranging from languages to sports and drama clubs.

At playtime and lunch, football was dominated by a group of older boys as at Benjamin Laurence. However, the large expanse of grassed fields and play equipment meant that girls could engage in a variety of active games. One of their favourites was class-wide 'chase' games involving both boys and girls. Facilitated by access to open grassed space, the school encouraged

⁶ Nilay was also a key participant in the original tomboys study but declined to continue with the research after moving to a private Muslim girls' secondary school.

participation in cross-country running and had a large contingent of children involved. Spirit, Nirvana and Lucy all took part in cross-country running and Spirit's accomplishments in the sport garnered attention from Champions Running Club, which she subsequently joined. In Year 6 the school also developed girls' netball sessions and Nirvana and Lucy enjoyed playing this.

It was each of the girls' pleasure and engagement in various sporting activities that seemed to suggest they were likely to continue with their sports involvement into secondary school. Of the original eight girls that had been part of the tomboys study, six elected to continue the research with me. Their individual stories document their engagement in both sports and schooling over this period.

Holly Bank Girls

Spirit

Spirit was of average height and build with light brown hair past her shoulders, a ready smile and a quiet manner. She came from a white Scottish background and her family lived in a large detached house in a gated community. Spirit was an only child until the age of 10 when she gained a baby brother. Her father's position as director of an insurance firm allowed the family to remain comfortably well off while her mother stayed at home, organising schooling and activities for the children.

Throughout primary school Spirit was involved in a wide number of extracurricular activities including basketball, karate and cross-country running. In year 5 she was seen as one of the fastest runners in her class, thus gaining accolades from teachers and coaches, as well as interest from Champions Running Club.

At Holly Bank she was a member of the 'middle group' of girls in her class, who were all high achievers and similarly held an array of athletic and musical talents. Her best friends were Nirvana and Leafy Blue, neither of whom continued with her to Folkestone, a private girls' school.

Like many of her peers, Spirit began studying for entrance tests and taking extra tutorials leading up to the end of year 6. She spoke about the pressure

from her parents to do well and the expectation that she would attend an Oxbridge college like her father.

Much to her parents' delight, Spirit received an academic scholarship to attend Folkestone and in Year 7 she continued to bring home glowing reports from her teachers. On the outside, Spirit appeared to be the 'perfect child.' She was achieving very well academically as well as at sports, she took care of her baby brother at home and talked about keeping up with her chores.

At the transition to secondary school, Spirit found it difficult to deal with the loss of her old friendships and described herself as 'in between' the friendship groups in her new class. While the other girls chatted and went to the canteen over breaks, Spirit worked on her homework. She continued to train with Champions Running Club into Year 7 but was unhappy about the coaching there and the strong emphasis on performance. In Year 8 Spirit declined to be interviewed again, having lost contact with me on a regular basis.

Lucy

In Year 5 Lucy was on the small side for her age and she had a pixie-like quality about her. Her long blondish-brown hair was usually worn in a plait down her back. Lucy's white, middle class family was relatively unconcerned with typical middle class appearances and were more likely to spend money on trips and outdoor activities than new cars, clothing or fixing up the house. The family was very active and enjoyed outdoor activities such as canoeing, camping, cycling and rock climbing on a regular basis. Lucy had three brothers, one of whom was a twin and she kept up with their range of activities including Cubs and then Scouts.

In primary school Lucy was a member of the 'good' girls group but had some difficulty with her friendships. At playtime she had enjoyed chasing and running games but this became increasingly difficult to keep up due to the slowing down of her friends in Year 6, who began to prefer quiet games. She had therefore taken to playing with children in lower years over playtime in order to keep up her active games.

Both Lucy and her mother Mary deliberated over sending Lucy to an all-girl or mixed school. Mary did not want to consider a grammar school as she felt they were too pressurised. Despite their concerns, she continued on to the single sex Wellington Gardens Secondary School.

In Year 7, Lucy seemed to be adjusting well to her new school and it helped that she knew several girls from Scouts. She described these friends as having more in common with her than her primary school friends. She did well in her SATs and continued to do well academically in her classes.

Lucy was disappointed that she was not allowed to run around at playtime at her new school, and she described being told off for doing so. Lucy's mother described the provision of sports at her all-girls' school as 'quite pitiful really' but Lucy continued to play hockey after school and did athletics in the summer. She found selective sorting practices at clubs and school teams both discouraging and exclusionary.

Nirvana

Nirvana was tall and slender and she had brown eyes and dark, shoulder length hair. She shot up in height by Year 7 and this combined with her new fringe made her look older than many of the other girls in her Year. In Year 6 her teacher had nominated her as 'head girl' and he attributed this to her maturity. Similarly in Year 7 her form tutor described Nirvana as both mature and clever and felt that this set her apart from her classmates. In primary school Nirvana had been best friends with Spirit and Leafy Blue, who had also been high achievers. Although involved in netball and running, Nirvana's tomboy identity seemed to rest more in her maturity and interest in rock and indie music.

Nirvana lived with her mother, father and older brother. Her mother worked in I.T. and her father was a property developer who had renovated the family's four bedroom terraced house near to her primary school.

Nirvana's musical talents seemed to stem from her family's particular interest in music and her home was full of different instruments her parents had picked up over the years. Nirvana took formal lessons in flute and piano

and she also played with the school's orchestra and hoped to get into the Brit School of Music for secondary school.

By Year 7 Nirvana had dropped out of her former sporting activities and steadily disinvested from PE. She said she 'couldn't be bothered' to try out for netball and talked about frustrating experiences of playing in Year 6 when 'no one knew what they were doing.' This was compounded by her belief that she was not very good at sport in general.

Although Nirvana liked the music programme at Wellington Gardens, she complained about the all-girl environment, which she found 'boring.' Nirvana still talked on the phone with Spirit and Leafy Blue and they hung out with their male friends from primary sometimes 'so we all keep in touch.'

Unlike physical activity, music remained very important to Nirvana who told me 'it's kind of my life.' In Year 7 she still played flute and piano, attended orchestra at her primary school and had joined the jazz band at Wellington Gardens. Her very busy music schedule seemed part of the reason she did not join any sports teams but moreover it was clear that music was an important part of her identity unlike sport had ever become. She felt that Wellington Gardens had a good music programme and had given up on attending the Brit School of Music since she had already settled in at Wellington Gardens.

Nirvana decided to attend Wellington Gardens School since it was close to her house and she could walk there with girls from her neighbourhood. She seemed frustrated by the level of her instruction at her new school and resented that her teachers 'dumbed down' lessons and explained very simple concepts to them which she claimed already to know. She also resented the levels of homework she had been given and the sedentary patterns this had led to but seemed unclear about how to change this.

Benjamin Laurence Girls

Gazza

In Year 5, Gazza always had her long brown hair tied back and she wore jeans and jumpers most days to school. She was a slender, pretty girl who

often had dark circles under her eyes. Gazza lived with her parents and sister in a flat within walking distance of both Gazza's secondary and primary schools. Her mother worked as a teacher's aide and her father worked in an administrative position, neither had attended university.

At primary school Gazza was bright and conscientious and as a result did very well in school. Her Year 5 teacher described her as an 'always child' meaning that she always did her homework, always helped the teacher and always seemed to be pleasing others. In Year 4 she had been what her teacher described as 'angsty.' She often took up a mediating role with teachers and between friends and this caused tension for her particularly in Year 6.

Both Gazza's teacher and her mother Barbara described a notable change that had come over Gazza when she took up football. Barbara felt that football had increased Gazza's general confidence and she now spoke up in class more often and stood up for herself. Barbara described her daughter as 'not a girl's girl' and she felt that this sometimes made it difficult for Gazza to negotiate her friendships.

Gazza decided to attend Adlington secondary school nearby since her cousins also went there. She had done very well in her Year 6 SATs and could have attended a more academically oriented school but this was not her own or her parents' priority. She found behavioural issues in class frustrating and suggested that this made it difficult to get proper lessons.

Gazza had felt particularly that she wanted to attend a mixed school. When I spoke to her in Year 7, she seemed fairly well settled at her new school but told me that she missed the intimacy of primary and 'would rather have stayed.'

Despite her previous desire to continue with sports, by Year 7 she was not involved in any physical activity outside of PE. She had quit karate given that the lessons took place at her old school and though she tried out for the girls' football team at her new school, she found the sessions unfocused and reported that there was no proper training, only a kickabout after school.

By the end of Year 8 Gazza had begun to wear her long brown hair down, and parted on the side as well as wearing makeup to school and changing her clothing. She and Lindsay continued to be friends and occasionally snuck to the park with boys from their class to hang around and perhaps kick a ball about.

Lindsay

At primary school Lindsay was a pretty, popular girl who wore her headscarf with fashionable clothing and was well liked by both her male and female classmates. Her family is from Pakistan and she has two older sisters, an older brother and a younger sister. Her father works in a menial position for a supermarket chain and her mother, whose English is limited, stays at home with her siblings. At Benjamin Laurence Lindsay was able to attend 'prayer room' with the other Muslim girls in her class, and she got along with everyone in the class, which was very well integrated.

Lindsay would sometimes play basketball and champ⁷ at playtime until she took up football in Year 5. She described this time with a sense of joy during interviews. She and Gazza were highly regarded by their classmates for their athletic abilities and this formed part of their high status in the class. In Year 6 Lindsay and Nilay told me that they felt the football coach was racist and ignored them as a result.

Lindsay's parents wanted her to attend Adlington in order to be with her older brother. Although this allowed her to travel to school with her brother, the school was very far from her home and it took her an hour by bus to get there.

At Adlington Lindsay was unable to continue with her sporting activities.

Her parents were concerned about the distance home, which meant that Lindsay could not try out for the football team as she'd hoped to do.

Lindsay continued to enjoy PE and she participated in lessons and did well.

When her Year 7 class did time trials for the athletics team, Lindsay was not selected, much to my surprise. Lindsay explained that there were lots of

⁷ Champ was a popular game played by girls at Benjamin Laurence. It involved bouncing a ball between four equally proportioned squares drawn on the pavement.

other girls in the school who were faster than her and she seemed resigned to this.

Although there were many Muslim boys at her secondary school, Lindsay was the only Muslim girl in her class and this proved difficult for her. By the end of Year 8 she had stopped wearing her headscarf to school and had even begun to wear makeup and sleeveless vests. She continued to achieve well in school and to balance this with her social friendships.

Deniz

Deniz had emigrated from Turkey as a child with her family, who were practicing Muslims. She had missed a year and was therefore a year older than her classmates. In Year 6 she was taller than all of the boys, wore a headscarf and was not afraid to stand up for herself. She described herself as ‘a bit naughty.’ Deniz had struggled somewhat with learning English and her mother did not speak it. She had two younger siblings and a large extended family, many of whom lived in Turkey where they went back to visit each year. Deniz’s father managed a small fast-food outlet and worked long hours there. Her mother stayed at home with her baby brother. Deniz often helped out with her younger siblings and was very family-oriented.

In primary school Deniz was friends with Lindsay and Nilay but found this ‘third wheel’ status sometimes difficult to negotiate. Although she got on relatively well with the other girls, she did not seem to have a ‘best friend’ like them.

Deniz had been the first girl in her class to take up football once her teacher began the initiative and it was her presence on the pitch that facilitated the other girls’ participation. She seemed to take football more seriously than the other girls and some of her male peers said she was ‘like a boy’ in the way she moaned about losing and got upset over games. Deniz was a good student in primary school and seemed to do relatively well. She was in the top or middle ability groups for each subject. However, she was not happy with her Year 6 SATs results.

Deniz decided to go to Blythevale Secondary School, a comprehensive girls’ school, because she had family friends there who would ‘stick up’ for

her. She took the thirty-minute bus ride to school with her friend Teniya from primary, who was also Turkish and Muslim. While Deniz made friends initially, she and Teniya were ‘ousted’ from their friendship group by the end of Year 7 and they moved to being with the other covered Muslim girls in the class. Despite the school’s diversity and large Muslim population, Deniz had described being targeted and bullied as a result of wearing a headscarf.

Deniz said she had decided not to try out for the school’s football team since she was afraid of getting into a fight. Football continued to be one of her main interests and she watched games on TV and still played football with family and friends outside of school. She had also been able to accompany her (male) cousin to football training at a club for a while.

In primary school Deniz had greatly enjoyed PE but in secondary school her teacher complained that she often did not participate. The first time I visited her PE class, Deniz sat on the side and had not brought her PE kit to school. I soon found this was a common pattern and Deniz admitted to me that she did not like PE and got her mum to write notes excusing her from participating.

Secondary Schools

The girls went on to attend four different secondary schools, as detailed below.

Wellington Gardens School

(where Nirvana and Lucy continued to)

Wellington Gardens is a comprehensive girls’ secondary school located in a well-off, suburban area of outer London. Parents described specifically moving to the area for the quality of schools.

The school is heavily oversubscribed and its intake is already achieving above-average results upon entry to the school. It has low numbers of students with English as an additional language or special educational needs. In its last Ofsted inspection it was rated as an ‘outstanding’ school whose students continued to achieve ‘well above average’ year on year (%).

who achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs). The school has both specialist sports and technology college status with further specialisms in modern languages and healthy schools status. It maintains high expectations for its students with a strong focus on 'performance' and 'behaviour.' In practice this emphasis translated into strict regulations around dress, appearance and physical deportment in and around the school.

Despite its outstanding results, the school continues to compete with other high-achieving schools nearby, including independent schools such as Folkestone. The positioning of the school amidst a range of other independent girls' schools seemed to produce a desire to emulate the ethos and performance of such schools. This was underscored by the emphasis on discipline and appearance, as well as results. The school's specialist designations as well as its links with local organisations contributed to the perceived status of the school. The school was once a mixed sex school but in the 1980s underwent what the head of year referred to as 'the divorce.' It continued to be linked to its now neighbouring boys' school both spatially and through its inclusion of boys in its 'A' level college. Girls who had attended Holly Bank continued to see many of their former male classmates walking to school and across the fence that separated them.

The PE department had a strong focus on discipline, enforcing prescribed 'kit checks' and displaying intolerance towards inattention or lack of enthusiasm. Unlike Blythevale School, it was rare for a girl to present a note excusing her from PE and talking out of turn was punished by laps around the tennis court, where lessons were often held.

Adlington Secondary School

(where Gazza and Lindsay continued to)

Adlington is a mixed sex comprehensive school located in inner city London. It has approximately 1300 pupils on the register from 11-18 years. The school converted from being an all boys' school and continues to have many more boys than girls. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is twice the national average and it has a high proportion of students with statemented special needs. It received a 'satisfactory' grade in

its latest Ofsted report but with ‘many good features.’ Adlington has status as a visual arts college and recently received healthy schools status. The school has an inclusive ethos and ‘a desire not to give up on students’ as noted by parents. The school population is culturally and ethnically very diverse with many students from African-Caribbean, African and Asian backgrounds.

In an attempt to curb disruptive behaviour in the classroom the school has implemented a behaviour system of ‘praise, warning, concern.’ There is little grassed space surrounding the school but it provides a paved, fenced in area for playing football over break. Unsurprisingly, I never observed any girls taking part in this free for all.

Blythevale Secondary School

(where Deniz continued to)

Blythevale is an all girls comprehensive secondary school (11-18), located within walking distance from Adlington in an area ‘with high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.’ There are approximately 1200 students on the register, 8.1% of whom are on the special needs register. A high proportion of the students are eligible for free school meals and over half of the students are from minority ethnic groups, many bilingual. The school has a significant refugee and asylum seeker population (15%) and a very wide range of languages are spoken with Bengali, Albanian and Arabic being the most dominant. There is a sizeable contingent of Muslim girls (whose brothers presumably attended nearby mixed or boys’ schools). Its government educational (DfEE) profile defines a high proportion of the students as being ‘vulnerable’ and with some form of learning difficulty or disability. Blythevale School is also connected to a ‘matched’ boys’ school next to it. It specialises in information and communication technology (ICT) and has achieved designations for leadership. It has also achieved healthy schools status.

Despite its social context, the school achieves well in local standings and is a very popular school that is oversubscribed. Students make good progress in relation to their starting points. In 2008, 43% of its students achieved 5+

A*-C grades (including maths and English). It achieved a 'good' rating in its latest OFSTED inspection report. Its wide range of after-school sports, public speakers and other extra-curricular activities add to its appeal and the school hosts trips abroad each year. The construction of a dance studio also appeals to students and has led to dance being incorporated into the PE curriculum and after-school activities.

The school was concerned about the number of girls taking part in after-school sport and PE and was attempting to create greater attendance at these. Below average attendance at the school contributed to this difficulty and the school had appealed to parents to increase attendance.

Folkestone Secondary School
(where Spirit continued to)

Folkestone School is an independent day school for girls between the ages of 4 and 18 and is a member of the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST). The school is selective and fee-paying with students achieving well above average on entry to the school. There are around 600 girls in the senior school. Approximately three-quarters of the pupils are from families with professional backgrounds and one tenth of pupils are of ethnic minority origin. Very few pupils had English as an additional language (EAL) and at the time of writing only one pupil had a statement of special educational needs (SEN). Although the school offers scholarships these seem to be on the basis of grades rather than means, as Spirit received one to attend despite her family being well positioned to pay the fees of around £3,000 per term.

With high fees and parental expectations, the school has high expectations to live up to and delivers in the form of results. Of 92 students entered in GCSEs in 2008, the percentage at A* and A grades was almost 71%, with 32% at A*. All students achieved 5 or more A* - C grades. However, grades are not the only measure of the school's achievements and it offers an extensive range of extra-curricular activities supported by structural facilities including a heated pool, tennis courts and masses of wide-open space. Pupils also achieve highly in the many other extra-curricular

activities in which they take part. Standards in sport, and in music, dance, drama, public speaking and debating are very high.

Although I visited Folkestone on several occasions and held interviews with the Head of Year and with Spirit and a group of friends at the school, I was not permitted to conduct further research there. The head of year described parents at the school as being very demanding and she was concerned about being able to supervise my visits.

Conclusion

The secondary schools the girls went on to attend varied greatly in their pupil composition, geographic location and relative position in the league tables. In the following chapter I describe more specifically the particular 'ethos' that was embedded at each school and the implications this had for pupils' sports participation. I suggest that the ways in which schools envisioned student sports participation and their expectations of students variously contributed to the construction of a perceived 'problem' around girls' sports participation.

Chapter Five Schooling, PE and the Standards Agenda: The identification of a ‘problem’ in girls’ participation in physical activity

Introduction

A range of discourses around girls’ engagement in sport over the course of adolescence constructs this participation (or lack of it) as a particular problem in which schools can both directly intervene and even be held responsible for. Within the UK, recent health concerns raised in the media and in government have sparked a renewed interest in the lifestyles, physical activities and eating patterns of young people (British Medical Association, 2003, Department of Health, 2004). The child and adolescent body has been taken up as an intense site of interest; a symbolic representation of the ills of British society and the target of community programmes and school initiatives aimed at increasing society’s physical health and productivity. Scientific discourses in sports science and medicine posit continuous links between obesity rates, cardiovascular diseases and physical inactivity, thus providing heightened justification for young people’s involvement in physical activity with an ongoing ‘obesity epidemic’ as the overriding imperative (Gard and Wright, 2005). Girls’ under-representation in physical activity and sport has made them a particular target for such interventions aimed at increasing young peoples’ participation rates.

In attempts to get girls more involved in sport and physical activity, schools have taken up a number of strategies which seek to comply with both parental and government agendas. Initiatives such as the ‘ActiveGirls’ programme sponsored by the Youth Sport Trust (2007) and the Healthy Schools initiative (DCSF, 2008a) outline a range of incentives that implicate schools in the management and upholding of young people’s health and physical fitness.

Whilst early feminist research advocated girls’ involvement in sport on the basis of equity, current arguments increasingly centre on the assumed links between health and physical fitness as well as aims to identify young ‘talent’ in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics (DCSF, 2008b). Such

incentives tend to operate on the assumption that sport and physical activity are necessarily 'good' for young people and therefore unquestionably worth promoting. Popular discourses often construct sport as a sort of panacea for girls' bodily ills - as a means of improving self-esteem and lowering risks of perceived problems such as teenage pregnancy and substance abuse (Heywood, 2007, Pike, 2007). Such discourses often draw on the 'girl as victim' narrative, suggesting that sports participation might allay some of the seemingly inevitable risks that accompany female adolescence (Frost, 2001).

It is primarily within this backdrop of concerns around young people's health and the need to identify young 'talent' that schools have been persuaded to encourage girls' participation in PE and to see girls' disengagement as problematic. At the same time, schools have become subject to increasing regulations and standardisation introduced via league tables and an overwhelming emphasis on performance. Despite the relatively marginal status of PE within education more broadly, the introduction of the National Curriculum for PE set targets and levels of achievement that raised its reputation and value within school agendas overall (Green et al., 2007). The introduction of national targets and attainment levels within a performative educational context has insidiously linked PE to the broader educational standards agenda. It is within this context that schools are increasingly persuaded to see girls' PE participation as contributing to their overall credibility, thus inserting girls' bodies and physical performances into the standards agenda.

A small but growing body of work within the sociology of sport has provided a critical response to such health and ability incentives, questioning the extent to which they are always 'healthy' for young people and investigating the ways in which young people take up and respond to such overwhelming incitements towards 'health' and achievement-based aims (Houlihan and Green, 2006, Green et al., 2007, Hunter and Hay, 2006, Evans et al., 2008b, Evans et al., 2007, Tinning and Glasby, 2002). This work has implicated physical education and health curriculums in constructing restrictive models of 'ability' alongside moralising discourses

that align 'health' and body size in often pernicious ways and with particular consequences for young people. Several studies in this tone have sought to situate the role of schooling in the construction and contextualisation of health discourses, which may translate into narrow and surveillant prescriptions around health behaviours that set up moral hierarchies between students (Evans et al., 2004). Girls' participation in physical activity, their construction of physical identities and their investment in models of healthy citizenship are inevitably set within this overarching background, and more specifically within the contexts of their particular schools and the ways in which schools engage in these discourses.

Within this chapter I outline various theoretical approaches to girls' participation in PE and sport and in so doing I attempt to consider the ways in which these approaches frame girls' participation as potentially 'problematic.' I begin by tracing early feminist interventions through to liberal strategies aimed at decreasing 'barriers' as well as outlining various feminist approaches that have sought to understand girls' frequent disinvestments in sport from girls' own perspectives. Finally, I argue that schools and the standards agenda form an important contemporary backdrop to girls' (dis)engagement in sport and physical activity. I consequently describe the key characteristics of the four secondary schools I researched at, which were also described more briefly in the previous chapter. This involves detailing these schools' particular orientations towards sport, physical activity and achievement constructed through their investments in the standards agenda.

Feminism, Schooling and Sport

Over the past two decades, gender has been established as a key mediating factor in young peoples' participation in sport and physical activity, with many girls likely to drop out of sport during adolescence (Green et al., 2007, Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Hargreaves, 1994, Wellard, 2007). The Active People Survey 2005-2006 found that almost 54% of men aged 16-24 took part in sport and recreation over the previous month, where only 45% of women in that age bracket did the same (UK Sport, 2006: 5). However,

findings from the Sport England Survey (2003) indicated that girls were over-represented in the 'untapped potential' category of youth participants, suggesting that many wanted to do sports but were unsure of their own capabilities or of how to get involved (Green et al., 2007). Similar perspectives have identified girls as being 'underserved' by traditional physical education and sports provision, suggesting that schools should aim to increase girls' participation in physical activity (UK Sport, 2006, DCSF, 2008a). Citing such discrepancies in boys' and girls' involvement, various programmes have aimed at 'getting girls active' by encouraging their participation in different sporting initiatives and a range of activities often deemed to be 'girl-friendly' (Kirk et al., 2000, Davison et al., 2006, Baggett et al., 2007, Bailey et al., 2006). The incentives for these programmes represent a shift from early feminist interventions that identified male dominance in sport alongside discrimination against girls' and women's participation as the 'problem.'

Feminist queries into sport and physical education have followed on from fundamental issues raised in second wave feminism. Within education more broadly, criticism of an androcentric curriculum alongside concerns over girls' unequal educational experiences and outcomes led to feminist research into the role of schooling in the reproduction of sexual inequality (Whyte et al., 1985, Weiner, 1985). While these criticisms focused particular attention on core subjects including mathematics and the sciences they seemed to ignore physical education as a marginal subject that was viewed as less important to the emancipatory struggle for gender equality (Scruton, 1992, Hall, 1987). A focus on girls' involvement in sport and physical education was not premised until several years later (Hall, 1987, Graydon, 1997, Theberge, 1987, Theberge, 1986, Hargreaves, 1994). Despite noting the barriers and inequalities affecting girls' participation in sports, there was also space for optimism and a sense of the liberatory potential of sport. It was believed that a feminist revisioning of traditional competitive sports could both challenge gendered bodily inhibitions and provide opportunities for female friendship and bonding during much-deserved leisure time (Theberge, 1987, Theberge, 1986, Graydon, 1997).

Women's participation in sport, whilst constrained by other factors, seemed to hold out the potential for both individual and collective empowerment. Theberge (1987: 393) writes: 'the liberatory possibility of sport lies in the opportunity for women to experience the creativity and energy of their bodily power and to develop this power in the community of women.' Despite this (possibly utopian) vision, research into children's early schooling suggests that girls often have negative experiences of their bodily capabilities from a young age and that this is often perpetuated through physical education.

Girls' early experiences

Research into children's early learning has suggested that by the time they enter reception, children have already formed opinions about appropriate physical activities for girls and boys set in gendered bodily habits (Thorne, 1993, Davies, 2003, Paechter, 2007). Anne Williams' (1989) pioneering research in primary education demonstrated the reinforcement such gendered patterns received in physical education lessons for example by segregating girls and boys in early games activities and by providing more extracurricular sports provision for boys. Most importantly perhaps, it has been pointed out that the provision of a games-dominated curriculum in PE benefits boys who often have both more experience and investment in competitive sports (Williams 1989). Girls' experiences of PE in primary school are key since they affect later attitudes. By the time girls enter secondary school, they tend to have already formed set ideas about both their own abilities and their activity preferences (Williams et al., 2000). It is in secondary school in particular that PE teachers and coaches have noted girls' overall disinvestments in physical education and activities. Cynthia Cockburn (1999) describes a continuum of girls' participation ranging from a minority of active and willing participants, a number of 'absentees' who purposely skip lessons or bring in notes, and the vast majority in between who participate but with the minimal amount of effort and commitment required. Girls are often seen to be a problem by coaches and teachers as a result of their withdrawal from PE or concerns with appearance. In Jan Wright's (1996: 66) research, girls were perceived by their teachers 'to be

far less enthusiastic than the boys, much harder to motivate, slower to change and far less skilled.’ As these findings attest, girls are often compared to their male peers and found to be lacking. However, the tendency to blame girls for their disinvestments does not take adequate consideration of *why* many girls choose to opt out of PE.

Girls’ own accounts of their PE experiences have highlighted both sexist policies in schools as well as the emotive everyday realities of PE participation. Girls have described inappropriate kits that expose their bodies to both the elements and the male gaze, enforced communal showers, boredom, lack of choice, harassment from male peers and feelings of incompetence generated through hierarchies of ability (Ennis, 1999, Ennis, 1996, Scraton, 1992, Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Hills, 2007, Coakley and White, 1992). Many of these complaints centre around an exposure of the body on display in which feelings of shame and humiliation have left permanent damage (Wellard, 2007, Wright and Dewar, 1997). Early experiences are very important in young people’s later decisions about participating in sport. Coakley and White’s (1992: 31) research found that both boys’ and girls’ decisions to take part in sports reflected past experiences but that girls’ experiences tended to be much more negative. An important strategy in confronting girls’ negative experiences and disaffection in PE has been that of equal opportunities.

Girls in PE: equal opportunities vs. anti-sexist policies

The National Curriculum Council has identified equal opportunities as a cross-curricular dimension, which should permeate all subjects. For physical education this means that all children should be allowed access to and be given confidence in the different activities involved, regardless of their ability, sex or cultural/ethnic background.

(DES Physical Education 5-16 1991)

The introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 and the 1988 Education Reform Act both legislated against sex discrimination in schools and called attention to gender bias and inequality with unfolding implications for physical education and the implementation of equal opportunities policies (Scraton, 1992, Weiner, 1985).

Although these strategies seemed to address early feminist concerns over girls' disadvantage in PE, they could also be considered 'watered-down' versions of the anti-sexist arguments originally put forth (Weiner 1985). School responses operated on a premise of 'removing barriers' for girls, for example by relaxing kit requirements or putting curtains up in the showers (Kirk et al., 2000).

Despite such 'token' efforts, the implementation of these strategies was hampered by both a lack of political/social will and insufficient understanding of complex gender issues. A teacher in Flintoff's (1996) research explained 'we have no problems with equal opportunities here, we've got mixed changing rooms!' This comment relays some of the early confusion around equal opportunities policy and its implementation, which often varied considerably across schools. As Milosevic (1996) points out, the exemption of sport in this legislation and its conflation with PE created uncertainty among schools. For example, equal provision could still mean football for boys and hockey for girls since these were interpreted to be comparable activities (Milosevic, 1996: 33).

The interpretation of 'equality' in terms of either a male or female PE curriculum has spurred a central controversy in sporting provision. This debate focuses on either providing girls with equal access to what are considered to be 'male-model' sports or in providing 'girl-friendly' activities that cater to girls' experiences and interests (Williams, 1993, Bailey et al., 2005, Vilhjalmsson and Kristjansdottir, 2003, Scraton, 1992). As Williams points out, girls and boys continue to have different experiences of physical activity and thus equal access may in fact mean access to a 'male-defined PE curriculum' (1993: 127). Interpretations of equal opportunities have often translated as co-education within a mixed curriculum that tends to be dominated by competitive games (Williams and Woodhouse, 1996, Flintoff, 1996). The idea that mixed-PE sessions offer equality to girls has been challenged by questions about girls' experiences in these sessions.

Catherine Ennis' work provides a striking indictment of inadequately regulated mixed PE settings in which dominance, aggression and elitism

reign as unquestioned tenets of participation (Ennis et al., 1999, Ennis, 1996, Ennis, 1999). She writes, 'No curriculum in physical education has been as effective in constraining opportunities and alienating girls as that found in co-educational, multi-activity sport classes (Ennis, 1999: 32). Ennis reports that such mixed-game sessions are often seen by dominant boys as opportunities to prove their sporting prowess while girls and other lower skilled boys were viewed as mere 'impediments' to dominant boys' rigorous game-play. Her outline of a 'Sport for Peace' programme encourages players to foster relationships of trust, encouragement and confidence in models of play based on interdependence rather than overtly competitive individualism (Ennis, 1999). The 'Sport for Peace' model represents a somewhat radical challenge to male dominance in PE and Ennis describes the particular benefits for girls in being able to foster skills and relationships in a supportive environment. However, as Ennis admits, the model continues to privilege dominant players as paternalistic 'coaches' and to work towards integrating girls into already male-defined sports. Similarly, the facilitation of girls into 'male-model' sports has been challenged for its uncritical acceptance of competitive models of play which leave the underlying ideological bases of sports relatively unquestioned (Cooky and McDonald, 2005). As Cooky and McDonald's (2005) research reveals, simply moving girls into traditional male model sports continues to position them as continually lacking in relation to male players and without the critical tools to interrogate the hierarchies that are reinforced through traditional sports participation.

A number of researchers have otherwise advocated girls' participation in 'female-friendly' activities (McManus and Armstrong, 1996, Kirk et al., 2000, Vilhjalmsson and Kristjansdottir, 2003). The provision of 'female-friendly' activities such as dance, fitness classes, and cheerleading can be seen to attract girls by appealing to their desire to lose weight or to emphasise an 'attractive' femininity (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Hargreaves, 1994, Adams and Bettis, 2003).

Despite catering to girls' interests, these activities continue to reinforce gender binaries without sufficiently challenging girls' gendered capabilities.

Scraton (1992) points out that when given the choice, girls often chose fitness activities in PE, but traditionally gendered experiences were not inevitable. She suggests that 'when gender stereotypes are challenged, less gendered outcomes can be achieved' (1992: 84). In their overview of gender and physical activity, Bailey, Wellard and Dismore (2005: 4) argue that rather than looking for ways to make activities more 'girl-friendly' we should be trying to make activities more 'youth friendly' by focusing on experiences of pleasure and fun through movement of bodies rather than on competitive sporting outcomes. Others such as Gorely, Holroyd and Kirk (2003) have insisted that physical education should have the express aim of encouraging physical empowerment with consideration of particularly gendered habituses. 'The content of programmes themselves need to have a capacity to challenge and change aspects of physical culture that are oppressive for particular groups' (2003: 442). A variety of strategies are thus needed both to encourage girls' initial interest and to challenge gendered stereotypes for both boys and girls. At the schools I researched at, 'girl-friendly' activities such as cheerleading were certainly popular in their perceived ability to attract and retain girls' participation.

Within physical education, the equivalent of 'female-friendly' activities has been a separate PE curriculum for girls based on a premise of 'different and complementary' (Hargreaves, 1994, Scraton, 1992: 52). This has often meant providing 'female' versions of popular boys' sports such as netball and hockey both in the hope that these would appeal to girls and with the understanding that these were more 'appropriate' to girls' capabilities (Scraton, 1992). This strategy has been relatively successful in attracting girls to such sports. However, girls-only PE has also been described as providing an 'inferior curriculum' of activities that reinforce limited spatiality and movement and are less likely to be carried on into adulthood (Williams, 1989, Williams, 1993, Scraton, 1992). As Williams (1993) points out, while activities such as dance, gymnastics and netball continue to dominate girls' PE provision, they do not represent activities that women are likely to take up in adulthood such as swimming and aerobics.

Whether championing girls' movement into 'girl-friendly' or 'male-model' sports, equal opportunities policies seem to be characterised by either their unwillingness or inability to problematise dominant models of play in male sports participation. This has not only been disadvantageous to girls. It has meant that boys are often left out of equity strategies and not given the opportunity to experience different forms of movement and expression through dance or other creative movement programmes (Gard, 2001, Green et al., 2007). Overall, equal opportunities policies are characterised by their attention to access rather than outcomes, thereby raising questions about who in particular benefits from the current models of provision (Williams and Woodhouse, 1996). They can therefore be seen as a depoliticised strategy of moving girls and women into sporting programmes and curriculums without questioning their underlying aims and structural organisation (Hargreaves, 1994, Weiner, 1985). As Hargreaves (1994: 29) notes, 'there is a powerful tendency in this perspective to divert attention away from the gender-linked value system of mainstream sports and to accept the dominant ideologies that support them.'

Practices such as the removal of 'barriers' for girls and women still seem to place the impetus for participation on young women themselves by addressing what might be considered as 'superficial' aspects of participation rather than more fundamental issues around gender constructs and social power. Equal opportunities has also been criticised for its failure to take into account the different experiences of girls as they are structured around class, ethnicity and 'racial' inequalities (Evans and Davies, 1993, Penney and Evans, 2002). As Penney and Evans (2002: 8) write: 'Ethnicity, culture, ability and social class codetermine how an individual is likely to receive and respond to the experiences of physical education.' However, in practice strategies to confront 'isms' were often seen to be counterproductive to one another and therefore unable to deal with the complex ways in which identities are constructed.

