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The spectre of neoliberalism: pedagogy, gender and the construction of learner identities

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Short bio

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Abstract

In this paper I draw on ethnographic observation data taken from a school-based study of two groups of 12–13-year-old pupils identified as high achieving and popular to explore how relations between teachers and pupils are mediated and constituted through the spectre of neoliberal values and sensibilities – zero-sum thinking, individualism and competition. Specifically, I demonstrate how certain high-achieving male and female pupils respond to and negotiate competing challenges summoned through the class- room – pushes to be competitive, autonomous and achieve academically, and pulls to court the acceptance of others and become or remain popular. This highlights the deep interconnections between neoliberalism and pedagogy and school-based orientations to learning. At the same time, it draws attention to resistance and the efficacy of the interpellating demands of neoliberal discourses in the context of intersecting dynamics of gender, friendship and popularity. I conclude the paper by considering how neoliberal styles, rhetoric and cultural forms impact on ideas of social justice and possibilities for a ‘critical’ or ‘transformative’ pedagogy that takes seriously the positive contribution of learners to education discourses and practices.

Keywords: critical theory; education policy; gender; neoliberalism; pedagogy

Introduction

This paper borrows from concepts and perspectives developed through critical education and sociology of education studies to demonstrate how boys and girls identified as high achieving and popular negotiate the kinds of pedagogical demands summoned through neoliberal performativity. This calls attention to the influence of neoconservative, new public management and consumerist discourses on the development of education policy and practice (Ball, 2008; Clarke & Newman, 1997) and the extent to which politically circulating discourses have percolated into the dynamics structuring and mediating classroom interaction between teachers and pupils. Building on recent research by Francis, Skelton and Read (2009), in which the authors explicate how some high-achieving pupils ‘maintain their academic achievement while simultaneously remaining popular with their peers’ (p. 3), this paper further explores how high-achieving pupils negotiate this educational terrain in the context of fantasies and aspirations to be well-liked and popular. This paper therefore aims to make a distinctive contribution to debates on the deep interconnections between neoliberalism (broadly defined as practices relating to marketisation, consumerism and deregulation) and pupils’ orientation to learning in the context of intersecting dynamics of friendship, popularity and gender.

Since the 1990s there has been a plethora of media stories, academic research and public debate in the UK concerned with the perceived attainment gap between boys and girls and their differential levels of participation in ‘critical’ learning (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw 1998; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001). For some anti-feminist writers, the comparative shortfall in boys’ achievement is linked to the embedding of ‘feminine’ attributes of anti-competition across the curriculum and the often perceived feminised character of teaching and learning strategies more generally (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Francis, 2000; Harris, 2004; Pollack, 1999). Such a view can be traced through a Sunday Times article in which Minette Marrin (2010) argues that education discourses and practices have been co-opted

by a set of feminist sensibilities and values – a peculiar offshoot of the 1980s feminist-inspired drive to improve the personal and academic success of female learners. In a scorching tone that peddles anti-feminist rhetoric, Marrin criticises the extent to which even ‘conversations and jokes [in the classroom] have been feminized to sneer at testosterone-drive male aggression’ (p. 18). The implication here is that boys are being short-changed in terms of educational outcomes because the dominant discourse is unfit to meet the (competitive) needs and interests of ‘masculine’ subjects (for a discussion, see Browne & Fletcher, 1995). This has led some commentators to suggest that male, rather than female, teachers possess the capacity to court the acceptance of disaffected boys and raise their educational attainment (for analysis, see Ashley & Lee, 2003).

The comparatively low educational achievement of boys has also been explained in terms of the ‘crisis of masculinity’, referring to the idea that certain enduring economic and socio-cultural trends particular to Western capitalist societies (specifically, de-industrialization and the rise of the service sector) have contributed to de-centring and de-valuing traditional ‘masculine’ employment routes and their attendant ‘registers of masculinity’ (Nayak, 2006, p. 814). These trends signal a broader transition from the old Keynesian Welfare State to a Schumpeterian Workfare State, characterised by Jessop (1993) as tendencies relating to the shift in Western economies from Fordist to post-Fordist or neoliberal regimes of accumulation defined by the deregulation of capital and labour, the causalisation and outsourcing of the workforce and the disintegration of working patterns, trade union bargaining powers and centralised authority. Specifically, the ‘crisis of masculinity’ can be traced to how the shift from manufacturing to the service industry has led to the creation of formal and informal market opportunities for women, sometimes referred to as the feminisation of the workforce (see Moghadam, 2005).

