

Valuing the Informal Realm:  
Peer Relations and the Negotiation of  
Difference in a North London Comprehensive  
School

A thesis submitted for Doctor of Philosophy  
by  
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## Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the informal realm in a North London comprehensive school. Although situated within, and formed by, an institutional context, this network of peer relations is largely unmanaged by adults. Pupils are in charge. They exert influence, manifest social definitions, create their own hierarchies and negotiate their differences.

My focus of study is a cohort of 15 to 16 year-olds in Year 11. They come from a diversity of backgrounds, in terms of religion, parental occupation, academic attainments and ethnicity. Through close attention to the pupils' words and actions in the day-to-day workings of the informal realm in this school, I explore the constitution and consequences of this impressive phenomenon.

Anthropological studies of the informal realm are few and far between, and ones in British schools even rarer. Yet, the informal realm offers valuable contributions to three areas in anthropology: the emerging anthropology of youth; the little-studied everyday realities of Western personhood; and an application of Munn's theory of value production (1986).

Munn's model has not yet been applied to the informal realm. However I argue her theory of value production serves to illuminate the entire realm. It is intrinsically relational and involves subjective transformation. Centrally, action is the primary unit of analysis, as it is for my analysis. There are no structures or formal roles in the informal realm, so pupils must continuously maintain their arena with a constant flow of transactions.

I argue that in the process of creating and maintaining this realm, pupils come to value themselves as particular kinds of people (Evans 2006). Different groups engage in different modes of value production. Through these actions, their subsequent evaluations, and the daily debate over what constitutes positive and negative value, pupils collaboratively establish a constellation of differences. They organise their world, enabling them to share the same social space yet define themselves as very different kinds of people.

In this constellation of differences, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are particularly salient categories of distinction, subject to pupils' collaboratively set conventions. In order to 'fit in' pupils have to conform to these conventions. Thus this ethnography delineates what is involved in becoming an appropriately ethnic, sexual and gendered person in school. The application of an intrinsically relational model of subjective formation challenging Western ideals of the autonomous individual.

These processes of differentiation occur at the same time as processes of unification. Throughout their time as a community, Year 11 pupils are producing communal value through which they can define themselves worthwhile as a group. They end their time of compulsory schooling with a celebration of this communal value.



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<sup>1</sup> Original illustration by Shaun Peters

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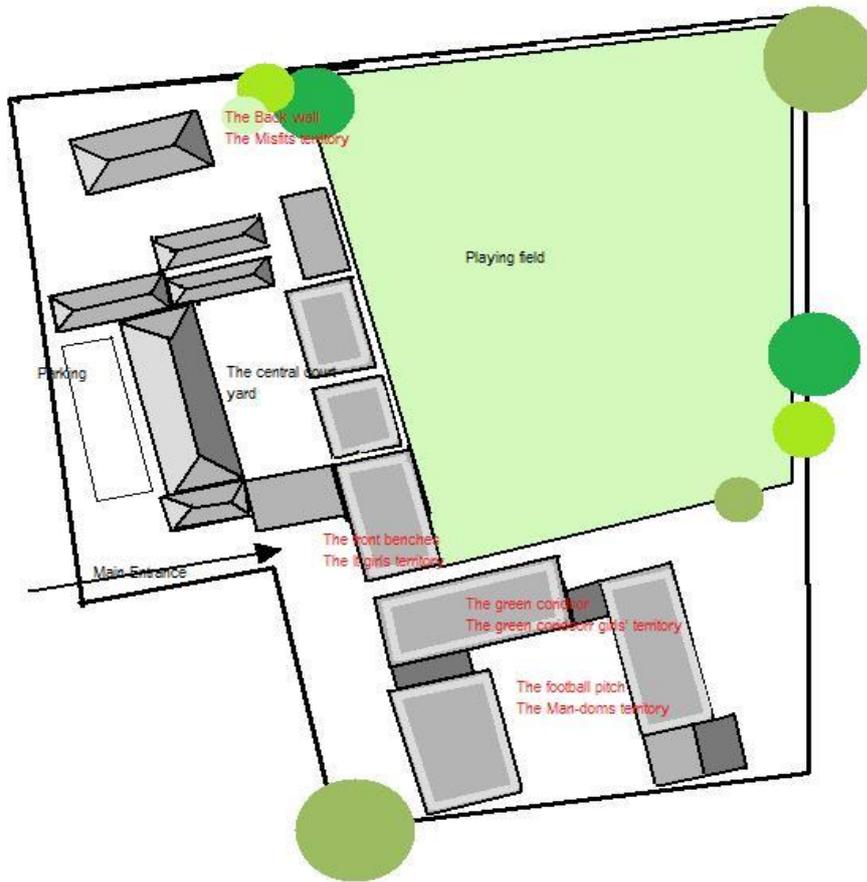
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# Collingson School: The grounds and peer group territories



## Pupil guide<sup>2</sup>:

### Year 13's

#### The Alternative girls inc:

Jane  
Eleanor  
Megan  
Ali  
Kate

#### Shola's friends:

Shola  
Rachael  
Pearl  
Olo

#### Others:

Jerome  
Jat  
Amanda  
Josh  
Blair  
Alice

### Year 12's

Chantelle  
Kessie  
Petra  
Lillian  
Alicia

### Year 11's

#### The Man-dom inc:

Chimmi  
Davros  
Joseph  
Peter  
Kemal  
Abdul  
Bart  
Ishwar  
Karl  
Nathan

#### The It girls inc:

Samiya  
Kadia  
Grace  
Cheryl  
Maria  
Natasha  
Ruby  
Georgia

#### The Green corridor girls inc:

Caroline  
Lisa  
Keely  
Jess  
Debbie

#### The Misfits inc:

Leah  
James  
Michael  
Dominic  
Lionel  
Sam  
Segal  
Richard  
Tom  
Ibrahim

#### The Blonde Barbies inc:

Paige  
Indigo  
Catherine  
Kayla

#### The Crazy smarts inc:

Lexy  
Rhiannon  
Jenny  
Nihal  
Linda

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<sup>2</sup> This guide includes pupils' I have referred to by name (quoted or recounted events they have been part of). I have organised them according to peer group affiliation except when I have not discussed them in reference to their peer group identity, in which case I have just listed their names. The peer group lists do not necessarily include all members of that group, only those I have discussed by name.

Charles  
Nadia

**The Low status group inc:**

Elaine  
Rose  
Fatima  
Talia  
Deepa

**The Opt out rebels inc:**

Candice

**The floating popular girls inc:**

Marina  
Beth  
Francesca  
Ling  
Gemma

**Others:**

Muhammad  
Tanya  
Nadege  
Ahmed  
Aabida  
Daisy  
Abeeku  
Zohra  
Nihla

**Year 10's**

Mariam  
Vincent  
Elisabeth  
Lily  
Ella  
Mariam

**Year 8's**

Lisa  
Shaun  
Blake  
Amit  
Sumesh

## Introduction

“School is literally the biggest club on earth without music. There are so many chances to make conversation, so many chances to make bridges with people, so many chances to make relationships. It’s quite amazing ...it shapes you out to be who you are in a way...you never think it will, you always think ‘fuck it, it’s just school’, but it really does shape you to be who you are”.

Jerome pauses thoughtfully. It is May and, as a Year 13, he is getting ready to leave school for good. Coming to the end of my fieldwork, I too am preparing to leave school. “Yeah, totally,” I agree emphatically. “Coming back to school I’d forgotten what it was like to be in such an environment every day. Not only are you with your friends, but hundreds of people you know, and you’re with them everyday”. We both fall silent, each lost in reflection about the intensely social place we are about to leave behind – him for the first and me for the second - “it’s making me depressed now, thinking about it,” Jerome concludes before excitedly telling me about his plans for university.

During my fieldwork in the North London comprehensive Collingson School<sup>3</sup>, I am reminded daily of the chances, which pupils take up with energy and enthusiasm, to make relationships. Everywhere I look pupils are interacting with each other; chatting, laughing, hugging, linking arms, play fighting and joking (and less often arguing, shouting, crying and fighting). Schools are packed full of meaningful relationships; friends, former friends, enemies, classmates, teachers, objects of desire, boyfriends, girlfriends and exes - I am continually struck by the extraordinariness of this ordinary experience.

The focus of my thesis is this network of peer relations, distinct from the formal institutional organisation of school. Young people in Britain are required to attend school seven hours a day, five days a week. This institutional management of young people segregates them into narrow age-specific groups and ‘compresses and hence intensifies peer interaction’ (Amit-Talai 1995: 153). I argue that this ‘informal realm’<sup>4</sup> at school is an important arena of young

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<sup>3</sup> I use pseudo-names for the school, area and all pupils and teachers.

<sup>4</sup> As I will go on to discuss in this chapter, the presence of an informal realm in school has been identified in a number of ethnographies such as Willis (1977), Amit-Talai (1995), Hey (1997) and Mac an Ghail (1994).

peoples' experience and central to the processes through which they produce themselves as particular kinds of people, 'collectively distinctive and uniquely particular' (Evans 2010 in press: 287). Pupils intersubjectively bring into being categories of distinction - ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class as well as national and local differentiations – and concurrently define themselves through these categories. Through their relations and actions, they come to understand and organise their experience and the world around them in these terms.

Through attention to pupils' collaboratively set conventions, and the importance they place on 'fitting in', this ethnography also highlights what is at stake in becoming an appropriately ethnic, sexual and gendered person in school, as evaluated and enforced by peers.