Muslim girls and physical activity

A number of studies have highlighted the particular difficulties that Muslim girls may experience in relation to physical activity, thus resulting in low participation rates characterised by ‘limited involvement in organised sport’ (de Knop et al., 1996, Johnson, 2000, Kay, 2006). The importance of ‘family honour’ within Muslim households has been identified as limiting girls’ access to sport and physical activity with girls’ leisure pursuits centred more on the home and family (de Knop et al., 1996, Kay, 2006). Cultural interpretations of Islamic traditions have been seen to be in direct opposition with specific aspects of physical education provision as it is structured in the UK. Particular issues centre on the uncovering of the body in PE kits, communal showers, fasting around Ramadan and staying after school for extracurricular activities (Carroll and Hollinshead, 1993, Carrington and Williams, 1988).

The identification of ‘barriers’ to Muslim girls’ participation in sport can be framed within either an assimilationist or integrationist perspective depending on where the supposed ‘problem’ and impetus for reform is located. Locating said issues within the home/cultural context conforms to an assimilationist model in which minority cultures are expected to adhere to dominant cultural requirements (Zaman, 1997). This view reinforces a deficit model by locating problems within religious and cultural traditions. Suggestions that the dominant culture make provisions for these specific requirements can be seen as part of an integrationist model in which ‘concessions’ are made in order to encourage participation (Zaman, 1997, Figueroa, 1993). This would require schools for example to relax requirements around PE kits and to allow girls to miss PE when they are fasting. This was a particular issue at Blythvale School where Deniz attended since the large number of Muslim girls in the class seemed to prove frustrating for the PE teachers, thus contributing to the construction of a particular ‘problem’ around their participation.

Carroll and Hollinshead’s (1993) research portrays Asian girls in particular as caught up in a ‘culture clash’ between home and the school because of these difficulties. In order to avoid conflict, girls in their research were

forced either to miss school or to skip PE lessons, thereby avoiding physical activity altogether. The authors suggest that Asian girls are doubly affected by both the racism of school policies and the sexism of their home cultures. In this view, teachers' attempts to implement equal opportunities policies by including Muslim girls in PE and thereby challenging sexism are at odds with anti-racist requirements to respect cultural traditions. Carroll and Hollinshead seem to view this problem as irresolvable because of the underlying conflict in cultural traditions.

However, the theory of 'culture clash' has been branded as both unnecessarily divisive and as inaccurate. As Siraj-Blachford (1993 :79) points out, school policies can be seen to be both institutionally racist *and* in effect sexist. Indeed, issues of revealing PE kits, mixed PE sessions and communal showers have been identified as problematic for many girls and certainly not just for Muslim girls. Furthermore, Siraj-Blachford suggests that Carroll and Hollinshead's study itself continues to reproduce cultural stereotypes through its characterisation of Muslim values as both sexist and oppressive. 'The study takes as its 'foundations' the very racist and sexist structures that the researchers profess to understand and undermine' (Siraj-Blachford, 1993: 82).

Indeed, as Zaman (1997: 54) points out, Islamic tenets do not mitigate against participation in physical activities *per se* and in fact she argues that the Islamic concept of 'fitra' advocates physical fitness and health as the naturally good and pure state of existence. Instead, Zaman implicates Western societal values for alienating Muslim girls from physical activity through 'divorc[ing] physical fitness and health from Muslim reality' (1997: 59).

Both of these critiques imply that the specific socio-historical and political context needs to be addressed in any consideration of Muslim girls' participation in both physical education and physical activity more broadly. Dagkas and Benn's (2006) research attempts to do this by comparing the experiences of young Muslim women in physical education in Greece and Britain. While concerns around Ramadan, PE kits and sex-segregation were similar in these settings, there were far fewer conflicts in the Greek context.

Dagkas and Benn attribute these differences to two particular processes. First, a shorter history of settlement in Britain and a growing Islamophobia has led pupils to privilege their Islamic identities and therefore to see this as at odds with their participation in physical activity. Secondly, they argue that there is a higher understanding of Islam in Greece and thus a more sensitive consideration of issues around kit requirements and the scheduling of physical activities. The authors conclude that despite apparent tensions, Muslim girls' needs can be met in order to experience the benefits of physical activity (Dagkas and Benn, 2006).

Within schools, Muslim girls' disinvestment in PE is perceived as an increasing problem, particularly as it is seen to reflect on the effectiveness of both the teacher and the school involved. Certainly the group of Muslim girls in Deniz's PE lesson who frequently did not participate in the lesson was seen as a potential problem, thus creating growing feelings of distrust between the girls and their teacher. Interestingly, this had not in any way been identified as a problem at Benjamin Laurence Primary School where Deniz and Lindsay had attended and where the majority of the girls did PE in long trousers and headscarves. Some of the potential reasons for this difference are discussed later on when I talk about Blythedale School in particular.

Ideology of Femininity

Attempts to situate women and girls' experiences of PE and sport within the wider cultural contexts of their lives have also led to the identification of an 'ideology of femininity' which is seen to contrast with the demands of sporting participation (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Choi, 2000, Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). This explanation suggests that the association of passivity and fragility with femininity, and activity and strength with masculinity, means that sport as an active pursuit is less appealing to girls and women. Furthermore, women's participation within sport can be seen to undermine their feminine identities, rendering women less likely to take part because of a 'fear of masculinization' (Choi, 2000). Indeed the male athlete is held up as the epitome of an idealised masculinity while female athletes

are continually asked to 'prove' their femininity through overtly coded symbols of both motherhood/marriage and heterosexuality (Hargreaves 1994: 163). Feminist accounts have stressed that by participating in sport and PE, women and girls risk gendered harassment and accusations of lesbianism that question both their attractiveness and sexual orientation (Clarke, 1998, Hargreaves, 1994, Adams et al., 2005).

During what has been described as a period of both transition and gender intensification (Jackson, 1996), adolescent girls may be particularly at pains to demonstrate their allegiance to an emphasised heterosexual femininity. Hargreaves (1994: 156) suggests that girls do this by taking part in a 'cult of adolescent femininity' which is premised on the development of a 'trendy', 'sexy' persona that is adverse to sports participation. Similarly, Cockburn and Clarke (2002: 653) stress girls' positioning in popular youth culture where emphasised heterosexual femininity is the 'only sanctioned option for girls' and where sports participation is deemed to be a hindrance, rather than an asset, to participation in this overtly gendered culture. While boys are able to gain prestige and confidence through sport, girls' sports competence is said to be only valued within the particular field of sport itself (Gorely et al., 2003).

Physical education is seen to be particularly problematic in girls' constructions of emphasised femininities since by participating, girls are asked to 'unadorn' themselves through tying back hair and removing jewellery while simultaneously performing under scrutiny of the 'male gaze' (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). This is seen to generate conflict and tension for girls and to persuade many girls to either withdraw or half-heartedly take part. Choi (2000) argues that those women who do take part may end up compromising and living a 'compensatory femininity' outside of sports through overtly feminine clothing, makeup and other signifying codes.

Ultimately, Cockburn and Clarke argue that girls' resistance to PE is self-defeating in that it continues to contribute to the male hegemony of sport while reinforcing girls' distance from it.

By emphasising their (traditional) femininity as an identity that resists the PE/sporting culture, girls contribute to the marginalisation of this culture. In so doing they “succeed” in their attempts to appear inactive, recipient and therefore mature young women.

(Cockburn and Clarke, 2002: 660)

While highlighting the impossible choices girls are faced with, a focus on an ‘ideology of femininity’ as impeding girls’ sports participation oversimplifies identities and identifications and fails to take into account the embodied capacities of sports participation. Based on her research with secondary school girls, Bethan Evans (2006) argues that the ‘fear of masculinization’ theory does not account for girls’ embodied experiences of PE. Girls’ physical education experiences drew attention to their lack of confidence in their sporting abilities and fears that they would be laughed at for their poor abilities. Evans (2006) therefore concludes that girls suffer doubly through a need to appear both competent and heterosexually attractive while participating in sport and PE classes.

In addition to its inattention to embodied capacities, the theory of an ‘ideology of femininity’ can be seen as deterministic in its framing. It uncritically pairs gendered social constructs with their ‘matching’ sexed bodies without considering other important factors such as social class, ‘race’, age and sexual orientation. Femininity is seen as a homogeneous identity taken up by girls and there is less space to explore their resistances to this script as well as the ways in which multiple discourses intersect to affect girls’ experiences. This perspective thus fails to account for the ways in which girls may use sports participation to construct their identities within secondary school, sometimes in direct resistance to codes of emphasised femininity (Adams et al., 2005). While these resistances seemed to be more accessible in primary school, I suggest in chapter seven that hierarchies of both ability and group membership and practices made it more difficult for girls to access sport as a useful form of social capital.

Girls into sports: experiences in and outside of schooling

As these critiques suggest, an emphasis on an ideology of femininity may not tell the full story and may also reinforce the idea that all girls have negative experiences of sport without taking into account the particular

context of their involvement. Various studies have addressed the specific pedagogical context of girls' participation in PE, detailing factors that go beyond a 'fear of masculinization' (Hills, 2006, Flintoff and Scraton, 2001, Williams and Bedward, 2001, Williams and Bedward, 2002). Girls' lack of power is evidenced in a combination of discipline, performance on display and lack of choice that characterise PE provision in schools (Williams and Bedward, 2002). These aspects have been viewed as particularly damaging to girls' positive sporting experiences. Moreover, while teacher stereotypes may continue to underestimate girls' interests and abilities in sport, girls themselves often hold different views and may see themselves as more or less skilful than their teachers assume (Williams and Bedward, 2001, Flintoff and Scraton, 2001). The views and perspectives of girls themselves also vary considerably and while some girls may see competitive games as unappealing, others may resent that they are not given the opportunity to play games such as rugby and football (Williams and Bedward, 1999, Hills, 2006). Certainly Deniz resented the fact that football was not included in their PE curriculum. This more recent research also suggests that girls may have very different experiences of sport in and outside of school with the latter often proving to be more positive. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) therefore question whether the possibilities for empowerment and a challenge to dominant discourses are more viable in extra-curricular sports settings.

Indeed, girls' participation in a number of sports and leisure pursuits outside of schooling is steadily growing (Scraton et al., 1999, UK Sport, 2006, Bennett, 2000). Aside from advocating girls' participation in out-of-school sports clubs, this research also seems to suggest the importance of schools and the educational setting more broadly in contextualising girls' experiences of sport, physical activity and the body. Increasingly, the physical education and health curriculum has been tied into the standards agenda, thus raising the emphasis on performance and the identification and measurement of ability (Evans et al., 2008a, Evans et al., 2008b).

Schools and sports

In the performative climate of educational provision, schools have become steadily more subject to regulatory mechanisms such as parental choice and ranking systems (Ball, 2003a). This places schools in the unenviable position of competing for parental support whilst subject to governmental targets and controls (Evans and Davies, 2004). Ofsted now includes health as one of its indicators of school quality and the 'National Healthy Schools' initiative incites schools to take up pervasive health monitoring and incentivisation techniques aimed at linking 'good health, behaviour and achievement' (DSCF 2009). Indeed all four of the secondary schools the girls attended either attained or were seeking to attain healthy schools status during the period of research. As Evans & Davies (2004: 10) note, 'schools today are increasingly steered by the barren managerial mantras of liberal individualism – achievement, assessment and accountability.' The emphasis on 'winners' and 'losers' in sports competition is now disturbingly echoed in an education system aimed at identifying and nurturing 'excellence' from very young ages (Lucey and Reay 2002). This emphasis on performance shrewdly translates into PE and sport provision.

Survey research into physical education provision has found that overwhelmingly, PE teachers and schools felt judged by their performances in extracurricular competitions of individuals and school teams (Penney and Harris, 1997: 48). The emphasis on excellence and achievement has only heightened over the past decade, making it ever more difficult to resist traditional structures of competition in school sports. For schools in the 1997 survey, performance in competitions operated as indicators of 'quality,' and parents and senior teachers placed emphasis on winning as a symbol of success (Penney and Harris, 1997). Moreover, the commitment to performance and ability codes is reinforced through the identification with and investment in such codes by mediating adults. Evans and Davies (2004: 7) suggest that 'teachers, coaches and agents are still strongly attached to performance, body perfection and product, very often shaped by elite attachment or personal desire for all three.' New policy statements and initiatives also encourage elite performance and encourage schools to focus

on ability by nurturing ‘the most talented’ young athletes (DCSF, 2008b). The increasing emphasis on performance in schools has important implications for student subjectivities by constructing the ways in which worth and competence are assessed. Although schools have individual approaches to physical education and sport provision, a school’s positioning in the league tables, its socioeconomic composition and its investment in the standards agenda form an important backdrop to its PE provision and the expectations it holds of students.

School orientations and PE provision

It became clear in my research as the girls made the transition to secondary school that their choice of school had a significant impact on their engagement in sport. Choices about secondary schools are influenced by a variety of factors with inevitable implications for children’s spatial geographies and embodied physicality. Schools hold wider implications for physical activities in terms of their overall ethos, sports facilities and provision as well as geographical aspects. The transfer to secondary school represents a significant decision in children’s educational trajectories and has been described as a ‘key moment’ likely to generate considerable class anxiety (Ball, 2003a: 3). Ball (2003a: 59) describes a set of ‘social mythologies’ that inform parental choices about schools, allowing them to make judgements in regards to the schools’ particular merits and cultural ‘fit’ with themselves and their children. Ball argues that these are not necessarily linked to straightforward ‘facts’ about the school but are rather based upon classed preconceptions and familiar shared stories of school reputation. Similar to Ball’s participants, parental concerns at both primary schools related to a range of issues including discipline, amounts of homework, exam results, student behaviour and geographical location. In many parents’ minds but particularly for middle class parents, the concept of a good school was also equated with an all girls’ school, which are often associated with girls’ higher academic achievement (Power et al., 2003).

Schools can be characterised by complexes of behaviour that distinguish between expressive and instrumental orders (Power, et al. 2003). A school’s

particular complex might be described as an ‘ethos’ that creates expectations both around student achievement and the way in which this achievement is appropriately embodied. An interview with Spirit’s friends conveys the extent to which girls are restricted in their embodied practices by the policies and expectations of the school. The girls here attend Folkestone Girls’ School, a private school preferred by ‘new money’ parents, as described by the Head of Year. In discussing their uniforms the girls described how precisely the rules of dress needed to be followed, including length of skirt, tucking in shirts and wearing ties. Even as they travelled to and from school, the girls told me, these instructions needed to be complied with:

Sarah: We’re meant to represent our school

Rafi: Yeah

Sarah: Outside of school and in school [said in monotone as though she has heard it a thousand times repeated to her].

Rafi: And in between.

Sarah: In case there’s any visitors or anything.

Diana: I understand in school, but outside of school I don’t really understand.

Sheryl: So what kind of image do they want to project, do you think?

Rafi: Smart, sort of like.

Diana: Both kinds of smart.

All: Yeah. (laugh)

Rafi: Yeah, and like they just want to show it’s a good school. Cause it is a good school.

(Group Interview, Year 7, July 2007)

The girls’ comments reveal the extent to which school values and ethos are expected to be embodied in pupils, so that pupils become walking, breathing ‘representatives’ of a their school, upholding its reputation even away from the school grounds. Rafi explains that representatives of a ‘good’ school

should be both intelligent and well-presented - 'both kinds of smart.' Both middle class schools claimed to support sports for their female pupils but confined physical activity to a narrow field of acceptability with set rules and configurations (and even set clothing), which dictated how and when girls should be able to enjoy their bodies, reveal their aggression or even raise their voices above hushed tones. This suggests that they had very specific ideas about pupils' appropriate embodiment. Folkestone and Wellington Gardens Schools also placed a strong emphasis on academics and achievement, underlining these expectations with strict behavioural requirements. The schools held exacting uniform regulations, which were rigidly enforced by teachers in often public and humiliating ways. I witnessed girls being shouted at in corridors for violations of these rules such as untucked shirts or skirts that seemed too short. Paechter (2007: 114) describes school uniforms as a form of 'bodily regulation' in which pupils are 'expected to take pride in a public performance of 'good pupil from a good school,' thus demonstrating their identification with both the school and their peers.

At each middle class school there was also a strong emphasis on sports and this was aided by impressive sports facilities at Folkestone in particular. Spirit and her friends mentioned this as one of the reasons they were attracted to Folkestone School, along with its local sporting dominance.

Sheryl: So what did you hear about the sports provision at the school before you came?

Diana: Um, they have a big sports hall, and we knew they had a pool.

Sheryl: Yeah.

Diana: And um, here we kind of beat most people at other schools, which is good.

(Group Interview, Year 7, July 2007)

Victories in local tournaments and the individual sporting accomplishments of students added to the prestige and positioning of the school amidst other local schools that were vying for parental support and student attendance. Lists of student successes in sport could be added to the roster of attendance

rates at Oxbridge and other markers of student achievement showcased by the schools. Both Folkestone and Wellington Gardens showcased sporting and academic achievements of their students on display walls, thus highlighting the accomplishments of their ‘most talented’ pupils.

Folkestone and Wellington Gardens were located nearby to one another and the PE teachers at Wellington Gardens mentioned their ‘friendly’ rivalry in sports. In 2008 Wellington Gardens became a sports college, thus heightening its stake in sporting accomplishments. During our Year 8 interview, Nirvana described this transition and her disappointment about the implications it held for her personally. During our interview she offhandedly noted the school’s recently acquired status.

Nirvana: Oh yeah, we’re a sports college now.

Sheryl: Are you?

Nirvana: Yeah, and it’s really bad. Next year on Tuesdays we have to have twenty minutes more of lessons to have PE for two hours a week. It’s really rubbish.

Sheryl: You’re upset?

Nirvana: Yeah, I want to go home on Tuesdays at the normal time. I don’t want to have two hours.

Sheryl: Why are you a sports college now?

Nirvana: I don’t know, maybe because they think we’re good at sports. But we’re like a sports college, technology college, blah blah blah. There’s so much stuff. And it’s really rubbish because since we’re a technology college I have to do tech for GCSE. And I’m really rubbish.

(Interview, Year 8, 03/2007)

Here Nirvana acknowledges the stake the school holds in attempting to convey the image of a ‘good’ school with various attributes including sporting accomplishments as indicators of its status. While special sport or technology statuses seemed to uphold the image and value of the school locally, the onus is ultimately placed on girls to fulfil its new requirements

and Nirvana laments the limited choices in subject she now has as well as the increased time she will have to spend on a subject she already resents. Being a sports college also meant an increased investment in local sporting competitions, which in many ways compelled PE teachers to select only the ‘best’ players for games, even when other willing girls had dutifully come along to practices or tryouts. Girls’ experiences of selection and the impact this had on their sense of competence are explored more fully in chapter eight.

The physical education teachers at Wellington Gardens school were also very strict and told girls off for not having their uniform or talking in class, sometimes making them run around the pitch as punishment. Kit checks were carried out every term and regulations around their dress often prevented girls from insulating themselves against the cold, something they particularly disliked about PE. In many ways, the emphasis on achievement and behaviour were part of Wellington Gardens and Folkestone’s appeal to middle class parents in their largely wealthy catchment areas on the outskirts of London. The orderly behaviour, the enforcement of uniforms and most importantly, the production of ‘excellent’ results and outstanding inspections conveyed the assurance of a ‘good school’ to anxious parents keen to maximize their child’s potential. As a private school, Folkestone was well aware of its need to both attract and reassure parents and the PE teacher spoke to me of the overwhelming’ demands such parents often made of the school. The school offered a vast array of extracurricular activities including various sports as a means of marketing itself to selective, fee-paying parents.

PE and inner city schools

At Blythevale and Adlington Schools, the atmosphere was very different and similarly this related to the class and ethnic compositions of the school. Blythevale in particular expressed concerns about the number of girls engaging in PE and as a result offered a range of extracurricular provision before and after school. Nonetheless, the number of Muslim girls taking part in lessons was identified as a problem, which was something that came

across both in my visits to the school and in discussions with teachers. During our interview, the girls' Year 7 teacher remarked on the group of Muslim girls who regularly opted out of her PE lessons. I had asked if there seemed to be any 'anti-Islamic sentiment' at the school, following what Deniz had told me about harassment she had experienced in the corridors.

Jenny: It's not in terms of 'anti-Islamic', but quite generally across the year groups we're having difficulty with getting those girls to participate. And I don't notice any sort of undercurrent between the girls but I think they're making themselves stand out more because of that. And that could potentially become an issue. And as a teacher I don't know how to deal with that. Because there's a fine line between respecting someone's way of life but also having to meet certain requirements because of the government and me having a part somewhere in the middle of that. And then making sure they don't seem to be getting any special treatment compared with the other girls. And it's a really delicate juggling position that you're in [...] None of us are really sure how to tackle that. Because we're required by the National Curriculum to make sure they're all doing it. But at the same time, what do you do when, and how far do you allow them to make themselves stand out from the other girls? Which could lead to problems. So I don't think there is a problem at the moment but I think there is potential for them to start developing.

(Interview with Deniz's Y7 PE teacher, Blythvale School, 05/2006)

Earlier, Jenny had been surprised when I told her that Deniz had been very keen on PE in primary school and was one of the more active and assertive girls in her class. To her teacher, Deniz was among a group of other Muslim girls who regularly 'opted out' and as Jenny describes this created an issue for the teachers in their understanding of curriculum requirements as contradictory to 'respecting someone's way of life.'

Although Jenny does not identify a ‘problem’ per se, she suggests that it is the girls’ self-segregation, which could constitute a problem, by distancing the girls from their classmates. Jenny explained that Deniz often put herself in a ‘helper’ role as a sort of compensation for her lack of participation when she regularly ‘forgot’ her kit at home. In fact there was no set uniform at Blythevale, only the stipulation that girls should change into a different set of clothing for PE.

Although girls at Blythevale could wear what they wanted during PE still a small, consistent group tended to opt out of lessons, including Deniz and her friends, who were also practicing Muslims. This seemed both to compound and result from the lack of trust between PE teachers and students. Their notes from home, excusing the girls from lessons, were met with dissatisfaction from PE teachers, something the girls couldn’t understand. ‘They don’t believe us!’ they told me, in mild surprise at their PE teachers’ reactions to weekly notes.

In Year 7 when I began my observations at Blythevale School, the girls did not have a regular PE teacher and were taught by a stream of outside supply and non-PE teachers within the school. The lack of an enduring relationship seemed to contribute to feelings of distrust and individual teachers seemed crucial to enjoyment for some girls.

Deniz: Yeah, we’re doing relays. I don’t like it that much but it’s fun with her. But with Miss Rivers, it’s boring. That’s why I don’t do it with her. But with the other teacher I really like it.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

Girls’ relationships both with their PE teachers and their peers had been key to their enjoyment of PE in primary school and it was this bond that they often bemoaned the loss of at secondary school. Flintoff and Scraton (2001: 16) have similarly found that ‘quality of relationships’ was key to involvement in physical activity. The girls’ emphasis on the importance of this relationship differs from the DFES regulations, which advises the hiring of more specialist practitioners in line with its attempts to raise standards of attainment. At Blythevale and Adlington Schools, teachers had already

relaxed the uniform requirements. They had found these difficult to enforce given broader issues of behaviour management and crisis intervention.

Instead of the orderly, organised line of students doing exactly as they were told (as at Wellington Gardens), PE lessons sometimes seemed quite chaotic in comparison – particularly at Adlington where PE lessons began in a gym full of up to 90 students.

Adlington was a mixed school but given the appeal of local girls' schools to many parents, it was overwhelmingly populated by boys. In PE this often meant catering to traditional boys' sports agendas but it also meant that the teachers were taken up with many behavioural issues. I witnessed on several occasions the male PE Head shouting at students in a drill-sergeant pitch that reverberated through the large gym from the corridor. Students spent a lot of time sitting and waiting for behavioural incidents to be dealt with and girls in particular were subject to teasing and sexual harassment from male peers. Students had an assigned PE kit but it was not strictly enforced and girls often complemented their kit with matching jumpers or designer socks.

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the identification of a problem in relation to girls' participation in PE and physical activity. It suggests that such an identification involves a series of judgements around both the ideal forms of this participation and the basis on which it is justified. Such judgements in turn affect decisions about where to locate particular failures and how to go about making changes. The development of sport in line with masculine ideals of aggression and dominance meant that for many years girls' and women's lack of participation in these models was deemed natural and unproblematic. Indeed it was not until feminist interventions that girls' overall disadvantage and less successful outcomes in sport were identified as an issue for schools in particular. Although a broad variety of interventions were attempted, liberal strategies arguably proved most successful in moving girls and women into sports in large numbers, though often without questioning the underlying ideological bases of such participation. Rarely are male dominance or overt competition in sport

deemed to be problematic and instead it has been more likely girls' engagement and skill that is said to be inadequate and lacking.

In schools in particular, the requirements of the National Curriculum and the onus on teachers to develop their students in line with set targets means that some girls' disaffection or non-participation is seen as particularly problematic and that girls themselves are likely to be cast as the problem. Muslim girls' disinvestment in PE is perceived as an increasing problem, particularly as it is seen to reflect on the effectiveness of both the teacher and school involved. Feminist perspectives have been key in highlighting girls' own experiences of PE lessons, demonstrating how girls' efforts to appear inactive have often facilitated their construction of conventionally attractive young femininities. Issues of class and race have often been less explored, except to see these as compounding factors in girls' non-involvement.

In recent years, concerns around young people's health as well as the desire to identify and develop young 'talent' have created a renewed emphasis on young people's participation in sport and physical activity. This has again shifted attention to girls' participation in particular since they are likely to be engaging in fewer hours of physical activity than their male peers. The overwhelming power of discourses which endorse physical activity on the basis of health benefits has made questioning the forms or justification for this participation increasingly difficult. The popularity of the healthy schools initiative has further tied physical activity and other 'health' outcomes to school performance, thus linking them to the broader standards agenda. It is specifically within this context that schools have been persuaded to see girls' participation levels as problematic and to encourage their participation in sport and physical activity through a variety of available means.

Gaining status as a sports college, developing successful sports teams and providing a variety of extracurricular activities set in impressive facilities have all become means by which schools can demonstrate their worth and overall value both in local league standings and in parents' estimations. At Wellington Gardens and Folkestone schools, girls' outstanding

achievements in sports were much more likely to be fostered at outside clubs and lessons facilitated by wealthy parents, but they nonetheless represented accomplishments on the part of the school, adding to its overall prestige. And while Blythevale and Adlington struggled to get many girls on board with their activities, their efforts were tinged with the fear that girls' lack of engagement might be seen as a reflection of the school, rather than a broader issue about sociocultural values and the ways in which parents envisioned their children's successful education. The current government emphasis on achievement, performance and set targets forms an important backdrop to girls' participation in sports at schools that are differentially positioned in relation to the overall standards agenda. This chapter is therefore directly relevant to my second and fourth research questions in contextualising girls' participation in sport and PE within a broader educational agenda and by suggesting that the increased emphasis on performance with the current standards agenda has specific implications for girls' involvement in sport. It thereby argues that academic and physical achievement are more closely linked than is often acknowledged.

The following chapter more specifically takes up this contention by exploring parents' and girls' understandings of a 'good education' and the implications this had for both their school choice and engagement in physical activities.

Chapter Six A Good Education: Girls' extracurricular pursuits and school choice

Introduction

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.

(Austen, 1988(orig. 1813): 39)

This chapter explores the ways in which girls' and their parents' understandings of 'a good education' impacted on girls' activity and school choices in operating as discourses of successful girlhood. The defining characteristics of a 'well-educated girl' have shifted over the years, reflecting changes in social trends including labour markets and dominant gender narratives. In the 19th-20th centuries, middle class women's perceived inevitable domestic roles translated into education aimed at developing a repertoire of 'feminine accomplishments useful in the marriage market' (Shilling, 1993: 65). The preceding quote from Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' demonstrates a Regency English characterisation of a well-educated, 'genteel' young woman, whose extensive accomplishments nonetheless served primarily to attract a husband. While the list of musical and artistic abilities is impressive, these are insufficient and must be accompanied by a specific embodiment, an elusive 'certain something' that is simultaneously classed, raced and gendered. The body has always been implicated in education in both subtle and explicit ways. An idealised version of middle class femininity similarly underpinned early physical education programmes, prompting activities linked to women's seemingly 'natural' traits of gracefulness and passivity such as callisthenics and dance (Scraton, 1992). In the 21st century, competitive global markets and ongoing credentialism have been viewed by some observers as removing gender barriers within education. In fact the idea of the 'successful girl' has been held up as a model of 21st century self-sufficiency and progress, prompting fears about 'failing boys,' a position that has been criticised by feminist

educationalists for over-simplification of complex educational outputs. (Epstein et al., 1998, Francis, 2000).

This chapter looks at what it might mean to be a well-educated, successful girl in a globalised, 21st century Britain by exploring the different meanings of ‘a good education’ to parents positioned differently by inequalities of social class and ethnicity. Educational policy currently privileges performative results in the form of A levels and GCSEs; as quantifiable indicators of excellence and guarantors of future success. However, my research suggests that, particularly for middle class parents, ongoing beliefs about ‘a good education’ continue to be invested with notions of a well-rounded pupil with an array of talents and interests outside of academics – whose mannerisms and activities embody a particular version of ‘successful girlhood.’ Despite its shifting connotations and outputs, a good education continues to hold emotive resonance as an arbiter of privileges, rights and aspirations and educational attainment is still strongly linked to social class, gender and ethnicity (Gaine and George, 1999, Whitty, 2001, Kenway et al., 1998, Walkerdine et al., 2001). In her memoirs of life at a girls’ grammar school in the 1950s, Mary Evans (1991) provides a compelling critique of the clashing ideals around gender and academic achievement within middle class girls’ entry into elite grammar schools. Though seemingly designed to provide a rigorous academic experience, Evans contends that girls’ grammar schools were constantly confronted by the looming prospect of marriage and motherhood that was expected to shortly curtail any academic or career aspirations of their students (Evans, 1991). Although career prospects and educational possibilities for girls and young women have seemingly widened immensely since this time, the ‘double shift’ many women occupy have problematised the prospect of ‘having it all.’ Further to this, McRobbie’s (2007) recent writing suggests that women’s bids for formerly masculine domains of success are granted only at the expense of an overtly feminised public persona or ‘masquerade.’ That such a masquerade is inevitably embodied suggests the implication of bodily regimes and ‘care of the self’ in the maintenance of successful feminine personas.

Successful girlhood

Angela McRobbie describes a contemporary socio-economic context in which demands for flexible, skilled labour have discursively shifted ideas around well-educated girlhood from those of ‘marriageability’ towards those of ‘capability’ (McRobbie, 2007: 722). This capacity model of girlhood positions girls as productive economic figures in a new global economy, thus offering up tantalising prospects of independence and financial success for individual young women. However, McRobbie suggests that economic possibilities opened up to women and girls have been accompanied by a new ‘sexual contract’ in which reassuringly feminine performances of heterosexual attractiveness and vulnerability operate through a form of ‘post-feminist masquerade,’ which continues to reinforce patriarchal privilege (McRobbie, 2007: 722). Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001: 3) similarly take on the idea of girls as ‘modern neoliberal subjects’ with particular attention to the class divisions that continue to thwart this possibility. Their longitudinal research suggests that social class remains highly implicated in the divisions between those girls who embody either success or failure in this new meritocracy. Participation in this new socio-economic landscape requires an ongoing ‘reinvention of the self’, in which subjects are encouraged to think of themselves as ‘autonomous agents’ who must constantly remake themselves through a sense of personal responsibility (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 2). My research found that middle class parents were particularly keen to invest in such projects and therefore to see extracurricular activities (including sport) as important in the overall education or ‘making up’ of their daughters (Vincent and Ball, 2007).

Neoliberal discourses of the self as ‘project’ in the constant process of remaking are strongly echoed in recent government health initiatives in schools and beyond (Evans *et al.* 2007). Recent work has emphasised the embodied aspects of educational achievement, suggesting that bodies can and do ‘matter’ in educational outputs as corporeal manifestations of suitable academic subjects (Allan 2007; Evans *et al.* 2004; Evans *et al.* 2008). In addition to the accrual of athletic forms and skills, sporting and

musical accomplishments alongside academic achievement may represent significant assets in the demonstration of ‘well rounded’ academic subjects suitable for top scholarships and university places. Cooky and McDonald (2005: 65) argue that sport can act as a ‘key avenue for the transmission of dominant cultural values and bodily expectations,’ in which the athletic characteristics of discipline and hard work serve the capitalist marketplace well.

Class considerations play out particularly poignantly in the choices made by the girls in my study as they entered secondary school. After attending two co-educational state primary schools, the girls went on to attend a variety of mixed or single sex, private and comprehensive secondary schools; placing them in varying relations to future opportunities. Based on research into social class and school choice, Whitty (2001: 290) writes, ‘It becomes clear that certain school choices still bring a significantly greater chance of success than others, particularly when competing for the ‘glittering prizes’ associated with elite universities and elite occupations.’ This suggests that girls’ choices around schooling are significant in terms of their eventual output and are related to their extra-curricular activities. Throughout the chapter I seek to highlight links between the girls’ academic and sporting/extracurricular choices by focusing on notions of what a ‘good education’ constituted and considering how this influenced their decisions and practices.

Class and the educational market

In contemporary England, education has come to the forefront of government policy aiming to both maintain and construct models of excellence able to thrive in a competitive global market. Among others, Stephen Ball’s work has been essential in identifying a current educational climate of ‘performativity’ in which competition for scarce resources has led to increased marketisation and policy espousal of the neoliberal concepts of choice and achievement in education (Ball, 2003a, Ball, 2003b). This context is seen to produce both neoliberal schools and educational subjects ‘in the service of competitive global markets’ (O’Flynn and Epstein, 2005:

187, Ball, 2003a). Ball argues that this particular educational climate caters to the needs and wants of middle class parents. Conversely in a system of league tables and government monitoring, schools themselves can be seen to attempt to secure particular types of middle class students as model pupils who will elevate the results of the school (Ball, 2003a: 25). As students compete for limited places at the 'right schools' good grades may not be enough. Middle class parents in particular may seek out other ways of distinguishing their children with involvement in extra-curricular activities and attendant displays of 'talent' and 'dedication' viewed as important investments in children (Vincent and Ball, 2007).

Research within physical education and sport (Garrett, 2004a, Gorely et al., 2003, Walseth, 2008) has suggested that inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity are particularly relevant in young people's sports participation. Research into immigrant girls' sports involvement in Norway found that although girls from various ethnic immigrant groups could network socially through sport, divisions along class lines continued to create barriers (Walseth, 2008). In their research with mixed secondary school students in England, Gorely, Holroyd and Kirk (2003: 439) argue that boys were able to translate sporting ability into popularity and prestige but that this was not the case for girls for whom a concern with physical appearance, or 'hair, make-up and nails,' remained more socially prestigious. In a more promising vein, Robyne Garrett's (2004b) research with Australian girls suggests that female athletic bodies can and *do* create a form of social capital valuable in the heterosexual matrix of peer groupings and social status, but that this is limited by dominant discourses around physical activity and feminine embodiment. The relative higher valuing of sports participation in Australia as compared to Britain may account for this possibility. Within this context, the equation of fitness with a lean (but not too muscular) body seems to frame many girls' and women's participation in sports.

My findings suggest that girls' experiences within sport also divided along lines of social class as related to the secondary schools the girls continued onto (Cooky and McDonald, 2005, O'Brien, 2003). Recent concerns over

girls' relative inactivity often seemed difficult to fathom at the two middle class secondary schools I researched where girls were involved in so many extracurricular activities that they overlapped one another. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes conveys some of my surprise on my first day of observations at athletics training in a suburban, largely middle class girls' secondary comprehensive:

Several of the girls are concerned about over-exertion since they have further activities planned for the day or week. Caroline tells me she is doing trampolining tonight and already did running once today, this after her doctor told her she should take it easy. Kristin has swimming tonight and Callie is going to do two hours of dance after this, plus she's already gone running in PE. I thought the problem was girls doing not enough activity but these girls seem to be doing too much.