These trends can be understood to contribute both concretely and discursively to the sovereignty of neoliberal performativity as an ‘imaginary’ for guiding policy development, organisational restructuring and relations to the self. Here I use the term performativity in the Butlerian sense to demonstrate how identity and social action are produced as a ritualized repetition of socially circulating discourses rather as an expression of a prior identity. Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) encourages us to think about how material and bodily citations are implicated in the performance of gender and sexuality, for example. The suggestion here being that:

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, a natural sort of being. (Butler, 1990, p. 33)

From this perspective, neoliberal performativity refers to a set of discourses, functions and framings through which subjects are hailed (interpellated) as competitive individualists. Taken to its logical conclusion, neoliberal performativity is less an act of spontaneity and autonomy (the standard rationality presupposed by the political and moral doctrine of (neo)liberalism (see Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004) and more of a re-enactment of and adjustment to socially and politically ascribed norms. But how do boys and girls respond to the demands, fantasies and reward structures summoned through neoliberal performativity in the context of classroom behaviour and interaction?

Existing literature on gender and education suggests that dominant constructions of what is considered 'acceptable' gendered behaviour position competition at odds with 'feminine' identity, thus constraining the possibilities of girls successfully inhabiting and performing a competitive orientation to learning (Francis, 2000, 2009). In this paper I want to extend and complicate these analyses by showing how competition is sometimes enacted and lived by boys and girls and that friendship and popularity appears to be more at odds with competitive behaviour than gender itself. Eschewing biological-reductionist arguments that attempt to naturalise gender and gender distinction as a unitary discourse through which competitive behaviour might be theorized (i.e., as something individuals possess due to genetic hardwiring or inheritance), this paper deploys elements of feminist and post-structuralist perspectives to take account of how neoliberal performativity is lived and experienced in the context of intersecting dynamics of popularity, friendship and gender. Such an approach is important for the way it moves beyond a concern solely with identity to take account of how identity and subjectivity is produced and emerges through social and institutional practices. On this view it then becomes possible to view subjects as situated social agents and agentic, engaged in creative and active negotiations with the positions and discourses made available to them (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001).

In what follows I trace the emergence of a succession of government practices geared towards promoting and legitimating neoliberal policy devices in education, with the aim to provide some political background to my discussion of the empirical data.

Neoliberalism and its (dis)contents

Since the 1980s, education services in UK have increasingly come to be defined through the lens of new public management and consumerist discourses (Gewirtz, 2002) with their attendant concepts of deregulation and marketisation. A consequence of this has been a reorganisation of the relationship between citizen and the state in which citizens are hailed (interpellated) through a narrow rational, utilitarian logic that presupposes the willingness and capacity of individuals to behave as consumers of education services (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmarland, 2007; Wilkins, 2010). Despite attempts to distance themselves from the anti-state, pro-market rhetoric of 1980s Conservative government policy and politics, Blair's New Labour government (1997–2007) can be read as 'distinct reflections of, or developments from, the period of Thatcherism or neo-liberalism' (Ball, 2008, p. 84), with its emphasis on the efficacious role of private sector involvement in public sector organisation. According to New Labour rhetoric (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004), the 'old' system of education inherited from the post-war settlement sustained itself through delivering 'a basic and standard product for all' (Foreword), making it incompatible with the expectations, desires and aspirations of a burgeoning 'consumer culture'. In contrast, the 'new' system of education imagined by New Labour was represented in terms of a more equitable and fair model of service delivery because of its sustained commitment to meanings and practices of consumer voice, choice and 'the need to differentiate provision to individual aptitudes and abilities within schools' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001, Introduction). Central to this imagery of education was the lionisation of an ethics of self-care and self-responsibility in which parents and students were solicited into fulfilling their assigned obligation and duty as consumers and co-producers of education services.