In my elaboration of these processes, I draw from Nancy Munn's theory of value-production (1986). Her model, originally derived from material from Gawa - a small island off the coast of Papua New Guinea - places action and the potentials of actions at the centre; the lived-world is not only an arena for action, but is created through action. As people construct their social worlds, they simultaneously construct themselves and their modes of being in the world. Munn argues that value is produced through action. Actions – culturally defined types of acts and practices – have the potential to produce both positive and negative value, so defined by the community. Through the production of value and the explicit assertion of these values, communities can be understood as engaging in 'an effort to construct and control themselves and their social world' (1986: 3).

Although Munn's work stems from a very different context to mine, I found it instructive in my conceptualisation of the informal realm. In this realm pupil action is everything, and self-construction is intrinsic in these intersubjective processes. Without institutional structures, formal roles or material resources, pupils manage to constitute an arena apart from the adult-constructed and controlled realms of formal schooling and home.

This realm is reconstituted daily by acts, practices and transactions - types of acts that create self-other relations - of different media<sup>5</sup>. Different pupils (and groups of pupils) are

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<sup>5</sup> For example chatting, bitching, hugging and play fighting.

engaged in different modes of social action and, through this, they produce, and are conferred with, value. It is these actions, and the different evaluations of the value they produce that create the social order of the informal realm, conferring certain individuals and groups with high status, and others with low status. These in turn constitute a hierarchically arranged social order of peer groups<sup>6</sup> and individuals, recognised by all pupils regardless of their relative status. Simultaneously pupils are coming to value themselves as particular kinds of people as they engage in these processes.

My thesis contributes towards the emerging anthropology of youth, which pays full attention to young people as active producers of their social worlds. This approach is in contrast to the earlier tendency to treat youth as 'not-yet finished human beings' being lead into full cultural membership by adults. This was, until recently, characteristic of anthropology's engagement with youth (Bucholtz 2002, Wulff 1995). Young people's peer relations have tended to be relegated to a footnote to other anthropological and sociological questions, such as class reproduction or socialisation (Amit-Talai 1995).

However, in this thesis, they are the starting point. The study of the informal realm has a valuable contribution to make to an anthropological understanding of 'growing up' in contemporary Britain, and particularly the way peers 'grow each other up'. My focus illuminates how social differentiations are produced in everyday life and come to structure experience and self-definition. And through attention to the constitution of peer relations and pupils' consequential informal networks I bring an intrinsically relational understanding to 'growing up'.

My work also contributes to an investigation of Western personhood based on the everyday empirical experiences of Westerners, rather than ideas about Western reality based on ideological assumptions of individualism derived from elite thinkers (Ouroussoff 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> As I will go on to discuss in more detail in later chapters, peer groups are collections of friends who define themselves as a group in contrast to other peer groups within the year. Peer groups are understood as having distinct identities related to style, music tastes and the modes of action they are engaged in. They vary in size between three and twenty-five members, and most have core and periphery members. Peer groups usually have their own territory, a group-designated area of the school where members spend their break and lunch-times.

## **Value production and the constitution of the informal realm**

I understand the informal realm in school as a network of pupil action creating and sustaining intersubjective relations, and producing value outside that recognised by formal schooling. However, even though it is apart from formal schooling, it is also shaped by it. This informal realm is formed by, but in tension with, the constraints of the formal institutional organisation of school (Amit-Talai 1995).

My focus is the informal realm in Year 11 of a large, mixed-sex comprehensive in a relatively affluent North London suburb. Collingson school has a diverse intake of pupils in terms of religion, ethnicity, countries lived in, languages spoken, parental occupation and academic attainments. Three years ago, the school was put on special measures – a designation by Ofsted, the school inspection body – that indicates failure in educational standards. However, since then a new head teacher has taken over and the school is now recognised as rapidly improving. On the whole, pupils are positive about the school, especially its caring community atmosphere.

Pupils in Year 11<sup>7</sup> are fifteen or sixteen years old and in their final year of compulsory schooling. They have been together as a year group since Year 7 (age eleven) and are now working towards their GCSE examinations<sup>8</sup>. There are 230 pupils in the Year and they are variously divided up into form groups<sup>9</sup> and class groups organised according to GCSE subjects and academic ability. This type of organisation structures pupils' days as they move from form-time through five classes according to their individual timetables and back to form-time, broken up by a morning break and lunch-time.

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<sup>7</sup> In Britain most children start school at four, the name of each year grouping signifies the number of years spent in school. Most children start 'year one' at four years old, and will move from primary school to secondary school at eleven years old (year 7). Year 1 to year 11 are compulsory, years 12 and 13 optional. It is very rare for pupils to be held back at school so almost all pupils within a school year will have been born in the same year (the school year is counted from September to August).

<sup>8</sup> GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. These are the main qualification taken by pupils at the end of their compulsory schooling. Pupils at Collingson study core subjects (Maths, English Language, English Literature, Science), at least one language, and other subject options to make up nine GCSEs.

<sup>9</sup> Form groups are administrative units; they gather for registration at the beginning and end of the day. Form tutors are responsible for the pastoral care of their tutees.

The 'institutional age-grading' (Amit-Talai 1995) which organises pupils in one-year age groupings according to the month and year of their birth, is also reflected in the alternative organisation of the informal realm<sup>10</sup>. Friendships are the cornerstone of this realm, and collections of friends understand themselves as part of peer groups with distinct characteristics. Peer groups almost always consist of members from the same year-group, and the social order - the hierarchical arrangement of peer groups and individuals - is year-wide. There is no corresponding school-wide structure.

Value-producing actions in the informal realm are distributed within key organisational fields: sociality, heterosexuality, 'teenage fun'<sup>11</sup> and appearance. Acts and practices produce value in these differing but overlapping fields, and the same act can produce value in multiple fields. At the same time certain acts and practices might produce value in one field at the expense of value in another one. The most successful pupils in the informal realm are those who are best able to negotiate their investment in order to create the most value in the most fields, through their acts and practices.

These actions are evaluated by peers. While value-creating processes lead to a recognised social order, they are also a matter of intense debate amongst pupils. The differing interpretations of what constitutes positive or negative value is key to the constitution of different peer groups. For example, while a peer group might recognise their status within the informal realm as relatively low, they often dismiss this status as unimportant and emphasise their own alternative value-producing practices.

The debate over value is central to the process of becoming a particular kind of person in school. Through these value-creating processes and the debates surrounding them, pupils come to value themselves as particular kinds of people - subjective transformation is a part of value-creation (Munn 1986). The constant processes of intersubjective comparison, contrast and evaluation make visible the numerous categories of distinction (Evans 2006) brought into being by the pupils in this diverse school. Subsequently, pupils collaboratively

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<sup>10</sup> However the interpersonal network does connect young people from different year groups and schools.

<sup>11</sup> For example parties, drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana and visiting night clubs.

establish a constellation of differences through which to define themselves, and define and organise the world around them.

Although the informal realm is an important place where, as Hey (1997) has argued, the 'social is indexed', how relations of difference are established in the informal realm is not always predictable. Value is created within the informal realm, not simply imported from the wider context. How acts and practices will be evaluated and what value will result cannot be assumed. While drawing significantly from the wider social context, the constellation of differences created by pupils is a unique product of a specific time, place and combination of pupils.

As part of these processes, pupils collaboratively set conventions which define acceptable and appropriate ways of being a gendered, sexual and ethnic person. Potent relations of power are intrinsically interwoven, and being placed outside the bounds of acceptability can be a painful experience. Conventions make visible forms of negative value, and pupils evaluated in this way may be excluded from peer relations, or sanctioned by peers (the most common sanction is to stop talking to the offender). These conventions are on the whole agreed by all pupils and so represent the boundaries of the debates over values. The possibilities of negative and positive value production are defined by these relations of power, and so the production of value is not 'value-free'.

Conforming to conventions, transactional success and successful value production are all key to 'fitting in' at school. Fitting in offers the rewards of companionship, support, fun and a validated identity. It is necessarily defined by those who don't fit in, and suffer exclusion, harassment or isolation. Fitting in has both seductive and coercive dimensions so there is clearly a lot at stake. Fitting in demands the enactment of an appropriate and acceptable identity conforming to the conventions set by pupils, and is closely linked to 'social indexing'. Because of this, we can clearly see the imperative to become an appropriate gendered, sexual and ethnic person.

I argue that the informal realm is an important site of identity construction. Pupils are in charge, they shape social definitions, can wield significant power and influence, and can

clearly see the effects and value of their actions. I seek to show what an amazing achievement it is: pupils, brought together through institutional organisation, create and maintain a hierarchical social order. Through their positive-value generating acts, and attempts to limit negative value-production, Year 11s are engaged in an effort to 'construct and control themselves and their social world' (Munn 1986). Despite the intense debate over value, I illustrate that these processes also lead to communal value (Munn 1986) through which Year 11s define themselves as a worthwhile group.

### **Thesis structure**

In chapter 1, I discuss my research in relation to existing literature. I examine previous ethnographic accounts of the informal realm within school, and establish the strengths and limitations of these conceptualisations. To shed light on the processes of the informal realm, I go on to discuss Munn's theory of value (1986) and how it can be applied to my data. In chapter 2 I discuss my methodology.

In chapter 3, I situate the informal realm within its locality and institutional context. I illustrate the way this realm is both formed by and in tension with its institutional surroundings. In chapter 4, I take a 'top-down' approach to my ethnography, examining how prevailing ideologies have informed educational policy and are taken up in Collingson School. I argue these discourses circulate a myth of individuality and the individualisation of success. I examine the applicability of notions of capital (Bourdieu 1977) in understanding pupils' educational experiences. I conclude this chapter by arguing for the importance of examining the informal realm in its own right – as an important arena of pupil action and value-production.