(Fieldnotes, Wellington Gardens, 24/5/2007)

Conversely at Blythevale school in inner city London where many of the girls were first and second generation immigrants with fewer financial resources, the PE teacher conveyed her dismay to me on my first visit at the lack of a 'culture of staying on' after school for extracurricular activities. Penelope Eckert's (1989) research in the United States suggests that middle class alignment with school values and culture means that middle class parents are more likely to accept the school as an extended caretaker for children that can and should provide extracurricular activities. This is reinforced by research in the UK where middle class mothers were more likely to have both the knowledge and resources necessary to fill up children's schedules with an array of extracurricular activities (O'Brien, 2003, Reay, 1998).

Middle class parental strategies and knowledges employed in the education market have been described as a mode of 'class action' that informs and secures middle class privilege with particular consequences for those working class 'Others' left behind (Ball, 2003a, Reay, 2001a, Vincent, 2001). This research places particular emphasis on parents, though other studies have focused more specifically on the experiences of young people in this high stakes pursuit (Evans et al., 2004, Lucey and Reay, 2002, Reay and Wiliam, 1999, Whitty, 2001). Recent research by Vincent and Ball (2007: 1062) into middle class families' childcare decisions noted their

particular enthusiasm for enrolling children in ‘enrichment activities, extra-curricular sports and creative classes.’ Parents in this research tended to view such extracurricular activities as investments in their children for future displays of sporting, linguistic and musical talents in a competitive educational context (Vincent and Ball, 2007). The increasing use of personal tutors in the years up to selective schooling entrance exams can be seen to slot in alongside the range of extracurricular activities children attend, with sport and other forms of physical activity acting as one of many ‘value-added’ pursuits. Although I am here concerned with the particular consequences of these classed practices on girls’ activities, an emphasis on ‘class actions’ seems to remove something from the girls’ experiences of these activities as sources of identity construction, physical pleasure and social bonding. I therefore re-orient my analysis towards these aspects of girls’ engagement in later chapters. However, the dominance of social class in a neoliberal educational framework formed an overarching context within which physical activity was made more or less accessible and/or thinkable for girls as they made the transition to secondary school.

A good education = a good life

Studies examining school transitions have focused on social class as a particularly relevant factor in students’ choices with a smaller number looking more closely at the influence of ethnicity and gender in such decisions (Abbas, 2007, George, 2004, Gaine and George, 1999). Across their differing backgrounds and class/ethnic positionings, a common concern expressed by the girls and their parents alike was the pursuit of ‘a good education.’ In teleological reasoning, a good education could be acquired at a good school that would position you to attend a good university and therefore secure a professional or managerial career leading to a prosperous life. Power, Edwards, Whitty and Wigfall’s (2003) research on high achieving middle class students seems to suggest that this equation is a particularly White, middle class ideal, but within my research this held resonance across social groups, although with varying understandings of what these terms meant and what their requirements were. Abbas’ (2007) research with South Asian parents found that although all the parents valued

education as a means of social mobility, cultural capital in the form of knowledge and finances divided their access to selective schooling. In London in particular, a significant means of sifting access to different schools occurs through mobility and the ability to ‘buy into’ the right areas with ‘good schools’ (Ball, 2003a). This was certainly the case in my research where girls’ access to both schooling and physical activity was highly dependant on their economic privilege and the area they could afford to live in.

A good school

Decisions to attend the local mixed comprehensive or to take selective entrance exams for a private education were made through a series of classed understandings, parental histories and recommendations from ‘people like us’ (Ball, 2003a). Parents’ choice of school also held wider implications for physical activities in terms of the school’s ethos, sports facilities and provision as well as its geographical location.

The current governmental promotion of ‘choice’ and the litany of private, selective, state comprehensive, religious and new academy schools this has resulted in means parents and their children face weighing up and balancing the pros and cons of sometimes overwhelmingly various educational scenarios. Critics of contemporary educational policy have asserted that such choices are in fact governed to a large extent by the inequalities of gendered, classed and racialised social processes that favour middle class families in an increasingly competitive educational environment (Gaine and George, 1999, Lucey and Reay, 2002, Noyes, 2006).

Most of the children at Benjamin Laurence School made decisions about their secondary school based on proximity and familiarity rather than academic merit. This accords with Maeve O’Brien’s research, which found that working class families in Ireland often let their children choose their secondary schools based on advice from friends and relatives, whereas middle class parents were more likely to make informed decisions *for* their children (O’Brien 2003). Although middle class children who had attended Holly Bank Primary School certainly had a say in their choice of school,

this was mediated by parents who had already ensured that the available choices were appropriate.

Similar to Benjamin Laurence Primary School, parents at Holly Bank had also used proximity as a factor in their decisions, yet nearby schools were much more likely to be ‘good’ schools. Nirvana and Spirit’s parents had both mentioned the merit of nearby schools as a specific reason for moving to their relatively affluent area in outer London. This shift in geographical location was also strongly tied in with racialised lines and patterns.

Nirvana’s parents explained that they had moved from an area that was:

not very far away but it’s a whole different kind of culture. It’s far more multi-cultural I suppose. Yeah than here, this is...very different.

(Interview with Dave and Carol, Nirvana’s parents, 10/2005)

The pause and then the expression ‘very different’ seemed to allude to the homogeneity of the suburban, White middle class area they had moved to in order for Nirvana to attend what they perceived to be a good primary school. Although the anticipation of high academic grades was important, this was not the only consideration in making decisions around schools.

Sheryl: Do you know why they wanted you to come to Wellington Gardens as a school?

Erica: Um, well they thought it was a good school. And it was closer. My mum’s got a friend who she works with whose daughter goes here and she thought it was a really nice school and she thought I’d like it.

(Interview, Year 8, 10/2007)

Erica had joined the study in Year 7 when she was chosen as a friend of Nirvana’s to attend the group interview. Both girls attended Wellington Gardens, which Erica describes as a ‘good school.’ This understanding is based on the ‘outstanding’ results the school achieves, as well as the range of activities and specialisations the school provides; something no doubt both sets of parents were aware of before encouraging their daughters to attend. Choices about secondary schools are influenced by a variety of factors with inevitable implications for children’s spatial geographies and

embodied physicality. Ultimately, Spirit and her parents' decisions around her secondary school related not only to the perceived quality of results but also to the social landscape of the school and its opportunities for physical activity provision.

Sheryl: Why did you decide to come to [Folkestone] school?

Spirit: I tried for here and [nearby selective schools] and I got into there but I just decided to come here because it's got more sports and stuff. 'Cause [nearby school] is surrounded by concrete and so my Mum and Dad were like "I'd rather you be in a green place."

(Group Interview, Year 7, 05/06/2007)

Ball (2003a: 59) describes a set of 'social mythologies' that inform parental choices about schools and allow parents to make judgements in regards to the schools' particular merits and cultural 'fit' with both themselves and their children. Here the image of green space conjures up images of nature and outdoor play associated with idealised notions of childhood spent outdoors (Jones, 1999). Parental concepts are not necessarily linked to straightforward 'facts' about the school but are rather based upon classed preconceptions and familiar shared stories of school reputation. Similar to Ball's participants, parental concerns related to both the 'expressive' and 'instrumental' orders of the school and concerned discipline, amounts of homework, exam results, and student behaviour. Both Folkestone and Wellington Gardens Schools are located in an affluent middle class area where the difference in academic achievement between secondary schools is 'neither here nor there' as Lucy's mother puts it. Decisions about schools were often loaded with a lot of emotional weighing of potential risks and benefits that could be somewhat alleviated by the familiarity of other attendees. Although Lucy's mother has some concerns about Lucy's ability to 'fit in' at an all girls' school and the appropriateness of activities that will be provided for her, she wants to send her to the 'sister' school that her twin brother will be attending.

Mary: Academically both schools are exceedingly good. But my problem there would be that my oldest two are at Wellington boys and the logical thing to do is that Matthew [Lucy's twin] follows them into Wellington Boys where they're very happy. But I do think it would worry Lucy going to [nearby mixed sex school] with Matthew at Wellington Boys.

Sheryl: Are Wellington Boys and Wellington Girls connected?

Mary: They are separate schools about twenty yards apart.

Sheryl: Oh I see.

Mary: They are very separate schools. And Wellington Girls is a very strict school. With quite strong [unclear] The head is quite, it's a tightly run school I understand. A very good school, a very good school. But I'm just not convinced.

Sheryl: It's a big decision.

Mary: It's a very big decision. And it's one that you'll never know really - unless they are desperately unhappy or something. You'll never know if you got it right.

(Interview with Lucy's mother, 30/07/2005)

Mary's words convey some of the anguish and guilt parents struggle with as they make decisions that are seen to impact on the rest of their children's lives, simultaneously weighing up future happiness with their child's individual and social needs. Eventually, Lucy went on to attend Wellington Girls and seemed to settle in well. Despite the strictness of the school, which discouraged active games over break time, Lucy managed to fit in with a group of similarly active girls whom she knew from Scouts.

In their inner city locations, Lindsay, Gazza and Deniz also made decisions about their schools based on proximity and familiarity, though their assessments of a 'good school' is relative and may more accurately be described as 'good enough.' Gazza and her mother had decided that it would be best for Gazza to attend a local mixed, ethnically diverse comprehensive

school since it was within a short walking distance and several of her cousins already attended there.

Parental decisions around secondary school choices relate to a variety of factors including the ‘cultural’ fit for ethnic minority children and the perceived willingness of the school to tackle racism and allow children to express their cultural identities (George, 2007b). Although Deniz’s parents wanted her to attend a single sex girls’ school, her own desires were in being around other young Turkish people.

Deniz: My mum didn’t want me to go to a mixed school.

Sheryl: What did she say?

Deniz: She said that they have lots of kissing so she didn’t want me going there. But my cousin goes to a private school. Mixed. Boys and girls. I want to go there. It’s all, there’s all Turkish people there.

(Interview, Year 8, 09/11/2007)

Deniz’s comments about the mixed Turkish school reflect how both ethnicity and gender come into play in terms of school choice and desirability. The impact of dominant discourses around immigration and racism are bound to influence the schooling decisions of young Black and ethnic minority people as well as affecting the available expression of cultural identities (Shain, 2003, Back, 1996). In this context of marginalisation, it is understandable that Deniz wishes to attend a school with other students ‘like her.’ Eventually, Deniz settled on a comprehensive girls’ school not far from her home that was ethnically diverse and had a large immigrant population. Despite this diversity, she found that her wearing of a headscarf still set her apart from other students and she felt unwelcome on the school football team.

Parental Aspirations and Educational Trajectories

At the transition to secondary school, the girls and their parents were making difficult decisions about education and sport that would have long-lasting consequences for their future opportunities. Although they seemed to

start out with similar interests in securing a good education, the more nuanced details of their understanding of this process as well as their different forms of cultural capital in entering into this education marketplace presented them with a varying set of choices and results in terms of the type of secondary school they attended. While some girls and their parents viewed secondary school as a point at which to curtail extracurricular activities in order to focus on their studies, others simply wanted to cut back by placing particular emphasis on one sport or musical hobby.

It became evident in my research that questions of school choice and educational pathways were an emotive and personalised issue, often calling up parental aspirations and expectations. ‘The communication of expectations also embed the child in an imagined future, in a sense of what they could and should aspire to, in the form of a normal biography’ (Ball, 2003a: 108).

Lindsay⁸ (British-Pakistani, working class) attended Benjamin Laurence School and then went on to a mixed comprehensive nearby. Almost two years into secondary school, Lindsay explained that although she had little idea of the kinds of formal requirements needed for applying to university, she was nonetheless still committed to the idea of a good education, a concept passed down to her from her parents.

Lindsay: ‘Cause in Pakistan they don’t let the girls work. Like, be educated. They let the boys go off and do their things and the girls stay home and work.

Sheryl: Right. And how do you feel about that?

Lindsay: That’s sad, ‘cause I think it should be fair. But here my Dad wants us to be educated and like get a job and everything.

Sheryl: Mmm, I guess that’s what I meant. Do you think your parents want you to go to university?

⁸ The girls chose their own pseudonyms in Year 5 and their young age, as well as the dominance of English names, led to several Asian girls choosing Anglicised names. This represents one of the difficulties in defining ethnic minority identity in a dominant culture.

Lindsay: Yeah my dad really, 'cause my sisters are in college, second year. And he wants them to be really good, and us as well. He wants us to get a job and everything and not be uneducated.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/10/2007)

For Lindsay, whose parents are both immigrants, education is here seen as the stepping-stone towards a professional career and the security and status this will bring. Lindsay explained that although her father had worked as a diplomat in Pakistan he now did menial work for a supermarket chain in North London. The disjunction between her father's past status and current economic position highlights one of the complicating factors of straightforward class analysis based on parental occupation. The decision to emigrate to England may be influenced by multiple factors but the chance to provide future opportunities and prosperity for children ranks high among them and education is perceived as a key way to go about this (Abbas, 2007). The parental sacrifice of job and status, along with many other things surely left behind, is at the same time an opportunity for children to pursue higher education and therefore secure good jobs. Along with this opportunity comes a form of obligation and Lindsay spoke of the pressures placed on her to succeed in school and eventually to end up with a better career than her father. Lindsay also made sacrifices in this pursuit and in addition to being a diligent student she travelled over an hour each way by city bus to attend school with her brother. This was deemed necessary after her family were able to purchase a much-needed larger house on the outer edges of London. The long distance also meant that Lindsay was unable to attend football training after school, as she had hoped to do. Lindsay's experiences of schooling and her local neighbourhood are tainted by racial harassment, attesting to the high costs of her parents' social aspirations in a new country. Lindsay's words and her father's hopes as they come across in her telling are at the same time imbued with a gendered cultural critique. The opportunities are doubly enhanced by Lindsay's gender, since Lindsay and her father suggest that she may not have had the same opportunities in Pakistan. Muslim girls' participation in British education has sometimes been identified as 'problematic' and this has been attributed to an oppressive

home culture and patriarchal restrictions (Dwyer, 1998, Archer, 2003, Abbas, 2002, Khanum, 1992). The stereotypical characterisation of Muslim girls as being held back at home due to parental restrictions is here challenged and it is Lindsay's father who encourages her to 'get a good job and everything' in defiance of societal expectations (Archer, 2003, Dwyer, 1998). Louise Archer's research also found that Muslim girls felt supported by their parents in their educational choices, in contrast with wider conceptions often expressed by teachers (Archer, 2003: 52).

Lindsay's expression of not being 'uneducated' is at the same time haunted by the prospect of her mother who did not complete schooling in Pakistan and did not speak English. Often speaking to both Lindsay and Deniz they seemed to equate 'being educated' with being able to speak English.

Although I initially viewed this as a misunderstanding of my questions, I later came to realise how it attests to the dominance of the English language in a multicultural Britain where other forms of cultural capital are devalued, including non-European languages (Brooker, 2002). Despite being bilingual or multilingual and educated in other forms of cultural capital, the low value this is given in a British culture casts these knowledges as 'lack of education.' Lindsay's words convey only a hint of the internal struggles that may occur in distancing oneself from an 'uneducated' immigrant parent in order to pursue the kinds of opportunities they were not given, or indeed gave up for their child's benefit.

Spirit's background differed considerably from Lindsay's in terms of parental background and economic privilege, coming from a White, middle class family. Spirit originally attended Holly Bank School, where she took up cross-country running. Like Lindsay, Spirit also spoke of parental aspirations on her behalf as a result of opportunities missed or gained. While her mother regretted not having attended university, her father had attended an elite university, gained professional qualifications and went on to become the director of an insurance company. He thereby secured a large house in a gated community, fees for lessons, overseas holidays and private schooling for his daughter. Spirit's educational and career aspirations are similarly bound up with those of her parents and here she talks about the hopes her

parents have for an elite university education. This is used to justify the sometimes intense pressure she was being put under in studying for selective entrance exams into secondary school.

Spirit: Yeah I just want to go to a normal school like and be normal. In Tweedsmuir⁹ you have to work really hard plus at the moment my Mum is doing English tests with me every night and she got really upset with me 'cause I said the wrong thing and she said 'That's wrong, that's wrong' and I said 'No it's right. 'Cause she said, 'What does...what does...' I forgot what it's called.

[laughter from her friends]

And she just got very upset with me and everything and I was just like, I said I was not going to do it anymore. And so, I don't really care. I don't really want to practice English. I think it's better when people don't shout at you to do everything.

[later]

Spirit: The thing is my Dad went to [Oxbridge College] yeah, and he just wants me to get into a really good school. So that I can carry on, and like get a really good job. I don't want to be an accountant like my dad is.

Sheryl: What would you like to be?

Spirit: [whispered] An Olympic runner.

(Interview, Year 5, 14/06/2005)

Here Spirit expresses being upset about the critical way in which her tutoring was preceding. However, she was later able to rationalise the pressure she was being put under by referring to her parents' best wishes for her, even if she had her own misgivings. By Year 7, she had given up on the dream of becoming an Olympic runner and her thoughts now turned to more

⁹ Tweedsmuir is a competitive, selective State school that many students at Holly Bank took entrance exams for.

'realistic' career choices in line with a competitive marketplace. In this regard Spirit is also making sacrifices both in terms of her future hopes and current pursuits. She described completing her homework over the lunch break so that she could keep up with both her schoolwork and competitive running commitments. Lindsay and Spirit's narratives echo one another in many ways. Both stories bring across the idea of parental sacrifice, of past opportunities, missed or taken, that could now be pursued by their children. However, the differing access to privilege and educational knowledge has meant that Lindsay attended an inner city, mixed comprehensive while Spirit attended a private girls' school in an affluent area of Greater London. Lindsay could not attend football club after school because of the long journey home on the bus with her brother. Meanwhile, Spirit's commitment to running intensified to several nights a week and on weekends, which she was chauffeured to and from by her mother. In this way, their educational choices were mirrored in their sporting and extracurricular choices with Spirit's academic achievement echoed in models of attainment at her running club, which emphasised results over participation.

The well-rounded subject

Although achieving high academic results is viewed as important in a child's education, it is not seen as sufficient by many middle class parents, and the idea of 'investing' in your child refers to a more rounded concept of education including extracurricular interests. Ball relates parental wishes for academic setting and the need to 'stretch' children to fulfil their potential as a means of achieving 'categoric value' (Ball, 2003a: 71). While no doubt this applies to core subjects and academic ability, it is also carried over into extracurricular activities such as sport and music where concepts of 'talent' play out particularly strongly. At the transition to secondary school, middle class parents in Ball's research generally aspired to 'a rounded general education, not too specialised, with plenty of extracurricular activity' (Ball, 2003a: 71). Similarly parents at Holly Bank school seemed to view in-school learning as insufficient in terms of their child's development and children often had packed itineraries that included language, music and sports lessons after school and on weekends. In addition, many of the

children at Holly Bank had begun extra tutorials well before their Year 6 SATs in preparation for selective entrance tests at nearby grammar and private schools. In an already packed schedule, this was a lot to take on. Spirit gave me the following summary of her weekly activity schedule in Year 5.

I used to do karate on Monday, Tuesday running, Wednesday karate, that's what I used to do, Thursday running, Friday orchestra, Saturday basketball, Sunday rest. I used to do it all every week.

(Interview with Spirit, Year 5, 14/06/2005)

Diane Reay's (1998) research at two primary schools in London found that packed extracurricular itineraries were characteristic of middle class children's lives. She suggests that unlike middle class mothers, working class mothers were less likely to recognise extracurricular pursuits as an essential component to children's rounded educations and financial and time constraints prevented them enrolling children in comparable levels of lessons (1998). Similar to educational aspirations around university, middle class parents' decisions about extracurricular activities often revolved around the notion of opportunities.

I think it's just very.... Like for me I wanted, there's just so many opportunities I think for children nowadays, that I wanted Spirit. Well it's just my way, of trying as much as you can to, to work out what you really like. And therefore I wanted to offer her as wide a scope, and I think we're really fortunate to be in a position where we had so much on offer that we could choose from.

(Interview with Siobhan, Spirit's mother, 10/2005)

Siobhan's comments revolve around the notion of choice and opportunities, suggesting a world for the taking in which any and all interests could be pursued. This could be said to represent a particular middle class sensibility in which ambition and privilege go hand in hand. Yet despite her early opportunities in sports and other extracurricular pursuits, Spirit is strongly encouraged by her parents to cut back her activities once she reaches secondary school in order to concentrate on her studies. Nirvana attended Holly Bank School with Spirit (they were close friends), but she went on to a high-achieving single sex comprehensive nearby. Her parents (White and middle class) also talk about providing opportunities for their children but in

this instance they pose this as a counter to the materialistic trappings of a consumer culture.

Dave: We don't...in a culture of buying. We don't buy them-

Carol: Much-

Dave: Sort of much really or things that you know their other friends have got which provide their credibility. Like the latest fashion in this that or the other. But what they have had is a musical education.

Sheryl: Mm-hm.

Dave: Which is, I think it's paid dividends, because they both sit there for, oh for half an hour at least a day and play the piano. Out of the joy of doing it not because anyone says to you 'Go and sit down and practice the piano' but just because it's been instilled in them and they enjoy it.

Sheryl: Yeah

Dave: Because they've got talent I guess.

(Interview with Nirvana's parents, 11/2005)

Neither Nirvana nor Spirit's parents speak of their children's extracurricular activities in any kind of calculating or strategic way, as a set of 'credentials' that will come in useful one day. In fact their comments revolve around notions of personal development and 'talent.' A discourse of opportunities and children's happiness is used to explain children's involvement in sometimes overwhelmingly busy itineraries. Siobhan's comments relay a degree of class awareness in her use of the word 'fortunate,' but Nirvana's parents' aspirations for their children actually run counter to the idea of using privilege to secure privilege, or at least material privilege. Instead their knowledge of music is seen as complementary to children's education, as a form of distinction that is both useful and individually fulfilling. Later, Nirvana's musical accomplishments do become relevant when she applies for an elite music school, even though she is unsuccessful in this bid. Similarly in their application to a good primary school, Nirvana's mother

used extracurricular activities on Nirvana's application form as a way of 'selling' her daughter, a language fully attuned to a marketised education system.

Carol: And you had to try and sell her on the application form and she had a really good report from the prior year, which I put in and added a few extra things, I don't know if that helped. But she finally got placed which was good.

(Interview with Nirvana's parents, 11/2005)

Middle class parents described various strategies they had used in order to secure their children's places at good schools nearby and having an impressive repertoire of talents or accomplishments was just one of these 'extras' as Carol refers to them. Both Nirvana and Spirit decided to scale back their activities once they reached secondary school. For Nirvana, this meant dropping out of sports and pursuing music solely. While for Spirit this meant focusing intently on her running at an elite sports club. These choices were also part of the girls' ongoing identity constructions. Running and music respectively represented special talents or dedications for the girls and their devotion and aptitude justified their continuing participation. Spirit was guided into this choice by her parents but Nirvana seemed to decide this on her own, and this was also reflected in their choices of private and comprehensive schooling respectively. These instances further reflect the differences between parental class aspirations and girls' individual experiences. Although girls' extracurricular pursuits could be valuable in terms of their broader educational goals, I want to emphasise also the intrinsic pleasure and bodily joy the girls could derive from these activities, which were nonetheless justified within particular classed discourses of a well-rounded education.

Happiness and being pushed

Recent psychosocial approaches have drawn attention to the emotional aspects of social class and schooling and the massive psychic investments therein. Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody's (2001) work highlights the discursive investment in concepts of 'failure' and 'success' in relation to social class and education in describing the impact of class anxieties on the schooling of middle class and working class young women. Following these

insights into social class, Lucey and Reay suggest that psychological anxieties relating to class location are ‘aggravated’ for middle class parents during the transfer to secondary school (2002: 322). They propose that the concept of ‘delayed gratification’ is used to justify the pressures middle class parents put on children to gain acceptance at a good school, and point out middle class parents’ higher likelihood of guiding such a choice for their child. Importantly, Lucey and Reay (2002) highlight the emotional costs of this pressure to succeed on those middle class children expected to uphold the ‘beacons of excellence’ in schooling. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) suggest that working class parents, who had often had negative schooling experiences, were more likely to prioritise their child’s happiness at school and resisted pushing or pressuring their children in relation to their schooling.

Vincent and Ball’s (2007) work suggests that middle class parents are particularly prone to view extracurricular activities (including sport) as key investments against downward class mobility and to view their children as *projects* in the making. They contrast this view with that of working class parents who believed that providing ‘love, food and safety’ were sufficient and ‘did not focus on developing their [children’s] special talents’ (Lareau 2002 quoted in Vincent and Ball, 2007: 1068). This is echoed somewhat in parental views on ‘pushing’ children within extracurricular pursuits where long-term benefits are prioritised above short-term wishes. Although actively involved in school-organised karate and football during primary school, Gazza (White, working class) dropped out of both activities upon her transition to secondary school. Gazza’s mother described her constant anxiety in relation to her daughter, and her consequent unwillingness to push Gazza any further in both schooling and her involvement in sports.

Barbara: You know, and so I don’t know where she’s going to end up.

But, she’ll end up where she ends up.

Sheryl: Yeah. And um, is that something-

Barbara: No

Sheryl: -that you’re concerned about-

Barbara: No

Sheryl: - With her continuing football or...?

Barbara: No

Sheryl: No? Even though it's changed her personality?

Barbara: No. Do you know what? I spent so many years worrying about Gazza for not eating, for this, for that.

Sheryl: Yeah

Barbara: But now I don't.

(Interview with Gazza's mother, 10/2005)

Barbara's decision to leave things up to her daughter and not to interfere overly or push Gazza into anything was reflected in both Gazza's choice of secondary school and her participation in sports. Barbara is very insistent here that she is not going to worry about her daughter any further and this is conveyed in the transcript through my ongoing qualifications despite Barbara's insistent response of 'no.' Barbara's insistence here might be identified as a form of fatalism related to Gazza's future yet this seems to hold up a normative ideal of motherhood in which children are 'guided' into certain decisions based on expectations of future gains. Diane Reay suggests that the idea of the 'good parent' consists of middle class norms, acting as a form of judgement on other mothering practices (Reay, 1998: 13). In line with such a view, I suggest that Barbara's insistence here on not pushing or pressuring her daughter can be seen as a form of resistance against normative demands on mothers to not only take on their child's anxiety but to fuel it with increasingly pressurised schedules and standards of achievement. While the suggestion that working class parents are less intent on 'making up' their children through extracurricular activities may prove true to some extent, it does not account for the financial and time consuming aspects of such endeavours. Barbara expressed that she would have loved to see Gazza continue with her sports, but her carer responsibilities for her own mother amidst other conditions meant that she could not make it a priority in their lives.

Gazza's decisions around sport stand in contrast to the pressure Spirit felt in keeping up her achievements. Here Spirit talks about her reasons for keeping at her running, in response to my question regarding why she enjoys it.

Well I've got a lot of history behind it, obviously. It's like, I don't know I just keep it up. Plus it keeps me fit, which I like. 'Cause I like knowing that my body feels good as well. But then I dunno, it's just 'cause I've got such. Cause in my old school all the PE teachers were like 'You're doing really well. Don't stop, just keep going.' So I kind of don't want to stop 'cause I don't want to let anybody down and stuff. It's like, I just don't think about stopping.

(Interview with Spirit, Year 7, 17/01/2007)

Within Spirit's reasoning, it seems impossible to stop running given her ongoing commitment sustained over many years. The time and effort she has put into running, along with past accomplishments in the sport, seem to preclude the idea of dropping out or even taking a break, despite the intense rise in commitment at her running club along with her expressed unhappiness at the pressure her coach was putting her under. After a two-week absence at the running club while she was away on holiday with her family, her coach accused Spirit of being a 'skiver'. Girls were discouraged from going on holiday, and if they did so they were expected to continue training over holidays and warned of how quickly their fitness would deteriorate if they did not do so. Within this extract, Spirit is able to hold on to her bodily pleasures somewhat but these seem to be overwhelmed by the combined expectations of others surrounding her commitment. It is also significant that Spirit mentions fitness, since this was something girls increasingly linked with physical activity, contrasting earlier experiences of learning and play. Here, models of development in sports participation echo those around academic progress, where the notion of 'investment' is sustained by discursive constructions of ongoing commitment and personal development. Exhortations to 'stick it out' and 'keep with it' arose in decisions for middle class girls to continue their involvement in sports or other hobbies, often by restricting their participation into one or two activities at an intense level of performance. Ball (2003a: 163) suggests that models of commitment and improvement heavily structure ideals of middle

class subjectivity that centre on ‘making something of yourself, realizing yourself, realizing your potential.’ It was this model of ongoing development that seemed to structure girls’ relationship to sports in secondary school, though in primary school forms of engagement had centred more strongly around pleasure and enjoyment. The qualitative shift in sporting emphasis at secondary school from pleasure to achievement had a significant impact on the girls’ participation and was linked to educational models of excellence and attainment, which I explore more fully in chapter eight. For many girls this seemed to preclude or limit their involvement in sports while for those who did continue it often meant increasing the commitment in a particular pursuit and combining this with high academic achievement.

Achievement models in school and sport

In addition to constraints on time and finances, an educational climate of performativity and achievement meant that many parents and children were reluctant to spend too much time on sports or other hobbies because of increased homework and pressure to achieve academically. In an increasingly competitive educational environment, it is unsurprising that children will have to sacrifice more and more of their ‘free’ time in order to attain the types of educational outputs demanded by steadily rising thresholds of ‘excellence’ (Reay, 1998, Lucey and Reay, 2002). For middle class pupils who continue in extracurricular activities it is also likely that forms of participation will increasingly model ‘perfection’ and ‘performance’ codes that now saturate educational policy (Evans et al., 2007). Girls’ participation in sport thus becomes co-opted, compromising their earlier enjoyment and visceral joy in the bodily engagement and sociality of sports participation.

Current educational emphases on training and jobs were also interpreted by many students and parents as a form of valuing subjects hierarchically. This often left physical education at the bottom of girls’ priorities. Danny had joined the study in Year 7 when she was invited to join in the group interview with her friends Gazza and Lindsay, who were also at Adlington

School with her. For Danny (White, working class),¹⁰ the hierarchical valuing of subjects prioritises her subject choices, despite her preference for ‘applied’ subjects and her love of physical education and sport. Despite this, she decides to focus on subjects that will provide her with ‘choices’ in life, repeating the rhetoric of her school.

Danny: Um, I probably will take the main three subjects like GCSE maths, English and science ‘cause you have to. Like if you want choices in life then you kind of have to get them.

Sheryl: If you want what?

Danny: Choices. ‘Cause they said in assembly, if you want choices then you probably have to get those three or something.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/10/2007)

Current government discussions around healthy schools and its concerns over students’ physical fitness must ring hollow for many students who at the same time are aware that the mind/body dualism continues to value forms of disembodied academic achievement over other accomplishments, knowledges and practices (O’Flynn and Epstein, 2005). It is similarly Deniz (Turkish-British, working class) and her mother’s understanding of educational priorities that influences her devaluing of physical education and justifies her non-participation in PE lessons. When I asked how her mother felt about skipping PE, Deniz said ‘my mum doesn’t really care if I do it’ and claimed that her parents were more concerned about science since it was her ‘worst subject.’

Sheryl: So your mum’s worried about science?

Deniz: Well science is good, but I don’t like it. I’m getting fives and fours, but my mum is proud but because I don’t like it, she wants me to like it. Because when I grow up I’m gonna be a doctor.

Sheryl: Yeah? You’re gonna need science for that aren’t you?

¹⁰ Danny is a classmate and friend of both Lindsay and Gazza who was interviewed with the girls in year 7. She competes in football, ice skating and cross-country running at high levels.

Deniz: Yeah, but I don't like blood. How am I going to see blood?

Sheryl: Why do you want to be a doctor then?

Deniz: Lots of money.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

From the school's perspective Deniz's non-participation in PE could easily slot in to the wider 'problem' of Muslim girls in sports and their 'failure' to see its value (de Knop et al., 1996). Yet clearly Deniz's decision is based on a reasonable assessment of its value in her education and future career prospects. Deniz later asserted, 'Well I'm not going to be a footballer, am I?' in response to questions about her continuing participation in sports. Indeed, it might be argued that many socially disadvantaged boys' near obsessions with sport and football in particular can detract from their academic commitment by holding out promises of future sporting glory (Swain, 2000, Archer, 2003). Similar to Deniz's response, young women in Scraton and Flintoff's (2001: 9) research felt that there was 'no clear purpose' to PE and often mentioned a need to prioritise their studies, citing little connection to their career plans. Research into girls' involvement in sports has tended to search for causal factors *within* PE or sport, accounting for dropout rates in terms of lack of enjoyment or confidence and overwhelmingly in the ideological disjunction between femininity and sports. These findings suggest that it is worth considering wider aspects of schooling and educational policy that influence these decisions by valuing certain forms of knowledge and achievement above others.

Future Aspirations

While each girl made decisions about her sports involvement in the transition to secondary, some continuing and others not, it was clear that for all of them the form of engagement had altered considerably. Spirit's aspirations of Olympic glory were quickly curtailed at her elite running club where relentless models of pressure and achievement echoed those of her academic pursuits. Gazza's assuredness that she would play football in secondary school was put aside as she struggled to deal with the implications of being a 'clever girl' in an inner city comprehensive where

other forms of social capital were valued much more highly. Her new experiences had led to a change of mind regarding her career and this was prompted by a general unknowingness regarding A levels and university requirements.

Gazza: Um, I quite like the idea of being a teacher 'cause I like being with children and I like being around other people. And, yeah. I think I'll be alright there, 'cause I don't want to do something so big that I'm not going to be comfortable in.

Sheryl: What would be something so big that you're not comfortable with?

Gazza: 'Cause like when I was in primary I wanted to be like a lawyer or something. But I just think that's gonna be quite hard to do and you have to get like loads of stuff. And I think just, I'd be happy being a teacher.

Sheryl: Mmm.

Gazza: And you don't have to get as much as like some of the bigger jobs.

Sheryl: Mmm.

Gazza: It wouldn't be so much money but as long as you can live off it, it's fine.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/10/2007)

Changes in aspirations were common among the girls, reflecting their shifting recognition of social circumstances and perceived future successes. This is what Ball (2003a) refers to as 'the management of aspirations or aligning of ambitions.' Gazza's altered aspirations reflect a fear of the unknown; of careers and educational pathways that are 'too big' for a girl of modest circumstances whose parents did not attend university. Rather than continuing to take untested, unknown risks, Gazza decides to narrow her aspirations. The lack of confidence, the weighing up of future possibilities and fear of the unknown are common across girls' educational and sporting aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with varying understandings of ‘a good education’ and the implications this had for girls’ participation in sport and physical activity. I began this chapter with the characterisation of a ‘well-educated girl’ taken from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which suggested that educational accomplishments and talents were not simply a set of checklist criteria, but combined to create a particular classed, raced and gendered embodiment. Angela McRobbie (2009) has argued that although models of girlhood have ostensibly shifted from those of marriageability to capability (as modern economic subjects), the accompaniment of a ‘new sexual contract’ means that such educational subjects can still be ‘read’ as safely within the confines of attractive heteronormativity; self-consciously policed by young women themselves. Education (including physical education) remains heavily implicated within such projects. McRobbie (2007: 727) describes how the young woman is now seen as an ‘active and aspirational subject of the education system and she embodies the success of the new meritocratic values which New Labour has sought to implement in schools.’ Models of self-improvement and development come across strongly within current ‘healthism’ incentives in schools, propagating ideals of ‘healthy, fit’ bodies that are narrowly constricted and inevitably gendered (Evans *et al.* 2004). Intriguingly, in a bid to attract girls into PE and sports participation, many schools have now begun to offer cheerleading and aerobics classes to girls, which seem geared at constructing a particular embodied femininity that is both heterosexually attractive and suitably unthreatening to the masculine hegemony of sport. McRobbie’s elaboration of the new sexual contract suggests that despite this new educational and economic capacity, these skills are expected *in addition to* normative expectations of heterosexual attractiveness, marriage and motherhood. So perhaps we have not moved on quite so far from Austen’s characterisation of the ‘well-educated’ girl whose list of extensive accomplishments served primarily to attract a husband.