Following their electoral success on 6 May, 2010, the Conservative-led coalition government re-articulated the demand for such a model of education reform through shoring up visions of a 'Big Society' (Stratton, 2010), a society in which citizens are 'empowered' to engage in the governance and delivery of public services as active and self-maximising welfare recipients. Echoing earlier attempts by Labour governments to discredit and dismantle traditional notions of central authority, regulation and state power, the coalition government extended the commercial use of private companies and sponsorships for the delivery of education services with the introduction of the free schools programme (Murray, 2011), together with an expansion of the Academies programme launched by New Labour in 2000. But what has been the impact of these political and economic trends on the culture and ethos of British schooling, in particular the character of pedagogical developments and the curriculum? Are their certain types of learners and orientations to learning that are celebrated, rewarded and made more visible, to the detriment of others?

The scope and reach of private sector involvement in public sector education is evident through the managerial and disciplinary focus of education institutions, ranging from primary and secondary schools through to Further Education (FE) colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This battery of managerial and bureaucratic procedures, to which all education institutions are forced to submit, represent themselves through the imposition of business-oriented discourses and practices: measured outputs, accountability measures, program specification, annual program reports, progression rates, withdrawal and retention rates, standardised test scores, school inspection, league table positioning, benchmark statements, curricula design, competition and so on. For Mccafferty (2010), these procedures for effective education management are suggestive of a neoliberal pedagogy, 'the inculcation of enterprise values as a crucial element of contractual and pedagogic obligation' (p. 542). Monitoring systems and performance indicators that work to provide tighter regulation and control of the measurement of effort and work levels (for both teachers and children), for example, echo and redeem the character of neoliberal governance (Ball, 2003). Elements of a neoliberal pedagogy can be further traced to the ways in which schools, FE colleges and HEIs are encouraged to incorporate 'capitalist enterprises' into their procedures and rationale (in other words, submit to the requirements of Capital) as a matter of social responsibility and care (Fisher, 2009). This is because, as we are continually reminded by pro-business governments in advanced capitalist countries, children need to be equipped with the necessary skills for ensuring future employability (presented in the language of fairness and equity); in other words, preserving economic sustainability, the wealth of the nation and the needs of labour markets.

As Hill (2007) observes, forcing schools to produce 'compliant, ideologically indoctrinated, pro-capitalist, effective workers' (p. 120) is a testament to the pervasive role of neoliberalism on education reform. At the same time, we must remain circumspect about the novelty of these policy trends. They signal nothing particularly 'new' about the trajectory of British education – the need for state intervention in education to further the interests of capitalism has been understood since the nineteenth century (Jones & Novak, 2000). Rather, these trends in education governing can be understood to register the continuing embedding and subsuming of British school culture within a competitive ethos and business ontology. And while competition in British schooling has existed since the 1970s (see Lacey, 1970), neoliberalism as a framing for guiding and shaping competition can be considered unique in that it attaches importance to entrepreneurially relevant skill devel-

opment and entrepreneurial literacies that seek to close the gap between requisite learning skills and the demands of the labour market. This demonstrates the role of state education as a disciplinary apparatus for facilitating and sustaining social control and political stability on the one hand (Jones & Novak, 2000) and the development of ongoing government attempts to reform state education around emerging labour market needs on the other (initially sketched out by Allen and Massey [1989]).

Research methods and data collection

In recent research, Francis, Skelton and Read (2009) observed how certain pupils attempt to facilitate and sustain 'balance' between popularity and academic achievement and explained how these forms of engagement are inflected through gendered values and concerns. The empirical data analysed in this paper follows a similar vein of critical inquiry, engaging with important questions around interpretation, meaning-making and the relational constitution of social practices and student subjectivities, but situates these discussions in the context of neoliberal performativity. In order to make a distinctive contribution to the field of gender, education and neoliberal studies, this paper attends to the messiness and contradictoriness that flows from pupils' engagements with pedagogy decidedly neoliberal in character.