In the following chapters I focus on the informal realm. In chapter 5, I examine the production and evidencing of status. I then discuss the organisation of this realm in Year 11, focussing on four key peer groups within the year and the contrasting processes of unity evidenced through the 'growing together' discourse. In chapter 6, I explore friendships, a cornerstone of the informal realm. I examine friendship as fundamental to this realm, both as a positive value product, and necessary for producing other kinds of positive value.

In the next three chapters I focus on the ways in which pupils produce, define and police important categories of difference; ethnicity in chapter 7 and sexuality in chapter 8 and through their actions produce value in these fields of difference. In chapter 9, I discuss appearance, arguing that the importance of being seen in the right way within school evidences evaluative practices, and their centrality in the informal realm.

Finally, in chapter 10, I conclude with a discussion about the last day of school, a moment of *communitas* (Turner 1969) through which pupils can celebrate the communal value they have produced together and the temporary triumph of unity over differentiation.

## **Chapter 1: Situating my research**

In this chapter I discuss my research in reference to existing literature. I focus on ethnographic research that has analysed the informal realm within school, the ways in which they have conceptualised this realm and the strengths and short-comings of these approaches. I then go on to focus on Munn's theory of value (1986) in order to elaborate on ideas that emerge through the preceding discussion. I apply this theory to my own research and offer an understanding of the informal realm as manifested through pupil action, and through which they produce value and in turn come to value themselves as particular kinds of people. Finally I discuss the way my understanding of the informal realm articulates a notion of growing up and personhood which is fundamentally relational – which always occurs in relation to other people - and so challenges the Western ideology of the autonomous individual.

### **Anthropological approaches to youth and schooling**

Amit-Talai (1995) writes that when she started to consider the dynamics of friendship among youths she was frustrated by anthropological and sociological studies which tended to treat the construction of peer relations as footnotes to questions of socialisation or class reproduction. While they often observed the importance and intensity of peer relations, few studies focussed on the structure of peer relations in their own right.

This is related to a more general scarcity, up until the 1990s, of anthropological research that focussed on 'youth-centred interaction and cultural production' (Wulff 1995). As Amit-Talai highlights, 'the problem...is not that Juveniles are absent from ethnographies...Youths appear, but as potential adults rather than in their own right' (1995: 224). Thus, until relatively recently anthropology's engagement with 'youth' was primarily in terms of adolescence as a life stage studied almost exclusively as a liminal position between childhood and adulthood and usually marked by some form of initiation ceremony (Bucholtz 2002). As such, young people in anthropology were primarily framed as 'not-yet finished human beings' being led into full cultural membership by adults. This focus on adult-child socialisation was foregrounded at the expense of a focus on 'the more informal ways in

which young people socialise themselves and one another' (Bucholtz 2002: 526, Wulff 1995).

Similarly while there is a long history of ethnography in school (both in educational anthropology and education studies) most have considered peer relations in terms of social reproduction or educational underachievement. Or more recently as collective and creative responses to the hegemonic institution of schooling (Levinson and Holland 1996):

'Educational anthropologists for many years have noted persistent underachievement patterns among ethnic and racial minority groups...they have concentrated on how cultural factors affect academic achievement and related conceptions of what it means to be a formally educated individual' (Hemming 2006: 129, e.g. Phelan et al 1993, Fordham and Ogbu 1986).

Educational achievement continues to be an important issue because as many researchers have pointed out there are significant discrepancies in the educational attainment levels of different social groups (e.g. Tomlinson 2005). However this focus on educational outcomes is also likely to shape research and understandings of peer relations.

My research focuses on peer relations in their own right, without presupposing what issues will emerge as important. It joins the concerns of the emerging anthropology of youth which is, 'characterised by its attention to the agency of young people, its concern to document not just highly visible youth cultures but the entirety of youth cultural practice' (Bucholtz 2002: 525).

Likely because of anthropology's history of neglect of young people's own 'cultural practice', anthropological accounts of the informal realm in school are few, particularly those focussed in British schools<sup>12</sup>. In the following section I discuss book length ethnographic studies that have directed significant attention toward this realm. In order to tip the balance

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<sup>12</sup> Amit-Talai (1995) offers an account of the informal realm in a Quebec high school. Bucholtz (1999, 2001) approaches peer relations in a Californian high school from a linguistic-anthropological perspective, as does Goodwin (2002, 2006, 2007) (Goodwin M. H., 2006) focussing on pre-adolescent girls in a Californian elementary school. Goodwin explains she focuses on playground interaction because 'not much is known about how children interact when they are apart from adult supervision' (2006: 3).

in favour of British schools I include work undertaken in cultural studies (Willis 1977) and educational studies (Hey 1997, Mac an Ghail 1994) as well as anthropological accounts, from the US (Eckert 1988) and Britain (Evans 2006).

### **Ethnographic explorations of the informal realm in school**

#### Paul Willis, Learning to Labour (1977)

Paul Willis's ethnographic account of a group of working class, anti-school 'lads' in a secondary modern school<sup>13</sup> was hugely influential in educational research and beyond<sup>14</sup>, marking a 'watershed' in understandings of class and schooling (Levinson and Holland 1996). He identifies an informal realm in school that enables the development of alternative values and status. Willis is centrally concerned with social class, and his focus is on how a working class group of 'lads' develop a class identity in contrast to the values of formal schooling. Willis argues that the informal realm is essential in this project, and identifies it as the sole domain of anti-school pupils. However, as I will argue, this understanding is too limiting, following Amit-Talai (1995), I contend the informal realm is more helpfully understood as a consequence of the institutional treatment of *all* teenagers.

Willis focuses on a group of lads as they pass through the last two years of compulsory schooling and enter work at sixteen. Willis argues that through their anti-school peer group culture, the lads creatively and actively appropriate, produce, transform and contest class cultures and structures. Within school the lads actively resist the authority of the teachers and the institution, and view themselves as superior to the conformist pupils, the 'ear 'oles'. However Willis argues that this resistance is ultimately self-defeating, the lads' active appropriation of working class culture directs them to, and prepares them for, manual work and they end up in low-paid, low-status jobs, reproducing class inequalities.

Focussing on the lads in school, Willis writes that the opposition between the staff and the conformists, and the lads can in many respects be understood 'as a classic example of the opposition between the formal and the informal' (22). The school represents the formal realm; there is a clear structure, designated buildings, rules, a staff hierarchy and the

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter two for a discussion of secondary moderns in the context of changing British educational policy.

<sup>14</sup> And one of the few ethnographic accounts from the Birmingham centre for contemporary culture studies (CCCS) which attracted anthropological attention (Wulff 1995).

institution is ultimately sanctioned by the state, the law and the police. In contrast counter-school culture represents the realm of the informal, and this is where the unwelcome demands of the school are resisted and denied. The lads struggle to win symbolic and physical space, and are adept at managing the formal system in order to secure informal spaces. Their opposition is also made visible through 'stylistic and symbolic discourses', for example public smoking and drinking and through a distinctive style of dress.

The basic unit of this informal (anti)school zone is the informal group. It is this that situates and enables all other elements of the culture to develop, and it is the group that is the fundamental source of resistance and 'decisively' distinguishes the lads from the ear 'oles:

'Even though there are no formal rules, physical structures, recognised hierarchies or institutional structures in the counter-school culture, it cannot run on air. It must have its own material base, its own infrastructure. This is of course, the social group' (23).

Being part of the group is very important to the lads – offering fun, belonging and back-up and enabling them to continuously express their opposition to the staff and conformists.

In their informal group, the lads develop an alternative system of value and set of 'cultural skills'. Within their group the lads pursue fun, independence, excitement and sexual experiences, and it is through these alternative value systems that the lads define themselves as superior to the conformists. Skill in linguistic exchange – 'having a laff', 'piss-taking'<sup>15</sup>, and 'quickness'<sup>16</sup> are high valued. Willis observes that fighting and violence are also central to the constitution of the lads group, enabling their dominance over the conformists and marking 'the last move in, and final validation of, the informal status system'<sup>17</sup>, (35).

In addition to the conformists the lads also define themselves in hierarchical contrast to girls and ethnic minorities. Girls are differentiated between those to be pursued sexually (who

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<sup>15</sup> This involves drawing attention to perceived weaknesses such as stupidity or sexual inexperience – 'the more personal, sharper and apposite the better' (35).

<sup>16</sup> Willis comments that although the 'lads' resist conventional ways to show their abilities being 'quick' is highly valued, it takes considerable linguistic skill and cultural know-how to mount and resist such attacks.

<sup>17</sup> According to Willis status in the 'lads' group is also based on 'masculine presence', being from a 'famous' family, being funny, being good at 'blagging', extensiveness of informal contacts (35).

are seen to lose their 'value' after the 'conquest'), and girlfriends who should be sexually inexperienced, passive and domestic to be considered potential wives. The lads had a more straightforwardly oppositional attitude towards ethnic minorities, verbalising racist viewpoints and boasting about fights with groups of 'pace's' and 'niggers'.

In sum, Willis designates the informal realm as the territory of anti-school groups, such as the lads and describes the ways in which through their informal group they develop, project and validate values and ways of gaining status in distinction to formal schooling and official values:

'Status and identity are constructed informally and in the group, and from the resources of the working class culture and especially in terms of masculinity and toughness...As we have seen, the counter-school culture is expressly geared to the development and maintenance of cultural attitudes and practices quite separate from the official ones' (102).

In contrast 'the conformists', who are only given a cursory voice in Willis's ethnography, relinquish their claims to this zone by investing in the formal institution of the school and its aims:

'Having invested something of their own identities in the formal aims of education and support of the school institution – in a certain sense have forgone their right to have a 'laff' (13).