The findings highlighted in this chapter suggest that classed understandings of education and appropriate extracurricular activities held important

implications for girls' activities and it is therefore directly relevant to my second research question. This understanding affected whether sports participation was seen as a distraction or as complementary to girls' schooling. The chapter is also related to my third research question in suggesting that parental aspirations and girls' desires either to exceed or to live up to the opportunities afforded to their parents affected their decisions to drop out of or continue with their sports involvement.

Moreover, this chapter suggests that the competitive, performance-oriented context of schooling, as advocated by ongoing policy initiatives, represents an overarching framework for girls' participation in sports. The current government emphasis on results has introduced intense forms of testing and scrutiny in schools that seem to be increasingly echoed in models of sporting achievement. While such models of achievement offer prestigious outputs, these are unattainable to all but a few. It was clear from my research that girls' class positioning strongly affected their engagement in sport as related to their understandings of a 'good education.' The large emphasis on school results also means that parents make choices about securing future opportunities early on and this often involved dropping out of or cutting down on sports in order to concentrate on homework and schooling. Those girls who did continue with sports had to be very serious about it, dedicating large amounts of time and effort to their individual pursuits.

As suggested, it was particularly middle class girls who were likely to continue with their sports involvement, combining these pursuits with high grades and other forms of achievement. However, middle class girls often pay a high price for this outstanding achievement with eating disorders, self-harm and fierce anxiety as not uncommon symptoms of the constant striving for perfectionism (Walkerline 2001; Evans *et al.* 2004). Girls' sporting and extracurricular pursuits can be described both as forms of embodied, classed expectations resulting in unequal outcomes as well as individualised practices through which girls might construct ongoing notions of self and identity. The following chapter focuses more specifically on the role of sport in girls' self-identifications. It does so by looking at the particular

subject positions available at each girl's school and the ways in which girls both took up and resisted the various implications of these school identities.

Chapter Seven Being and Doing Active Girlhood: Girls negotiating identity in peer cultures

Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that girls' and parents' varying understandings of 'a good education' translated into their different trajectories towards secondary schooling, to decisions around sports participation and to the relative significance of these in the girls' lives. In this chapter I extend this discussion by exploring the various identities that were available to the girls in their different social locations and secondary schools, namely those of being clever, girlie or sporty. Girls' negotiations around these positions are seen as creative and agentic processes in which girls engage with various discourses 'through which their identities as girls are accomplished' (Currie et al. 2006: 423). While peer groups played an important role in girls' gender constructions, so too did the particular schools the girls carried on to. As Paechter (2007) notes, schools are actively implicated in the construction of young people's gendered identities. She writes:

[Schools] give young people messages about who they can be, what they can do and why, through the images of masculinity and femininity that they convey and purvey, and through the ways in which the capillary disciplinaries of the school act upon and are acted upon by young people as individuals and in groups (Paechter, 2007: 112)

Thus in addition to providing different sporting facilities or engendering a culture of 'staying on' after school for sports, schools also upheld different ideals of 'successful girlhood' that had specific implications for girls' sports involvement.

An overwhelming focus on an 'ideology of femininity' as preventing girls from participating in sports has tended to dominate theoretical discussions of girls' declining sports participation in the transition to adolescence (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). This perspective proposes that girls incur a 'femininity deficit' as they engage in sports that emphasise masculine characteristics, thereby compromising their femininity. Such a contention

seems to remove girls' actions from the wider educational and peer contexts in which they take place. Furthermore, it has tended to oversimplify the situation by ignoring class and ethnicity constructs in girls' take-up of sporting identities and by seeing femininity as an overarching script rather than as a set of disparate discourses that take on differing significance in localised contexts.

The idea that sport and femininity are fundamentally at odds is particularly suspect at middle class schools where girls' growing participation in sport is upheld through achievement discourses that trace across academic and sporting contexts. For example, girls in Allan's (2007) research at a private primary school were expected to attain sporting achievements alongside a range of other accomplishments in their fiercely competitive school settings. Traditional constructions of femininity which require humility and do not condone overt competition may render girls' bids for status and power (in sport, friendships or other fields) even more difficult, forcing girls to resort to seemingly duplicitous gendered practices (George, 2007a). Contemporary constructions of girlhood and success are exemplified in the 'Alpha girl' discourse (Ringrose, 2007a), which links girls' educational achievements to a particular set of embodied practices. Laura Azzarito (forthcoming 2010) argues that such discourses challenge notions of inactive girlhood. She defines 'Alpha Girls' as a set of 'contemporary monocultural discourses of sporty, fit and healthy femininities that contradict discourses of the traditional feminine docile body' (Azzarito, forthcoming 2010). This contention links girls' educational success stories with their engagement in physical activities and suggests some of the corporeal dimensions of constructions of 'successful girlhood.'

Girls can be seen to take up multiple and sometimes-contradictory positions within gender discourses that are variously made available within specific historical and social contexts, including sport and physical education. This argument allows for a more nuanced exploration of the availability of gendered subject positions and their implications for sports participation. The ways in which 'sporty', 'girlie', and 'clever' were made available to girls as viable ways of 'doing girl' within their particular school contexts is

therefore the focus of this chapter. I suggest that these positions were more accessible to some girls who were even able to negotiate their practices, whilst for other girls they represented exclusive positions that could not be easily combined.

Doing Girl

Social labels such as ‘sporty’, ‘girlie’ and ‘clever’ were often used by the girls in discussing different ways of ‘being’ within their schools.

Accordingly, they can be described as subject positions that are made available within the discursive framework of the school and surrounding social context (Currie et al., 2007). The specific configuration of subject positions at different schools creates subjectivities that act as ‘constellations that create both possibilities and constraints for who students can be’ (Youdell, 2005: 249). Such positions represent localised ways of ‘doing girl’ by holding particular (and limited) implications for the practices, meanings and social symbols associated with such positions (Currie et al., 2007). Therefore being a ‘clever’, ‘sporty’ or ‘girlie’ girl held particular connotations for the ways in which girls were expected to dress, to appear physically, to behave in class, to perform in physical activities, to achieve academically and to relate to others around them. They were also options that were variably available through girls’ classed, racialised and gendered positions in their schools. Girls discursively positioned themselves in relation to these identities, variously embracing, resisting and reinventing particular subjectivities through an active process of negotiation set within both discursive and subjective constraints.

Accounts of girls’ educational experiences have suggested that the taking up of available (and ‘correct’) subject positions is paramount because it constitutes subjects within the bounds of acceptability in their social and peer groupings (Jones, 1993, Davies, 2003). Alison Jones (1993: 162) writes, ‘dominant positions are embedded in the sets of meanings which define what is ‘ordinary’ and what we might take for granted about gender,’ in what she terms as ‘standards of gender intelligibility.’ To act outside of such norms and to refuse to conform entails specific consequences including

ostracisation and marginalisation within the competitive context of youth and peer cultures. Girls' ability to resist dominant gender discourses was thus constrained within this context and held both social and academic implications for them.

As Diane Reay (2001b) has pointed out, accounts of gendered subjectivities have tended to emphasise the fluidity of subject positions over and above their fixity. Rather than being seen as disposable assets, subject positions require an affective investment, or what Gee describes as an 'emotional commitment on our part to the categories of person to which we are allocated and see ourselves as belonging' (Gee, 2002 quoted in Currie et al., 2007 :380). Girls' sense of who they 'were' was thus constrained by who they thought they might 'become.' As Stuart Hall (1996: 4) suggests, identities 'describe a process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how we represent ourselves.' Accordingly, lack of confidence or a sense of 'mis-fit' in sporting or academic ability made it difficult for girls to see themselves as 'clever' or 'sporty' and therefore to make moves towards these ends, such as trying out for a sports team or taking a selective entrance test. Girls who had invested in particular subject positions were therefore taking a risk in attempting to perform an alternative version of themselves, one which peers, parents and significant others may or may not have deemed to be 'authentic' (Currie et al. 2007).

In her ethnography of schoolgirls' style, Shauna Pomerantz (2008) sees social identities in schools as functioning as both a source of constraint and a source of agency for schooled subjects. Within her research, girls' attempts to negotiate their school identities through dress sometimes led to (mis)recognition by their peers or teachers but nonetheless represented a desire on the part of girls to shift their identifications by changing others' perceptions.

Girls saw their identities in the schools as fixed in that they were positioned through the constraints of discourse that felt beyond their control; but girls also felt their identities in the school as fluid in that they understood that they could- in recognizing these positionings- negotiate how they were seen by others. (Pomerantz, 2008: 16)

Similarly the girls in my research (like most young people) were quite adept at 'reading' the dominant meanings within their new social situations and thereby considering the ways in which they might shift or maintain conceptions of themselves through investment in particular practices such as sport or other extracurricular activities. Rather than being taken as a given, girls' social positioning can be seen as an ongoing process in which subjects reflexively engage in the forging of their always incomplete subjectivities (Archer et al., 2007, Currie et al., 2006). This chapter explores girls' negotiations of clever, sporty and girlie subject positions as part of their ongoing take-up of classed, gendered and racialised identities.

Being a 'good' or 'bad' student

Recent contributions have suggested that one of the central contradictions of contemporary girlhood is the juxtaposition between 'good' girls and 'bad' girls, and their attendant educational implications (Harris, 2004a, Aapola et al., 2005, Lloyd, 2005, Charlton, 2007). Such positions have been particularly linked to classed and racialised identities. Poverty, class disadvantage and ethnic minority status are all deeply implicated in the limitation of possibilities embedded in student subjectivities for girls and young women (Charlton, 2007: 122). The availability of certain subject positions is therefore limited by both biographical (raced, gendered, classed) and subcultural (peer status group) identities (Youdell, 2006, Pomerantz, 2008, Archer et al., 2007, George, 2007a). For Deniz and Lindsay, their identities as 'Asian Muslim girls' had important implications for their friendships and peer status in terms of the ways in which they were positioned by their classmates and in how they constructed their own sense of self.

In her exploration of student subjectivities at two schools in England and Australia, Deborah Youdell (2006) argues that the status of student subcultural identities is often inverse to the requirements of being a 'good' (hardworking, clever, conformist) student learner, thus creating irresolvable conflicts for subjects constituted as impossible learners through their social and ethnic/class positioning. Similarly, recent studies into the schooling of

Black and ethnic minority girls describe common difficulties in asserting self-worth in a structurally racist education system, leading to conflicts over privileging their ethnic minority identities in school, and thereby risking 'bad girl' status and possible academic failure (Archer et al., 2007, George, 2007b). Such research concludes:

Young women's social locations provide them with few avenues through which they might generate identity value and worth to resist the symbolic violences associated with living social inequality... the actions they do take-while demonstrating agency, generating social capital amongst peers and bolstering a sense of self-worth- are ultimately paradoxical because they play into oppressive power relations (Archer et al., 2007: 552).

What each of these studies posits is the normalisation of 'good' student subjectivities as White, middle class and feminine. It is such subjects that seem to make up the new academic success stories so celebrated in post-feminist discourse (Ringrose, 2007a, McRobbie, 2007, Reay, 2001b). Following the proliferation of the 'successful girls' discourse, Becky Francis (2000) argues that contemporary conceptions of the 'ideal pupil' have shifted to being more compatible with dominant constructions of femininity. Based on her research with both boys and girls in schools, she found that the association of femininity with maturity and sensibility acted in accordance with the hard work and good behaviour required to do well in class (Francis, 2000: 65). Despite this new seeming compatibility between school success and femininity, it continues to be the case that compulsory heterosexuality, peer group hierarchies and the punishing measures of racism and sexism have powerful influences on girls' ability to resist dominant gender discourses. Diane Reay's (2001c) and Emma Renold's (2005) research in primary schools suggests that girls may invest in cleverness or sport as strategies to resist dominant gender discourses but that such resistance comes at a social cost to both themselves and others.

Girls can be seen to be investing in different 'versions' of themselves which may seek to emphasise 'sporty', 'clever' or 'girlie' practices that are variously available within their schooling and social context. The following sections emphasise girls' negotiations of such positions with particular attention to the ways in which friendship and school culture influenced these

possibilities. Attention is also drawn to the importance of social class and ethnicity as key arbiters of available subject positions. As girls anticipated, the transition to secondary school often resulted in a change in behaviour, interests and appearance, although the particular manifestation of these did not necessarily accord with girls' predictions.

Tomboy Identities in Primary School

As described in chapter four, girls' constructions of tomboy identities within primary school had often centred on their sports participation. In conjunction with their tomboy identities, the girls were varyingly invested in a 'good girl' identity that was demonstrated by their academic achievement. In primary school this 'good girl' identity was constructed through a commitment to schoolwork, compliance with the teacher and a 'sensible' maturity that made male antics on the football pitch sometimes problematic (Clark and Paechter, 2007). Similarly, Francis (1998) suggests that 'silly' and 'sensible' behaviours demarcated gendered expectations for boys and girls respectively in primary school. Although she always did her homework and worked sensibly in class, Deniz alone was willing to compromise her identity as a 'good girl' in order to defend herself against both physical and verbal attacks from classmates. Deniz was also physically bigger than many of the boys in her class at this time and this seemed to allow her to embody a more assertive physicality.

The girls were thus linked through their status as both clever and hardworking students. In some ways this compromised their tomboy identities, as Gazza described being only 'partly' tomboy.

Sheryl: So what are the other parts of you that aren't a tomboy?

Gazza: Probably that I always do my homework. Boys tend to not do their homework or not bring in their reading records or things like that. Where I have never ever ever once forgot in my whole life to bring in my homework.

(Interview, Year 5, 06/2005)

Like Gazza, most of the girls shunned misbehaviour due to its potential to compromise their ‘good girl’ status, which was associated with academic achievement and compliance in the classroom (Walkerdine, 1990). Deniz alone had shocked the other girls by receiving a ‘level three’ misdemeanour, something only other boys in the classroom had received. The girls’ simultaneous status as both ‘tomboys’ and ‘good girls’ held unanticipated conflicts as they moved into secondary school as they attempted to negotiate this academic investment and the desire to fit in socially in their new settings.

In addition, girls’ investment in a tomboy identity in primary school was often premised on a simultaneous rejection of ‘girlie’ characteristics often deemed babyish and superficial such as the colour pink, dolls and make-believe games. This was particularly the case at Holly Bank School where such ‘girlie’ symbols were more prevalent. Diane Reay’s (2001c) research suggests that at least in the early years of primary school, the maintenance of a tomboy identity often rests on the derision of ‘girlie’ femininities and their associated practices. In her Year 6 interview, Chelsea¹¹ claimed, “you will never see me in a pink frilly dress!” and Nirvana told me “I’m still going to stay like I am, I don’t want to go all prissy.” Girls thus marked out their disdain for ‘girlie’ practices and a planned continued investment in a tomboy identity.

Despite this disdain, girls often described their shifts between ‘tomboy’ and ‘girlie’ identities as fluid and reversible performances and this was particularly the case for high status girls who could shift their identities depending on the situation. Danny attended Adlington Secondary School with Lindsay and Gazza but had gone to a different primary school in the same area. She described her ‘tomboy’ identity as being relative to her activities and social context.

Sheryl: Why do you think you were a tomboy in Year 6?

Danny: Um, I just got on with the boys in primary ‘cause I liked football and then I kind of, if there was an argument I’d just go

¹¹ Although involved in the original ESRC study, Chelsea did not continue with my research project when she moved on to secondary school.

to they boys. Like I used to play with the boys all the time. But then I can also just switch to being a girlie girl, really easily. I'd just wear a puffy skirt and leggings and something like that.

(Group Interview, Year 7, 29/06/2007)

Danny describes a fluid self-presentation in which she is able to switch between a 'girlie' and 'tomboy' position by changing her clothing or playing football. These practices provided part of the localised repertoire of gendered identities and were important ways in which girls could signal their shift in gender positions. Importantly, Danny's ability to shift her self-presentation was deemed to be 'authentic' by her peers as she was well regarded both on the football pitch and in the gendered peer hierarchy. Girls' ability to shift their gender performances is therefore subject to social status, something that becomes more relevant in secondary school.

Moving into secondary school

Despite the girls' defiant statements, as above, there was some indication in primary school that the girls anticipated a shift in their gender performances as they moved into secondary school. When asked whether she thought she might change when she went to secondary school, Spirit guessed 'I might be more girlie because I'm at an all girls' school, but I'll be a tomboy so I can play sports.' The relationship between 'girlie' and 'tomboy' is here cast as fairly unproblematic, an identity she can shift in line with her activities. Spirit's entrance into a private girls' school with a strong emphasis on sporting competition seemed to ease this transition and she was indeed able to carry on with her competitive running.

At Benjamin Laurence School, girls seemed less certain about their ability to maintain a tomboy identity into secondary school, and this was often linked to a concern with grades and academic performance.

Sheryl: So do you think anything might change when you go to secondary school? Do you think you could still be a tomboy?

Nilay: I don't think so.

Sheryl: No?

Nilay: I think that I am going to change because I'm not gonna play football anymore and I'm not gonna want to play. It's gonna be like I've just got old and I've got to more concentrate on my work.

(Group Interview, Year 5, 06/07/2005)

Nilay's concerns about school achievement and future career prospects represented a common concern for the girls in my study. This is similarly documented in Becky Francis's (2000) research where she argues that girls' educational success can be attributed to future discrimination they expected to face in university and the workplace. Despite similar academic aspirations, girls from different backgrounds with differing cultural capital were more or less inclined to see sport as either complementing or detracting from their educational experiences. In chapter six I suggested that this related to girls' and parents' understandings of 'a good education,' which for Nilay did not include sport. Within Nilay's discursive reasoning, sports participation and academic achievement acted as two seemingly opposed identities. She could either invest in a sporty, masculinised 'tomboy' identity and thus continue to play a game now seen as immature; or she could invest in a conscientious, hardworking student identity, one that is deemed to lead to future university and career success. Her attendance at a private, Muslim girls' secondary school also seemed to reinforce this contrast. For Nilay, her participation in football is seen as an unnecessary distraction to a successful student identity.

Typically in primary school, girls seemed able to perform 'tomboy' as a situational and thus casual, non-committal identity that could be enacted or discarded simply by changing clothes, playing football or moving to a new group of friends. Performing both a 'good student' and 'tomboy' identity were relatively unproblematic and girls' participation in sports was based on an accessible, participatory model, thereby allowing girls to access a 'sporty' subjectivity. However, by secondary school, the negotiation of these positions became more challenging and girls often noted the difficulty

of making what had once been easier shifts between gendered identities. In the following sections I outline three potential reasons for this and the ways in which girls attempted to renegotiate aspects of their identities in the context of a new and demanding secondary school culture. These reasons included, first, the compulsion towards conformity and fitting in; second the heightened appeal of ‘girlie’ or emphasised femininities as a means of achieving popularity; and finally the shifting allegiances of friends and their impact on activities.

Although I have separated these processes into distinct categories, they were in fact interconnected in complex ways that make their distinctions less clear-cut than is here suggested. However, they were each important in variously enabling and constraining girls’ self-constructions within their new peer and educational contexts.

Fitting in: playing by the rules

The importance of conformity and fitting in at secondary school have been emphasised in a number of youth cultural accounts that detail consequences for not doing so, including bullying and marginalisation (Renold, 2004, Francis, 2005, Ringrose and Renold, 2009). Paechter (2007: 37) describes a ‘mutual regulation’ whereby young people monitor and assess one another’s behaviour in line with group practices and suggests, ‘it is precisely through this immediate, collective and anonymous gaze that teenagers expect to be judged as belonging or otherwise.’ She adds that group expulsion acts as a risk linked to ‘getting wrong even minor details of self-presentation’ (Paechter, 2007: 37). For the girls in my study, attempting to ‘fit in’ at secondary school involved adapting to a new set of social norms and practices. Girls described making the transition to a new school with a sense of trepidation and disorientation, which is a common experience over this period (Measor and Woods, 1984, George, 2004). Just as girls could find themselves lost in the confusing corridors of a new, larger building so too could they find themselves lost in the new social rules that dictated what to wear, what to say and how to behave.

Each girl described encountering a social milieu that was at times both confusing and frustrating for them, leading them to adopt alternative strategies in adapting to their new social environment. An obsession with material possessions was particularly striking and often provided an excuse for bullying. Deniz talked about the new rules of her school's social setting with a sense of both bewilderment and distress.

Deniz: They cussed my friend today as well. She was wearing a Nike tracksuit and they said 'where'd you get that from? You can't afford it. I bet you got it from Poundland or something like that.'

Sheryl: Really?

Deniz: They cussed her today as well, it was sad.

Sheryl: There seems to be a lot of stuff about money at this school.

Deniz: If you don't have money they say you're poor, if you do they say you're rich. I don't get this school.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

Secondary schools thus formed complex configurations of social norms based on dress, appearance and popularity – statuses that more subtly coded differences of social class, wealth, 'race' and ethnicity. Within Deniz's all-girls' comprehensive in inner London, tensions around financial status led to an intense monitoring of consumer and designer items and accessories. This fascination with monetary value may have stemmed from girls' precarious class positions, since a large proportion of the students came from immigrant backgrounds. Within this new social environment, girls worked to define themselves and others through localised symbols that inferred wealth and status.

At Nirvana's more racially homogeneous middle class girls' school, the wearing of uniforms meant that dress distinctions were less class-coded and revolved around resisting the school's attempt to enforce an 'asexual femininity'. The learning of new rules was apparent on Nirvana's first day of Year 7.

Nirvana: Like some of them [older girls] have their skirts really high or all of that kind of stuff. And like, they always laugh at Year 7s the first day because they always have their skirts really long.

Sheryl: Mm

Nirvana: So everyone's had them short since. (laughs)

(Interview, Year 7, 24/10/2006)

Nirvana's experience of wearing her skirt 'too long' on the first day of school brings across what many girls perceived as a form of naivety that needed to be quickly and accurately adjusted in this new and exacting social situation. The ability to 'get it right' (for instance by wearing your skirt at the correct length) could have long-term consequences for girls' social status in the school. At Holly Bank Primary School, rules around the appropriate sock length had formed similarly discriminating codes of conduct and Nirvana's ability to correctly apply these codes had served her well. Girls' ability to correctly interpret and appropriate knowledge in bids for social power can thus prove key to their social status (Paechter and Clark, 2010).

The ostracisation of girls whose embodied practices marked them out as 'deviant' acted as a kind of warning for others who might be tempted to stray from socially approved norms of both dress and behaviour. Joanne was a classmate and friend of Gazza and Lindsay whose inability to 'get it right' marked her out as a target of taunts and exclusion. Joanne's 'difference' was compounded by both her middle class status and academic confidence in a largely working class school.

Danny: Yeah, 'cause she [Joanne] is not exactly popular. And, 'cause like everyone cusses her about the way she dresses and things.

Sheryl: Everyone says things about the way she dresses?

Danny: But I think she knows and she tried to improve. Everyone accepts her for who she is but sometimes people don't.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/10/2007)

Judgements of social acceptance are here marked by a discursive contradiction between the individuality mantra to 'be yourself' with the simultaneous insistence that such individuality should fall in line with localised social conventions. In their research into girls' identity constructions in secondary school, Currie et al.(2006) found that a discourse of 'being yourself' allowed girls to resist dominant peer identities in the school. This excerpt demonstrates the ongoing conflicts and ostracisation that can nevertheless result from such a position, since 'being yourself' does not necessarily lead to social approval.

Accordingly, girls were often tempted to adjust their self-presentations in line with accepted conventions. For example, Gazza discovered that her interest in and knowledge of football was no longer as acceptable a practice amongst her female friends. This became increasingly apparent as she attempted to bond with other girls in her class.

Gazza: Yeah, none of the girls in my class play football and it just feels like I'm a weirdo. Like I'm the only one who likes it. But I know it's up to you if you want to do these things.

Sheryl: But it might be quite difficult if no-one else is doing it.

Gazza: Yeah, you go in and talk about it and they're like 'whatever.' When I go in to Lindsay and Asma and talk about it they're like 'whatever' I have to go and talk to other groups about it. Which kind of makes it hard.

(Interview, Year 7, 14/03/2007)

A discourse of individual responsibility here compels Gazza to accept personal accountability over decisions around discussing football, despite the harsh punishments that could accompany such difference. The fear of being 'weird' or 'different' was often an incentive for girls to attempt to shift their self-presentation, though it could also serve as a form of distinction that nonetheless carried social repercussions. Whilst an interest and knowledge of football provided a form of social capital in primary school, the decisive marking out of football as a practice of masculinity within secondary school rendered it virtually inaccessible to Gazza as a

resource. The demarcation of sport and especially football as a 'male-only' practice can serve both to shore up masculine privilege and to construct young masculinities (Parker, 1996, Nespor, 1997). Laura Hills (2006: 547) describes the 'boundary-solidifying practices' used by boys in her study as a form of investment in football which actively excluded girls. Similarly Gazza's attempts to engage male peers in football talk were met with silence and/or ignorance, marking her engagement as outside the bounds of acceptability. The cumulative and influential effect of this distinction led to Gazza's disinvestment from football as a strategic social practice, though not entirely. Playing and talking about football were some of the key ways in which girls performed tomboy identities in primary school (particularly Benjamin Laurence) and their inaccessibility in secondary school made tomboy identities less feasible there.

Both Gazza's experience of talking about football and Joanne's inability to 'dress the part' draw out the complex inconsistencies girls experienced between discourses of individuality and the more compelling demands of conformity with localised gender conventions. The individualist incitements to 'be yourself' and do things because 'it's up to you' were in fact belied by gendered social conventions that valued conformity. The compulsion towards such conventions formed a 'localised panopticon' (Paechter, 2007: 37) in which boys and girls intensely monitored one another's behaviour by bestowing both condemnation and approval. The extent to which girls internalised or resisted such expectations depended on a number of factors including notions of 'authenticity' and peer support.

Girls Creating and Compensating

Despite a range of normative demands, girls were sometimes able to carve out roles for themselves that resisted the conformist rules of youth culture but also allowed them to 'fit in' through emphasising another aspect of their self-performance. Girls often acted to reinterpret cultural symbols and codes of behaviour in ways that emphasised their own creativity and ongoing construction of self.

Danny: Yeah, I kind of have my own way of dressing. I'm not anything. Like some days I might wear jeans and some days I wear a skirt or something. But everyone knows that I am good at sports so they don't really judge on what I wear 'cause they know inside that I'm good at sports.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Danny here uses her interest and ability in sport to distance her from the concern about appearance that many girls expressed. For Danny, the practicalities of sports participation mean that she cannot wear a skirt every day and this provides justification for more 'practical' clothing. Although Danny did not seem to possess the kind of cultural capital evident among Spirit's privately educated friends, her parents could afford to take her to ice skating lessons and to pay for the expensive equipment and costumes it required. Danny's well-recognised sports performances both in and outside the school seemed to provide the kind of 'authenticity' that Gazza was unable to achieve through her football talk. Both Gazza and Lindsay had enjoyed a high social standing within their primary school class but found that their interest in sport, which had once contributed to their social standing, was now less tenable.

Despite being in an ethnically diverse secondary school, Lindsay was the only Muslim girl in her class and her wearing of a headscarf seemed to set her apart somewhat. In primary school, being a covered Muslim girl was both 'normal' and acceptable, an identity which was largely unproblematic for the girls at Benjamin Laurence. At secondary school, Lindsay explained that although there were Muslim boys in the class, there seemed to be no allegiance between them and her own visible difference made her stand out where they could more easily blend in socially (see also Archer, 2003). In our Year 8 interview, Lindsay described the difficulties of fitting in socially in a competitive, heteronormative and racist context geared around appearance.

Lindsay: I don't think I quite fit in. But I just tag along.

Sheryl: Really? How do you think you don't fit in?

Lindsay: Maybe 'cause I've got a scarf on.

Sheryl: Does that make it more difficult to fit in?

Lindsay: Yeah (very quiet, emotional tone). But if you have a nice personality then you might fit in.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Despite or perhaps because of the diverse mixture of the school, conventions of social acceptability were highly racialised. Various accounts have suggested that Asian girls may be positioned outside the bounds of a heterosexually desirable femininity or as 'sexual rejects' within a British schooling context (Brah and Minhas, 1985). Farzana Shain (2003) describes how the wearing of a headscarf provided both a form of identification for Asian girls while also leaving them open to criticism and discrimination. Whilst Lindsay's ethnic and religious 'difference' marked her outside the bounds of an idealised heterosexual attractiveness that was very valuable in her peer group setting, this did not mean that she could not fit in socially. Attempting to compensate for a perceived lack of conformity, Lindsay reasons that a 'nice personality' 'might' allow her to fit in. This compensatory or perhaps survivalist tactic seems to require a great deal of emotional labour on Lindsay's part by investing in a 'good personality' in an attempt to make up for a perceived lack of physical/aesthetic capital. This requires Lindsay to take on the highly feminised traits of a 'good friend' such as caring, compassion and listening skills (George, 2007a). The social status of being 'the most athletic girl' in her class at primary school is no longer available, making sport less appealing as a social practice.

Farzana Shain's (2003) research has demonstrated that the specific approaches Asian girls take towards racial discrimination are subject to diverse factors and are highly implicated in girls' school success and peer group status. At her diverse, inner city, all girls school, Deniz was surrounded by many other Muslim girls within a large immigrant population. Despite this, Deniz still worried about bullying in the school causing her to take on a defensive strategy. Deniz described a social milieu

in which fights regularly occurred between girls. Many of these seemed to revolve around economic status and racialised identifications.

Deniz: Like if someone gets me really angry I always start a fight. If someone says 'stupid' I get really angry. Everyone says that I'm tempered but I'm really not. Everyone thinks that.

Sheryl: Yeah, like what happens?

Deniz: [describes an incident that occurred in DT]... And I said to the other girl who said she had a better phone than me 'I've got N70' and then I got really angry and started swearing and everything. I broke the girls' heart.

Sheryl: You broke the girls' heart? (laughs)

Deniz: She deserved it though (laughs).

Sheryl: Why? Because she had said that –

Deniz: Yeah, she was being rude to me. I don't like it when people be rude to me.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

As discussed earlier, Deniz's willingness to stand up for herself, even against dominant boys in the class, distinguished her from her friends who were more intent on performing 'good girl' femininities in primary school. The competitive and discriminatory climate of secondary school only seemed to up Deniz's investment in a more confrontational identity, resulting in numerous altercations with her classmates. Deniz makes the claim that she is 'not tempered' on the basis that such incidents were defensive reactions to perceived attacks on her dignity and identity. This seems to accord with the actions of the 'gang girls' described by Farzana Shain, whose 'violent' and rebellious actions were the result of previous racist provocations (Shain, 2003). The girls Shain describes had all experienced racist attacks or harassment at their schools and their open contestation of this led to their marginalisation and 'bad' reputations (Shain, 2003: 62). In Year 7, Deniz had described being barged by another girl who 'cussed my scarf.' Deniz's strategy in the midst of this social milieu was

both to withdraw from certain situations and to defend her in the face of perceived attacks. Accordingly, she decided not to try out for the football team ‘cause I might have a fight.’ Similarly in PE, her allegiance with the group of other covered Muslim girls in the class involved separating themselves from the rest of the class, often through skipping the activity, as we saw in chapter five.

The construction of an assertive femininity through practices of ‘truth-telling’ or ‘speaking my mind’ have been associated with ethnic minority femininities within structurally racist schooling systems (George, 2007a, Archer et al., 2007). This defensive position has been shown to potentially compromise girls’ academic identities.

Girls’ assertions of loud, active and visible femininities can be understood as challenging the forms of submissive, passive and quiet femininity that are usually rewarded within schools (Archer et al., 2007).

Deniz’s adoption of a more assertive femininity seems to position her outside the dominant conventions of both a White and Muslim femininity, which is often associated with passivity (Shain, 2003: 60). As Claire Dwyer (1998) asserts, Asian girls can be seen to negotiate their identities in dialect with and resistance to dominant stereotypical depictions. Yet this process remains subject to the dominant cultural norms of the school. Although the performance of an assertive femininity was acceptable to Deniz, her interest in football similarly threatened to compromise the construction of a conventional femininity. Deniz continued to play football at a club with her cousin into Year 7 but decided not to tell her classmates about this.

Sheryl: So tell me about this club, when did you start going to it?

Deniz: This year. But no one knows about it. I never told no one, it’s a secret.

Sheryl: So who doesn’t know? People at school?

Deniz: Alexis doesn’t know, Maleeha doesn’t know.

Sheryl: Why don’t you want to tell them? What would they say?

Deniz: Why do you play football? Are you a kid? Are you a boy? Are you a tomboy?' But, I'm not a tomboy, I just like playing football. I think it's fun.

(Interview, Year 7, 19/05/2007)

Within this excerpt, the construction of an adult femininity is cast as incommensurate with the practices of football, and brings into question both Deniz's age and gender identity. Similarly in Laura Hills' research, girls described hiding their sporting interests from friends both in and outside of school (Hills, 2006: 547). Deniz's resistance to these labels may also represent a perceived vulnerability to accusations of gender impropriety because of her ethnic and racialised positioning within the school.

In primary school, despite being the most-cited 'tomboy' according to her classmates, Deniz was also the most resistant to this label and seemed to see it as a threat to her gendered normativity. As a strong-willed and assertive Muslim girl, Deniz's gender performances already seemed to position her outside the bounds of conventional constructions of girlhood within her school. At secondary school, playing football in addition to these performances appeared to be too much of a risk and remained something she kept a secret, declining to join the school team. Of all the girls, Deniz seemed to construct the most highly resistant position, one that was resistant both to school norms and to constructions of both 'girl' and 'Muslim girl'. During interviews, Deniz related her ability to withstand this intense pressure to both the close bond with her family and the support of other Muslim girls at her school and particularly her mosque. However, the combination of both a 'sporty' and 'rude' identity along with her attempts to remain a 'good' student despite minor conflicts with teachers seemed too much to uphold. She withdrew from sport at her school and in Year 8 left the outside football team she'd been practising with in order to help her mother out more at home.

Danny, Lindsay and Deniz were each in the process of constructing acceptable identities for themselves within the discursive context of their new secondary schools. In different ways they managed to carve out

resistant positions that stood in contrast to normative demands. Danny's abilities in sport seemed to allow her to resist the dominant girlie position in the school, allowing her to dress 'my own way' without feeling judged by her classmates. During their group interview in Year 8, Gazza and Lindsay had both spoken enviously of Danny's ability 'not to care what other people think.' Neither girl felt able to be similarly indifferent to the imagined perceptions of their classmates. The judgements and consequences around Joanne's lack of conformity seem to attest to the social astuteness of this decision. Both Deniz and Lindsay's ability to perform different versions of themselves seemed to be overridingly constrained by their ethnic and religious positioning within the school. This concurs with arguments that 'race' and racism continue to be implicated in the construction of minority ethnic femininities both in and outside of schooling (Shain, 2003, Dwyer, 1998).