This paper draws on new evidence generated from a study of two London co-educational schools in which Barbara Read and I followed two groups of 12–13-year-old pupils over a period of one week in each school (five days at Constable House and four days at Archcroft Close). To carry out the research we first collected and analysed various sources of information on schools with the aim to identify schools that might be considered to be diverse in terms of the social class and ethnic mix composition of the student population. To carry out the fieldwork we wrote to, and later telephoned, the headteachers with the aim of opening up discussions around the possibility of providing some access for the project. Through these exchanges we offered evidence of Criminal Records Bureau clearance, explained the background to the project, the aims of the research, its ethical dimensions and how we intended to disseminate research findings. Once consent was given by each headteacher we began distributing consent forms to pupils we were interested in observing. Pupils were instructed to read the consent form carefully and to indicate whether they wished to participate in the research (e.g. fill out the questionnaire and be subject to classroom observation but not interviewed). Additionally, pupils were instructed to pass this information onto their parents/carers to obtain further consent.

To identify pupils who were both high achieving and regarded by others as popular, we distributed questionnaires to a class of Year 8 pupils located in the top stream group of Constable House and Archcroft Close and privately evaluated details of the pupils' Key Stage 2 (KS2) SATs results with the consent of the Head of Year. (I use the term 'popular' to designate those individuals who were identified by others as well-liked and who others aspire to be like.) In total, questionnaires were distributed to 26 pupils at Constable House and 30 pupils at Archcroft Close. These questionnaires also served to collect information about the pupils' social class and ethnic background, in which we invited pupils to describe their ethnicity and their parents' or carer's jobs/occupations. Pseudonyms have been used to replace the real names of the pupils and schools under discussion in this paper.

Of the 26 high-achieving pupils observed from the top stream group at Constable House, 14 are males and 12 are girls. A small number of these pupils (8) come from families where there is at least one parent working within the professional/ managerial sector, with the biggest proportion of pupils (14) coming from families who work in blue and white collar industries. A high number of these pupils (22) describe themselves as White. When asked 'which student or students in the class would other people say is most popular', 18 of the high-achieving pupils from Constable House answered Martin and 10 answered Luisa, with the biggest proportion of pupils (6) identifying Luisa as 'the pupil they would most like to be like'. Martin is of mixed-heritage (self-described as Black/Black British) while Luisa's ethnicity is unknown given she declined to describe her own ethnicity in the questionnaire provided. Of the 30 high-achieving pupils in Archcroft Close, 17 are boys and 13 are girls. A small proportion of these pupils (6) come from families where there is at least one parent working within the professional/managerial sector, with a considerable majority of pupils (19) coming from families who work predominantly in the service and blue collar industries. A high number of these pupils (20) describe themselves as Asian/Asian British. When asked the same question as above ('which student or students in the class would other people say is the most popular'), 17 of the high-achieving pupils from Archcroft Close answered Radhak. Radhak describes himself as Asian/Asian British. In the empirical section that follows I have selected four high-achieving pupils (Martin and Luisa, including Molly, from Constable House and Radhak from Archcroft Close) as the focus for my analysis since they share attributes of high achievement and social distinction as popular persons.

Neoliberal performativity and the injunction to compete

The following field observations taken from Constable House demonstrate how pupils are increasingly incited to conduct themselves as competitive subjects, to engage with the curriculum and learning as autonomous and flexible agents and, similarly, view others as agents competing for symbolic rewards (teacher approval, for example):

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

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

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

It is important to treat each of the observations analysed in this paper as context-sensitive and situated performances. By this I mean, classroom interactions between teachers and pupils, pupils and other pupils invariably mutate and shift according to the power relations and forms of identification that situate and constrain them. Thus, the observations analysed in this paper should not be taken to be definitive or exhaustive descriptions of the teaching practices at Constable House and Archcroft Close. Additionally, any focus on a particular boy or girl should not be construed as an attempt to abstract from their behaviour generalities that may apply to all young people. These analyses reflect nuanced attempts to map the complex positionings some boys and girls engage with in their role as learners, as gendered subjects and as popular persons, and to outline the lived experience of these complex negotiations of positionings. And while I do not want to generalise from these observations, I do want to propose that the similarities between them are significant and consistent with a view of education as ‘neoliberalised’ (Hill, 2009; Mccafferty, 2010; Ross & Gibson, 2007).