However in her ethnography of a Quebec high school, Vered Amit-Talai suggests that rather than view this informal/ formal opposition in terms of distinct student groups and school orientations, as Willis does:

'The formal/ informal tension can more fruitfully be viewed as a more general contradiction embedded in a particular institutional treatment of adolescents' (153: 1995).

I also subscribe to this more encompassing understanding of the informal realm. Although I argue, like Willis, that the informal realm provides alternative values and status to those offered by formal schooling, I contend that investment in formal schooling does not

preclude investment in this realm<sup>18</sup>. In Collingson School almost all pupils, regardless of their academic attitudes, are part of informal groups which constitute the informal infrastructure within school<sup>19</sup>.

### Penelope Eckert Jocks and Burnouts (1989)

In her ethnographic study of 'adolescent social structure' in a high school in a suburb of Detroit, anthropologist Eckert argues, like Willis, that school is an important context through which social class identity is developed among young people. She argues that students do not experience these differences in purely social class terms. Instead the school environment fosters the formation of two opposed class cultures, made visible through student peer 'categories' - 'Jocks' (middle class) and 'Burnouts' (working class). These peer divisions end up acting as a social tracking system.

In contrast to Willis, Eckert emphasises these peer groups must be understood together - they exist in mutual awareness and each defines itself consciously by what the other is not. However, I will argue that despite her more encompassing understanding of this alternative realm, by conceptualising these peer groups as 'universal categories' she disregards pupils' experiences, actions and agency and constructs a static and generalised model of the informal realm.

Eckert argues Jocks and Burnouts are in competition for control over the definition, norms and values of their life stage cohort (in other words they are competing for what becomes defined as 'cool'). Jocks are the 'leading crowd', college bound, achieving good grades and

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<sup>18</sup> In addition, as I will go onto discuss in following chapters, I did not find that peer group membership particularly corresponded to orientation toward school or academic success, within each group there tended to be a spectrum of investment and engagement in formal schooling. This is in contrast to the findings of almost all the ethnographies discussed in this section. Are my divergent findings due to the specific school I undertook my fieldwork in? The area? Or perhaps the period in which I undertook my fieldwork? Or perhaps a combination of factors? Based on one research site, it is difficult to offer an answer.

<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Willis's study has been criticised for its reductionist reading of power, his focus on class resistance fails to adequately address the ways in which this results in practices that re-inscribe other relations of domination and inequality, particularly racism and sexism (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Hey (1997) argues Willis is representative of accounts of class during this period that 'empirically underrepresented and theoretically eliminated women, girls were relegated to the sidelines of what was in effect a masculine (if not masculinist) version of cultural production and transmission. Other channels, other forms of creation and distribution were ignored' (Hey 1997: 16). Further Mac an Ghaill criticises Willis's lack of attention to intra-class, as well as inter-class variations which can be generative of diverse masculine identities (1994).

enthusiastically taking part in extracurricular activities and leadership roles within the school. They are visible within school and encouraged and validated by teachers and the institutional structure of the school – this leads them to have higher aspirations. Their group structure and personal relations are hierarchically arranged and competitive, Eckert likens it to a corporate structure and argues that school is preparing them to succeed in middle class ‘corporate America’.

In contrast, the Burnouts are the ‘rebellious crowd’ who reject the hegemony of the school and in turn feel rejected and alienated by school. They are usually on vocational courses, orientated towards the neighbourhood and are associated with smoking and illicit drug use (hence the name ‘burnout’). Their networks are egalitarian, inclusive and interdependent and it is through these networks that students are able to secure necessary resources, preparing them for their working class future. Eckert claims that with some regional and historical variations the Jock and Burnout categories are almost universal in American public high schools; they are the stable and conservative foundations of adolescent societies. Through this competition and opposition the categories work *together* to maintain the hegemony of the American class system within school.

According to Eckert these categories reflect a broader split between the adult middle and working classes. However this does not mean that all students who identify with a category will be of the corresponding class (there are working class Jocks and middle class Burnouts). Rather, Eckert contends that due to the considerable extent that class is significant in these categories they are ‘elevated’ to class stereotypes. In this way Eckert argues the Jock and Burnout categories come to mediate adult social class within the adolescent context.

There are many aspects of Eckert’s argument I find problematic; by conceptualising these categories as universal and defining of school experience, it seems she is ignoring important aspects of student’s experiences and perspectives. For example although she states that the Jock-Burnout opposition defines student’s social structure she then goes on to say ‘the majority of high school students are not members of one category or the other’ (1988: 5). She justifies her continued insistence on the importance of these categories (and the focus of her ethnography) through the observation that these students describe themselves as ‘in-

between'. So she continues to contend that 'an important part of most adolescents social identity is dominated by the opposition between the two categories' (1988: 5). However she devotes very little attention to these majority 'in-betweens' (who are only differentiated in the ethnography in terms of where they appear on the Jock-Burnout spectrum) so we have little chance to understand their experiences. Eckert also states that 'nerds' resist placing themselves according to this spectrum, but she pays them no more attention than a few brief lines in her ethnography.

Similarly, Eckert recognises that the division between the Jock-Burnout categories is at its strongest and most rigid in grades 8 and 9 (age 12-14) and that many older students pride themselves on having transcended this black and white category system. However she dismisses student's own accounts when she maintains:

'However sophisticated the population becomes about categories, they remain tied into them. What probably changes more is their way of talking and thinking about categories than their reliance on them in making individual decisions about their own behaviour and judgements about others' (1988: 97).

Despite arguing that class divisions are 'made real through adolescent social dynamics' (1988: 5) Eckert's model allows the students themselves little agency in these dynamics. Apart from her disregard of students' opinions and experiences discussed above, she also distinguishes these categories from actual friendship 'cliques' (peer groups). She argues that the Jock-Burnout categories exist 'on a higher level of abstraction' than the groups that compose them, and reflect socio-economic groupings in wider society. In this way students' denial, non-affiliation or alternative ways of conceptualising their social worlds have very little impact on Eckert's all encompassing model. All pupils in the school are white, so ethnic difference is not salient in the school. However Eckert also barely mentions gender and it is hard to imagine that this is not a salient category in High School. Even if we accept the 'polarised opposition' of the Jock-Burnout categories the way they will be lived out is likely cross-cut by gender differentiation.

Equally problematic is the concept of social class Eckert utilises, and through which she understands the Jock-Burnout split. Eckert does not define her concept of adult social class,

but in her discussion the impression is of homogenous and dichotomous classes. Although Eckert recognises that not all students who affiliate with each category are from the corresponding class, she often slips into assuming corresponding affiliation in her analysis. For example by explaining the difference in Jocks and Burnouts behaviour with reference to family background<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore because of the deterministic view of how membership in these categories affects life chances it seems that Burnouts will end up as 'working class' and vice-versa anyway - 'The differences between groups take on a clear relevance to future adult status' (1988: 11).

Bucholtz (1999), approaching the study of American high school peer groups from an anthro-linguistic perspective, develops Eckert's account by focussing on the category of 'nerd'. She argues that despite the 'structural significance of the nerd in the organisation of youth identities, few researchers have examined its implications' (211). Unlike me, Bucholtz does not find Eckert's model unworkably problematic, however by framing peer groups as 'communities of practice'<sup>21</sup>, she does offer interesting insights into the workings of peer groups in practice.

Bucholtz argues nerds are not the socially isolated individuals they are often presumed to be (e.g. Eckert 1988, Kinney 1993), but rather 'competent members of distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice' (212). They reject notions of 'coolness' which both divides and unites the Jocks and Burnouts in a single community of practice. Bucholtz focuses on a group of 'nerd girls' in a Californian high school, and elucidates the practices through which they stake out an alternative identity<sup>22</sup>. For example in contrast to more 'trend conscious' groups the girls placed a high value on individuality and were less constrained by 'peer group sanctions'. They also avoid the use of slang that characterised other more 'cool-orientated' groups.

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<sup>20</sup> For example Jocks get support, encouragement and funding from middle class parents for their extracurricular activities. Burnouts have more freedom because their parents are at home less and the working class neighbourhoods they live in provide social networks that they can fit into when they enter High school.

<sup>21</sup> Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) developed the idea of communities of practice which I discuss later in the chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Bucholtz distinguishes between their negative practices, through which the girls define themselves through what they are not (identity as an inter-group phenomenon), and positive practices through which the girls engage in actively constructing their chosen nerd identity ( the intra-group aspects of social identity).

In this way Bucholtz's findings are similar to mine; we both recognise that groups seen as 'low status' within the informal social structure do not usually view themselves as social failures. Instead through their peer group practices they develop a distinct position and claim value for this position. Furthermore, she highlights that within peer groups, students do not necessarily agree on the meaning of the actions or what is valuable. Nerdiness, like every other identity, is a contested domain, for example the nerd girls debated 'who's better at being a nerd' (struggle over the control of their shared values) and 'who counts as a nerd' (struggle over control of the identity itself). As Bucholtz writes, the ethnographic method is well suited to understanding the informal realm, as it enables us to view the social meanings with which students invest their practices:

'These meanings emerge on the ground in local contexts; thus what it means to display academic knowledge, or to use slang, depends not on fixed identity categories but on where one is standing' (220).

#### Valerie Hey, *The Company She Keeps* (1997)

Hey focuses on girls' friendships, drawing data from fieldwork carried out in two London comprehensive schools (one mixed sex, one all girls) in the 1980s. She argues that the informal, private realm is a significant place where the 'social is indexed' and girls' develop their gendered, class and ethnic identities:

'The interpersonal recesses of schooling provide a material base where girls are both compelled (and determined) to make sense of each other and the forms of identity proffered/ preferred by: home, school, community, popular and elite culture and male authority. It is between and amongst girls as friends that identities are variously practiced, appropriated, resisted and negotiated' (1997: 30).