The appeal of a girlie femininity

As Emma Renold (2005: 40) and others contend, a heterosexualised 'girlie' femininity remains a 'dominant and popular way of 'doing girl' in schools,' thus persuading girls to define themselves either with or against this dominant discourse (2005: 40). Although practices associated in primary school with a girlie femininity were easily castigated as babyish and immature, the lure of a girlie femininity became both more tempting and coercive as girls moved into secondary school. The appeal of a girlie femininity is simultaneously implicated in the competitive environment of compulsory heterosexuality. At their middle class girls' school, Nirvana and Lucy commented on the proliferation of 'girlie' cultural symbols and codes that were both a form of identification and social status. Nirvana described the prevalence of this dominant femininity in her school.

Nirvana: And it's boring being in an all girls' school. Everyone has handbags and all and they're all just like super pink or Burberry and it's just not cool.

Sheryl: Really?

Nirvana: Yeah, and it's all just really girlie.

(Interview, Year 8, 07/11/2007)

While Nirvana's comments might suggest the disavowal of a denigrated 'girlie' femininity as in primary school, I would argue that in fact they now represented a positioning away from what had become both a pervasive and powerful form of social capital within secondary school. As Currie et al. (2006) describe, the status accorded with what might also be termed an 'emphasised femininity' provided a form of power and status for girls in a competitive and male-oriented youth culture.

At Wellington Gardens School, girls were able to distance themselves from this overtly 'girlie' femininity by investing in positions of 'cleverness' and/or 'niceness.' Although not as socially high status, these nonetheless remained viable positions for middle class girls. This was reinforced by teachers who drew contrasts between 'clever' and 'girlie' positions, suggesting that the two were somehow juxtaposed. During our interview, Nirvana's form tutor divided her class into 'mature' and 'immature' girls and allocated Nirvana to the former category. She told me, 'it's usually the low ability girls who are less mature and into things like hair straighteners and make-up.' It was both the supposed disinvestment in schooling and the 'bitchiness' associated with this popular girl status that prompted Nirvana and Lucy to position themselves in opposition to this powerful identity. This was something they had also done in primary school, where both girls had similarly distanced themselves from the 'popular' clique in their class.

Nirvana: Cause I don't hang around with people in my class who are like annoying or they're bitches.

Sheryl: So what is it about your friends that's different?

Nirvana: I don't know, we're nice to each other? I don't know 'cause we're all kind of like into the same thing. We're all fairly clever, we're all just kind of nuts. So yeah, just quite fun.

(Interview, Year 8, 07/11/2007)

Nirvana here constructs a subject position that is relative to the peer culture of the school, positioning herself in opposition to the powerful, high status group of girls in her Year. Her self-definition as both 'clever' and 'nice'

calls up characteristics that run counter to those associated with the dominant group of girls at the school, who she describes as ‘bitchy’ and ‘annoying.’ Paechter (2007: 141) suggests that a self-positioning as ‘nice’ can allow marginalised girls to ‘claim a moral superiority over those by whom they are intimidated, thus permitting themselves to feel the power of their goodness and respectability, even if that power is not available for mobilisation.’

In our interview, Nirvana described herself and her friends’ social status as a ‘middle to lower’ status that had resulted in bullying from a higher status group of girls in their Year group. In fact a close friend of Nirvana’s had left the school due to intimidation from this powerful group of girls. Thus, although cleverness was a position valued by her teachers, it was not without its social consequences. Rather than highlighting the ‘normative cruelties’ girls often inflict on one another (Ringrose, 2007b), this account suggests that by positioning themselves away from a dominant and powerful ‘girlie’ femininity, girls can also end up in vulnerable positions within the social hierarchies of their schools.

At Adlington School, popularity was similarly constructed around an overtly heterosexualised femininity and a disinvestment from schooling, although the particular practices associated with these positions were highly specific to the class and ethnic configuration of the school. As previously suggested, Gazza’s take-up of both a ‘good girl’ and ‘tomboy’ identity were somewhat in conflict with one another in primary school, though she was able to manage these contradictions in various ways. Gazza’s mother had however expressed concerns about Gazza’s ability to continue to manage these contradictions into secondary school. In our Year 6 interview, Gazza’s mother Barbara had expressed concerns about Gazza’s ability to fit in socially at secondary school.

Barbara: I mean this is a tiny school. And I think secondary school is really going to bring her back to her... I think she’ll find it hard and I, ‘cause I don’t know where she’s going to fit in.

Sheryl: In secondary school?

Barbara: Yeah, 'cause she's kind of...she will make friends, I'm not saying she won't make friends, but, I don't know what sort of group of friends she'll fit in with, because academically she wants to do well, so does she fit in with that group? Or socially does she fit in with the other group? You know, and so I don't know where she's going to end up. But, she'll end up where she ends up.

(Interview with Barbara, Gazza's mother, 11/2005)

Barbara's concerns seem to centre on possible contradictions between peer group status and academic performance. Despite her mother's misgivings, Gazza did manage to fit in socially at her secondary school and was described as 'popular' by other girls in her class. Gazza's classroom had both a high proportion of boys (approximately two thirds of the class were male) and strong behavioural issues. Over Years 7 and 8, Gazza described a classroom in which she struggled to learn amidst often overwhelming conflict and interruptions during instruction.

Despite her high investment in a 'good girl' status throughout primary school, this became more difficult to maintain into Year 8 and her grades began to drop somewhat. She continued to admire and comply with her teachers but expressed frustration at their inability to control the classroom environment. Gazza described her strategy in the classroom that involved 'getting on with the work' and attempting to remain outside of overt attention.

Gazza: I kind of just get on with the work and I'm not naughty and stuff like that. I don't know everything, but I'm not naughty. Like we don't get in trouble with stuff. Like some girls can get in trouble.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Gazza therefore attempts to position herself away from a 'naughty' position yet is simultaneously reticent around performing a 'good' and/or 'clever' position within the classroom because of its denigrated status. She nonetheless recognises the value of performing well in her schoolwork and

attempts to do so without drawing attention to herself. This is a strategy similarly described by the girls in Carolyn Jackson's (2006) research where girls sometimes hid their schoolwork from others or rushed to finish assignments at the end of a lesson spent chatting in a performed nonchalance. Gazza described her on/off friend Joanne who was subject to ridicule within the year group:

Gazza: I don't find there's much wrong with her. Like I don't ignore her but lots of people do.

Sheryl: Why is that?

Gazza: Cause she's very clever as well. She's good in class and stuff. But I'm good in class but she kind of knows everything. There's nothing that she don't know.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

As the only middle class girl in her class, Joanne's willingness to display and even celebrate her cleverness is met with ridicule and resentment by her classmates. Gazza describes attempting to distance herself from this denigrated identity by suggesting that while she is also 'good in class' this is not accompanied by an overt cleverness. A disinvestment in schooling has been described as a compelling practice for the construction of working class identities (Hey, 1997, Reay, 2002, McRobbie, 1991a). Valerie Hey describes working class girls in her ethnographic study as resisting the demands of the schools through an 'opposition to cleverness/studiousness' (Hey 1997: 76). Although Gazza's position as a 'good' student was unproblematic within the peer group hierarchy in primary school, at secondary school it seemed too closely associated with a 'boffin' status to be completely safe. Unlike Nirvana, Gazza finds it difficult to embrace a 'clever' subjectivity and instead tries to get on with her work without drawing attention to herself. Gazza thus attempts to straddle the division between 'naughty' and 'good girl' somewhat precariously by attempting to remain beneath the radar of both her classmates and her teachers.

Similar to Lindsay, she begins to take up what might be considered as 'compensatory' tactics in a bid towards social acceptance. Near the end of

Year 7, Gazza's friends decided to experiment with her hair and clothing, suggesting that she should attempt to look more 'girlie.' At Adlington, her mixed-sex school, one of the most effective ways of achieving popularity (in terms of social status) rested with an investment in a heterosexually attractive or 'girlie' femininity. This has been documented in numerous studies of secondary school culture (Renold, 2005, Pomerantz, 2008, McRobbie, 1991a) where the competitive politics of compulsory heterosexuality often pit girls against one another in bids for male attention and validation.

Although Gazza's look had been fairly androgynous until then, in Year 8 she began to invest in a more 'girlie' appearance. Emma Renold (2005 :42) defines such practices as 'corporeal capital' which can then be transformed into social or sexual capital in the form of popularity or desirability. Gazza described the subtle shifts she had undergone in appearance as she took up various codes of a 'girlie' femininity.

Gazza: You know how my parting used to be? Then they started playing with my hair and it got left like this I can't get it back to how it was 'cause I've forgotten how it was. And I'm not allowed to wear tracksuit bottoms.

Sheryl: Why?

Gazza: Because they said I'm too much of a tomboy, and I'm a girl.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Here it is Gazza's friends who suggest an alternative gender performance, premised on the undesirability of a tomboy identity. After her friends had experimented with Gazza's appearance she began to brush out her hair, wearing it down and parted to the side as suggested. This was combined with the wearing of light makeup including lip gloss and mascara. In this excerpt, Gazza remains ambivalent about the take-up of a more feminised 'girlie' subjectivity, claiming that she has simply 'forgotten' how her parting used to be. Yet with ongoing social approval this shift in gender performance became more appealing. Girls' experiments with their appearance were often prompted by friends who proposed new looks as a

form of playfulness that soon became more compelling given the attention and approval these achieved. Girls' investment in their appearance through 'girlie' codes could act as a form of pleasure and social capital within their subcultural milieu. Although teachers or parents were keen to castigate such identities, they proved powerfully alluring for many girls including Gazza and her friends for whom 'sporty' or 'clever' subject positions had become both less appealing and less available. However, this was certainly not the case for example, at Spirit's running club, where highly skilled middle class girls easily combined both 'girlie' and 'sporty' codes. I further describe these practices in chapter nine in relation to the girls' embodied occupation of space.

Finding 'girls like me'

Friends became extremely important for the girls as they attempted to navigate the new social landscape of secondary school. Friends could act as insulation against social ostracisation and the constant fear that one did not 'fit in' (George, 2007a, George, 2004). They also provided a sense of identification for girls who attempted to find friends with similar interests and self-constructions. The larger scope of young people at their new schools often meant that girls had a better chance of finding friends with whom they felt comfortable and accepted. On the other hand, the shorter amount of time they had known these girls could also create a greater sense of insecurity around their loyalty and this was sometimes evidenced through friendship exclusions. With loyalty, however, came a greater compulsion to spend time with one's friends and to join in their activities and interests.

Girls described friendship groups that had once been more fluid but were now more restrictive in secondary school. For example, Danny expressed a lack of freedom stemming from this new compulsion to demonstrate loyalty towards one's friends by both spending time with them and engaging in the same activities. She described the difference between her friends in primary school and the situation in secondary school.

Danny: So I had like two friends that I could play games with so it was good so we could just all be friends. But here it's like I've

got my group and I have to do that. I just wanna be free sometimes. I don't even know, I just want to be with some random person who I don't even know and just go off with them.

(Group Interview, Year 7, 29/06/2007)

As Danny's experience attests, friendship groups that had once been more open in primary school were now less flexible. Constructing one's selfhood in certain ways was also highly dependant on finding the right kinds of friends who shared your interests and tastes. The prospect of not knowing anyone could often prevent girls from trying out for a new team.

Sheryl: Why wouldn't you want to go [to football training] without girls from your class?

Gazza: I dunno. It's just like, I dunno.

Sheryl: What do you think would happen?

Gazza: I'd just prefer to have someone there that I know.

Sheryl: Yeah.

Gazza: Like if you've gotta get in partners and stuff like that then I'm going to be the odd one out. And I don't like that, I just feel really exposed and like it's just a bit...

Sheryl: Yeah I see what you mean.

Gazza: But if it was someone that I know, at least one person.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Friends were therefore key mediators of sports participation, acting as a form of insulation against perceived judgements. Gazza here expresses the fear of being 'exposed' without their support and protection. Although the absence of friends could prevent girls from trying out for a new team, a friends' attendance or encouragement could also lead to girls trying new activities and it was often friends who had introduced girls to new sports they became highly involved in. The sense of comfort and acceptance from other girls on their team or sports club was often a key motivation in

continuing their involvement but conversely feeling 'left out' of social politics on her team could prompt a girl to give up sports. This highlights the key importance of friends for girls' social identities and peer status.

Lucy had experienced friendship difficulties in her primary school where her assertiveness and confidence in physical activities did not easily translate into either her friendships or her academic confidence. As her mother explained, 'she's not confident with her friendships. She's not confident with her abilities. And she's not always that happy.' This lack of confidence had created a dilemma in choosing either an all-girls' or mixed-sex school. Eventually Lucy and her mother settled on Wellington Gardens, the all-girls' school nearby. For Lucy, the transition had created a positive change and had greatly increased both her social and academic confidence. Despite being at an all-girls' school, Lucy found comfort in a host of friends from Scouts who were similarly less invested in a 'girlie' femininity. Lucy described her new friends at school.

Sheryl: And what is it about those girls [that you like]?

Lucy: I don't know, I think it's just they've got the same personality to me. Or roughly the same personality and I'm used to that sort of people.

Sheryl: And what would that be?

Lucy: They're adventurous. And, they're all just like, I don't know. Like they don't care what they look like or what they're doing. They just do it. But like nothing they do is mean to hurt anyone, or anything like that. So, I don't know. I just prefer them, I don't know why.

(Interview, Year 8, 7/11/2007)

Lucy's transition into secondary school was smoothed by the acquisition of 'friends like her' who were less concerned with their appearance or the social acceptability of activities that they deemed to be fun and enjoyable. At the same time, Lucy distanced herself from the popular clique at her school whose status relied on the bullying of less powerful girls. Like the girls in George's (2007a) research, Lucy had learnt to more carefully

navigate friendship politics from her primary school experiences. Lucy cautiously added that while she and her friends were carefree in their activities ‘nothing [we] do is mean.’ Lucy’s choice of activities became less problematic and she was able to invest in an active, sporty subjectivity that remained compatible with both her social grouping and her ‘good’ academic status. She joined both the hockey and netball teams at school and continued to attend Scouts. In fact, Lucy’s grades and academic confidence increased, suggesting that her social confidence directly related to her academic confidence and to the overall expectation within the school of all-round achievement in accordance with its educational distinction. Yet as George’s (2007a) research has demonstrated, girls’ friendship groups are far from straightforward and can often act as sites of exclusion and bullying, which was Deniz’s experience in Year 7.

At Benjamin Laurence Primary School, friendship groups had been mixed and fluid and were not based on ethnic identifications. However, at Blythevale School, the situation shifted and ethnic identifications took on a growing importance in friendship groupings, as is common at secondary school (George, 2007b, Shain, 2003). In Year 7, Deniz had initially formed friends with an ethnically mixed group of girls, some Muslim and others not. However, this changed following a key incident where Deniz was informed by the leader of her friendship group that she was no longer to be included. Deniz explained the story to me in Year 8, after she had had time to reflect on the situation and remove herself somewhat from the emotional trauma this must have entailed.

Deniz: First what happened, we was best friends and then at the backfield. I was with my friend Maleeha and the other friends and then Vesna and Sufia came, saying that Ginnie took my place.

Sheryl: Took your place where?

Deniz: Like they don’t want me in it.

Sheryl: In their group?

Deniz: Yeah. And they want Ginnie. And I just went out. I didn't say anything.

Sheryl: How did you feel when they said that?

Deniz: I felt left out. But I don't really care anymore. Everyone thinks that Vesna's the boss and everyone's following her.

Everyone's saying that everyone is her tail. But I don't want to be her tail.

(Interview, Year 8, 09/11/2007)

In the closely regulated and hierarchical environment of secondary school, Deniz's expulsion from her group of friends must surely have been distressing. Rosalyn George (2007a :58) describes the 'pain and bewilderment' experienced by the girls in her study 'when they found themselves relegated to the margins of, or excluded from, their friendship group.' George's findings suggest that friendship 'oustings' among girls are exceedingly common, and yet the secrecy and shame involved often caused girls to remain silent about this treatment, somehow believing that they were to blame. For the girls in George's study, secondary school represented a shift in friendship allegiances, which became marked by ethnic identifications. Deniz's experience of group exclusion also seems to suggest that these shifts might be less voluntary in some instances.

After being ousted from her former group, Deniz and her best friend Maleeha (also Turkish Muslim) joined an all-Asian Muslim group in their class. As Shain's (2003: 32) research demonstrates, Asian girls' membership in all-Asian groups may both serve as a form of defence from racism and as a positive form of identification. This was certainly the case for Deniz, whose exclusion from her former friendship group led to an increased investment in her Islamic identity. Between Years 7 and 8, Deniz increased her investment in her Muslim Turkish identity. She began wearing a necklace symbolising both Turkey and Islam each day and became friends with a new group of more devout Muslim girls. During our Year 8 interview, Deniz discussed her growing investment in a Muslim Turkish identity.

Deniz: I'm proud to be a Muslim, that's one. And I like being Turkish. Cause one girl in Year 9, she knows Turkish but she looks Jamaican. And then we talk in Arabic, which is nice, I like it.

Sheryl: So what does that mean for you? Being proud of being Muslim?

Deniz: Everyone says that I'm really into it. And I like being into it. I really want to know about my religion. Everyone says 'you shouldn't' and everything. Like Vesna, she's not really into being Muslim. So I'm just like, I'm really into it. I wanna learn, I really want to learn about it.

Sheryl: Yeah, and what about your new friends. Are they more religious?

Deniz: Yeah, Afshan and Sunita, they're really religious.

Sheryl: So is that sort of what you meant by 'more in common with them?'

Deniz: Afshan is even more religious than me.

(Interview, Year 8, November 2007)

Deniz's investment in her Muslim and Turkish identities can be seen as both a resistance to her former friendship group and as a positive identification with her religious/ethnic background. Dagkas and Benn (2006 :31) similarly found that girls in their study displayed 'a growing awareness of Islam and what it meant to be Muslim' during adolescence. Deniz's ability to speak in Turkish and Arabic forms a bond with an older girl in her school, creating a positive form of identification and validation. By emphasising her own interest in Islam, Deniz was able to distance herself from her former friend who was 'not really into being Muslim.' Deniz stressed her willingness to learn about Islam, which distinguishes her from her former friends who are less committed to certain tenets of Islam that set them apart from other girls at the school. At the same time, Deniz distanced herself somewhat from her new friends, claiming that Afshan is 'even more religious than me.' This seems to suggest some ambivalence on Deniz's part, despite the strong

appeal that Islam held for her both as personal conviction and source of identity.

Dagkas and Benn (2006: 31) also report that girls' growing awareness of their Islamic identities affected their ability to take part in PE. Deniz formed a new group of friends with other devout Muslim girls in her class who constructed their identities in opposition to dominant school norms including participation in PE. Each week this group of girls would bring notes to excuse themselves from PE and would sit at the side of the field watching the other girls play. The girls' sense of social exclusion from the class certainly contributed to this stance but so too did certain inappropriate comments from a substitute teacher who insisted they take part during Eid when they were fasting. The teacher's lack of cultural awareness certainly contributed to the girls' disinvestments, further cementing teacher perceptions of them as a 'problem.' Deniz's taking up of a devout Muslim identity seemed to preclude an investment in PE and games that she had enjoyed in primary school but at the same time it seemed to be necessitated as a defensive strategy within what Deniz perceived to be a hostile environment.

Conclusion

The transition to secondary school proved to be a major turning point in the girls' lives in terms of the identities that were available to them as viable subject positions. This chapter has directly addressed my first research question by suggesting that girls' take up of gendered identities is strongly related to the specific peer groupings at their schools and the range of classed and raced discourses that held resonance within these settings. It also relates to the third research question by suggesting that girls' friendships and peer groupings played a key role in mediating their participation in sports by providing guidance into the appropriate practices that 'girls like me' might engage in. Friends could moreover provide insulation against the harsh judgements girls expected to face in peer contexts including sports settings and teams.

The powerful impact of peer cultures and hierarchies, dominant constructions of femininity and the compulsion towards conformity seemed to be most constraining in girls' abilities to take up active, sporty or 'tomboy' identities as they once had in primary school. The possibility of tomboy identities in secondary school became less feasible as practices associated with this identity such as an interest in football or a particular kind of clothing, were deemed less acceptable.

Although peer cultural practices often demanded conformity, girls cannot be said to be simply victims of a controlling youth culture. Drawing on their nuanced understanding of school cultures, girls were able to act within local spheres in order to define themselves and others within understandable terms. This often involved girls constructing their identities in opposition to the dominant norms of either the school or the peer cultures within it. While Gazza, a white working class girl, found it more difficult to construct a clever or tomboy identity at her school, the appeal of 'girlie' codes served as a form of social capital that was more valuable in her peer group. Her best friend Lindsay found that her ethnic and religious identity positioned her outside the heterosexual dating mix of the class but she nonetheless managed to fit in by performing various aspects of a 'good friend' with a 'nice personality.' Deniz's construction of an assertive Muslim identity allowed her to resist processes of exclusion and racism at her school, as well as the dominant conventions of both a White and Asian femininity.

At their middle class girls' school Nirvana and Lucy were able to position themselves in resistance to a powerful form of 'girlie' femininity by investing in 'clever' and 'nice' subjectivities. The proliferation and status of sports at their school meant that combining these positions with a 'sporty' position was less difficult, even if constructions of physical ability continued to exclude girls from sports participation.

As the girls' experiences attest, the ability to 'do' girl in various ways is strongly contingent on both the dominant ethos of the school and on the kinds of friends they were able to make and keep. The particular connotations of specific subject positions and the ways in which these might be combined at each school seemed to be strongly constrained by the class

and ethnic composition of the school. Both Lindsay and Deniz's experiences suggest that the 'othering' of Asian femininities renders it considerably more difficult for minority ethnic girls to 'do' girlhood in whatever way they wished to.

Combining a sporty subjectivity with other subject positions seemed to be a privilege that was highly contingent on the available expressions of possible girlhood at their specific schools. Although girls could sometimes use sporting participation to distance themselves from 'girlie' positions and practices, the elitism of sporting participation made it more difficult for girls to claim an 'authentic' sporting identity. In addition to these limitations, available discourses justifying sports participation seemed to shift at the secondary level, thus supplanting former participatory discourses on the basis of 'fun.' I explore this shift in the following chapter, where I argue that girls' participation in sport came to be framed around discourses of 'health' and 'ability' that were less prevalent in primary school.

Chapter Eight Health, Ability and Fun: Competing discourses of sporting participation

Introduction

This chapter explores the shifting ways in which girls' participation in sport and physical activity came to be understood in the transition to secondary school; namely through discourses of 'fun,' 'ability' and 'health'. I suggest that girls' understandings of sports participation are strongly influenced by wider conceptualisations of participation in sport and physical activity at both the school and extracurricular level.

Over the past decade and concurrent with the introduction of the new PE curriculum (Green et al., 2007), physical education and sport have come to be increasingly framed within concerns over obesity alongside a renewed emphasis on ability and the development of young 'talent' (Evans et al., 2007, Penney, 2006, Wellard, 2006b, Gard and Wright, 2005). As a result of these emphases, 'health' and 'ability' have come to operate as dominant frameworks of understanding, thereby holding specific implications both for girls' involvement as well as their (dis)investment in sport and/or physical activity and their sense of themselves as competent participants. For the girls in my study, a discursive shift seemed to occur between primary and secondary school where participation in physical activity could no longer be framed within a democratic ideal of 'taking part' for the sake of social or physical pleasure. Over this transition, formerly sufficient participatory discourses of 'fun' were supplanted by more dominant discourses about being good at sport and engaging in healthy behaviours. Wellard (2006a) relates this shift to the introduction of adult models of participation in the PE curriculum. More broadly, these trends can be situated amidst current government emphases on targets and achievement in education, whereby 'perfection' and 'performance' codes translate across physical education/health and academic contexts (Evans et al., 2008b, Evans et al., 2004).

Contemporary discourses around 'ability' and 'health' have been described as 'new orthodoxies' or 'regimes of truth' currently circulating between and

across social contexts but with particular resonance in physical education and health curriculums and settings (Evans and Davies, 2004: 10). As Evans and Davies (2004: 10) contend, while such knowledges maintain salience in various contexts, their moral/scientific authority derives from the health sciences and broader governmental policies around obesity as a pressing social concern (Gard and Wright, 2005). Ideas around health and ability can be seen to operate as collective frameworks of understanding, structuring ways of talking about and justifying participation in sport and physical activity. As Foucault (1977, 1978) has demonstrated, it is their ability to be passed off as naturalised, 'commonsense' explanations that invests such discourses with power, thus constraining what is knowable or understandable about physical activity and why or how girls might get or stay involved. Passed off in this commonsense way, ability and health discourses are exemplified in the sentiments: i) that physical activity and slenderness equate with good health; and ii) that sports should be played by those who are already able or 'good' at them. Although these sentiments are not inherently harmful, their discursive authority and the conflicting ways in which they are taken up by girls and influential adults had a significant impact on girls' activities. Resoundingly, girls' decisions about participating in sports related to these commonly expressed sentiments. However, a third, less dominant discourse existed particularly at the primary school level where participation in physical activity was more readily centred around relationships, physical pleasure and an ethos of 'taking part.' Significant shifts that occurred at the transition to secondary school seemed to make accessing participation on this 'fun' basis more difficult to sustain as it was supplanted by more dominant models of participation. While discourses of ability and health were also present at the primary school level, they came to take on an overwhelming importance at the secondary school level, operating as dominant modes of understanding of sports participation. Ability and health discourses required sporting participation to be justified either on the basis of a perceived 'talent' or 'ability' or through a sense of self-responsibility in keeping fit and 'healthy.' Such discourses could work to justify girls' participation, even serving as a moral inducement that cast inactivity as laziness and irresponsibility and/or suggesting that 'talent' is

both a prerequisite and ongoing incentive for participation. At the same time, discourses of health and ability operated as modes of exclusion by setting up binaries between ‘able’ and ‘non-able’ participants alongside ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ others (Tinning and Glasby, 2002, Evans et al., 2007). The power of these categorisations worked to construct subjects who could think of themselves as ‘good at sports’ or not and therefore as (un)healthy, (ir)responsible citizens meant to take care of their bodies. Girls’ ability to position themselves in relation to these discourses were at the same time caught up in complex configurations of social class, gender and ethnicity that made physical activity more or less ‘doable’, thinkable or realisable. Although differences between girls are increasingly being recognised within newly government sponsored sporting initiatives (Sport England, 2009) inadequate attention has been paid to the ways in which health and ability discourses function to override other possible pleasures of participation and to set up exclusionary constructions of who can or should participate in sports by distinguishing both the motivational and corporeal forms necessary for this participation.

Within this chapter I explore the ways in which multiple, conflicting discourses of sporting participation have affected girls’ involvement by constituting subjects as either ‘good at sports’ or not, and by extension as ‘healthy’ or not. Importantly, these constructions are not simply ideas that girls held of themselves, they are also embodied habits constructed through gendered experiences of sports participation (Evans, 2006), often cemented in noteworthy ‘moments’ where girls became convinced of their own lack of skills and therefore interest. Although constructions of health and ability powerfully shape the possibilities through which sporting participation might be achieved they are also subject to interruption. My analysis seeks to understand how girls might take up, resist and/or challenge discourses around ability, participation, health and physical activity in the context of physical education and extracurricular sports (Wright, 2004).

Discursive understandings of sport and physical activity

By the time the girls were in Year 8, when I did the last set of interviews, four of the six original girls were no longer participating in sport or physical activity outside of PE for various reasons. These included its lack of appeal within their peer settings (as is explored in the previous chapter) and practical issues such as transportation and fees (as I suggested in chapter six). Participation in PE had also shifted in its focus with several of the girls less invested or regularly skipping lessons. While noting this drop-off (and its relation to broader trends), the reasons and circumstances in which girls made these decisions told a much more complicated tale in which girls' ability to take part in pleasurable, participatory physical activity was highly constrained.

Although the girls from Benjamin Laurence primary school had all enjoyed football in primary school, none of them felt able to continue with this participation in secondary school. Lucy and Spirit (who had attended Holly Bank together) did continue with their sports participation, but they each had issues around coaching and club selection that differentially affected their involvement and enjoyment. Coakley and White (1992: 21) suggest that young people make choices about their sports participation 'through a series of shifting, back and forth decisions made within the structural, ideological and cultural contexts of their worlds.' Although the ability to participate in sports often related to material circumstances including travel, cost and time, these were moreover framed by broader understandings of sports participation and the place it might have in the girls' lives and identities.

Girls' experiences and understandings of sports and physical activity were shaped by overriding discursive frameworks of *Health and Fitness*, *Ability/Competition* and *Fun and Participation*. These were reflected both in the way girls spoke about their involvement and the way in which it was structured by their schools and sports clubs. It has been suggested that discrepancies between discourses can provide sites of resistance for subjects, yet more readily these discrepancies seemed to create confusion, frustration and self-blame for the girls as they struggled to reconcile what

turned out to be often conflicting tenets of participation. While their early experiences in primary school suggested that participation might be based on democratic ideals of ‘taking part’ facilitated through trusting and supportive relationships with peers and teachers, their attempts to reconcile these experiences with later difficulties in accessing sports and physical activity often led them to believe that they were overwhelmingly responsible for this disinvestment and that it represented in some way a personal ‘failure’ to maintain a healthy, active lifestyle.

Fun and ‘taking part’

Despite its significance in many young people’s experiences of physical activity, ‘fun’ is often seen as a hedonistic, individualist experience that is merely consequential to the overall aims and pursuits of effective physical education, particularly at the secondary level (Wellard, forthcoming 2010, Bailey et al., 2007). Yet overwhelmingly it was this sense of ‘fun’ that girls lamented the loss of as they described the difference between their secondary school engagement in physical activity and their experiences at primary school. In attempting to conceptualise ‘fun’ Wellard (forthcoming 2010) describes a ‘circuit of body reflexive pleasure’ in which social context, mental orientation and physiological awareness interact to create memorable physical experiences for young people. Wellard (forthcoming 2010) goes on to emphasise the importance of bodily pleasure, fun and enjoyment both in sustaining interest in physical activity and for the process of learning through and about the body. Within this scheme, ‘fun’ translates into pleasurable moments as ‘bankable memories’ that might sustain young people’s interest in physical activity, despite possible further experiences that are not always so pleasurable. Accounts from teachers and parents described an enthusiasm for physical enjoyment and play from a young age. Nirvana’s mother suggested:

She’s always been very active from a young age. Skipping, just bouncing, she’s just been a happy, bouncy little girl.

(Interview with Carol Vickers, 19/10/2005)

Girls in my study were more likely to describe this sense of fun at the primary school level. This also related to the inclusive culture of the school at Benjamin Laurence and to the wide availability of equipment, space and supportive adults at Holly Bank. Within their descriptions, a sense of fun in physical activity seemed to be the result of trusting, encouraging relationships, a sense of freedom in engagement with the physical environment and a heightened bodily awareness. Descriptions from the girls themselves also conveyed an embodied physical awareness derived from active play.

I like getting the energy out of me and running (Interview, Lucy, Year 6, 9/12/2005)

Well when I'm running I kind of feel worn out but then I have some energy left so if I kind of sprint really hard you used up all the energy and you can't really feel your legs, I quite like that feeling (Interview, Rhiannon, Year 8, 10/2007)

These accounts describe a kind of heightened bodily engagement through movement that create pleasurable moments of physical sensation. The feelings evoked here might be described as a kind of 'kinaesthetic' or 'sensual pleasure' that is particularly available through bodily movement (Wright and Dewar, 1997). The women in Wright and Dewar's (1997: 88) research similarly conveyed a sense of 'connectedness' with their bodies which the authors suggest might be described as a 'rhythm' or 'flow.' However, women in Wright and Dewar's study were in their late 30s or older and they had the freedom, time and critical awareness to challenge dominant discourses and to engage in alternative forms of physical activity that differed from earlier PE experiences that were more negative. For the girls in my research, selective models of participation highly constrained their ability to take part in physical activity in ways that arrived at these types of pleasures.

The above excerpts convey a kind of joy and abandon that contrasts with many of the girls' secondary school experiences. These narratives seem to suggest a sense of 'fun' constructed around a participatory model aimed at

enjoyment through bodily movement and nurtured in supportive relationships (Ennis et al., 1999, Ennis, 1999). In her outline of a culturally relevant curriculum for disengaged girls, Ennis (1999: 36) advocates 'socially responsible' play within an 'emotionally safe environment' founded on feelings of trust, mutual reliance and encouragement as precursors to otherwise marginalised young people's enjoyment of physical activity. Similarly for the girls in my research, adults often facilitated these relationships, but they were also about less demarcated friendships groups where conformity was not demanded.

Danny: Cause like in primary school I had this best friend and she was exactly like me. Actually not like me at all. And we used to just be random and go running round and you didn't have to be in a group or anything, you could just play whatever you wanted to play. And then I'd have a different friend who we used to play proper games with like imaginary games. So I had like two friends that I could play games with so it was good so we could just all be friends.

(Group Interview, Year 7, 29/06/2007)

Danny's description of activity in primary school conveys a less constricted environment where physical activity is facilitated within friendships and marked by imaginative play and exploration. Similarly women in Wright and Dewar's study contrasted negative PE experiences with 'playful activities in less structured settings' (1997:86). Modes of bodily engagement within primary school had more readily focused on individual development and whole-class participation facilitated in particular by the interpersonal relationships built up between peers and with teachers. Indeed the most popular and engaging form of physical activity at both schools had been class-wide chase games or football that were overseen by a conscientious teacher. In Year 5 teachers at Benjamin Laurence had intervened to ensure that girls had their own pitch time and could thereafter take part in year-wide 'big matches' with their male peers. Gazza and Deniz recalled these big matches as having been highlights of their footballing experiences in primary school. Unfortunately the evasiveness of these forms of play at

secondary school discouraged either girl from trying out for her school's football team. At Holly Bank School, the large playing fields had provided space for the children to take part in class-wide games of chase and hide and seek, thus encouraging active play over the breaks. The school-wide focus on cross-country running got many children involved in a model of physical activity that valued participation over selection as the majority of the students ran together in large groups after school.

At Wellington Gardens, a popular intake school for former Holly Bank girls, the playing fields were off-limits over break and running outside of PE lessons was discouraged. In line with the National Curriculum, PE centred on developing particular skills in a limited number of sporting activities throughout the year. Nirvana, who had once greatly enjoyed PE, became gradually more disaffected. During one lesson she self-assessed her overall participation as 'below average.' I asked her about this during our Year 8 interview.

Nirvana: Cause I don't really care about PE anymore. It's just I go there, I do whatever I have to do and then I leave. I just don't like put any effort into it, apart from something I like, like a netball match. But the rest is just really annoying.

Sheryl: What's changed? Why don't you care about PE anymore?

Nirvana: I don't know. It's just, [primary school] was so much better. There were more things to do and it was more exciting. I'm not sure but it was a lot more fun (Mm hm). And, yeah. It's [PE] annoying now and I used to love it. It was well cool. And at break as well we'd always like run around and like play the catching game. It was always exercising. But now it's just like you sit down and do nothing, lunch, sit down, eat, do nothing. It's really annoying.

(Interview, Year 8, 07/11/2007)

The instruction in class that day had involved girls assessing their levels of participation but while the teacher's emphasis seemed to be on physical performance, Nirvana focused on her mental/emotional commitment to

physical activity ‘I don’t really care anymore.’ She seemed to be saying that while she is physically ‘able’ to do the tasks her teacher requires, she is no longer engaged or interested in the models of activity on offer. Nirvana also positioned her disengagement in physical education as fitting more broadly within her general activities throughout the day ‘it was always exercising.’ While models of physical activity at school demanded skilled performances at set times (during PE or as a member of a school team), Nirvana here sees physical activity as being more widely about her ability to run around at break, have free time after school and have access to local facilities in her community.