In each of the above observations, for example, the subject content for each class is different (e.g. French, English and Geography). Yet, despite the glaring differences in the curricular focus for each class, there is in evidence a set of discourses and practices that unite them and force into view their deep interconnections. These are: competitiveness, autonomy and individual responsibility. Such values are evident in the way some teachers retain a strong focus on inscribing neoliberal values into their teaching practices as well as organising learning strategies on the basis of these values, that is, channeling ‘excellence’ through competitive and individualist orientations to learning (Broadfoot, 1996; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). A clear example of this is demonstrated through the above observations where pupils are motivated to learn through competitive means, where one person’s ‘success’ necessarily implicates another person’s relative ‘failure’. These trends in education governing are also reflected through the character of obsession and preoccupation among the teachers (and pupils) with credentials, levels and grades – something which is both a product of, and feeds into, neoliberal rationality (Ball, 2003).

Example C14 further demonstrates how gender as a dividing practice is implicated in teachers’ strategies to summon learners of this ilk and ‘naturalise’ gender division in order to stimulate competition. From this perspective, the discursive category of gender offers teachers a set of tools and discourses for enabling pupils to imagine and engage with success and social advantage as competitive individualists. This undermines the supposed neutrality of neoliberalism as a governing mechanism (Friedman, 2002) and points to the practicality and usefulness of gender as a mechanism for summoning/sustaining neoliberal governmentality. Some boys and girls refuse to engage with these types of pedagogic experiments, however.

Martin and Luisa for example – both high achievers and recognised by others as popular – continually assert themselves in ways that contradict and undermine the neoliberal drive

towards atomisation (see C41 and C22). This is because atomisation (or individualisation, the pursuit of self-interest as an ethical virtue) runs the risk of alienating others, undermining self-confidence, displacing attachments and collapsing feelings of self-worth. From the perspective of a 'neoliberal pedagogy' (McCafferty, 2010) with its concentration on entrepreneurial values of flexibility, nomadism, risk-taking and competitiveness, Martin and Luisa demonstrate behaviour that might be considered 'passive'. That is, behaviour which is inert, inactive, apathetic, detached, unresponsive, lazy and even undeserving. But to view their behaviour in this way is to reinforce the active-passive dynamic inscribed through neoliberal formulations of subjectivity and agency (Johansson & Hvinden, 2005). Here, neoliberal constructions of citizens as consumers ('citizen-consumers') work through inducing the active enlistment of individuals as self-governing agents (as responsible, independent, self-interested etc.) (Wilkins, 2011). A more complicated reading suggests that Martin and Luisa are locked into, and stand at the intersection of, a number of contradictory and crosscutting discourses and positions framed by intersecting dynamics of gender, friendship and popularity.

Martin and Luisa's popularity, for example, arises from their mismatched behaviour: their ability and willingness to move through and in-between seemingly competing positions. Martin's behaviour is simultaneously rebellious and conformist, laddish and compassionate, physical and gentle. Similarly, Luisa's behaviour is subject to cross-cutting impulses: disciplined and playful, single-minded and other-oriented, industrious and relaxed. The following extract demonstrates Martin's strong inclination towards competitive behaviour, for example, but competitive among boys and not girls:

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

As some education researchers have observed, 'masculine' ways of thinking and behaving are constructed as being at odds with the kinds of attitudes and orientations to learning peddled by schools and teachers, attitudes such as diligence, care, obedience and conformity. These attitudes become demonised and pathologised by boys as effeminate characteristics (Skelton, 2001; Smith, 2007). The above extract illuminates something different, that male competitive behaviour is sometimes 'acceptable' when it is exercised among males only and takes the form of derogatory name calling, incessant put-downs, mud-slinging and point scoring. Ironically, this may explain in part how Martin, through recurring verbal aggression, exaggerated threats of physical punishment and jibes, successfully sustains peer approbation among boys and his social distinction as a popular person.