Hey argues that this informal realm provides a system of prestige, alternative to that offered by formal schooling. However unlike Willis, she contends that *all* girls move between these different systems.

In her ethnography Hey (1997) focuses on the differing constitution, practices and values of three (all white) friendship groups. She emphasises the importance of both formal and informal dimensions in the constitution of these friendships; success in one system does not

provide immunity from struggles in the other. For example a working class peer group is disinvested in formal schooling but through their private relations can enjoy rewards of prestige and popularity that cannot be conferred by formal schooling. In contrast, a group of academic high-achievers are publically recognised for their formal achievements, but this does not protect them from struggles in the informal realm. Further, their public success in school (as a minority of successful pupils) results in marginalisation in the informal realm, and makes it more difficult to achieve popularity in this realm.

Like Willis, Hey illustrates the way the informal realm provides an alternative system of value, and can offer prestige and power to those typically excluded from the rewards of formal schooling. As she highlights, girls varying degrees of investments in the official curriculum interact constantly and variably with their investment in school as a social space (see also Lees 1985, Griffin 1985, Mac An Ghail 1994, Power et al 2003). While girls' interpersonal relationships can be understood as 'other' to the school system, they are also in constant interaction (Hey 1997).

In her ethnography Hey attends to the ways in which girls construct classed notions of appropriate femininity in opposition to other girls who are positioned as the girls not to be - off-loaded with the 'bad bits' of femininity. Girls occupy multiple regimes of power, and use these regimes to define themselves as acceptable in contrast to other versions of femininity. For example both middle class and working class groups of girls projected inappropriate 'slaggy' sexuality onto other groups of girls, consequently positioning them as inappropriate, and themselves, by contrast, as appropriate. Friends are central to this process, providing mirrors of shared cultural understandings, and acting as critics and regulators to ensure their friends do not fall outside the bounds of acceptability:

'If belonging was the name of the game, then being accepted implied the performing of appropriate forms of femininity...girls insisted on making each other into acceptable selves, in suitable appearances and dispositions (variously caring, nice, kind, attractive, confiding but not too close)' (130).

There is much I recognise in Hey's account from my own fieldwork, and I think she effectively captures the complexities of girls' friendships. The imperative to be an

acceptable and appropriate person (and the intersections of class, race, and gender this entails), in order to fit in with peers, is a central theme of my thesis. However I would argue that although she attends effectively to processes of differentiation and difference between groups of girls, she fails to attend to processes of closeness and unity that are also an important feature of relations between pupils. Perhaps because of the organisation of her ethnography (which examines three different friendship groups, in three different year groups, across two different schools), she does not explore the possibilities of shared as well as differentiated identities.

In contrast, I observed that pupils are adept at shifting scales of difference, and in this way can define themselves as concurrently united and divided. For example Year 11's define themselves as both divided into peer groups and also united as a year-group in contrast to other year groups. And as I will argue friendships, particularly in older years, can be premised on the transformation of difference - developed between those who define themselves as 'different kinds of girls'. I suggest that by mirroring pupils' own understandings of the organisation of the informal realm, which is organised within, but not across, year-groups, we can capture processes of both unity and differentiation.

I also suggest that focussing only on girls' homosocial relations may not adequately reflect pupils' own understandings of their informal realm. I found that although I initially entered the field with the aim to focus on girls' experiences (see chapter 2), homosociality did not adequately reflect the way girls understand their sociality. Although peer groups are, on the whole, divided along gender lines, girls' often talk about being 'good friends' with boys, male and female peer groups are interconnected and in the classroom interaction is frequently hetero-social<sup>23</sup>. As Thorne (1993) highlights gender differences become more or less salient depending on the context (within school and generally), if we are to analyse occasions of homo-sociality, it is equally important that we attend to occasions of hetero-sociality.

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<sup>23</sup> As I will discuss in later chapters pupils had different kinds of friendships. Peer group friendships were generally the closest and required the commitment to a peer group territory, but other kinds of friendship, for example 'class friends' were also important but understood and enacted in different ways. Peer groups were usually gendered but other kinds of friendships between boys and girls were also valued.

Furthermore, as I got to know boys as well as girls, I came to see that they, as much as girls', are policed (and police) through notions of appropriate gender. As Mac an Ghail (1994) highlights it is not only women who are oppressed by gender normativities. When I asked pupils who they think is most restricted by gender expectations, both boys and girls said boys. Moreover the appropriate modes of femininity and masculinity are often defined in contrast to each other, for example 'slag' and 'gay' are discourses that police notions of appropriate gendered sexuality in opposed but complementary ways.

#### Mairtin Mac an Ghail The Making of Masculinities (1994)

While Hey focuses on femininities, Mac an Ghail, focuses on the making of masculinities within school. Drawing from three years fieldwork in a Midlands comprehensive, he argues that practices of school<sup>24</sup> are all important in the making of student subjectivities. The informal realm, constituted by peer-group networks, is analysed as one of the 'key infrastructural mechanisms' through which masculinities (and femininities) are constructed and lived out.

Male peer-group networks are an arena in which a range of social and sexual identities can be negotiated, 'ritualistically projected' and validated:

'Here, young male students learnt the heterosexual codes that marked their rites of passage into manhood' (53).

Mac an Ghail focuses on four male peer groups in Year 11 (15-16 year olds), analysing the range of masculinities that emerge through different peer-group practices<sup>25</sup>. The groups Mac an Ghail focuses on each have different relations to school, and he argues that curriculum differentiation and the differing pupil-teacher relations that accompany this, are central elements in the practices of these peer groups, and subsequently the production of different masculinities.

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<sup>24</sup> Institutional, material, social and discursive; for example subject allocation, modes of discipline and surveillance, and the web of student-student and teacher-student social relations.

<sup>25</sup> However Mac an Ghail also points out the boys also talked about being part of different friendship groups (for example in the neighbourhood or in shared activities) and the boundaries of the peer group were often fluid and ill-defined. He is critical of earlier representations of peer groups and youth cultures that have tended to present them as fixed, unitary categories, suggesting instead that we view the discussion of separate peer groups as a 'heuristic device to highlight the range of masculinities produced in Parnell School' (54).

Like Willis, Eckert and Hey, social class is a central concern for Mac an Ghail. However he is critical of earlier ethnographic work on young males, including Willis that have failed to examine how intra-class variations shape school masculinities. In contrast he argues that the interplay of masculinities, intra-class variation and ethnicities generate highly diverse gender and sexual identities within school. For example the working class 'macho lads' enact the most visible anti-school culture, constructing an alternative value system based on 'toughness', 'having a laugh' and heterosexual success. The macho lads see school as an apprenticeship for 'learning to be tough' and position themselves against the 'dickhead achievers', associating academic work with inferior effeminacy.

In contrast the 'academic achievers' are also working-class students, but view school as the ladder to social mobility and are highly invested in formal success. They are developing a masculine identity within the context of their participation in subjects and activities deemed 'effeminate' by the macho lads, who frequently harass them for being 'gay'. The academic achievers respond to this by both parodying dominant gender meanings, and emphasising other dimensions of their masculine identity. As Mac an Ghail argues these peer group relations illustrate the complexity of students' cultural investment in particular kinds of masculinities; masculinities are produced in specific contexts in relation to and against each other and gender discipline is imposed on men as well as women.

All but one of the groups contained a mix of ethnicities and Mac an Ghail writes he did not find a fixed pattern of inter-ethnic within the informal realm; tensions and alliances varied in different year groups. Ethnicity and masculinity intersected in varying ways and among different groups and various hierarchies of masculinity were 'competitively negotiated and acted out' (86).

Mac an Ghail also focuses on the more private and hidden aspects of young men's lives. He argues that earlier ethnographic work has presented peer groups as successful collective responses to academic subordination (like Willis 1977), but has been more reticent in researching 'the bleaker side of male peer-group life' (97). While affirming male power, the competitive, unsupportive environment also led to private feelings of intense vulnerability among boys. In individual interviews boys expressed feelings of loneliness and confusion

when with their mates, and said they did not have a safe space or a language in which to express these feelings<sup>26</sup>.

Mac an Ghail offers a nuanced account of masculinities, attending to intra- as well as inter class variations. His work offers a counter-point to Hey's focus on girls' friendships, and illustrates that there is equal pressure on boys to enact 'appropriate masculinity' in order to fit in at school. As I will discuss in further chapters (especially chapter 8), the policing of masculinity and femininity can be best understood in relation to each other, revealing the relative but contrastive ideals of masculine and feminine heterosexuality. However, I would question his assertion that masculinities are so clearly differentiated through their differing relationship to the official curriculum. Mac an Ghail focuses on four groups whose members share an orientation towards school, but I found that even when members of male peer groups did not share an academic orientation they continued to produce modes of masculinity in contrast to other peer groups.

#### Gillian Evans Working Class Boys and Educational Failure (2006)

Although Evan's ethnography is drawn from fieldwork in a primary school, like Bucholtz (1999), her attention to the details of peer group constitution is instructive. Through a focus on the peer group, primary school, neighbourhood and home, in Bermondsey, a South London neighbourhood, Evans offers an explanation for the on-going discrepancy between social classes and educational attainment. She argues that the system for establishing value through education, which is legitimated by institution and the law, conflicts with many other ways of gaining status which require very different forms of social participation.