Like other girls, Nirvana had elsewhere noted the lack of variety of activities offered in PE and the emphasis on skills acquisition over and above ‘fun,’ as had been the case at primary school. This might be related more generally to a shift at the secondary level where the curriculum emphasises competitive sports taught by specialist PE teachers in ‘adult-centred’ models of participation (Wellard, forthcoming 2010). As recent research by both Dismore (2007) and Wellard (2006a) demonstrates, such models often operate at the secondary level to supplant former experiences of ‘fun’ for children by imposing performative models of participation in line with the National Curriculum and its emphasis on achievement. Nirvana’s comments bring across well the boredom and sedentary requirements that so characterised many girls’ experiences once they entered secondary school. For other girls, including her close friend Spirit, the form of engagement with physical activity had simply shifted, reflecting the performative, achievement-based orientation of both her running club and school.

Spirit: But now it’s really changed, I’m now doing it. I’m not just doing it for fun, I’m doing it ‘cause I want to get faster.

(Interview, Year 7, 17/01/2007)

This shift in emphasis is clearly in line with the dominant tenets of Spirit’s running club where ‘participatory’ engagement was met with disdain and even exclusion. Girls like Lucy who could not keep up with the main group

were relegated to a 'beginners' group that was seen as transitory by the coaches (this is explored more fully in the next section). Within this understanding, it was not sufficient to 'do one's best' or simply to 'take part' and participation was marked by exclusionary constructions of ability incentivised towards continual improvement. The club expected 'personal bests' at successive races and expressed dismay if girls were not developing according to club expectations. Yet despite this emphasis on continual improvement, the girls were made brutally aware by their head coach that none of their running times would put them a position for future Olympic participation, something Spirit had dreamed about in early decisions about joining a running club.

Although Spirit here shifts her justification for running towards self-improvement, elsewhere she also noted the health benefits of running 'I just like feeling that my body is healthy.' The emphasis on health and fitness was a common justification for girls as they spoke about their participation in physical activity and seemed to be so firmly entrenched as a belief that it became virtually impossible to disagree with. Girls' engagements with such a powerful set of discourses around health and fitness formed an overarching set of arguments within which participation in physical activity could be explained/justified.

Health and fitness

Over the past decade, physical education and physical activity have been increasingly promoted within an incentive of health and fitness, or what Evans and Davies (2004) term 'healthism.' Healthism operates on the premise that sports and physical activity are 'good' for individuals by contributing to their overall bodily health and promoting longevity and resistance against illness. The incentivisation of health is frequently put across by government policy and is inevitably tied to productivity in the form of work targets and reducing strain on national health services (Shilling, 2008). In what has been characterised as a 'risk society', behaviours such as smoking, overeating and lack of exercise become 'risky behaviours' that individuals are expected to avoid (Tinning and Glasby,

2002). This represents a shift from reparative to preventative health measures, which place the onus of health maintenance on the individual.

Body perfection codes (which we suggest now pervade the cultures and structures of western societies and are reflected in schools)...represent a shift from a concern with repairing ‘the physical body’ through specific pedagogical action to protecting/preserving the unfinished body by reconfiguring body, mind and soul through intervention and prevention, which is everyone’s concern (Evans et al., 2004: 129).

Accordingly, exercise, ‘healthy’ eating and weight management are cast as preventative strategies through which individuals are able to demonstrate self-management and individual responsibility through individual body projects (Benson, 1997: 127). It is clear that exercise and diet are deeply implicated in such projects and represent important facets of women’s bodily conceptions and negotiations. Renewed emphases on slenderness in the wake of concerns over obesity provide dominant discourses through which young women might construct physical identities (Garrett, 2004a, Evans et al., 2008b). When girls framed their sporting experiences in terms of health and fitness it came across through a sense that they *should* be exercising regularly or eating healthily, but perhaps were not. It could result in feelings of guilt that they were not doing better by eating less or being more active. This sense of guilt was present despite the many overriding factors that made physical activity and ‘healthy’ eating challenging and at times impossible.

The large amounts of homework they were given forced girls to sit at home for hours on end, and restrictions at school meant they were no longer able to run around the school grounds at lunch and playtime. Outside of school, fears for their safety restricted girls’ ability to go outside without adult supervision (something I discuss in chapter nine). Therefore physical activity or exercise often required participation in a regimented, set environment at a particular time and place, controlled by a coach or teacher and mediated by relationships with teammates and constructions of ability. Many girls found that they had fewer opportunities to go to the park or run around at playtime and were often stuck at home doing homework. As Erica

describes, the boredom and monotony of studying often provoked excursions to the fridge.

Erica: Um, when I eat a lot of snacks my parents always tell me that I shouldn't eat so much.

Sheryl: Really?

Erica: Well I don't eat that much but if I have like a packet of crisps and then a chocolate bar I feel quite self-conscious.

(Interview, Year 8, 10/2007)

The exhortation to uphold exacting health standards around food intake, body size and exercise can be described as a form of 'biopower' (Evans et al., 2008b), which acts to induce feelings of guilt and anxiety in individuals. Within health and fitness discourses, food, sport and body size became aligned in complex, often misleading associations that translate across contexts and form instructive body pedagogies (Evans et al., 2008a). These body pedagogies acquire the power to mediate thoughts and feelings around food, causing Erica to feel 'self-conscious' about snacks, despite her very small body frame. The moralising of food intake into 'good' and 'bad' food can become quite damaging, causing individuals to lose touch with natural feelings of hunger or fullness and building up unhealthy and sometimes irrational relations around food and weight (Chernin, 1985). Although the 'feminisation of fat' (Orbach, 1986) has been problematised by feminists for decades, the complex coding of health, fitness and slenderness are now imbricated to the extent that they become indistinguishable at times, making the 'slippage' from weight concerns and exercise regimes to eating disorders steadily more slippery (Evans et al., 2008b).

Spirit's accomplishments in running were much celebrated by teachers and peers alike and she was viewed as a star athlete at her primary school. During our Year 7 interview, Spirit spoke of her love of running and her dedication to the sport seemed to attest to this. She then disclosed that she had begun running in Year 4 in a desire to lose weight and that this was tied in with disordered eating patterns she had developed at the time.

Sheryl: Do you think running is as important to you as it used to be?

Spirit: I think, I think when I was doing it before; I was more doing it for health, fitness and just to keep myself in shape really. Because even though I was quite young, in year four I started getting concerned about my weight and stuff, if you know like-

Sheryl: Really?

Spirit: Yeah, and I was like concerned about what I was eating, like only low fat foods.

(Interview, Year 7, 17/01/2007)

Links between running and attempted weight loss are not remarkable among young women, and it is only Spirit's young age that sets this admission apart. The connection of limited food intake and negative body image make it difficult to square with the perceived benefits of physical fitness. Evans, Rich, and Holroyd's (2004) research similarly looks at the implications of schooling for middle class girls by connecting specific processes within schooling to the development of eating disorders. The authors suggest a link between school emphases on academic performance and the development of such disorders.

Academic and health discourse in [schools] potentially commingle and may intersect with the material conditions of individuals' lives to create conditions of ill health (Evans et al., 2008a: 400).

In earlier interviews while she was still in primary school, Spirit discussed the pressure she was being put under in studying for entrance tests to selective schools as well as harassment from a male peer. Yet amidst these multiple pressures, Spirit was overwhelmingly concerned with pleasing those around her and she described her empathy for others as a valued trait of her personality. The feminisation of care and empathy coupled with achievement codes and 'health' incentives may thus prove particularly destructive for young women expected to live up to expectations of successful girlhood.

Body size and food

Evans, Rich, Davies and Allwood (2008b) contend that 'regimes of truth' around health and ability create hierarchies of the body constructed in PE

and in classrooms around weight, size and shape, with a significant impact on students. They argue that these hierarchies come across as body pedagogies or accepted truths about body size and weight. Similarly in my research, ideas around health often worked interchangeably with issues of body size, so that being skinny might discursively equate to being fit and healthy. Although the girls were asked not to include their names on questionnaires, one called herself ‘Miss Fatty, aka doesn’t do sports.’ In a similar equation between weight and fitness, a friend of Lindsay and Gazza who was restricting her food intake explained ‘I don’t to be skinny, I just want to be fit.’

While dieting might be criticised for its short-termism and superficiality, fitness or health have acquired a status of superior moral value to the extent that they become difficult to criticise or question as motives for behaviours that might otherwise be deemed damaging or even obsessive. The elevation of ‘slenderness’ as a corporeal ideal had even become an incentive for taking part in physical education, something Deniz’s mother had been happy for her to opt out of throughout Year 7.

Deniz: I asked my mum last night and she got confused.

Sheryl: About your grade?

Deniz: Yeah, ‘cause I don’t do PE that much. And she tells me off, like ‘why aren’t you doing PE?’ and everything. ‘It’s good.’

Sheryl: Your mum says that?

Deniz: Yeah.

Sheryl: I thought your mum didn’t mind if you skipped PE and things.

Deniz: That was last year. But now, I’ve gone a bit fat and then she goes ‘you should lose weight and everything and do PE.’

(Interview, Year 8, 09/11/2007)

Findings from Flintoff and Scraton’s (2001) research into girls’ physical activity levels found that physical activity (and PE by implication) was frequently related to short-term weight-loss goals tied to idealised feminine bodies. In their words, ‘fitness has become yet one more mechanism in

achieving ideal femininity' (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001: 9). Deniz was resistant to 'ideal femininity' in many ways and this was underscored by her position as a Turkish Muslim immigrant to Britain. Yet here the impending fear of 'fat' becomes sufficient incentive for a renewed participation in PE. This differs strongly from Deniz's orientation towards PE in primary school, where she had been highly engaged in active, unrestrained enjoyment both in PE and in playground football. The impending threat of 'going a bit fat' is used as an incentive towards engaging in PE lessons, though clearly with a different orientation than her experiences in primary school.

Personal responsibility

The normalisation of healthy behaviours establishes a context wherein those who are unable to conform to its requirements become stigmatised and held to blame for their lack of responsible behaviours. Individuals are expected to make 'healthy choices' as though free from structural and cultural constraints (Evans et al., 2008b: 55). Halse (2007, quoted in Evans 2008b: 56) refers to this construction as a 'moral economy of virtue,' which works to establish good and bad citizens through their adherence to 'risk-adverse' behaviours. When asked about her own bodily image, Lucy maintains a calm self-acceptance that is contrasted with overweight peers.

Lucy: No, I don't really mind. I know some people are quite... large. They get really upset and they don't do anything. They don't go swimming or anything like that. But then they don't try and stop it. They don't stop eating they just don't do the fun activities. Like say I was quite a lot bigger and I didn't want to go swimming because of it. Then I'd try and sort myself out and put myself on a diet or something but some people don't do that. They just cut out all the fun activities. Which is the thing that's gonna get them thin.

(Interview, Year 8, 07/11/2007)

Lucy begins by telling me that she is content with her body and appearance, 'I don't really mind.' Given my reading of the literature I expected to find girls highly dissatisfied with their appearance and/or weight (e.g. Frost,

2001) but in fact none of the girls interviewed reported open dissatisfaction with their body shape or size. In this sense they were often critical of normative discourses endorsing a 'cult of slenderness.' This may also be a result of the fact that each girl's pre-adolescent forms embodied a normative slenderness thereby insulating them from critical discourses. However, further comments or behaviours revealed a more ambivalent relationship towards food and weight that did not necessarily conform to earlier comments. Gazza's insistence that she ate when she was hungry and was happy with her body was somewhat belied by her daily habit of skipping both breakfast and lunch, in line with many of her friends. Evans, Rich, Davies and Allwood (2008b) similarly describe how girls' critical stances towards health discourses were nonetheless overwhelmed by health codes endorsed through both media and government incentives, which now permeate school cultures. Oliver and Lalik's (2001) research revealed that girls' outward bodily acceptance during group interviews was contradicted by an obsessive concern with bodily appearance and functions, as documented in their journal entries.

Crawford (1994: 1348) argues that 'health' and the healthy body are discursively reliant on the construction of the 'unhealthy other.' Thus an (outward) bodily acceptance may be linked to the projection of fatness and lack of exercise onto irresponsible 'others,' thereby validating one's own 'healthy' lifestyle. Health as the corporeal embodiment of slenderness becomes moralised and held up for scrutiny, with the linked understanding that 'fatness' equates to laziness and lack of willpower. Responsibility for health is strongly individualised in this excerpt, 'I'd try and sort myself out,' suggesting that extra weight is a sign of failure. The assumed conclusion of this sentiment is that those who embody a corporeal slenderness have already 'sorted themselves out', demonstrating a form of responsibility and care here seen noteworthy.

The interchanging of fitness and weight could be confusing for girls as it probably is for adult women. Boys at the mixed school also teased girls for being too skinny, calling them 'anorexic' as a form of insult. This harassment impelled girls to insist that they *did* eat and to hide any dieting

behaviour from friends and peers, or to explain it as otherwise, for example to say that they only wished to be 'fit' rather than to lose weight. Danny's reaction to being called anorexic was to insist that the reason she was so slender was due to the large amount of sports she engaged in. Thus body size, weight, eating and physical activity become entangled in a series of complex, contradictory mechanisms requiring equivocations, concealment and subtle manipulation on the part of girls in explaining and justifying their bodies and behaviours. Both Danny and the anonymous questionnaire respondent (AQR) are engaged in a process of self-justification through reference to sport. While Danny seeks to explain her 'low' body weight through reference to her intense sports participation, AQR uses her lack of involvement in sport to explain her 'overweight' physique - 'Miss fatty, aka doesn't do sport'. In this way, sports involvement served as a dominant, moralistic narrative through which girls could justify their bodily practices and shapes. Paradoxically, access to this sports involvement was overwhelmingly premised on constructions of ability geared around exclusive 'bodily-based performances' (Wellard, 2006a).

Ability and elite competition

Based on the 1991 report from the PE Working Group on Equality and Educational Provision, Evans and Davies (1993) outline two key views of equality. They suggest that equality of opportunity is based on the assumption that everyone begins from the same starting point and whilst providing opportunities for comparison, it operates through a process of sorting the able from the less able. A second perspective based on the concept of equity works on the premise that every child deserves the best possible provision 'regardless of their perceived abilities' (1993: 2).

Optimistically, the authors suggest that findings from the report, which promotes the latter definition, will have long-reaching, positive effects on PE provision. However, this may not now be the case.

Findings from Penney & Harris' (1997) survey research suggests that PE provision continues to provide 'more of the same for the more able' by endorsing traditional models of sporting participation. Their findings echoed

those of the 1995 Sports Council for Wales which found that 'extracurricular provision seems to be becoming ever more competitive and geared to performance' and is focused on the most talented performers, thus excluding those less able (Penney and Harris, 1997: 44). Thirteen years after the 1991 report, Evans and Davies (2004: 6) note the 'overwhelming influence' of ability as a marker of intelligence and value within education, as separating out 'winners' and 'losers' in an ever more stratified education system. Somewhat reluctantly, they note the tendency for this to filter into physical education programmes (Evans and Davies, 2004). Certainly ability and elite competition seemed to characterise one of the dominant ways in which sport and physical activity were understood within my research, particularly by coaches and PE teachers. Girls' reactions to this model of participation varied. For girls who had 'made the cut,' it could operate as a form of distinction and a sense of achievement, albeit with the attendant knowledge that performances needed to continue at the required standard. However, many girls concurred with definitions of themselves as 'rubbish at sports' and therefore unable/unlikely to participate. A vocal few, including Lucy, resented the unfairness of participation models based on ability but had little power to change sorting standards. Boys may be less likely to reach such conclusions about their abilities early on due to their privileges in accessing sport. However, the adult men involved in Wellard's (2006a) research suggested that required performances of a heteronormative 'exclusive masculinity' had similarly constrained their sense of ability in school PE.

Especially at secondary school, teams became more competitive and some girls felt that they were no longer 'good at sports' even if they had participated in a variety of sports outside school. Each school held a sports day and this meant competing in different events on show for the rest of the school. Of the four secondary schools, Blythevale was the only school that concentrated on 'fun' events, de-emphasising the competitive, performance-based aspects of the day. Several girls at the other schools mentioned the fear of 'coming in last' on sports day and embarrassing themselves. Danny

was one of the few girls who enjoyed this competition and this seemed to relate to adequate support and training.

Schools and sports clubs who were focused on competition in sport seemed to view this as a way to prove that they were a 'good' school or club. It was very possible for coaches or teachers to get carried away with the reputation of the club or school instead of focusing on individual girls' experiences. For girls who were able to compete in elite sports teams and clubs, there seemed to be compelling reasons for continuing, often reinforced by adult expectations of ongoing improvement. This could be considered a form of encouragement but it could also create pressure to continue to succeed and perform in successive competitions. The celebration of 'PBs' (personal bests) in Spirit's running club meant that girls were under constant pressure not only to place in events but also to achieve more highly than they had before. Here Spirit describes her coach's reaction to her performance in the school-wide races, where she had come second rather than the expected first.

Spirit: And he said to me 'Oh Spirit, I think you're over-training a bit now, that's why you lost.' and I said '*I'm not allowed to come second for once?!*' It's really annoying. That's why I hate Mr Sebastian.

(Interview with Spirit and Nirvana, Year 6, 06/12/2006)

The school-wide acknowledgement that Spirit was the 'fastest runner' worked to build up a series of expectations around her performances. Thereby her second place finish in the school races becomes noteworthy as insufficient and even as 'losing.' Similarly at her running club, the coaches described Spirit's progress as 'disappointing' given her earlier performances. It is important to emphasise that expectations around Spirit's sporting performances were matched in intensity by those around her academic performances, creating a pressurised context for her ongoing achievements. Spirit suggested that her position as a scholarship holder at her school meant that she had to keep up her high grades alongside growing extracurricular commitments. The identification of talent at a young age

remains part of government strategy to create elite athletes. While this becomes compelling for those who are ‘chosen’ it can also become a psychological burden as the need to prove oneself and one’s distinction becomes progressively more difficult in higher and higher echelons of competition. ‘Ability’ and ‘talent’ comprise shrinking categories of participants as they move upwards to elite levels of participation. While at the same time, these traits become not just benefits of participation, but prerequisites for the majority of participants.

Being good at sports

Girls who were able to hold onto a belief in their abilities at secondary school were often then confronted with the filtering system of school or outside teams. The idea of being ‘good at sports’ or the alternative ‘rubbish at sports’ was something that came up repeatedly within my data. This led me to consider constructions of ability and how this framed girls’ participation. In the questionnaire I distributed at the girls’ PE classes, one of the questions asked whether a girl had ever thought about trying out for a sports team but decided not to. Many of the responses suggested that ability or perceptions of ability played a key role in these decisions.

Yes, but I thought I wasn’t good enough. (AQR, Wellington Gardens)

Netball. [But] the teachers pick their favourites. (AQR, Wellington Gardens)

Not very welcoming as they make you think that you can only go if you’re good at it.(AQR, Wellington Gardens)

Yes, but I’m scared if everyone else is much better than me/more advanced. (AQR, Adlington School)

Responses from the questionnaires had resonances with the experiences recounted during interviews, for example when Lucy described trying out at Champions Running Club, which was located nearby to her. When I asked about running, Lucy told me that she preferred alternative sports that did not have preliminary sorting mechanisms that distinguished the able from the less able.

Lucy: Like running, you don't have to learn to run, you just sort of do it. But things like sailing or climbing or anything like that you have to learn the technique. So I prefer things like that 'cause you have to learn it and show your ability and things like that.

Sheryl: Mmm.

Lucy: Whereas with running it's just like 'right, you're really good you can go in the competition' or 'you're really rubbish, you can't.'

(Interview, Year 8, 7/11/2007)

Lucy's experience of running both inside and out of school is key here. In primary school she had joined cross-country and continued to enjoy it until the end of Year 6. Hoping to continue with her running she went along to Champions Running Club where both her brother and Spirit, a former classmate, competed. Lucy quickly discovered that expectations at the club were very high and she was 'relegated' to the mixed activity beginner's group since the girls' running group were unable/unwilling to cater to her abilities. As her mother described 'although Lucy is quite a nice runner and she has stamina, she's not... fast' (Interview with Lucy and Mary, 09/2006). Lucy's enthusiasm for running, her stamina and her commitment were meaningless to the running club, who were intent on being placed highly in league standings and churning out local champions. Lucy condemned these actions as 'unfair' but was powerless to do much about it. Run training at her school athletics club involved instructions to 'run around the track as many times as you can' whilst teachers concentrated on 'technique' disciplines such as javelin and long jump. Lucy's belief that running does not need to be learned belies the training, technique and hours of practice that in fact go in to making a 'good' runner. Her experience at the running club reinforced this view since girls were sorted into echelons of ability that necessitated a 'base' ability/speed assumed to be pre-existing. That the club was unwilling to train girls whose running falls below a set 'standard' suggests a limited view of the potential for development. This limited view of development carries across definitions of sporting, musical and

intellectual ability. Sloboda, Davidson and Howe (1994) argue that the seeming innateness of musical ‘talent’ or ability is in fact a result of hours of practice rather than ‘giftedness’ as is often supposed (Sloboda et al., 1994b). The increasing emphasis on ‘talent’ and ‘ability’ are constructed around a seeming innateness which suggests that certain individuals are simply endowed with such gifts at birth, rather than these being developed over many years of practice (Sloboda et al., 1994b, Sloboda et al., 1994a, Wellard, 2007). In this determinist view, one is either talented, or not, with little possibility of improvement and seemingly no prospect of individual development. Dweck’s (1986) psychological research reveals the perniciousness of this view in fixing concepts of ability and thereby discouraging development and learning through an orientation towards ‘performance’ goals rather than ‘learning’ goals. Her findings suggested:

Children who believe intelligence is a fixed trait tend to orient towards gaining favourable judgments of that trait (performance goals), whereas children who believe intelligence is a malleable quality tend to orient towards developing that quality (learning goals).

(Dweck, 1986: 1041)

When applied to sporting ability, this critique suggests limited motivational potential for young people whose performances are measured according to outcome rather than process. Contrary to these critiques, government sports strategies and PE culture seem intent on identifying and developing young talent, as though such talent were simply out there waiting to be discovered rather than acquired through endless practice and performance. UK Sport and Sport England are currently funding what is termed ‘the new science of talent identification’, which seeks to target young people for Olympic Glory based on scientifically measured perceptions of physical characteristics. The 2008 PE and Sport Strategy aims to engage ‘the most talented young people’ in its UK school games as preparation for the 2012 Olympics (DCSF 2008:1). The selection of this group is deemed as readily identifiable and therefore unproblematic, despite its exclusion of girls like Lucy who may wish to take part but are restricted from doing so in the pressurised model of performance set out for her.

Certainly in the experiences of many girls I spoke with, 'ability' had become the end-all, be-all of participation and concurrently, of self-worth. As Lucy puts it, 'you're rubbish, you can't.' Her experience at netball tryouts was unfortunately similar.

Lucy: They look at the good people at the [start] and then say, 'you're on the team' and then they just concentrate on people on the team....and all the people they chose were actually really quite good.

(Interview, Year 7, 09/2006)

Lucy's experience in netball and her sense that the coaches were less interested in her than other 'good' players had a significant impact on her participation, both in terms of opportunity to play and enjoyment whilst playing. The idea that you had to be good at sports in order to participate was something the girls often mentioned and also something many school teams practiced. Many girls believed that ability and even distinction were prerequisites for both participation and enjoyment. Tragically, the fragile nature of this identity made it increasingly difficult for girls to hold onto the belief that they might be 'good at sports', even if this was something they had previously believed in primary school.

Coakley and White (1992: 26) suggest that personal competence plays a key role in affecting individuals' decisions to continue with their sports involvement. Both in their research and my own, young people who felt that they were 'good' at something were more likely to carry on as it took on a central role in their lives, forming part of their self-definition. For Danny, being good at sports meant being picked for teams, thus continuing to increase both her confidence and skills as she took on different activities and trained in those she was already identified as 'talented' within.

Danny: Yeah, any sport I like. Like in PE if we have to do like cricket or something I'll do it 'cause I don't know what it is I'm just naturally good at any sport kind of thing.

Sheryl: Mmm, so you feel quite confident about your ability in sports and things?

Danny: Yeah, like when we're picking teams people say 'I'll take Danny' and it's a nice feeling 'cause everyone else can see that I'm good as well. But I don't like to show off about it. I just like take it in my stride. If the teacher picks me to do something I just say 'okay.'

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Widely regarded as the most athletic girl in her class, Danny's confidence in her sporting ability was seemingly firmly established. She was picked often for teams and gained a sense of distinction from both her teachers and peers for this. However, Danny added 'I don't like to show off about it,' thus displaying the requisite feminine humility that seemed to accompany most girls' self-assessments (Clark and Paechter, 2007). In our earlier research I noted that unlike their male peers, girls seemed unable to 'own up' to their accomplishments in either sport or academics. Nirvana had then explained 'it's not nice to talk about yourself,' thus reinforcing this view (Interview, Year 6, 06/12/2005).

As Danny's words attest, assessments of ability are always relative, relying for their positioning on the ranking of others who are 'not so good' and may be picked last rather than first. The coupling of feminised humility and ever-increasing pools of talent work against girls' positive valuations of their sporting abilities. Within a competitive model of sports it was often difficult for girls to believe in their abilities, even if they were competing at high levels since there would always be another girl who was 'better.' Lindsay had been one of the fastest girls at her primary school where both her teacher and classmates encouraged her. Once at secondary school she found it steadily more difficult to sustain the self-belief she once held.

Sheryl: So what's changed?

Lindsay: I'm not the most athletic girl.

Sheryl: You're not? So is it difficult to think of yourself as a good runner still?

Lindsay: I'm not a good runner anymore.

Sheryl: And has that stopped you from running?

Lindsay: Yeah. Cause you know you can't run quick, fast enough,
'cause there's so many other girls in Year 8 that can run so fast
and you feel like you can't do it.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Lindsay's abilities both in football and in running had served to distinguish her in primary school, contributing to her high status among classmates. Support from male peers, who had avidly cheered her on during class competitions, had been particularly encouraging. During our Years 7 and 8 interviews, Lindsay lamented the fact that male classmates no longer paid attention to her, something she connected with her wearing of a headscarf. She was not selected for her class relay team on Sports Day and this seemed to reinforce her belief that she was 'not a good runner anymore.' Girls sometimes mentioned specific moments where a PE teacher yelling at them had cemented the idea that they were 'rubbish' or 'not good.'

Nirvana: It depends on the sport, because I am rubbish at a lot of
sports. Like throwing a ball.

Sheryl: Really?

Nirvana: Yeah, 'cause like, well I told you the story of when we were
all on the field and Mr Sebastian made us, he said 'Ok,
everyone throw a ball.' Cause like he wanted to see for the
athletics thing.

Sheryl: Oh yeah.

Nirvana: And' cause I was second, I threw the ball and it went like
two centimetres and he kept shouting at me. He made me do it
three times and it still went nowhere.

(Interview, Year 7, 24/11/ 2006)

Feelings of shame, humiliation and anxiety are not uncommon affective traces of PE experiences described by adults who did not 'fit' the performative and corporeal requirements of school lessons (Ennis, 1996, Evans et al., 2007, Wellard, 2006a, Wright and Dewar, 1997). Wright and

Dewar's (1997: 85) research with middle-aged women found that these experiences often created 'long-term feelings of inadequacy' in relation to their sporting participation. Probyn (2000) notes the integral connection between the bodily experience of shame and sports participation. The competitive nature of sport necessitates 'a constant lack, or recurring incompleteness, the ever-incomplete athletic body is a symptom of the logic, the structure of competing' (Heikkala 1993, quoted in Probyn 2000:20). This lack is premised in the very nature of sports competition, which establishes winner and losers in sites 'where we are supposed to learn to lose well' (Probyn, 2000: 20). It is little wonder that being yelled at by her coach does not instantly transform Nirvana into a 'good' thrower. Instead it has the opposite effect, lowering her commitment and instilling the belief that she is bad or 'rubbish' at sports. Following Shilling's (1993) understanding of physical capital, negative sporting experiences and public humiliations quickly translate into negative self-belief and decreased capacity. For most girls, 'being good at sports' was a fragile identity that could be easily interrupted or broken. Yet this was a requirement for much participation in sports. This presents a catch-22 situation in that girls who cannot sustain a positive sporting identity are almost compelled to drop out, thus never getting the opportunity to disprove their believed incapacity. The experiences of adult women engaging in sport or physical activities later in life are often marked by a sense of surprise at both their bodily capacities and the enjoyment that such engagement might offer (Wright and Dewar, 1997).

Girls who believe they are good at sports might continue to take part but still feel pressured to keep up their performances. Persistent training and rising standards of performance make it ever more difficult for girls trying out new sports to 'join in' at a later age. The Long-Term Athlete Development plan (LTAD), endorsed by Sports Coach UK, assumes a model of development in which young athletes engage in increasingly competitive and time-consuming training phases leading ultimately towards the 'Training to Win' phase (Sports Coach UK, 2004). By assuming that all participation should lead towards elite performance, the model works to

exclude would-be participants at all ages. The reinforcement of ability by constraining those ‘lacking ability’ is described by Hay and Hunter (2006: 294) as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ perpetuated with disturbingly little concern throughout physical education programmes. Moreover, the reinforcement of ability relies on an understanding of such ability as innate and pre-determined rather than subject to mediating factors affecting enjoyment and participation such as gender and economic privilege and even physical disabilities (Wellard, 2006a: 311). Here Gazza reflects on her experiences of running, which are always constrained by physical limitations.

Sheryl: So I was just wondering how it feels for you when you do sports?

Gazza: Um, well, I’ve got asthma so it’s hard. And um, like, I’m not slow at running but I’m not fast. It’s like, I don’t mind running but I can’t run for ages. Cause I just can’t.

(Interview, Year 8, 18/11/2007)

Despite physical variations and (dis)abilities, the competitive nature of sporting events often meant that different abilities and needs could not/would not be taken into account since school and team victories were at stake. Wellard (2006a: 117) remarks that ‘schools (albeit often unwittingly) discriminate against many young people on the grounds of their bodily performances rather than take into account the individual’s willingness to take part.’ Comments from PE teachers suggested that schools might be aware of ability as a discriminatory sorting mechanism yet felt compelled to perpetuate such cycles due to the ongoing expectations of parents, boards, head teachers and other regulatory mechanisms.

Competitive models of sporting participation can make it very difficult for girls to feel confident about their physical abilities and to believe that they are ‘good at sports,’ which then becomes a requirement for participation. The emphasis on adult models of sporting participation at the secondary level meant that girls felt they had to make immediate decisions about

whether they were 'sporty' or not, thus dictating whether and which physical activities they continued to participate in.

Despite these overarching frameworks and the limited ways in which girls might justify and/or feel confident about their continuing sports participation, girls were likely to see their discontinuation in sport as a matter of individual responsibility and even personal failure. Despite a number of structural/ideological factors that made it virtually impossible for Gazza to continue with her sports participation into secondary school, she was keen to emphasise her own role in this decision.

Gazza: But I wouldn't like to blame it all on sensei that I quit karate or all on my coach that I quit football.

Sheryl: No.

Gazza: Cause it ain't his fault. It was nobody's fault and I kind of went on my own.

(Interview, Year 7, 11/2006)

As Cooky and McDonald's (2005) research demonstrates, the liberal model of participation makes it difficult for girls to critically deconstruct rules of participation that form increasingly sophisticated modes of discrimination. Within a neoliberal framework, the elevation of 'choice' and personal accomplishments positions young people as individually responsible for their decisions, as masters of their own destinies continually forging ongoing 'projects of the self' aimed at self-development and reinvention. While for many girls, it remains difficult to enjoy these accomplishments, it seems that concurrently it is easy to affix self-blame when expectations no longer continue to be met.

Girls were often aware of common perceptions about their physical activity participation as it is stressed within governmental incentives to keep young people active and fit. When I conducted the questionnaire at Adlington School during a PE lesson, one of the girls asked me afterwards 'what happens if you find out that girls aren't doing enough activities?' Her anxiety is marked by wider suggestions that girls aren't 'doing their part' in keeping active, and thus healthy.

Similarly, the expectation that is placed upon Spirit to continue to run is upheld by this knowledge and when her coaches tell her to ‘just keep going’ this is backed by the unspoken subtext that most girls do not continue with their sports involvement, thereby upping the incentive for her to ‘buck the trend.’ What Spirit’s teachers did not say to her was that she would have to steadily up her commitment and training would be subject to increasing scrutiny over her performances. Yet girls’ attempts to stay active were often thwarted in secondary school, particularly in the forms of activity that had been most engaging in primary school, namely playful/pleasurable activities supported in encouraging relationships.

Conclusion

Girls’ understandings of their participation in sport were marked by shifting discourses around ability, health and fun, thus making it more or less likely for them to feel invested in sport and to see sport as part of their self-identity. This chapter is therefore directly related to my fourth research question by suggesting that discourses of health and ability in particular were significant in framing girls’ participation in sport and physical activity. The chapter further relates to my second research question by arguing that processes of differentiation and selection were particularly important for girls’ participation by setting up hierarchies of ability that formed exclusionary barriers of participation.

The transition to secondary school marked a significant point where girls who had once identified/been identified as ‘good at sports’ and interested in PE found it increasingly difficult to sustain this belief. While constructions of talent and ability had operated to sustain or motivate girls at earlier points of participation, these became more difficult to uphold once they entered secondary school. This might be termed the ‘paradox’ of ability designations. Ability/talent pools comprise ever shrinking categories of participation since being identified as ‘talented’ can simply move one into a more advanced pool of candidates where this distinction is no longer noteworthy. This was certainly the case for Spirit when she moved to Champions Running Club having been identified as a ‘talented’ runner at

her school. Amongst a new pool of similarly identified girls, her running abilities were no longer seen as outstanding and Spirit worked to shift her motivations towards 'improvement' and 'fitness' meanwhile struggling to maintain the standards her coaches demanded. This demonstrates a further paradox of ability designations in that even those who have been identified as 'talented' remain under pressure to maintain their performances and achieve 'personal bests.' But potentially even more damaging is the tendency for ability to form a prerequisite for participation, when 'being good at sport' is both a motivation to continue and a reason for involvement. Girls who decided to not even try out for sports teams on the assumption that they would not be selected were strongly swayed by these ability designations. The experiences of girls who did try out for sports teams but were subsequently not included further attested to this. These expectations create processes of either self-selected or imposed exclusion based on perceptions of ability across sporting contexts, and thus a lack of opportunity to develop and improve for girls who have been convinced at some point that they are 'rubbish at sports,' as Nirvana expressed.

Concurrently, concerns around obesity and young people's fitness levels have increased pressure to maintain a 'healthy' lifestyle both by participating in physical activity and eating 'right.' As 'regimes of truth', such expectations form increasingly imperative moral frameworks around young people's 'health' practices. Evans and Davies (2004: 6) note the disjunction of health being cast as an individual responsibility whilst athleticism is treated as fixed and unevenly distributed. In this equation, girls who tried out for teams but were not selected were deemed 'not good enough', an assessment that could later position girls as personally responsible for their lack of activity, easily cast as 'laziness.' The girl who signs her questionnaire 'Miss Fatty, aka doesn't do sports' is burdened with a seemingly impossible contradiction of discourses and processes that render her the stigmatised, irresponsible 'failure' of health imperatives. While health and ability designations often formed contradictory/impossible situations for individual girls, decisions to opt out of sports were more likely

to be seen as personal failings rather than as a result of structural barriers and/or discursive inconsistencies.