Coupled with this, Martin is particularly well-liked by girls for being caring, thoughtful and compassionate. On a number of occasions, in different classroom settings and among different girls, I observed Martin offering to help girls (never boys) who appeared to be struggling to complete the work set by the teacher. At the same time, it should be observed that his behaviour demonstrates a positive adjustment to a ruthless, unapologetic and uncompromising individualism, held together through elements of a 'strong' or 'authentic' expression of masculinity (Frank, Kehler, Lovell, & Davison, 2003; Gillborn, 1990; Mac an Ghail, 1994). This underscores the importance of the notion of plural masculinities: the idea that there is no singular identity or unitary notion of hegemonic masculinity but rather masculinity is mediated and inflected through place, space and time (Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody, 2006).

Another high achieving and popular student, Molly, demonstrates a similar capacity and strong inclination for competitive behaviour, as illustrated in the following field-notes extract:

Pupils are instructed to work in groups to improvise a scene involving witches and which draws on drama techniques of slow motion, mime and freeze framing. Molly takes charge [of her group], assuming the role of facilitator and leader. There is a stand (or presidential podium) not too far from where Molly is standing. Molly begins speaking to the group from behind the podium. The boys soon follow her example and attempt to produce a similar simulation as a public addressor. The group consists of two girls and two boys – the boys are mischievous, easily distracted, excited and aggressive (but in a playful way) while the girls spend much of the time discussing the group task. Some of the boys begin to tease Molly in a playful way in attempt to dissuade her from engaging in the work, taunting and kicking her softly. Such playful aggression might also be construed as (failed) attempts to display affection. Molly is austere and strict when it comes to completing tasks set by the teacher and works to ensure that the people in her group follow her direction. The other girl in the group is meek and quiet and tends to shadow Molly. In an attempt to displace Molly's self-elected position as leader one boy begins to pull apart the stand, which provokes Molly to scream 'go away'. Molly performs the role of narrator for the group task, the arch or voice from above who oversees, directs and translates their actions. Every attempt is made to undermine Molly's self-elected position as leader/narrator. Ironically, the teacher expresses some dissatisfaction with their performance, saying 'I would expect better from my year sevens'. Molly's attempt to position herself in the role of leader/narrator results in the group achieving very little – too much time spent jockeying for power. (Constable House, Day 2, Lesson 1, C21. Subject: Drama)

According to some education researchers, the gendered nature of competitive behaviour (Read, 2008; Skelton, 2001) means that girls sometimes prefer to work collaboratively rather than competitively because competitive behaviour carries the risk that their actions might be interpreted by other girls as 'manipulative' or 'bitchy' (Francis, 2000). As the above extract illustrates, Molly has a strong propensity for leadership and motivating potentially disinterested others into performing the classroom tasks set by the teacher. This type of behaviour may be contrasted with the other girl in the group. Described as 'meek and quiet' (C21), the unnamed girl spends much of the class silently contemplating in the shadow of Molly. In contrast, Molly decisively 'takes charge' (C21) and elects herself to the position of group facilitator. Evident here, then, is a strong inclination and willingness to simulate

behaviour conventionally ascribed to 'masculine' pursuits or attributions (Skelton, 2001). As Reay (2001) makes clear, the increasing emphasis on competition and entrepreneurship within pedagogy and the curriculum tends to mirror and echo elements of the 'assertiveness and authority of masculinity rather than the aesthetics of femininity' (p. 165) (also see Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). This may explain why Molly's attempt to simulate a public speaker addressing an audience receives a hostile response from the boys in her group. Consider also that this reaction from the boys hints at the kinds of ideological contours that define and shape gender behaviour and distinction, discursively rendering what is visible and invisible within it, sayable and unsayable.