Evans examines the kinds of participation that is expected of children at home, in the neighbourhood and in school, and argues that as children learn what is valued in each context, they also come to value themselves as a particular kind of person. As Evan's illustrates, learning how to become a particular kind of person involves the development of

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<sup>26</sup> Exemplified by this quote from Graham who had a high-status reputation among his peers, especially for being sexually successful:

Graham: I think a lot of boys would like to talk but who do you talk to? Like these two girls said to me and my friends, you're not very close like us. And it's true girls are closer. They're allowed to be closer aren't they? If I said anything like this to my mates, they'd think I was a "poofter". I mean you just couldn't (97).

a complex and embodied appreciation of manifold conceptual distinctions like gender, race and culture:

‘These categories of distinction are not out there in the ether, they have to be brought into being, embodied as a stance and made sense anew in each generation’ (2006: 158).

As Evans shows, among the ‘disruptive boys’ peer group in Year five and six (9-11), who share a classroom in Tenterground primary school, there is a particular conflict between the participation required by teachers at school (sitting still, working quietly on tasks) and the boys’ peer group practices in which ‘being tough, looking for trouble, resisting authority are ways to gain a respected reputation’ (75). Evans points out that all children in the class are preoccupied with trying to accommodate the differing demands of disposition that are required for play, peer group and classroom interaction, but the rowdy and sometimes violent behaviour of the disruptive boys is most at odds with the kinds of disposition teachers require.

It is through their actions and exchanges - including fighting, pranks and football – that the peer group is constituted and a particular kind of participation is established as valuable amongst them (112). In this way the boys reconstitute, everyday, a pecking order<sup>27</sup> based on an alternative system of value and participation to that defined by formal schooling:

‘At school it is easy to see how thrilling to them and efficacious is the competition for boys to violently seek prestige in relation to peers...become caught in a cycle of turn-taking pranks and revenge-seeking scuffles which define not only their daring and their reputation, but also their friendship with one another’ (115).

In contrast another peer group, ‘the imaginative boys’ are not interested in engaging in this violent ‘prestige-seeking behaviour’. Their peer group revolves around a different kind of participation, drawing, talking about cartoons and playing imaginary games. They are often

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<sup>27</sup> Within this pecking order some of the most disruptive boys are also the most able academically, while some boys manage to combine participation in the peer group with managing their school work others invest in peer group participation at the expense of achieving in school, even if they are academically able: ‘When the climate amongst them is one of ruthless domination, it is often the brightest amongst the tough boys who quickly become peer leaders. It is not simply a matter of brute force; it is also to do with the combined skills of daring and personal charisma’ (86).

taunted and demeaned by the disruptive boys for their 'babyish', 'girly' or 'gay' behaviour, defined in relation to the disruptive boys pecking order of violence as 'less than boys should be'. In order to survive this attention the imaginative boys developed strategies of avoidance and submission, to avoid undue attention and trouble.

As Evans argues the social structure of peer groups emerges from an on-going and dynamic process of participation and through this children are continuously making sense of their relations with each other. Learning how to participate effectively in a peer group entails working out what the appropriate relations of verbal, physical and object exchange are. In this way the formation of friendships (and enemy-ships) is always an on-going process. Within peer groups social positions are established through who has enough influence to define what constitutes the appropriate exchanges within the group and who will be allowed to make those exchanges. Furthermore learning how to participate, and becoming incorporated into a peer group, leads to a feeling of value:

'The real reward of the social process of learning how to participate effectively, in any situation, is the change in one's feelings as one's sense of value in relation to others transforms. Learning always has, therefore, emotional implications' (126).

Through her attention to the disruptive boys peer group, Evans sheds light on the ways in which particular forms of participation and exchange constitute peer groups. These practices produce a particular form of value, and enable the production of prestige apart from (though in interaction with) formal schooling. Her focus on educational failure leads to a focus on the disruptive boys - who are dominating within the classroom and take up much of the teacher's time with their challenges to authority and their prestige seeking behaviour. But as Evans recognises the imaginative boys do not want to be part of the 'disruptive' behaviour and value their own forms of participation and exchange. Similarly Evans does not direct her focus to the girls within the class (who were outnumbered two to one) and their valued forms of participation and exchange but recognises:

'The difference between what it is to be a boy and what it is to be a girl is similarly constituted on the basis of an ongoing differentiation in relation to specific forms of participation' (132).

In sum these ethnographic accounts attest to the presence of the informal realm within school, as an important arena of pupil action, power and identity formation. They all identify alternative value systems that exist in the informal realm and which represent a way to establish value or gain prestige outside of formal schooling. Through these practices pupils collaboratively and hierarchically define what it means to be particular kinds of people.

Another point that emerges from my discussion of the informal realm literature is that by presupposing which social categories, relations of difference and units of analysis, are most important in advance, some of the complexities of the school experience may be missed. For example, in his quest to understand working class educational experience, Willis focuses on the lads relegating the rest of the Year, who appear as passive and scared mass of 'conformists'. Hey (1997) focuses on both pro- and anti-school peer groups but disconnects them from their wider context. Eckert recognises the importance of analysing the informal social structure as a whole, but by conceptualising these groups as polarised 'universal' categories fails to do justice to pupils' creative actions and dismisses their own experiences and perspectives.

I argue that by mirroring pupils' own understandings, and viewing the year group as an important unit of analysis, we can do more justice to the complexities of pupils' social experiences and networks. What emerges in my analysis is a constellation of differences through which pupils can position themselves and others. Furthermore, this is constituted on a number of different scales - individuals, peer groups, year groups and schools - pupils are adept at moving between these 'scales of difference' and depending on which scale is emphasised, different social categories became more or less salient. Studying school in this way makes visible processes of unity, closeness and similarity, as well as division, differentiation and distance.

The ethnographic studies discussed above attend to the constitution and maintenance of peer groups to greater or lesser extents. The most detailed attention to these processes comes from Evans (2006) who centralises participation and relations of exchange as ways to produce value. This value then becomes part of a sense of self; through participation individuals come to value themselves as particular kinds of people. Learning to become a

particular kind of person involves developing and embodying categories of distinction, these distinctions are not 'out there' but brought into being, and made anew, in these processes.

Evans' approach which starts from an analysis of action is closest to my own; as I observed pupils in their daily life within school, I came to understand that transactions (relations of exchange) were essential to the constitution of friendships, peer groups and consequently the informal social structure. And co-ordinately to the ways in which pupils came to value themselves as particular kinds of people. In order to elaborate on these ideas, I now turn to the work of Nancy Munn (1986). Her model of value production is derived from a very different context to mine, and has not been applied to the informal realm before. In fact, Graeber writes 'Munn's work and especially her theory of value has been little taken up by other scholars' (2002: 46). However, I argue that it serves to illuminate this realm; her model has at its centre the potentials of human action, and in the informal realm pupil action is everything.

### **Value**

Nancy Munn's theory of value is drawn from her ethnography of Gawa, a small island off the coast of Papua New Guinea. The island is part of the famous Kula exchange ring – the exchange of arm shells and necklaces between Kula partners from different island - which links a series of islands over long distances. Men on Gawa are engaged in this Kula exchange, the shells have different values and gaining possession of a highly valued shell is evidence of a man's success in this system, and the means of producing prestige. As the shell is passed on (the shells are in constant circulation) it circulates the names of their former possessors. In this way a man's name will become known, he will become a 'man of renown'. Normally the Kula system is understood through theories of exchange (Graeber 2002), but Munn conceptualises it as an example of value-production. She argues that Kula exchange is an example of positive transformative action, through which Gawans' seek to create the value they see as essential to communal viability.

From this material, Munn derives a more general theory of value-production that places action, and the potentials of action at the centre. She conceptualises the lived world not only as an arena for action but also as constructed by action; 'actors construct their social

world, and simultaneously their own selves and modes of being in the world' (7). Actions consist of culturally defined types of acts and practices, they are the creative 'potentialising' mode of social being and the basic unit of Munn's analysis, as they are the media for value transformations. Actions take place within a pre-existing meaningful order (constituted by previous actions) and so actors are both constructing the order and constructed in its terms.

Munn argues that positive value transformations, such as Kula exchange in Gawa, are in an on-going tension with negative potentials. Negative value, according to the views of the community, undermines positive value or prevents it from being realised – it threatens the ideal construction of self and society. In Gawa the witch is a potent figure of negative value, as she is seen to prevent Kula exchange. The dialectical process of positive and negative value comes together in the community's attempts to control these negative transformative possibilities. Through the symbolic system of meanings that is formed through value creation, and constituted in socio-cultural practices, and the explicit assertion of possibilities (positive value potentials) and counter possibilities (negative value potentials) members of the community are:

Engaged in an effort to construct and control themselves and their social world. By means of this process *taken as a whole* a community may be said to act 'as an agent of its own self-production (Touraine 1977: 4)' (Munn 1986: 3).

These processes, Munn argues, result in 'communal value'. Munn uses communal value in two senses: in a more limited sense actors create communal value by producing the positive value so defined as essential by the community. In the more comprehensive sense discussed above, positive and negative value transformations are explicitly manipulated by the community in order to produce the former and limit the latter. In this sense, Munn writes, a community creates itself as the '*agent of its own value creation*' (1986: 20).

### Hierarchy and Equality

The production of value is a hierarchising processes, value is by definition relative. For example in Gawa some men are more successful in Kula exchange than others, some men will effect more control over time and space and so will gain more prestige. This hierarchising process is in tension with the egalitarian ideals of Gawa, and so needs to be mediated. For example the witch attacks those that are too successful and so represents the

egalitarian ideals, symbolising a condensation of ideas about autonomy run wild. To protect against this threat to community viability, men of renown attempt to suppress witchcraft through communal practices such as rhetorical speeches. In this way social value is made visible through its opposite negative value – moral values are reinforced through representations of immorality, and in everyday life Gawans' are often reminded of negativities as part of the process of positive value transformation.