It was disappointing but not surprising that four of the six girls decided to opt out of PE or extracurricular sports once they reached secondary school. For those who did continue, their activities continued to be monitored, assessed and physically restricted. Often girls seemed to regret the loss of activity in secondary school but were unsure about how to remedy this. Their collective lament for the forms of 'fun' embodied in physical activity participation at the primary school level was not something they felt could readily be replicated at the secondary level and more likely they were compelled to shift towards performance or fitness-oriented goals if they wished to continue.

According to Dweck's (1986) psychological research into motivational factors, an emphasis on performance-oriented goals does not bode well for girls' ongoing participation in sport and/or physical activity. The emphasis on performative targets such as speed, constructions of ability and weight/body size as 'measurable' outcomes might be seen to negate the possibility of other learning-oriented goals such as bodily pleasure, social experiences and even personal development. Wellard (forthcoming 2010) emphasises the importance of 'fun' in sustaining ongoing interest in physical activities, as memories that can be drawn on in anticipatory expectations of future experiences. While girls often noted these 'fun' experiences in primary school, these seemed to be less possible as they engaged in more performatively-oriented models of participation at the secondary school level, thus decreasing their motivation to take part. It seems both individually lamentable and generally tragic that the sense of joy and abandon many children experience through play and bodily engagement is made ever more inaccessible within the regimented context of secondary school and selective team sports.

At the same time, girls' ability to play outdoors was also constrained by constructions of danger and vulnerability, as is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Nine Running into Trouble: Constructions of danger and risk in girls' access to outdoor space and physical activity

Introduction

This chapter considers girls' orientation and access to outdoor space in relation to their experiences of physical activity. I begin with an account from my own running experiences.

I often go out running in Lewisham, SE London, where I have lived for four years. The area seems to be in the news frequently in association with crime and violence, though I myself have never felt threatened or unsafe. On this particular occasion it is daylight and there are plenty of people about.

Running is something I enjoy and the sense of moving quickly and breathing hard frees my mind from my usual everyday anxieties. I am a few blocks from my house when the pavement narrows and runs under a bridge, next to a busy road. There are two young men ahead of me, blocking the path.

Rather than move aside, as I might have expected, one of the young men grins widely and stretches out his arms in a mock gesture of openness. It is the kind of gesture you might make to a friend in order to receive a hug. But this isn't a friendly gesture and the man's unfamiliarity and physical approach causes my heart to race.

Being heckled/harassed/mockered while out on a run is something I have come to expect over the years. Sometimes it is children who decide to run alongside me for a distance, sometimes people tell me to speed up or ask how far I have run. But the heckles from men feel different, immediate. They make kissing noises at me, comment on my legs, call me baby. I ignore them and try to overcome the twisted feeling in my stomach as I run on. I often spend the rest of the day angrily rehearsing in my head something clever to retort, always too late. The worst part is that where I had felt strong and in control I am so quickly reduced to an object, a source of someone else's amusement and sexualised gaze.

On this occasion I am faced with a particular dilemma. I can't ignore the man in front of me; I will run straight into him. If I step aside, I will be on

the road, my back to fast moving traffic under a narrow bridge. My heart rate speeds up and I have a split second to decide. Without thinking it through my left arm moves out quickly and I shove the man aside. I have just enough space to squeeze by without stepping onto the road. His friend laughs and the young man is surprised or amused enough that he carries on and does not reciprocate in any way. Did I really just push him to the side? I keep running, both incredulous and pleased with what I have just done.

I chose to recount this story because it picks up on some of the themes that I explore throughout the chapter. These revolve around the links between embodied physicality, gender, power, geography and space. My experiences are of course mediated by my age and social positioning. I am in my early thirties, in a stable relationship and equipped with a wisened critique of sexual harassment developed through my engagement with feminist theory. This experience (or perhaps maturity) mutes somewhat the fear and confusion that arises out of harassment - though it certainly does not remove it for me.

However, I continue to be puzzled and angry about the frequency of comments and heckles from male onlookers on my various runs. Both my own experiences (especially the one above), along with the experiences of the girls in my research have caused me to think more carefully about the ways in which bodies are constituted through space and movement, and the authority of sexual harassment in (momentarily) disempowering women in what might be an otherwise satisfying endeavour. At the transition to secondary school, my observations also recorded the rising intensity and frequency of sexualised taunts, gazes and innuendos around girls' bodies both in mixed PE lessons and outdoor activities, such as running, where girls' 'bodies-in-motion' were also 'bodies-on-display.'

The significance of both of these factors (access to space and heightened sexualised meanings around the body) came to take on increasing relevance for girls' participation in physical activity, particularly as their ability to play outside was often restricted on the basis of a perceived sexual threat or danger.

I use the term sexual harassment to refer to particularly intimidating actions or words set within a range of sexualised and objectifying discourses around girls' bodies that act as forms of threat, assessment and sometimes validation in ways that might be deemed restrictive for girls' physical expression and development. This definition hopes to open up the possibility that sexualised discourses can be 'read' in multiple, sometimes unpredictable ways and perpetuated in seemingly banal, 'post-feminist' contexts by friends, male peers and even well-meaning teachers or coaches. Although some comments are obviously much more threatening than others, the combined effect of these discourses and their grounding within a context of compulsory heterosexuality serves both to mystify their seriousness and to sometimes blur the lines between pleasure and danger for girls (Tolman, 2002). The significance of sexual harassment and perceived sexual threats to adult women's experiences of outdoor space and physical activity have been explored in studies such as that of Wesely and Gaarder (2004), Gill (2007) and Stanko (1993). However, less has been written about the impact of these discourses on young women's physical experiences and identities during adolescence, where the meanings around their bodies have come to take on a growing and shifting significance (McSharry, 2009, Oliver and Lalik, 2000).

In both primary and secondary school, issues of power and control are highlighted in numerous studies that document the extent and forms of sexual harassment among young people (Draper, 1993, Epstein and Johnson, 1998, O'Flynn and Epstein, 2005, Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997, Kenway et al., 1998, Lees, 1986, Renold, 2002, Youdell, 2005). Schools can be seen as 'site[s] for the production and regulation of sexual discourses, practices and identities' (Renold, 2002: 416). Renold's research with Year 6 children in two English primary school classes noted the significance of homophobic and heterosexist bullying as a means of marking out, constructing and valuing (hetero)gendered identities (Renold, 2005, Renold, 2002). Using Butler's (1999a) elaboration of sexuality and gender as mutually constructed, sexual harassment can be thought of as a persuasive and powerful system of discourse(s) in which dominant gender meanings

and identities are constituted within broader institutions of compulsory heterosexuality. Such institutions 'mark off what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility' (Butler, 1999a: 99-100). In this way, discourses of gender/sexuality (often enforced through harassment) form powerful frameworks whereby both culturally intelligible identities and 'safe/unsafe' spaces can be mapped out. This has specific implications for girls' engagement in physical activities.

Throughout this chapter I seek to investigate the interactions between girls' embodied physicalities and their locatedness in both physical and discursive space. This perspective seeks to connect notions of space and place with wider social relations, including gender. As Doreen Massey (1994: 2) writes: 'particular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with particular social constructions of gender.' This conceptualisation implicates space in the production and reproduction of power relations. At the same time, the dynamic interaction between gender, discourse and space seems to offer up the possibility of shifting meanings and potentialities around the body. I explore what it might mean for girls' or women's bodies to move out into and occupy space in an engaged and purposeful way. I am interested in how this engagement might affect the gendered configuration of that space, particularly the parks and fields that are often filled with the active bodies of boys and men playing football, rugby and other team sports. For the girls in my research, their bodily experiences and access to physical activities were intimately bound up in the spatial geographies framing their involvement.

Youth Studies and Space

Recent interest in young people's relationships to 'space' and 'place' have emphasised both the geographic constraints imposed on young people and their creative use of space in contesting and shaping their local environments (Hall et al., 1999, Holloway and Valentine, 2000b, Valentine et al., 1998, McGrellis, 2005, Laurie et al., 1999, Christiansen and O'Brien, 2003, Nesor, 1997). Such work seeks to connect young people's emergent and constructed identities with their sense of place in the world. As Hall et

al.(1999: 506) write: ‘young people need space to explore and nurture their emergent sense of self.’ This perspective highlights the potential importance of multiple, overlapping spaces as sites in which young people might negotiate their emergent identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Spaces such as school, the home, leisure sites, youth clubs, parks and local streets have been acknowledged as particularly salient to young people’s negotiated sense of identity (Holloway and Valentine, 2000a, Holroyd, 2002, Cullen, 2005). These spaces provide sites where young people can perform different aspects of their identities in their mutual engagement with the shifting meanings and possibilities tied to different spaces.

And yet the paradox of this engagement is that young people are often either confined to certain spaces (such as schools and home) that are highly regulated, or restricted from access to others (such as pubs and costly leisure sites) where adults might socialise and enjoy their free time. This particular relationship to space has often meant that young people are cajoled or enticed to congregate in marginal spaces such as the street corner, park or bus stop where they are easily moved on, ejected or complained about (Skelton, 2000, Valentine, 1996). Fin Cullen’s (2005) PhD research describes teenage girls’ appropriation of ‘cotch’ areas or grassed space where they could drink and smoke away from adult surveillance.

In the twentieth century, anxieties around children’s development and relationships with adults have led to increasing fears about the safety of children in public spaces (Walkerdine 1999). Young people’s relationship to public space can position them as vulnerable and at risk to dangers ‘out there;’ or conversely as comprising threats themselves by occupying public spaces such as the street in ways that are deemed to be unacceptable and intimidating (Nayak and Kehily, 2008, Matthews et al., 2000). A recent report from Play England, part of the National Children’s Bureau, suggests that this dual characterisation of young people is doubly damaging both in its vilification of ‘youth’ and in the restrictions imposed on young people in keeping them indoors and apparently ‘safe’ from outside dangers

(Beunderman et al., 2007). Findings from the Countryside Commission (1995) suggest that girls are particularly affected by these restrictions.

Investigations into young people's occupation of space might also attend to the physical, embodied nature of that locatedness and in how such bodies are both affected by and in turn affect the social spaces they occupy (McDowell, 1999). Within this chapter I explore the embodied experiences of girls as they 'moved out' into space in the engaged mode of sports participation, and in particular to running, which is very much geared around an exploration and movement through space including local streets and parks.

Feminist accounts have described the importance of spaces such as the bedroom and youth club for the creation of girls' subcultures (Griffin, 1985, McRobbie, 1991a, Leonard, 1998). During their photo projects, where the girls were asked to take pictures of places they liked to be, bedrooms were a popular choice. Gazza took this photo of her bedroom and reported that she was 'always in my room' where she liked to 'watch television, listen to music, do homework. I do loads of stuff. But I don't eat in there, I eat with my family.'



Figure 1. 'I'm always in my room.' Gazza's bedroom.

Girls' attachments to their bedrooms might be seen as a strategic reaction to the spatial restrictions often imposed on them. Research accounts of girls' activities have demonstrated their limited mobility in comparison with male peers who are often allowed more outdoor freedoms (Nespor, 1997, Griffin, 1985, Matthews et al., 2000). The locating of youth subcultures in bedrooms or streets respectively, and the gendered implications of these locations, relate to broader dualities of Western culture such as male/female, public/private and even child/adult (Skelton, 2000). Tracey Skelton (2000: 84) describes teenage girls' 'out of placeness' as relating to their liminal ambiguity between categories, she writes 'this in-betweenness dictated by their age impacts on their everynight choices of where they can go and what they can do.' Girls are also located according to dominant understandings of their embodied physicality.

Recent studies into young people's use of space have drawn attention to the particular salience of class, gender and ethnicity in defining young people's use of space. Watt and Stenson's (1998) research looks at the ways in which areas of a town in SE England were deemed 'safe' or 'dangerous' by young people occupying varying ethnic and class positions. Local knowledge and social networks mediated Asian and African-Caribbean youth's anxieties around areas that were deemed 'risky' by their White, middle class counterparts (Watt and Stenson, 1998). Black feminist accounts have also pointed out the different meanings of the home within Western culture, suggesting that the home may act as a 'site of refuge from racism' for racially marginalised women (Laurie et al., 1999: 13).

In contrast to recent concerns over young people's retreat from outdoor space, research in economically deprived areas within England and Wales suggests that both boys and girls use the street as an important site where they can form social bonds and enact aspects of their ongoing identities (Matthews et al., 2000, Skelton, 2000, Dwyer, 1998). Dwyer's (1998) research with young Muslim women in London emphasises their agency in negotiating aspects of their identities through the shifting spaces of home, school and their local neighbourhoods. This perspective emphasises the importance of space in youth identities. She writes, 'identities are negotiated

differently in different places and are constructed and contested within particular spaces' (Dwyer, 1998: 50). An emphasis on spatiality can thus highlight the shifting fluidity of youth identities as they are performed, reworked and contested in multiple sites. For the girls in my research, local knowledge seemed to do little to allay fears about the surrounding area and negative experiences in their deprived neighbourhoods had often convinced girls of the 'danger' of certain spaces where they were loathe to venture without male or adult supervision.

Vulnerable Girls and Aggressive Boys

Valerie Walkerdine's (1999: 4) work describes contemporary popular discourses that 'make up the social world' thus producing gendered subjects. Walkerdine describes the prevalence of dominant discourses such as 'vulnerable girls' and 'aggressive boys' that serve as cultural texts that both create dominant meanings and provide social scripts through which subjectivities might be enacted.

Girls' social positioning as 'other' has similarly influenced the idea of the 'active child' as a boy who is in need of outdoor space in which to exercise his playfulness and creativity (Walkerdine 1999: 13). Walkerdine argues that such discursive processes come to regulate childhood. Girls and boys are therefore subjectified through discourses that imply certain modes of behaviour such as working on your homework or playing outside as the actions of normative subjects. Walkerdine also emphasises the spatiality of these discourses since historical and geographical characteristics affect the particular configuration of discursive constructions at particular times and places. Gendered discourses therefore produce 'particular subjectivities in specific locations' (Walkerdine, 1999: 3).

Gendered theories of embodiment have sought to connect a subject's bodily experiences with the gendered social order and meanings in which they interact (Young, 2005a: 5). This means that how women experience their bodies is intimately connected to the discursively constituted landscape surrounding the female body at a particular time and place. Spatial orientation ties in strongly with movement and the ways in which young

women are expected to take up space in different contexts. Young's early essay on 'throwing like a girl' describes women and girls' 'inhibited intentionality' and links this restricted bodily movement with their 'othered' position in a male-dominated society (Young, 2005b [orig.1980]). More recent research such as that of Evaldsson (2003) suggests that such bodily restrictions or inhibitions are in fact context and activity specific.

As Evaldsson's research alludes, many young women do go on to develop their bodily orientations in open and unrestrained ways, and participation in sport might be one vehicle through which learned incapacity could be challenged and controverted (Shilling, 2004). Chris Shilling (2004: 483-484) describes a process of 'pragmatic action' in which the body's learned habitus might be interrupted through 'revelatory' lived experience in which the body is discovered to be *more* capable than was previously supposed. Versions of physical feminism have suggested that involvement in sport holds out the potential for women to experience their bodies as powerful, capable and agentic, thus challenging previous assumptions of passivity and fragility (Roth and Basow, 2004, Theberge, 1986, McCaughey, 1997). Yet although women's participation in sport might open up resistant possibilities, these continue to be constrained by dominant discourses of gender, health and ability.

The body and space are both implicated in these processes. Gendered theories of embodiment suggest that girls' participation in sport or physical activity might 'constitute their experienced world' through a form of movement that is more open and assertive than other learned modes of being (Young, 2005a: 9). Conversely this implies that physicality and movement can also reconstitute social spaces in ways that might challenge the dominant social order. McDowell (1999: 56) describes social relations and spatial processes as 'mutually reinforcing', suggesting that a shift in one area may lead to a shift in the other. This does not entail a direct causal relationship but rather the opening up of possibilities and meanings through mutual fissures that might be exploited, nudged at and otherwise explored. This is directly relevant to the ways in which gendered subjects might be expected to stay home and help with the chores or run off to football

practice after a meal carefully prepared by their mother. The gendering of certain spaces is open to both contestation and reproduction.

Assumptions about the correct place for embodied women are drawn on [both] to justify and to challenge systems of patriarchal domination in which women are excluded from particular spatial arenas and restricted to others.

(McDowell, 1999: 56)

In this way, active girls might be seen as ‘out of place’ and thus transgressive of dominant social norms, which mark their rightful place as otherwise than the streets and parks, their physical activities require. This seems to suggest several questions: First, how do discourses of female vulnerability construct girls’ subjectivity and embodied capacities? What does it mean for girls’ bodies to move out into and occupy space in an engaged, purposeful way? Finally, how might this affect the particular gendered configuration of that space?

Throughout this chapter I explore these questions by looking at girls’ experiences of running and other physical activities within the context of discursive constructions of vulnerability and sexual threats. I begin by looking at space as it was marked out at school.

‘That’s for the boys’: gendered space and play

At both primary schools the girls attended, football dominated the space available during playtime, although at Holly Bank the large expanse of fields meant that this did not pose as much of a problem as it did at Benjamin Laurence. Lucy and her friends could still play catching games elsewhere and had sufficient space to run around. When she went on to attend Wellington Gardens, Lucy expected that there would be fewer running games because of gendered expectations. She told me, ‘and apparently you’re not allowed to run in Year 7...or maybe you are but people just don’t want to and you’ll feel silly when you do and everybody else is talking’ (Interview with Lucy, Year 6, 12/2005). What Lucy in fact discovered upon attending Wellington Gardens was that although her friends were keen on doing so, they were not allowed to run around their school grounds outside of PE. Lucy and her friends were scolded for

chasing each other and for being too loud during their break and before and after school. The school was located opposite to its 'brother' secondary, where many of the boys they had known in primary now attended. In contrast, boys at this school could be seen playing football and generally running around at playtime on the space allocated by their school. This perceived lack of freedom was one of the disadvantages girls cited in attending an all girls' school.

Sheryl: And what do you girls think about being in an all girls' school?

Rhiannon: Um, I probably prefer primary school where there are boys. Because here you don't have any proper things you can play on at lunch, like you can't play football or anything.

Sheryl: I noticed there's big fields out there, can you not play on them?

Rhiannon: No, that's for the boys.

Lucy: The boys can play out there.

Sheryl: Do you not have a field you can play on?

All: No.

(Group Interview, Year 7, 06/2007)

Although an active boys discourse justified (and even demanded) space for boys to play in, this was not the case at Wellington Gardens Girls' School. Within this discourse, boys are understood to be naturally brimming with energy and thus more in need of space and time to 'let off steam' in order to be able to concentrate in school. In contrast, the girls' outdoor space was quickly deemed out of bounds after litter was not taken care of. Lucy described her frustration (which is more strongly voiced elsewhere) with watching boys, including many former classmates and her twin and older brothers, running around on fields directly next to her school while the girls could not do the same. Meanwhile Lucy and her friends were expected to conform to a feminised passivity deemed appropriate for well-behaved female students. This vivid contrast in gendered space was not as evident at

the inner city schools and may represent a particularly middle class sensibility. Although girls were technically ‘allowed’ to play in the caged space allocated to football at Adlington mixed school, neither Gazza or Lindsay felt comfortable in joining and I only ever observed boys playing there over break. Schools and their gendered organisation of space represent one facet of girls’ access and orientation towards physical activity and space. However, Nespor (1997: xiii) suggests we see schools as existing within ‘intersections of multiple networks’ that are ‘extensive in space and time, fluid in form and content’ set as they are within cities, communities and neighbourhoods. In the following sections I look at girls’ access to space more broadly within their local areas where similarly gendered restrictions around space were both echoed and resisted.

Spatial restrictions and access to physical activity

It was clear when the girls were still in primary school that access (or lack of access) to the local area was a significant issue in their ability to engage in outdoor physical activities. This was the case both for girls living in inner city London and those in affluent suburban neighbourhoods that might be considered statistically ‘safer.’ Parents voiced general concerns about their daughters being outside unsupervised, and therefore girls were either held back from doing activities or did these under the guardianship of a parent, coach or teacher.

In consequence, play or other physical activities were contained, supervised or restricted in their scope. Sites of leisure and play that the girls noted were often close to home, such as this photo Nirvana took of the trampoline in her back garden.



Figure 2. Nirvana's back garden.

Lucy, whose mother was critical of parental tendencies to limit girls' ability to go outside, was rare in being allowed to go out unsupervised.

Nonetheless, Lucy found it difficult to find girls her age to accompany her on bike rides and swims at the local pool since they were required to have parental supervision. Gazza's mother was particularly concerned about the safety of their neighbourhood. This is an excerpt from an interview with Gazza's mother, Paula, where we discussed Gazza's activities within her neighbourhood. Gazza was in Year 6 at the time.

Paula: But they stay at home, they've never played out.

Sheryl: Really?

Paula: We live on a street so, no.

Sheryl: Are there any parks nearby?

Paula: No. Not safe ones, no.

(Interview with Paula, 23/11/2005)

Paula's conceptualisation of their neighbourhood understands this space as being 'not safe' and therefore inappropriate for her daughter to play in. The family lived in a block of flats in central London, nearby to Gazza's schools.

Since she was not allowed outside on her own Gazza resorted to practicing her football skills in the front corridor by kicking the ball against the wall. During the photo project, Gazza took this picture of the park near her house where she was allowed to play only intermittently under her mother's supervision.



Figure 3. Park near Gazza's home.

Similar to Gazza, Spirit's parents' fears for her safety caused her outdoor activities to be highly guarded. She was not permitted to run outside on her own and was accompanied each morning by her father on her daily run. As she entered Year 7, Spirit's increased interest and abilities in running demanded longer distances and more space and her father could no longer keep up with her. As a solution, Spirit's parents found a park nearby where they could stand as Spirit ran around the park in circles. Spirit's running was therefore confined to these supervised runs and to the track sessions she took up with Champions Running Club nearby. Similarly, these sessions involved Spirit and the other girls running around the track in quick pursuit of one another while their coach critically surveilled their progress by calling out their lap times and commenting on their positioning within the group, shouting 'come on' and 'keep up' to individual girls whose speed he deemed to be lacking.

The surveillance and limited spatiality of Spirit's running opportunities contrast with Spirit's own feelings about running which emphasised freedom, pleasure and a sense of adventure in the exploration of new territory. During our Year 7 interview (when she was 12) she explained how running made her feel.

Spirit: I just love the feeling of running as well, especially cross-country. Because you don't know where you're going, that's what I love about it. You don't know what anything's going to be...

(Interview, Year 7, 17/01/2007)

Despite having to run on the track with her club over the summer training period, Spirit always insisted that it was cross-country running that she preferred, emphasising in particular the exploratory, revelatory nature of this experience - 'you don't know where you're going, you don't know what anything's going to be.' It is unlikely that the experience she describes here could be easily replicated by running around in circles under the supervision of her parents or coaches.

Nespor's (1997) use of children's social 'mapping' revealed girls' more limited spatial territories in their neighbourhoods, compared to those of boys. The impact of spatial restrictions on girls' embodied physical identities has been less explored and in particular on active girls or women whose activities demand a wide reign of outdoor space. Exceptions to this lay in the findings of two recent studies into outdoor adventurers and rugby players, respectively, whose enjoyment of physical activities operated in direct relation to their awareness and negotiation of the threat of sexual danger (Gill, 2007, Wesely and Gaarder, 2004). Fiona Gill's (2007) research on female rugby players in 'Bordertown' argues that the women's embodiment of 'violent femininities' reflect an active resistance against the overt threats of physical and sexual aggression in their local area. Similarly, Wesely and Gaarder (2004) suggest that women's enjoyment of trail running and mountain biking in outdoor space was tempered by security concerns in these spaces. Their negotiation of the threat of sexual danger

through a variety of strategies simultaneously compromised their autonomy and led to increased surveillance and reliance on technology (Wesely and Gaarder, 2004). Likewise for girls and young women who pursue outdoor activities such as cycling or distance running, the implications of restricted mobility are particularly relevant and their ability to run freely and ‘trouble free’ is compromised both by the threat of violence and ideas about girls’ safety and vulnerabilities.

‘Danger’ and girls’ vulnerability

Young women’s use of space (and particularly public space) is often framed in reference to their ‘sexual vulnerability’ and exposure to ‘threats’ posed by being outside the home where they are unprotected by parents and caregivers. This prospective threat has frequently been used to impede girls’ access to outdoor space. As Griffin’s (1985: 65-66) early research into the lives of working class girls revealed, ‘trouble’ referred both to the violent behaviour of young men as well as to the risks of sexual harassment and assault. This seems to continue to be the case and within my research discourses of danger and vulnerability were frequently used to justify girls’ limited access to outdoor space.

Fears about girls’ sexual vulnerability were in fact expressed more generally in concerns about girls’ overall physical vulnerability in their exposure to danger and risk during supervised activities. As Scraton (1992) points out in her overview of the history of girls’ physical education in Britain, concerns about girls’ weakness and fragility have long been used to justify their unequal access to physical activities. Early fears that girls’ involvement in physical activities would damage their reproductive organs and ability to bear children are no longer socially acceptable views, yet their legacy seems to linger on in fears about girls’ safety and well being. Health and safety concerns loomed large both in PE and in the schools in general, including lunchtime activities.¹² These concerns reiterated ‘risks’ that their parents discussed in explaining why girls could not be allowed out on their own.

¹² Since my research did not involve observations of boys’ PE lessons, I have no data to suggest whether boys were similarly constrained by these health and safety concerns.

The idea that sexual predators were at large, waiting to target young girls seemed well entrenched both in the suburban middle class enclave and in inner city London. Here Danny reports that her teachers also put across similar ideas. As a distance runner who enjoyed running at her local park, this was something she particularly resented. During their PE lesson, the girls expressed their dislike of the PE teacher they had that day

Danny: I hate this teacher.

Lindsay: He always lectures us for like thirty minutes.

Danny: He's always giving us lectures about how running is good for us, then he says 'don't run alone 'cause strange men are out there watching you.'

(Fieldnotes, Adlington School, 16/7/2007)

Danny's complaint about her teacher was especially interesting to me since the teachers' direction of the mixed football sessions that day emphasised participation and encouragement above overt competition; an attempt *I* took to be aimed at combating male domination within the lesson. Danny's critique of her teacher's comments here might therefore be seen as an opposition to the ways in which the justification of girls' participation in sports often simultaneously frames girls as incapable, incompetent and even 'at risk.'

At Spirit's running club, the girls (ages 12-17) were expected to go on a warm-up run which took them out of the track into a nearby park and, in the winter, onto pavements along suburban roads. The previous year, their head coach Malcolm had sent the girls out on the roads without any adult supervision. During a chat at the club, Spirit and her friend Suze expressed their indignation at the former practice of being sent out '*on our own*'! This indignation was largely due to the strong reaction the girls received from local men and boys, who would shout, honk and call out to them as they ran past. After a combination of girl and parental complaints, volunteer assistant coaches began to accompany the girls on their run. One of these coaches was Mark, a well-built police officer with a bald head and joking manner.

He talked a lot about protecting the girls on the first warm-up run I accompanied the group on.

We take a long route around the park, cutting through the woods at one point and then back around the park area. Mark explains that it is always a concern taking the girls out and he doesn't like to do it on the road because the girls get honked at constantly. He jokes that he waves back at the leering men and reasons 'they don't know these girls are only fifteen.' Both Mark and Malcolm have complained about the girls dressing 'inappropriately' for the runs. Overall, Mark seems very concerned about their safety and he tells me a warning story about a flasher in the park in a seeming attempt to justify his protectiveness

(Fieldnotes, Champions Running Club, 24/05/2007)

Mark very much assumed the protective cop role in which girls were cast as vulnerable and in need of supervision. Certainly this sentiment was appreciated and reiterated by some of the younger girls in particular. However, Mark's opposition to the heckles the girls receive seemed to rest not so much in the sexualised, gendered and threatening nature of this harassment but in the young ages of the girls, of which he reasons the men are unaware (and thus unculpable and even blameless). Mark and the head coach Malcolm (in separate discussions with me), both shifted attention away from the male harassers by drawing attention to what they deemed to be 'inappropriate' dress on the part of the girls. This often consisted of lycra shorts and sleeveless vests, both comfortable and conducive to running in the hot summer weather. Men and boys at the club would often run topless around the track in hot weather, and yet this was never deemed inappropriate or offensive in any way. However, aside from being comfortable and suitable for running, it is also probable that girls' dress provided a form of sexual power for some of the older girls in particular. As Shauna Pomerantz observes, certain forms of dress can facilitate both agency and status, linking girls 'to a particular body type, sexuality and sexual power' (Pomerantz, 2008: 96). Older girls at the club often combined their tight running tops and short lycra shorts with carefully straightened

hair, makeup and belly button rings, which suggested a particular investment in dominant notions of heterosexual femininity. These cultural markers were combined with lean, lithe bodies honed through distance running to create the embodiment of an emphasised femininity symbolised through youthfulness and (heterosexual) attractiveness. At the same time, the girls' physical capacities as high performance athletes often took onlookers and casual runners by surprise as the girls sprinted past them at impressive speeds.

Within the constructions of parents and coaches, girls were understood to be 'unaware' of their sexual power, and thus firmly on the side of 'innocence' in Walkerdine's (1999) framing. Walkerdine (1999: 11-12) suggests that dominant discourses of girls as 'little angels' or 'seductive lolitas' position girls as either potential victims of sexual abuse or as coquettish seductresses who lure men into temptation; neither of which adequately addresses girls' complex desires and fantasies. The complex configurations of such discourses suggest the ways in which girls may be 'caught up' within the enticing interpellations of sexual harassment. Emma Renold (2005: 30) also notes the duality and contradiction of sexually harassing discourses in their ability to be both 'objectifying' and 'seductive' for girls. Thus harassment may not be read solely read as threatening but might also constitute subjects within the bounds of attractive heteronormativity and the possibilities of sexual pleasure.

On other runs, accompanied by their male coaches and within the protection of the group, older girls would sometimes steer their path directly through a group of similarly aged boys engaging in football practice. The presence of both sets of coaches meant that no comments were exchanged as the girls successfully interrupted the training, causing most of the boys to stop and watch as the girls ran through the practice area. The presence of coaches and the security of the group seemed to provide a 'safe' space in which girls might test out their sexual power and visibility, whilst disrupting the masculinised space of the park, filled as it often was with the bodies of boys and men playing football.

However, restrictions imposed or advocated by parents and teachers did not always translate into acquiescence. Girls described occasions in which they had snuck out of the house together and such accounts became noted recurrences in our interviews where they excitedly discussed the details. Spirit and Nirvana recounted an occasion where they had gone carolling with another friend unaccompanied, each girl telling her parent that another parent would be supervising. The commonality and importance of such incidents suggest a kind of 'rite of passage' during which girls tested out the boundaries and limits of the home/public divide.

In our Year 6 interview, Lindsay and Nilay (both Asian Muslim¹³) described a recent incident in which they had snuck out of the house together and gone to a nearby park. Once there, the girls found that several of their male classmates were, unbeknownst to them, hanging out at the park on a regular basis. Later in the interview they went on to discuss this discrepancy more critically and to reflect on the reasons they were not allowed out on their own.

Lindsay: Well sometimes I feel I should be a boy.

Sheryl: Yeah?

Lindsay: Because sometimes I feel like, sometimes girls don't get the right to do some stuff. Like to hang out. Girls don't really hang out. My mum, like, my brother, she won't worry so much if he comes a bit late because he's a boy and he knows what he's doing. Girls, if we come home a bit late she starts going mad.

Sheryl: Really?

Lindsay: Cause girls, like girls are girls and big men can do anything to girls because girls are like quiet and they-

Nilay: - they don't really know like nothing to like defend themselves.

¹³ The girls' class positioning is complex. Although they now lived in less affluent (or working class) areas, their parents had held professional qualifications and jobs in their country of origin. Lindsay and Nilay and their parents' educational aspirations might be described as more middle class.

Sheryl: Defend themselves?

Lindsay: Yeah. That's why we'd like being a boy because you get to do whatever you like. Sometimes.

(Interview, Year 5, 06/07/2005)

Similar to the other girls, Lindsay and Nilay's access to public spaces was bound by constructs around gender. The girls' venture into their local park had obviously been quite exhilarating for them and they spoke about it in rushed, raised voices that fell over one another. When the girls were 'discovered' by Nilay's mother, her willingness to cover this up (so as not to alert Lindsay's parents), seemed to add to the pleasure of the excursion in the sense that they had 'gotten away with it.' The illicitness and thus excitement of the trip contrast with the mundanity of their male peers' presence, which is normalised as simply 'where the boys hang out.'

The sense of transgression seems to allow the girls to express their resistance towards gendered constructs of space. But this is quickly retracted through the reiteration of normative gendered constructs of vulnerability and aggression.

Despite the girls' joint sense that this discrepancy in personal freedom with their male peers was unfair, the characterisation of girls as 'weak, defenceless and quiet' is used to justify girls' limited mobility and even to frame it as protective and for their own good. The contrast between 'big men' and 'little girls' discursively positions the girls as both physically small and particularly vulnerable whilst the threatening 'big man' conjures up connotations of sexual predators without social consciences or constraints. In contrast, Lindsay's brother (and seemingly other boys as well) are here positioned as 'streetwise,' capable of defending themselves even against 'big men.' In a later interview, Lindsay spoke of further incidents in which she and her brother had been threatened, but it was her brother who was physically threatened and robbed while out on his new bike. Nonetheless, Lindsay's brother is expected to take care of her by riding the bus home with her every day.

In speaking to Asian Muslim boys, Louise Archer (2003) found that the boys asserted their male privilege by positioning Asian girls as lacking in agency. Girls were said by their male peers to be in need of protection from a 'dangerous White/British society' (2003: 149). She emphasises that 'the portrayal of the 'dangerous' local conditions can be mobilised to justify the tightening 'protective' patriarchal relations.' (2003: 150). However, the views of these boys did not necessarily reflect those of their parents and Archer emphasises that these discourses were used to reinforce the boys' masculinity.

It remains a risk in discussing this incident that the girls' restricted access to the park might be read as a 'cultural' restriction resulting from the girls' 'oppressive' ethnic backgrounds (Basit, 1997). Dwyer (1998) describes young Muslim women's identity constructions as negotiated in direct resistance and contestation to Orientalist and racialised/gendered depictions of them. Such stereotypes position Muslim women as either/both passive victims of an oppressive culture or as co-conspirators in militant anti-Western Islamist movements (1998: 54). The young women in her study's own identity constructions thus operated in awareness and resistance towards depictions of them as 'not allowed to go out they are not allowed to do this, they have to cover themselves' (Quote from Robina, one of Dwyer's participants, 1998:50). The young women in Dwyer's study are several years older than the girls here, who in this extract are 10 years of age. Lindsay and Nilay's awareness of the ways in which they were positioned in dominant discourses were perhaps less critical or developed at this stage, though certainly they expressed criticism of racist practices on behalf of certain school staff.

Moreover, the girls' restrictions are not unique to them as Asian Muslim girls, and girls from all backgrounds in my research experienced restrictions based in fears for their safety, including Spirit who lived in an expensive gated community on the outskirts of London. Similarly, Watt and Stenson (1998: 261) acknowledge that girls 'irrespective of ethnicity or class' expressed fears about venturing outside in the evening. Women and girls who do venture out after dark may also be exposed to derogatory sexualised

labelling which calls into question their moral respectability as related to their class and/or ethnic positioning (Matthews et al., 2000). Girls living on council estates in Matthews et al's study (2000: 74) reported being called 'slags' and 'tarts' because of their late presence outside.