On the other hand, what needs to be accounted for is the fact that girls successfully inhabit and perform these socially ascribed 'masculine' positions and discourses despite the potentially deleterious effects they engender, such as displacing or undermining 'feminine' attributes of docility, passivity and dependence or co-operation (Read, 2008; Skelton, 2001). These observations force us to question the efficacy of the performative capacity of discourses (gender, neoliberal, pedagogic etc.) to constitute subjects, the transmutability of gender boundaries in the context of dynamics of friendship and popularity and, from a discourse analytic perspective, 'the level of disjuncture and contradiction in identity positions' (Wetherell, 2005, p. 8). As Holland and Lave (2000) succinctly argue, 'sentient beings – along or in groups – are always in a state of active existence; they are always in a state of being "addressed" and in the process of "answering"' (p. 10).

Alongside this I want to emphasise the seduction of discourses of neoliberalism in the context of the classroom. Here I want to stress the structuring effects of discourses as circumscriptions of behaviour and choice, where behaving 'properly' or in the 'right' way in the context of the classroom is made 'acceptable' and congruent with projections of an impenitent, sometimes ruthless, individualism. As the following extracts indicate, some boys, particularly those who have acquired the privileged status of popular person, utilise competitive behaviour to overshadow and downplay the contributions of others:

Radhak holds his picture up to the teacher: 'Look, miss, look!' She praises it as really good, really nice blending. Padmaj says 'Miss, can we change the music to Kiss?' but she doesn't take any notice. Teacher gives Radhak some feedback. The teacher is now talking to the middle table again about what they've done over the year. Radhak shows the teacher his work again! Carl is singing along to the music . . . Radhak to teacher: 'Miss, what level is it?' [his work]. Teacher says 'What level do you think it is?' She then reads out what level 6 art work should be. (Archcroft Close, Day 2, Lesson 3, A23. Subject: Art)

Sadiq steals Radhak's ruler. 'Miss!', Radhak says to me, 'Sadiq's got my ruler!' Sadiq and Padmaj then start hitting each other for some reason and the teacher intervenes Teacher says 'who's got some kind of rainforest on their island?'. Morris says 'me!' Then she asks who has a cave. Second and third table say really loudly 'ME! ME! ME!' Radhak mimics them, saying 'ME! ME! ME!' in a baby voice Radhak says 'Miss? I've got a volcano and right next to it I have loads of houses'. He's talking to himself as he hasn't got her attention. (Archcroft Close, Day 3, Lesson 5, A35. Subject: English)

Radhak, like Martin, is recognized by his peers and teachers as a high achiever, as well as a popular. In contrast to Martin, though, Radhak is seduced by the symbolic rewards offered through competitive orientations to learning and demonstrates an unrelenting appetite for positive reinforcement, consistent with the narrow individuating conception of success and failure proffered by neoliberal discourses. Radhak can be observed consistently taunting, scrutinizing and undermining boys and girls' efforts to engage with classroom activities, for example. Indeed, his desire to be recognised by others in the context of the classroom as high achieving can be thought to feed into and be a product of 'neoliberal pedagogy' (McCafferty, 2010). Through the articulation of the phrase "Miss, what level is it?", for example, Radhak alludes to the importance some pupils attach to raw performance data, namely the production and circulation of grades and levels, as registers and evaluations for self-assessment and self-worth.

Conclusion

In this paper I have traced the impact of neoliberal discourses and practices on the structure of British school culture and, in particular, pedagogy and learning orientations. Implicit to these pedagogic demands, I argue, is a focus on inciting pupils to adjust their behaviour to fit with the principles and sensibilities that characterise 'neoliberalised' education (Hill, 2009; Ross & Gibson, 2007), broadly defined by concepts and practices pertaining to competitive and individualist developments in learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Martino & Meyenn, 2002). These trends in education governing can be linked to the wider ambitions of government education policy with its strict emphasis on schools responding to the performative and managerial drive to improve measured standards and raise achievement (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000) through the availability of measurable outcomes, assessment procedures and reward structures linked to demonstrable 'ability'. In this framing pupils are encouraged to engage with learning practices as autonomous and calculating subjects in order that they might outperform (and be seen to be outperforming) other pupils, with the expectation that such behaviour will be recognised and rewarded either by teachers or pupils (or both).