The positive and negative value potential of types of acts and practices are also defined with reference to the governing premises of Gawa – the appropriate and possible relations of power. The nature of value transformation is constrained by these premises, in turn the problem becomes embodied in the transformative practices themselves and becomes a critical component of the positive or negative value that can be generated.

#### Value potentials

Every act, or practice (a collection of acts) has a potential capacity - that which an actor can expect from performing it. Munn gives the example of giving food - a central practice in Gawa, giving food has the capacity to result in a return in hospitality, but in the longer term can lead to Kula exchange and an increase in inter-island renown (although these are not the only culturally defined outcomes of giving food). Each act has capacities but they are not assured, they are the 'key potential outcomes'. According to Munn, the value of an act can be viewed in these terms.

Munn also states that a value-producing act can also relate to a more general potential – a wider notion of value, and so acts can be 'measured' relatively in these terms. Munn argues for the Gawans', this 'relevant potency' is 'spatiotemporal transformation', the value of an act can be measured by its capacity to extend or expand one's influence over space and over time. The basic value template for this is the giving of food, from this, higher levels of value can be activated - these are not pre-existing levels but constituted through action.

Munn argues that through practices and acts different types of 'intersubjective space-time' are created - intersubjective because these practices form self-other relations. For example giving food, travelling, or Kula exchange all connect people and places in specific ways over

varying amounts of time. These practices also have a subjective dimension, for example giving food is expected to lead to mutual influence (its potential capacity) but in order for this to happen the exchange needs to be remembered. Other acts might lead to negative subjective states, like anger, and destroy the possibility of the desired outcome of acts. Subjective states such as consent, refusal or happiness are crucial to the value of different space-time and 'value transformations involve transformations of subjective states'.

Conversely, negative value is created through the reverse of spatiotemporal expansion. For example while giving food has positive transformative potential, eating food has negative value potential as it is seen to result in the contraction of space-time. And the witch is a potent figure of negative value because her space-time expands to destroy that of others. In turn, this negative value is evaluated as such by others and a subjective transformation occurs. Both positive and negative evaluative discourses are intrinsic to transformation processes of value production: 'Without these evaluative discourses Gawa cannot produce value for itself, inasmuch as it is through their operation than Gawans define and bring into consciousness their own value state or the general state of viability of the community' (272).

Furthermore 'practices not only form particular kind of social relations but also, co-ordinately, the actors who engage in them' (15). Actors not only engage in action but are also acted on by these actions, value transformation is a mode of self-construction. When value is produced it is also evaluated by others and the self comes to know itself through these evaluations. Value-production is intrinsically both inter-subjective and subjective:

"Others stand apart from the self, and through their apparent separateness become the organising processual field of each self – the ground upon which, within social process, the self is experientially constituted' (16).

### Fame

Munn argues that fame is the outcome and evidence of success of the value process as a whole. Through success in Kula exchange, a man's name is circulated and becomes known beyond the island, far and wide:

'Fame is a mobile, circulating dimension of the person: The travels of a person's name apart from his physical presence' (105).

When a man's name is circulated through the minds and speech of others, it goes beyond the immediacy of the act itself, and extends the actors' influence over the minds and actions of others. Fame is a 'virtual form of influence', without fame a man's influence would go nowhere. When the acts spread to others they 'objectify it as knowledge', and this then produces a potentiality for affecting other Kula acts. Fame is a product of transactional processes (Kula exchange) and must be on-going, to stop transacting is to risk one's name being 'forgotten'. Those who are successful in Kula exchange are then legitimated in playing a dominant role in the community.

Munn emphasises that the recognition and evaluation of fame by others is intrinsic to this process –you can only be famous if others recognise you as famous:

'Fame is both a positive value-product (an outcome of certain positively transformative actions) and an evaluation of the actor by significant others' (15).

In line with the dialectical nature of value, the reverse can also be the case. Defamation is a negative value-product and a result of negative evaluation of the actor by significant others. These value-products and evaluations subsequently come to 'crystallize the value of actors'. So fame results in a positive subjective conversion:

'It typifies the capacity for subjective relocation and positive reconstruction of self...fame reflects the influential acts of the actor back to himself from external sources...the actor knows himself as someone who is known by others' (117).

Further, through the fame of individuals the community also knows itself as strong - when Gawan's fear that the viability of Gawa is being threatened by witchery, speakers in public meetings appeal to the importance of Gawa fame and overseas standing, and comment on the subversive effects (defamation and shame) of witchery on it.

### Discussion

Munn's ethnography is rich, detailed and complex, and the analytical framework she develops is illuminating and is the central theoretical framework in this thesis. However Munn produces an account of 'almost radical ahistoricism' (Damon, 1988), and for me this lack of attention to the contemporary relations of spacetime (to use Munn's terminology) and possibilities of historical transformations in value-production is problematic.

Munn describes a community, constituted by its own logic, with shared history, symbolic system and beliefs. She identifies the 'generative schema' of giving food which is brought to life through ostensibly diverse socio-cultural practices such as marriage exchanges or mortuary rituals, of which 'fame' represents the highest value level. However, she also mentions in passing that visits from Kweawatans, residents on a neighbouring island to Gawa are more common than the reverse visits, because they journey to the church. At another point she mentions that due to missionary influence Gawans have adopted the European workweek (i.e. no one gardens on Sundays, which is reserved for church going and visits). However she does not discuss the way conversion to Christianity has resulted in different forms of spacetime (for example membership of churches on other islands). Similarly she does not address the question of whether missionary influence and the take up of Christianity has affected, transformed or challenged Gawan processes of value-production.

It seems likely that changes in Gawan society such as these, increased engagement with capitalism etc., will have an impact on value-production and intersubjective spacetimes. For example are the transformative actions, expected by the church, and that produce positive Christian value in tension with more traditional forms of value-production? Is there debate within Gawa about these divergent forms and debate over what constitutes positive value?

These questions consequently shed doubt on Munn's (overly) coherent model of value-production and account of the Gawan symbolic system. Thus while Munn's theory of value-production is the core theoretical theme in this thesis. I have not stuck rigidly to her model. Of central importance to my argument is the recognition that different groups of pupils are involved in different modes of value production, and often do not agree on what constitutes positive value. Value conflict between members of the same community is key to my study but not considered in Munn's original work. Furthermore I do not utilise her concept of 'generative schema' because I do not think it is relevant in this context of value conflict and divergence. However, as I will argue, actions can result in different forms of value and debate over what constitutes positive value does not preclude the production of communal

value. In this way I argue that processes of differentiation and unification can occur concurrently, as they do among Year 11s.

### Theories of Value

David Graeber (2002) draws from Munn's work in his discussion of value – 'conceptions of the desirable' (Kluckhohn 1951 in Graeber 2002). He suggests we view value as the way people represent the importance of their actions to themselves – actions produce value and thus value represents the importance of particular actions. Hence the starting point for a theory of value should be the generative power of actions.

Graeber uses the work of Jane Fajans (1997) to further expand his point. Fajans studied the Baining people of Papua New Guinea. They have previously been described as 'unstudiable' because they do not have social structures or any complex belief systems. Their lives are repetitive and mundane, interspersed by occasional festivals of masked dances which they describe as 'play'.

Fajans argues the value template of Baining is human action, which they see as distinguishing humans from animals. The ability to work (for example through gardening or bringing up children) and give food is the main thing that creates prestige among the Baining (it is the value template or 'generative schema' for this reason). For example being a parent is understood less in terms of procreation and more in terms of providing children with food.

The Baining exchange food constantly, often in like-for-like transactions (the same amount of one type of food for the same amount of the same type of food). This form of exchange seems pointless, but as Fajans argues without enduring institutional structures which exist outside of individual human action, individuals need to recreate their society constantly on a day-to-day basis (Fajans, 1997).

Drawing from the work of Munn (1986) and Fajans (1997) among others, Graeber conceptualises society not as a thing but a total process through which activity is coordinated: 'Value is the way actors see their own activities as meaningful as part of it'

(76). Like Munn, Graeber emphasises the importance of public recognition and comparison as part of this process, 'the most important ends are the ones that can only be realised in the eyes of a collective audience' (76). Social action is also a form of symbolic production, through action the definitions of what humans are, and what they should do, are reproduced.

I argue that conceptualising the informal realm in terms of these theories of value is productive. As I will now go on to discuss, it enables us to understand pupil action as the basic unit of analysis through which the informal realm is constituted on a day-to-day basis. Through these actions, value is produced, and through this and the corresponding evaluations a hierarchy is created, but so also is communal value. Hence this conceptualisation of the informal realm enables a simultaneous focus on differentiation and unification. Further, value-production is understood to result in subjective transformation, and so enables us to understand how the intersubjective processes of this realm are so central to identity formation.

### **Value in Year 11**

Building on these arguments, I conceptualise the informal realm not as a place but as a network of actions that produce value outside that recognised by formal schooling. This realm is reconstituted daily by the acts, practices and transactions<sup>28</sup> of pupils. Without enduring institutional structures, formal roles or material resources, the social order<sup>29</sup> must be reconstructed on a day-to-day basis.

This network of actions occurs most densely within the physical space of the school but does emanate out beyond this, for example value might be produced when pupils are socialising outside school. Importantly however these actions only become part of the social order of the informal realm when communicational transactions bring them into school. For example, some low status pupils emphasised that in their social networks outside school they were well regarded but as no one knew about this inside school they continued to be

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<sup>28</sup> Acts – action of a person that has the potential to generate certain outcomes, practices – collections of acts, transactions – different types of acts that create self-other relations

<sup>29</sup> The hierarchical organisation of peer groups and individuals in the informal realm which is recognised by all pupils regardless of status.

seen as low status (as not producing enough positive value). As I will discuss in my methodology (chapter 2), my research is limited to the school environment, this was stipulated by the school as a condition of access, and brings with it both limitations and benefits.