Lindsay's access to local space is clearly tainted by her family's experiences of localised racism directed at them. Lindsay recounted an incident in which a boy at her school (also a neighbour) put a bag of dog excrement into her family's mailbox. In their Year 8 interview, Lindsay and Gazza both described incidents in which they had been threatened by an unknown male while alone in their local area.

Lindsay: Cause there was this bloke and we were walking and he smashed his bottle and I turned around and he was like 'What? What are you looking at?' (laughs)

Sheryl: In your old neighbourhood?

Lindsay: No, this one. And then I started to leg it and he started to leg it too (laughing). I ran home but then he stopped and he was just like 'I'll get you next time.' (Gazza is laughing loudly).
And the last -

Sheryl: He was running after you?!

Lindsay: Yeah, I got scared (Gazza guffaws loudly). It's not funny, she never had this before. If she gets it-

Gazza: A man swore at me the other day and called me the 'B' word (both giggling). I was going through the park yeah and some man goes 'what are you looking at, you f-ing B?'

Lindsay: Yeah, and I never go to that park ever again. Without any adult with me, like my mum, like right next to me. I'm so scared. That park was dangerous.

(Year 8 Interview, 03/2008)

The girls' giggles throughout this extract sit in awkward contrast with the very real and terrifying experiences these must have been for them. I was unable to restrain my shock at the prospect of being chased down the road

by an unknown man, as described by Lindsay. The girls' laughing perhaps pertains to the ways in which girls' tales of sexual harassment are rarely taken 'seriously.' It seems that not much has changed since Griffin's (1985) research where girls did not report sexual harassment on a regular basis, under the fear that either they would not be believed or that they themselves would be blamed. Fears around girls' vulnerability which were earlier expressed by their parents and used to justify their restricted permission outside seem here to be cemented into convictions that certain spaces are dangerous and 'out of bounds.' It is important to stress that fears around girls' safety are iterated from variable positions of material social (dis)advantage and therefore neighbourhoods where girls and women are more or less likely to experience threatening incidents such as these. In discussing Asian Muslim girls' acceptance of 'restricted' freedoms, Basit (1997: 436) suggests that the girls might be seen as mature in being able to 'weigh the pros and cons of excessive freedom in the light of present day violence against women and ethnic minorities.' Regardless of the statistical 'likelihood' of threatening incidents, sexual harassment and the threat of such harassment, looms large as a restraint in most women's psyches.

Jo Deakin's (2006) survey of children's fears of victimisation found that girls in the same neighbourhoods feared victimisation more than boys, regardless of victimisation rates and actual threats of physical harassment. In line with findings from similar studies, Deakin argues that girls are actually more at risk of violence from men they knew than from the 'strangers' they feared, and that such acts were often carried out in familiar spaces such as the home (Deakin, 2006).

Work within criminology in particular has often puzzled over the 'irrationality' of women's fears in relation to the actual statistical violence they have (or are likely to have) experienced (Stanko, 1993). This may suggest that harassment and violence against women is simply under-reported or, as feminist researchers have suggested, that threats and harassment against women throughout their lifetime serve as a form of 'sexual terrorism' that keeps all women hyper-alert to these threats, positioning them as personally responsible for their individual safety

(Stanko 1993). Importantly, one of the central aims of the feminist movement lay with documenting and thus exposing male violence towards women. This included exposing harassment and abuse within sport (Brackenridge, 1997). And yet in addition to serving to challenge male violence, such connections have often been used to restrict women's freedoms by positioning them as potential 'victims.' As Lois Heise (1997) points out, the dilemma of anti-violence activists in exposing violence against women has been that its identification can come at a high cost. 'We risk gaining visibility at the price of promoting the image of woman as victim and the notion of sex as all danger and no pleasure (Heise, 1997: 423). As Deakin (2006: 384) points out, girls' fears of sexual violence have been related both to girls' 'sexual vulnerability' and to boys' 'physical aggression.' These essentialist links seem to see victimhood and violence as inherent traits of girls and boys respectively, rather than as dominant cultural constructions infused with power and holding particular implications for gendered, embodied subjects.

The documentation of sexual harassment and the restricted mobility many girls experience are not 'new' findings. But their significance in the context of girls' participation in physical activities alongside attention to the ways in which such discourses constitute subjects, make them relevant here for several reasons. First, girls' participation in sport and physical education brings their bodies into immediate and heightened 'encounters' with their local contexts including neighbourhoods, school and recreational settings. Secondly, the framing of girls' spatial restrictions around female physical vulnerability seems to contrast with girls' own experiences of empowerment and heightened bodily competence through sports involvement. Both Gazza and Spirit trained in karate – a martial art that combines technical ability and strength as a form of self-defence. Yet neither girl seemed to be able to capitalise on the feelings of empowerment or efficacy this may have provided. Instead, their over-protection and framing as potential 'victims' of sexual assault discursively constitute the girls as 'weak' and 'defenceless'. Lastly, this intense attention to predatory strangers as sexual threats (regardless of whether or not they actually constitute such threats),

nonetheless serves to minimise and/or divert attention away from the significance of the ongoing acts of sexual harassment perpetrated by known boys both in and outside of school.

Both Gazza and Spirit reported harassment and targeting by male classmates to me. In Year 7 Gazza described increasing feelings of discomfort over the unwanted attentions and sexual overtures directed at her by a male classmate. Similarly, in Year 6 Spirit described a period where a boy in her peer group became both verbally and physically aggressive towards her. In Spirit's words, 'he made my life a living hell' by both threatening her and spreading rumours about her at school after she turned down a date.

Although Spirit eventually told her mother about the harassment, they had agreed not to approach the boy's parents due to Spirit's concerns about protecting his feelings and not making him feel as bad as she did. It is not uncommon for girls to undermine their experiences of harassment and therefore not report these to teachers or parents (e.g. Renold, 2002). Yet in this instance Spirit did decide to tell her mother and together they agreed *not* to speak with the boys' parents. Given that Spirit's parents were so protective of her in other ways, I found it difficult to understand this failure to take threats and physical violence from a male peer 'seriously.' The construction of 'sexual danger' as a threat posed *outside* the school or home, in the form of faceless sexual predators and perverts seems to shift attention away from ongoing acts of violence that occur both inside the home and from boys and men the girls may *already know*.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have considered the spatial aspects of sports engagement in the mapping out of 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces as girls struggled to enjoy their bodies in open and unrestrained ways. Girls from various social backgrounds were similarly constrained by restrictions around their spatial freedoms. These restrictions were often framed around notions of physical vulnerability and weakness associated with their gendered identities. This seemed to contrast with the girls' own experiences

of sports participation which might open up the possibilities of capacity and self-efficacy.

I further suggested that the projection of 'sexual danger' onto faceless strangers lurking outdoors shifted attention away from the ongoing sexual harassment girls experienced from male peers at school and in their local communities. An exposition of sexual harassment and physical restrictions seems to frame girls' experiences within a context of restraint and containment that leaves little space for their agency in the face of structural impositions. Feminist analyses have often focused on the ways in which women and girls *negotiate* these dangers and restrictions, therefore emphasizing their decision-making abilities in the face of difficult circumstances.

Post-structural suggestions that girls 'take up' certain positions within available discourses might allow more flexibility in seeing how girls are constituted as viable subjects within the available repertoires of localised gender constructs. This is not always straightforward since discourses shift and change, therefore subjects may engage in several meanings at the same time that are otherwise contradictory (Jones, 1993). A spatial analysis of this construction similarly demonstrates the ways in which identities are shifting and fluid. As Laurie et al. (1999: 161) write 'the different spaces of everyday life offer different potentialities for the (re) construction of gendered identities.' This chapter has explored the ways in which girls might be constituted as powerful and agentic in the process of pursuing physical activities such as running and thereby challenge gendered constructs of their bodies as weak and passive. The subject position 'female runner' is also constrained by another set of coercive discourses around health, ability, body size and shape which dictate who might run and for what purposes. This was evident in chapter eight where I suggested that girls' experiences of physical activities were framed around discourses of ability and health.

Despite these other constraints, I want to suggest that there might be something potentially transgressive about women moving out and taking up space in engaged, active ways. Strong reactions from male passers-by (in

the form of sexualised taunts and harassment) might suggest that this is so. And yet if girls move out into space (such as parks and streets) in physically engaged and active ways, this creates the opportunity for that space to be reconstituted in some way, thereby challenging both assumptions about girls' restricted physicality as well as the ways in which the female subject experiences this physicality.

Yet while a woman or girls' occupation of parks, streets and playgrounds in a physically active way might constitute her as powerful and agentic, the interpellation of her movements into an assessment of the aesthetic sexualisation of her body through harassment seems to reconstitute that body as passive, pretty, objectified. This seems to be exacerbated by the construction of sexualised images of female athletes in the media. Girl's understandings of and positioning within such configurations are complex, contradictory and sometimes self-fulfilling. The embeddedness of sexual harassment within a context of sexist heteronormativity means that it can serve as both a form of pleasure and threat for girls. Parents and coaches were much more likely to emphasise the latter possibility, emphasising the threat of sexual danger framed in a justificatory discourse of female vulnerability and weakness.

Fears around girls' vulnerability often meant that girls did not go out running or stay after school for sports training, thus limiting and constraining the physically engaged possibilities they at times experienced. Yet girls are also often resourceful and resilient, sneaking out of the house, running in groups and contesting discourses around their vulnerability and need for protection, thereby resisting dominant understandings of their embodied capacities and rightful 'place.'

This chapter relates specifically to my second research question in suggesting that the gendered organisation and delimiting of space is particularly constraining for girls' participation in sports. The allocation and definition of space as 'boys only' and the ways in which access to outdoor space was restricted through discourses of sexual harassment and feminine vulnerability thus limited potential experiences of empowerment girls might achieve through bodily engagement through/within local spaces.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have considered the ways in which a group of girls, who were attending various secondary schools across London, constructed their gendered identities in the contexts of their schooling and sporting sites. Rather than focusing simply on whether or not girls continued with their involvement, I centred my attention on the sporting engagement itself, in girls' perceptions of this engagement and of the role it might play in their broader lives and particularly their education. The analysis therefore looks at the ways in which girls came to see physical activity and sport as enjoyable and worthwhile activities or as distractions or even negative experiences that they were not interested in pursuing. The process of tracing the girls' experiences over a period of four years revealed the ways in which these decisions were linked to their transition to secondary school and to broader processes of differentiation and selection within schooling.

My findings suggest that girls' constructions of academic, peer and social identities within secondary school mediate their participation in physical activity, making it increasingly difficult to access at the secondary school level. For those girls who were able to continue with this sporting engagement, the forms of participation had shifted and were expected to echo the achievement codes that were already operating in their schooling contexts. I conclude that girls' sporting decisions and identifications are located within a range of conflicting discourses in and around their participation that often obscure the difficulties they face and position girls as personally responsible for their 'failure' or 'success' in maintaining healthy, active lifestyles. This implies that structural inequalities within a performative, standards-driven education system provide a more comprehensive and thus crucial framing for girls' participation in sport and physical activity than individualistic narratives suggest. The analysis therefore complicates both the idea that girls' disengagement from sport represents an overall 'problem,' as well as straightforward suggestions that sport and physical activity are necessarily 'good' for young women as they are promoted within neoliberal models of progression and achievement.

As I began the research, my interest in girls' sporting involvement presented itself as a sensible concern and schools expressed their interest in the 'problem' of girls' participation in PE. As I pointed out in chapter five, the conflation of girls' disengagement with the perceived value of sports participation operates within discourses of health and liberal access models, thus justifying these concerns. A review of ongoing initiatives revealed a variety of programmes and strategies both in the UK and elsewhere that have arisen with the specific aim of 'getting girls active.' As I also pointed out in chapter five, such programmes often resort to 'girl-friendly' activities that do little to challenge girls' learned bodily capacities but are seen as positive in promoting physical fitness. Conversely, theories of physical feminism that have advocated women and girls' involvement in traditionally male-dominated sports as a means of physical empowerment seem to envisage such participation as somehow taking place outside the discursive constraints that constitute its existence. In line with post-structural insights developed in chapter two, my findings suggest that such empowerment does not exist beyond or apart from imperative projects of the self based on notions of development and self-actualisation.

The most popular theoretical approach to girls' involvement in sport and physical activity has posited an 'ideology of femininity' as constraining girls' sports participation. Within this formulation, girls' participation in sport is seen to be incommensurate with their constructions of young heterosexual femininities, and thus problematic for girls taking part in PE or sport. Along these lines, I predicted that the girls' ability to maintain an active tomboy identity into secondary school would impact on their sporting engagement. However, I found that although the construction of a tomboy identity in secondary school was somewhat problematic, social class and choice of school turned out to be more significant for the girls' participation in sport and physical activity. My findings suggested a more complicated analysis of girls' involvement in sport and physical activity that was inevitably bound up in their broader schooling experiences and in processes of differentiation around ethnicity and social class.

As Gazza, Lindsay, Deniz, Spirit, Lucy and Nirvana made the transition to secondary school I had admittedly high hopes for their ongoing involvement in sport and physical activity. Seeing their enthusiasm and enjoyment in various sports at the primary school level suggested that they would continue this involvement into secondary school. I even imagined that they might enjoy it more so there, where sport would be taken more ‘seriously.’ The girls themselves were more realistic about these prospects and they were often cautious about the extent to which they might continue to play sports as they entered adolescence. Nilay’s prescient concerns around ‘growing up’ and the need to ‘work hard’ at school turned out to be particularly significant for the girls. I found that schooling and educational achievement acted as the overriding contexts surrounding girls’ participation in sport and physical activity.

The Main Findings

My findings and analysis revolve around three key themes that run across the chapters. These relate to the importance of relationships and identity, of achievement and performance, and to processes of differentiation within both schooling and sporting contexts.

Relationships and Identity

The findings from my thesis suggest that girls’ participation in sport is crucially tied to the relationships that mediate this participation including those with their coaches, teachers and peers. This suggests that girls take up, resist and negotiate gendered identities relative to the peer settings of their schools and sports clubs within a network of identifications around race, class, gender, ability and health. This network of identifications influenced both how girls saw themselves as potential participants and in their lived experiences of sport in various settings.

For the girls in my research, the interpersonal aspects of their involvement played a key role in providing a sense of validation, enjoyment and safety for their bodily engagement in different activities. Girls expressed a desire to feel encouraged, challenged and *individually valued* within any physical activity settings they took part in. Such relationships seemed to hold more

importance for their engagement than the performatively based measures and specialist skills that were often promoted by teachers and coaches at the secondary school level. As I described in chapter four, girls' enjoyment of physical activities at primary school rested in their friendships with classmates and in the mutual trust and recognition they experienced with their teachers or coaches who, as Gazza noted of her karate Sensei, 'knows me.' This sentiment seemed to denote an individualised care and attention that acted as a form of personal confirmation for girls.

While I am not suggesting that these sorts of relationships are not available at the secondary school level and within competitive outside clubs, they certainly seemed more difficult to foster there. Lucy's suggestion that her hockey coach 'only picks the good ones' conveyed a sense of betrayal not only that the coach had favourites but also that she did not seem to trust in each girl's potential for development. Spirit's distress around her coach's 'skiving' accusations as well as Deniz and her friends' concerns that their PE teachers 'don't believe us!' seemed particularly to relate to this lack of trust and empathy among girls and their teachers and coaches at the secondary school level.

While I cannot decisively point out the reasons for this lack of trust, various factors seemed to contribute towards it including the irregularity of teachers in various lessons (in line with subject specialisation), the increasing emphasis on set targets and accountability within schools, as well as the ongoing investments significant adults sustained in models of success and achievement. The overriding standards agenda within schooling certainly seemed to perpetuate performance codes across schooling and sporting contexts, thus demanding achievement both from the girls and from their teachers (Evans et al., 2007).

Adults could also be key in facilitating girls' relationships with their peers and close friends within mutually supportive, 'safe' settings for physical activity. As I described in chapter four, at Benjamin Laurence School the Year 5 teacher's setting aside of girls' football time and his supervision of their game play with male peers was important in facilitating their participation. Indeed it was both these relationships with their former

teachers and with their male peers that girls often lamented the loss of in later interviews at secondary school. There was a sense that the sexualised, hierarchical peer settings at secondary school negated the kinds of friendships with boys that had once facilitated the girls' involvement. Similarly, Emma Renold's research has found that 'a ubiquitous heterosexual matrix' regulates girls' access to physical activities in both structured and unstructured settings (Renold, 2006). Conversely, the use of sport as a resource in the construction of young masculinities (Swain, 2004) seemed to negate girls' participation since it rendered such sporting practices problematic or even 'weird' as Gazza described of her attempts to engage in discussions of football with her classmates.

Girls at the mixed-sex secondary school in my research often found themselves competing for male attention amidst harsh judgements that valued heterosexual attractiveness above sporting accomplishments, as was described in chapter seven. My findings demonstrate that within secondary school the drive towards conformity and the shifting allegiances of friendships created situations in which girls found it more difficult to maintain their interests in sport and physical activity. Girls' negotiations around 'girlie', 'sporty' and 'clever' subject positions were subject to the particular configuration of social groups and classed settings within their respective schools.

Girls' friendships and peer groupings were significant to their gendered identifications and sports participation since they provided guidance into the appropriate practices that 'girls like me' might engage in. Within the conformist settings of their secondary schools, girls often ended up between conflicting discourses to 'be yourself' and the more pressing concern of standing out because 'no one else is doing it.' Girls were variously able to resist dominant gender discourses by investing in a number of practices, including at times, sports participation. However, 'race' and ethnicity were particularly constraining in terms of accessing various subject positions. As Pomerantz (2008: 154) suggests of the girls in her study, 'It was knowledge of how one was positioned as a certain 'kind' of (raced, classed, schooled) girl' that particularly constrained the limits of their performances of

girlhood.’ I found that this was particularly the case for girls’ sporting involvement, which is often already seen as a sexually suspect performance (Choi, 2000). In choosing not to discuss her football involvement with classmates, Deniz had hinted at this possible gender impropriety when she guessed what they might say about it: ‘Are you a boy? Are you a tomboy?’ But, I’m not a tomboy, I just like playing football.’

Importantly, girls’ relationships with friends mediated their sports participation since friends could act both as encouragement and as a form of social insulation against the kinds of harsh peer evaluations girls expected to receive in physical activity settings. As other research by Cockburn and Clarke (2002) and Evans (2006) has found, the combined effect of girls’ ‘bodies in motion’ also acting as ‘bodies on display’ did seem to raise the stakes for girls in ways that were sometimes disheartening and even humiliating for them. However, as my observations at the running club revealed in chapter nine, girls could also combine markers of emphasised femininity with impressive athletic feats to challenge gendered conceptions of their bodies.

Parental support and encouragement were also important, particularly in passing on expectations of appropriate sporting and extracurricular achievements and tastes. This filtered into parental ability or willingness to provide the fees, time and transportation to after school activities and clubs.

The research therefore suggests that girls’ sporting identifications and participation are anchored within a network of relations between parents, coaches, teachers, friends and other girls that frame girls’ identities and sense of themselves as potential participants.

Differentiation and Exclusion

The research also demonstrates how processes of differentiation and selection at the secondary school level had a significant impact on girls’ physical activities. While their prospects for physical activity were roughly commensurate in primary school and the girls were engaged in a range of activities at this time, these opportunities seemed to differentiate sharply at the transition to secondary school. The different secondary schools the girls

attended represented very different opportunities for them, both in terms of schooling and sporting achievement. My findings suggest that differentiation along lines of ability, class, gender and ethnicity were particularly salient for the girls and their opportunities to take part in physical activity and sport.

The gendered organisation and delimiting of space both at girls' schools and within their local areas proved particularly constraining for girls' activities, as was described in chapter nine. At the single sex schools, expectations around girls' behaviour and the low priority placed on providing recreational space at lunch and playtime meant that girls could not easily engage in the playful, less structured activities they had enjoyed in primary school. At the mixed-sex school, the demarcating of a specific, caged space for football, which was automatically co-opted as a 'masculine' space, made it almost impossible for younger girls to simply 'join in' without some sort of overt sponsorship (which was not forthcoming). Fears around girls' physical vulnerability and the periodic patrolling of space through tactics such as sexual harassment curtailed girls' access to outdoor space without a male peer or adult chaperon. Although gender has been a considerable focus in analyses of youth sport, my research also suggests that social class is particularly important in dividing girls' access to sport and physical activity. This division proved to be particularly salient at the transition to secondary school.

Classed understandings of a 'good education' strongly impacted on girls' involvement in sport. As described in chapters five and six, this occurred partly by dictating the type of school that girls would attend and partly by setting up expectations of what a 'well-rounded' pupil should achieve both mentally and physically. My analysis in these chapters considered the ways that schools embody pupils as classed, gendered subjects through particular constructions of 'successful girlhood.' This suggests that accomplishments such as sport, music and other perceived 'talents' are not merely individual interests, but that they embody their subjects in the formation of a particular habitus. As I documented in chapter six, middle class notions of self-actualisation and personal development resonated strongly in decisions

around extracurricular provision, including sports participation. I also suggested in this chapter that the realigning of ambitions around sport often echoed those around career aspirations where girls across schools suggested more ‘realistic’ ambitions in line with classed and gendered expectations. This suggests that processes of differentiation within sport and schooling are linked. For girls not already invested in notions of the ‘well-rounded student,’ sports participation seemed to present itself as a superfluous distraction to the academic demands of schooling.

Another form of differentiation that held important implications for girls’ physical activities occurred through processes of selection and hierarchisation along lines of ‘ability.’ In chapters four and eight I described how girls’ engagement in sport and physical activity at the primary school level had more readily centred on notions of ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’ based in inclusive models of participation. Team selection and performative models of participation in secondary school and in outside clubs created exclusionary divisions between girls. Selective sorting practices on school and outside sports teams normalised distinctions between ‘able’ and ‘non-able’ participants as though these were self-evident binaries. In chapter eight I looked in particular at how girls who were able to position themselves as ‘good at sports’ were permitted to continue this engagement at the expense of girls who saw themselves as the converse, ‘rubbish at sports,’ and were therefore unable/unwilling to participate.

I also found that girls who had once been able to see themselves as ‘good at sports’ found this self-definition more difficult to sustain as they moved into larger pools of talent/ability at the secondary school level. The focus on performance goals thus proved unsustainable in maintaining their interest in sport since there would always be girls who were ‘better than me’ in higher levels of competition. I suggested that the coupling of feminised humility and ever-increasing pools of talent work against girls’ positive valuations of their sporting abilities, and therefore against their participation in sports. Spirit was able to shift her goals towards self-improvement (personal bests) at her new running club where her progress was deemed to be ‘disappointing’ in relation to the other girls. However, her involvement

there was not as enjoyable as it had once been for her and the selective, competitive models of participation at her running club proved especially disheartening.

Achievement and Performance

Models of achievement and performance proved to be particularly significant to girls' participation in sports and physical activities. Girls' schooling experiences suggest that the current standards agenda in schools and its emphasis on achievement and performativity (Ball, 2003a, Ball, 2003b) was an important framework for girls' activities.

In chapter five I described different secondary schools' particular 'stakes' within this standards agenda as they struggled to secure their standing and league table positioning through the production of outstanding 'results' sought after by parents. School understandings of issues around girls' engagement in sports were thus strongly tied to their positioning within this educational context, to their perceived need to both comply with curricular models of achievement and to demonstrate their standing through, for example, school sport successes and healthy schools status. Schools that were already well positioned within the educational market tended to see girls' achievements in sport and physical activity as further indicators of both school credibility and success.

A discourse of achievement and competition within schooling was also an overriding concern for the young women and their parents who stressed the importance of academic achievement as a vehicle of social mobility and success. The emphasis on achievement and performance in schools translated into large amounts of homework for girls, into pressure to achieve good grades and into a common perception that such academic achievement would translate into life trajectories and chances, thereby raising the stakes for girls' accomplishments. As I described in chapters six and eight, girls who did not see sport as complementary to their academic achievement were likely to drop out of it at secondary school, while other girls noted the juggling acts required in balancing lessons, school work and family priorities, thus leaving less time for casual, 'fun' activities they had enjoyed

in primary school. Spirit's description of attempting to complete her homework over lunch (rather than relaxing with friends) in order to rush home, help out with chores and attend extracurricular sports or lessons most nights of the week seemed a formidable effort to sustain.

The research also suggests that performance and achievement are increasingly being translated into sporting sites both in and out of school. For those girls who did continue with their sports engagement, the stakes were substantially raised and 'taking part' was no longer considered to be a sufficient justification. Spirit described continuing with her running because of the broad set of expectations placed on her over a period of engagement. Coaches at the running club in particular expected the ongoing progression of sporting performances, just as schools expected continuing academic achievement. This proved to be potentially detrimental for middle class girls since notions of talent and achievement echoed those already emphasised in girls' academic pursuits, thus creating intense forms of pressure for them to succeed in both contexts. Girls at Spirit's private school described how they were expected to attain excellence across the range of their extracurricular and academic pursuits.

Concurrent with this emphasis on ability, constructions of 'health' and the moral imperative of 'good' eating choices and physical fitness served to frame and therefore justify girls' participation in physical activity. Evans, Rich, Davies and Allwood's (2008b) research suggests that health is being increasingly tied into current performative agendas within schools as it becomes constructed as an outcome that can be somehow quantified and thus 'measured.' My research found that girls readily took up such health concerns and could use health discourses to frame their sports participation as responsible, morally elevated practices. However, this framing of physical activity could also act as a compulsive project of the self, as Spirit's description of cutting her food intake and running every day to 'keep fit' and lose weight attests. For other girls whose practices did not become so extreme, health concerns still provided a moral framework that created feelings of guilt and anxiety around food and physical activity.

The construction of healthy behaviours as unreservedly ‘good’ practices lent them a form of moral elevation that also contributed to the construction of the unhealthy ‘other.’ Girls who had been constituted as such unhealthy/overweight ‘others’ were also excluded from participation through constructions of ability based on perceptions of physical performances and body size. The research therefore highlights the easy conflation that may occur between ‘health’ concerns and the moralising of body size and food intake for young people inundated with messages around ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviours in risk adverse contexts.

Summary

These findings reveal the often-conflicting ways in which girls are positioned within discourses around their sporting participation. Although girls were often told to take part in physical activity at school, the performative emphasis on academic targets meant that many girls prioritised these ‘mental’ achievements above physical pursuits. In their peer groups at school, girls were often caught between individualistic narratives and the conformist, surveillant rules of their peer settings, which sometimes saw sports participation as ‘strange.’ Girls were also positioned amidst conflicting discourses around space and physical empowerment. Although their activities often demanded a wide reign of space, girls were restricted from this space through constructions of their physicality as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘weak.’ Ironically, I suggest that girls’ bodily capacities might have been challenged through this engagement.

Despite the broad inequalities that framed girls’ participation and the conflicting ways in which they were positioned through various discourses, girls were most likely to see their disengagement in sport as a personal failing, and often as an inevitable implication of ‘growing up.’

Significance of Findings

The findings and analyses made within this thesis contribute various insights in relation to the original research questions set out in chapter two. First, they suggest that girls take up, resist and negotiate gendered identities relative to their peer cultures and schooling contexts and that these are

importantly constrained by class and ethnic identifications. Second, the research reveals that the different schools girls continued to as well as the selection criterion with sports teams and clubs held significant implications for girls' participation in sport and physical activity. Third, girls' relationships with friends, parents and teachers were important in defining what a 'girl like me' might accomplish and denoted acceptable practices of femininity. Such relationships also worked to set up aspirations and expectations around successful girlhood (particularly from parents). For coaches and teachers, these relationships worked to sustain girls' confidence and to validate her participation in a particular sport.

Finally, the research findings reveal that discourses of ability, achievement and health were particularly influential for girls' sports participation and that these were often set within understandings of 'successful girlhood.'

Overall, the research findings reveal that not all girls are disenfranchised from sport over the transition to secondary school and the early years of adolescence but that differences in sporting participation relate to processes of differentiation around ethnicity and social class. These were found to be intimately situated within the schooling system and the standards agenda. Simultaneously, the findings reveal that sports participation is not necessarily the panacea for girls that it has been portrayed as. Girls' participation seems to be increasingly coopted by achievement codes already operating within schooling, creating pressurized contexts for girls deemed to be the 'success' models of neoliberal girlhood.

Further Implications

The findings suggest that while girls may wish to engage in physical activity and sport, the models of engagement made available are not necessarily appropriate in that they tend to echo the achievement and performance codes already perpetuated in schooling demands and/or that they set up exclusionary categories of differentiation along lines of ability and other social resources. Ian Wellard (forthcoming 2009) argues for the value of 'fun' within young people's participation in sport, as bankable memories that can sustain them throughout more difficult moments of boredom, lack

of motivation, pain and even exclusion. Such possibilities seem ever more difficult to sustain within the current standards agenda within schooling and the continuing shift towards such performance models within sport.

Ironically, such models seem to be particularly emphasised within young people's activities as they are seen to have the capabilities and potential to both excel and 'succeed' within sport through competitive demonstrations of 'excellence' such as those modelled in the Olympics. In the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics, a range of initiatives including the 2008 PE and Sport Strategy (DCSF, 2008b) have emphasised the development of 'the most talented young people,' with inadequate attention to the ways in which a focus on elite performance can alienate and exclude the majority of would-be participants. My research points to some of the discouraging consequences for girls of holding up elite achievement as the ultimate aim of sporting participation.

Some of the practical recommendations that might arise from the research include the development of further girls' running groups that cater to all abilities and provide safe environments for girls to run in. Girls' secondary school PE lessons and sports clubs might also achieve better participation through a commitment to fostering positive, trusting relationships among girls and with their coaches, over and above the current emphases on the achievement of specific bodily performances.

However, the research also points to a broader educational context that has increasingly become focused on competition and performative results. It suggests that such a context has inevitable consequences for girls' sports participation and the ways in which schools feel compelled/incited to monitor and regulate both girls' physical bodies and their sporting participation. Early feminist calls for sport as a possible site of physical empowerment, sociality and democratic participation seem far off, yet they might still be held up as ideals of what sport can and might be for many girls and young women who choose to take part in contexts hopefully more freed of the constraints that currently exist.

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Appendix 1 Participant Information

| Participant's Name (girls) | Primary School | Secondary School | Ethnicity | Parental Occupation | Sports Played |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| Gazza | Benjamin Laurence | Adlington | White British | Mother: Administrative Father: Administrative | Football, Karate, Netball |
| Lindsay | Benjamin Laurence | Adlington | Asian British | Father: Unskilled Service Mother: Stay at Home | Football, Sprinting, Netball |
| Deniz | Benjamin Laurence | Blythevale | Middle Eastern British | Father: Restaurant Industry Mother: Stay at Home | Football, Netball |
| *Nilay | Benjamin Laurence | N/A | Asian British | Mother: Translator Father: Unknown | Football, Netball |
| Spirit | Holly Bank | Folkestone | White British | Father: Professional Manager Mother: Stay at Home | Basketball, Cross-Country Running, Rugby |
| Nirvana | Holly Bank | Wellington Gardens | White British | Mother: I.T. Professional Father: Property Developer | Netball, Sprinting, Cross-Country Running |
| Lucy | Holly Bank | Wellington Gardens | White British | Father: Professional Mother: Stay at Home | Cross-Country Running, Cycling, Climbing, Tennis |
| *Chelsea | Holly Bank | N/A | White British | Unknown | Football |
| **Danny | | Adlington | White British | Father: Skilled Manual Mother: Stay at Home | Football, Ice Skating |
| **Rhiannon | | Wellington Gardens | White British | Father: Professional Mother: Unknown | Football, Trampolining |
| **Erica | | Wellington Gardens | White British | Father: Professional Mother: Administrative | Hockey, Tennis |

Appendix 1 Continued

*Chelsea and Nilay were both participants in the tomboys study but did not continue with the research into secondary school.

** Danny, Rhiannon and Erica joined the study in Year 7 after being introduced by other girls in the study at their schools.

School Information

Benjamin Laurence Primary School: Comprehensive, mixed-sex, inner city London, ethnically diverse, primarily working class backgrounds.

Holly Bank Primary School: Comprehensive, mixed-sex, suburban, primarily white British and middle class composition.

Adlington Secondary School: Comprehensive, mixed sex, ethnically diverse, inner city London.

Blythevale Secondary School: Comprehensive, girls-only, ethnically diverse, inner city London.

Folkestone Secondary School: Private, girls-only, suburban, primarily White British and middle class composition.

Wellington Gardens Secondary School: Comprehensive, girls-only, suburban, primarily White British and middle class composition.

Appendix 2 Interview Schedule

| Participant | Year 5 2004-2005 | Year 6 2005-2006 | Year 7 2006-2007 | Year 8 2007-2008 |
|-------------|--|--|---|---|
| Gazza | Group Interview 06/ 2005 Individual Interview 07/ 2005 ¹⁴ | Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Group Interview 06/ 2007 Interview 03/2007 and 11/2006 | Interview 10/2007 Photo Interview 03/2008 |
| Lindsay | Group Interview 07/ 2005 | Group Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Group Interview 06/ 2007 | Interview 10/ 2007 Photo Interview 03/2008 |
| Nilay | Group Interview 07/ 2005 | Group Interview () 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | N/A (discontinues study) | N/A |
| Deniz | Interview 09/ 2005 | Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Interview 05/2007 | Interview 11/2007 Photo Interview Spring 2008 |
| Spirit | Group Interview 06/ and 07/ 2005 | Group Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Group Interview 07/2007 Interview 12/2006 | N/A (leaves study) |
| Nirvana | Group Interview 06/ and 07/ 2005 | Group Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Interview 11/2006 Group Interview 04/2007 | Interview 11/2007 Photo Interview Spring 2008 |
| Lucy | Group Interview 06/ 2005 Interview 07/ 2005 | Interview 12/ 2005 Exit Interview 07/ 2006 | Interview 09/ 2006 Group Interview 06/2007 | Interview 11/2007 Photo Interview 03/2008 |
| Danny | | | Group Interview 06/2007 | Interview 10/2007 |
| Erica | | | Group Interview 04/2007 | Interview 10/ 2007 |
| Rhiannon | | | Group Interview 06/2007 | Interview 10/ 2007 |

¹⁴ Note: highlighted interviews represent those undertaken as part of the 'Tomboy Identities' study.

Appendix 3 Questionnaire

Girls and Physical Activity Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a PhD study about girls' involvement in sports and physical activities. All answers are confidential so don't write your name down. There are no right or wrong answers, it's just about your experiences and opinions. If your answer to any of the questions is 'no' then please write this rather than leaving it blank.

Sports Teams and Physical Activities

- 1) When you were in primary school, did you join any sports teams or take any lessons (e.g. karate, swimming)? If so, which ones?

- 2) Do you play on any sports teams with your secondary school? If so, which ones?

- 3) Do you currently do any sports or physical activities outside of school? If so, which ones?

- 4) Have you thought about playing on a sports team inside or outside school but decided not to or quit shortly after starting? If so, please explain.

- 5) How do you feel about sports or physical activities in general?

- 6) If you have a favourite sport or physical activity, what is it and why?

- 7) Have you had any positive sporting experiences? If so, please describe.

8) Have you had any negative sporting experiences ? If so, please describe.

9) What's your favourite thing about PE?

10) What's your least favourite thing about PE?

11) What would you suggest to make PE more enjoyable for you?

Please circle the answer that relates most closely to the following statements:

12) *I enjoy PE*

Strongly Agree Agree Don't know Disagree Strongly Disagree

13) *I enjoy physical activity*

Strongly Agree Agree Don't know Disagree Strongly Disagree

14) *I am good at sports*

Strongly Agree Agree Don't know Disagree Strongly Disagree