Taking into consideration the data analysed in this paper, I want to caution against any reading of education policy and practice that presupposes learning strategies have become the target of excessive feminisation (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Pollack, 1999). Rather, the results from this paper are suggestive of a neoliberal pedagogy that is commensurate with traditional constructions of masculine identity in which self-confidence, perseverance and 'ability' is bound up with competition, flexibility and individualism (Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Reay, 2001). In drawing attention to how some girls engage in competitive behaviour while some boys adopt socially ascribed 'feminine' attributes (e.g. caring and compassion), this paper further illustrates the ways in which subjects resist the interpellative demands of discourses, making gender shifting, unstable and mutable in the context of dynamics of friendship and popularity. This contributes more broadly to post-structuralist and feminist critiques of education practices that attempt to naturalise gender and gender distinction as a unitary discourse through which competitive behaviour might be theorized (i.e., as something individuals possess due to genetic hardwiring or inheritance).

As a final thought, I want to consider what a 'critical' or 'transformative' pedagogy might offer as an alternative to managerialist culture of 'testing, targets and tables' (DfES, 2004) endemic to British school culture and education policy discourse more generally. From a Marxist perspective (Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2009; McLaren, 2005), British teachers, pupils and parents can be understood to be increasingly alienated from the learning process by virtue of the mechanisms and procedures that now shape and define it: the hyperbole around test scores and league tables peddled by both the public and media; the role of 'philanthrocapitalism' (Edwards, 2008) in British policy-making and political thought, which insists on the use of outside sponsors (usually charities, businesses, faith groups, universities or philanthropic entrepreneurs) to run public sector schools; and the managerial focus on standardisation, market and professional accountability (West, Mattei, & Roberts, 2011) and measured outputs. In this paper I have demonstrated the cultural dynamics inscribed through classroom interaction, where pupils can be observed competing for symbolic rewards of teacher approbation and deliberately, sometimes maliciously, downplaying the efforts of others wishing to engage with educational tasks also. However, since pupils are not encouraged to work collaboratively as a team – and therefore acquire skills in group learning, joint problem solving, consensus building, interpersonal social responsibility and so forth – but, rather, are rewarded as individualistic competitors, the individual cannot be blamed for such insensitive and brazen behaviour. This is because such behaviour is written into the education system itself. It is inscribed in the attitudes and norms schools aim to inculcate into individuals as something which is acceptable, legitimate and even desirable.

For social theorists Beck (1992) and Bauman (1992), the movement from 'traditional' to 'modern' or 'postmodern' society is symptomatic of this shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual: subjects are compelled to engage as reflexive, self-determining authors of their own lives and negotiate the ever-changing risks and obligations brought on by the necessities of the global market economy and the de-stabilising effects of consumer capitalism on aspects of 'tradition' and local culture. Citizens who militate against complacency, revere competitiveness, tolerate precarity and evince flexibility are precisely those individuals who fit into the coordinates of neoliberal performativity. At the same time, these dynamics generate a heavy burden on individuals and facilitate new forms of inequality and cultural injustice, pointing to the deleterious impact of neoliberal discourses and practices.

Pupils who lack the cognitive, cultural and social skills to engage as competitive learners, for example, are systematically disadvantaged in two ways. First, they are disciplined by teachers for not engaging the 'correct' or 'right' way and, subsequently, become marginalised as passive and undeserving learners. Second, when or if they do engage, they run the risk of being lampooned by the churlish behaviour of more confident, often less intimidated and high achieving learners. This means that some pupils find themselves in a double-bind of being damned if you do and damned if you don't. What is lacking, then, is a form of 'democratic' education practice in which pedagogy and the curriculum is promoted and practised as responses to the positive contribution of learners, rather than the imposition of business-oriented character and behaviour. In other words, there must be barriers to protect the spontaneity, creativity and agency of learners from the incursions of market forces, business ontology and bureaucratic administration.

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