When pupils enter Collingson School aged eleven they enter an institutional year age-grade cohort. Some pupils know each other from primary school or their neighbourhood or religious community, but the year-group as such, located in this specific Collingson School location, is new – they are a new community. This cohort will be more or less the same (give or take a few pupils who join or leave the year group) for five years. There is no academic standard that needs to be reached before moving on to the next academic year and it is very rare for a pupil to be held back, so the year group all progress reliably through school years until they reach Year 11, the last year of compulsory schooling<sup>30</sup>. The year group is a primary organising principle of school; all lessons, assemblies and school trips are undertaken within this grouping, teachers often address pupils by their year group name (“hurry up Year 11’s”), and both pupils and teachers perceive year groups to have distinct identities (“Year 10 are trouble”).

This ‘institutional age-grading’ (Amit-Talai 1995) is also reflected within the informal realm; peer groups almost always consist of pupils from the same year group<sup>31</sup>. When pupils describe their social order – the hierarchical arrangement of peer groups and individuals<sup>32</sup>, this refers to a year group organisational structure, and there is no comparable school-wide structure.

Year 11 can be viewed as a ‘viable community’ (Munn 1986); members define themselves in contrast to others and the boundaries are not easily permeable (a Year 7 cannot suddenly choose to become a Year 11). At the same time it is interconnected with, and dependent on, the larger institutional context, and exists within a larger community which pupils also see themselves as part of (the Collingson School community). The Year 11 community is constituted externally through institutional practices but is also constituted internally

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<sup>30</sup> At this point most pupils remain in education, but many move to new schools or sixth form colleges.

<sup>31</sup> In year 11 a few pupils hung out with older years, and likewise a few pupils from younger years hung out with year 11 peer groups – but there were no mixed year peer groups.

<sup>32</sup> As I have already discussed this social structure is recognised by all pupils regardless of their relative status.

through value producing acts and practices. In turn these constitute a hierarchically arranged social order – as Munn argues value production is a hierarchising process.

Given the short life-span of their community, it is impressive that pupils have manifested and maintained this social structure, which as I will argue is key to the process by which pupils). During my fieldwork, I observed that pupils are engaged in a constant flow of transactions – different types of acts that create self-other relations - of different media (including chatting, bitching, hugging and play fighting). And that these are vital to the constitution of the informal realm, creating and maintaining friendships, peer groups and relations between peer groups. Furthermore, success in the informal realm (evaluated by peers and evidenced in a variety of ways which I will go on to discuss), is to a large degree dependent on the successful creation, manifestation and management of transactions. Success is largely constituted within the logic of the informal realm, and evaluated and conferred by peers.

Viewing value as created within the informal realm, rather than just ‘imported’ from the wider context, enables us to conceptualise more satisfactorily the workings of the informal realm. For example, broad relations of power and inequality in wider society that position groups of people in hierarchical relations with each other – white people as more powerful than ethnic minorities, or middle class people as more powerful than working class people – do not necessarily manifest themselves in corresponding ways in the informal realm. Different pupils (and groups of pupils) are engaged in different modes of social action and through this they produce/ are conferred with value. It is these actions, and the different evaluations of the levels of value they produce that create the hierarchical social order of the informal realm.

Co-ordinately, these processes of value-production enable pupils sharing the same space to produce themselves as different kinds of people. As Evans also illustrates, value is established through participation, and through this children come to value themselves as particular kinds of people. Evaluation is intrinsic to value-production (Munn 1986), and as I will discuss evaluation between pupils is a fundamental feature of the

informal realm, it is through the evaluation of others that pupils can come to see their actions, and consequently themselves, as valuable.

This does not mean that wider relations of power are irrelevant in the informal realm. As I will show pupils collaboratively set conventions which define the acceptable and appropriate ways of being a gendered, sexual and ethnic person, and these are informed by such relations (see Hey 1997). These relations of power set the parameters of value-production and are embodied in the transformative practices themselves, becoming a critical component of the positive or negative value that can be generated. In this way relations of power are themselves brought into being by pupils' actions and made visible in evaluative practices.

For example in school the conventions of masculine and femininity sexuality are defined in opposite ways (chapter 8). This convention is established by pupils and made visible through those who transgress. In turn these conventions define the value that can be generated; if a boy has sex with lots of people these transactions conform to the conventions of masculine sexuality and simultaneously will be evaluated as generating positive value. If the girl does the same thing, her transactions will transgress the conventions of female sexuality and will be evaluated as generating negative value. These conventions are on the whole agreed on by all pupils and so represent the outer boundaries of the debates over values.

Conforming to conventions, transactional success and successful value production are all key to 'fitting in' in school. Fitting in is both a positive value product and a means to producing more value, for example companionship, support, fun and a valued identity. Conversely, not fitting in is both a negative value product (as evaluated by peers) and leads to further negative value products such as exclusion, harassment or isolation. Thus there are both seductive and coercive dimensions to fitting in, and is a lot at stake in the imperative to become an acceptable and appropriate gendered, sexual and ethnic person (Hey 1997). The production of value is not 'value-free'.

## **'Fame' in Year 11**

Munn's explication of 'fame' as the extension of 'virtual' influence over space and time is also instructive to our understanding of status within the year-group. Pupils describe the high status boys as those with the most power and influence, and their actions are discussed outside of their presence (their influence is 'virtual'). Furthermore, as I will discuss (chapter 5) pupils are quick to challenge the notion of popularity, which they feel implies 'most liked'. Instead they evidence those with status in terms of being 'seen' and being 'known'. These are exactly the words that participants in Damon's ethnography of the Muyuw, a neighbouring island to Gawa use to conceptualise fame: 'Muyuw say that in every Kula district one or two people are 'seen/known' all the way around the Kula Ring' (2002: 122). In contrast those with low status are expected to be 'invisible', seeing and knowing but not seen or known.

In turn the gaining of prestige also legitimates acts and practices which produce visibility and exert intersubjective influence (for example challenging teachers, speaking on behalf of the class, directing the actions of other pupils). Prestige is both a value product and a means of producing value. Likewise 'men of renown' are legitimised in taking a more dominant role in Gawan society as they gain prestige through Kula exchange. In school the same acts are evaluated as illegitimate if they are carried out by low status pupils, because they conflict with the expectation that those with low status should be invisible. Acts which lead to a low status person becoming seen and known are evaluated as negative value transformations, and further decrease the person's status (chapter 5).

Further, the extension of intersubjective influence can be used to exclude those who do not conform to conventions. Positive value is necessary for this process (to legitimise the excluder's actions), and also legitimises their evaluation of the negative value transformations of the person being excluded. As Evans (2006) has observed social positions within peer groups are established through who has enough influence to define what is appropriate and acceptable.

In Gawa, only men are engaged in Kula exchange and can achieve fame. Women can only enhance their reputation through the prestige of their husbands and can support their husbands through value producing acts such as giving food or circulating their name. Fajans, discussing Munn's work, writes:

'Men are rarely accused of witchcraft because autonomy is less unsocial in males...men can enhance their autonomy through exchange but women who manifest autonomy are the inverse of the nurturing female' (Fajans, 2006, p. 115).

Likewise the extension of intersubjective influence in Collingson described above is normally only legitimate for boys, the same acts by girls are normally evaluated as negative value transformations, 'acting big' as an inverse of acceptable femininity (chapter 5).

However, girls are engaged in acts that extend intersubjective experience on a smaller (but not necessarily less potent) scale. Pupils recognise that through friendships, girls can engage in transactions which will increase their prestige within the group, and through which agency can be experienced. These intersubjective relations create a more intimate space-time scale than the practices of high status boys, and so are more acceptable for girls within the conventions of femininity. For example bitching is the practice of highlighting another's negative value transformations, in order to emphasise the speaker's positive value (chapter 6).

### **Value conflict in Year 11**

I have previously discussed my doubts about the coherence of Munn's explication of the Gawan symbolic system, furthermore a school in North London is a very different context to a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. Collingson School represents a meeting place, where pupils of different ethnicity, religions, languages, countries and social classes are brought together.

An important dynamic in the informal realm is debate and tension over what constitutes positive value transformations, and these different interpretations are key to the constitution of different peer groups. For example, the value level of status (fame) within school is often challenged by other pupils, who criticise the acts as 'abuses of power' or 'domination' and dismiss the value products (year wide-status) as unimportant or irrelevant.

These peer groups are engaged in practices of positive value production that do not lead to year-wide prestige. In this way, we can refer back to Evans (2006) who also identifies that different peer groups are engaged in different forms of participation, and through this establish alternative values. Furthermore 'Year 11' does not represent pupils' 'social totality' but one important arena of action among a number of arenas of action. As Evans shows these different arenas (including formal schooling, family and neighbourhood) also establish different forms of action as valuable.

Value-producing actions in the informal realm can be understood as distributed within 'value fields' that contribute to the organisation of value meanings. Key fields in the informal realm are sociality, heterosexuality, 'teenage fun' and appearance. Acts and practices produce values in these differing but overlapping fields; the same act might have the potential to produce value in numerous fields, but at the same time certain acts and practices might result in the production of value in one field at the expense of value in other fields.

For example the act of getting a boyfriend produces value in the heterosexual field but can lead to negative value in the sociality field (evaluated by peers and made visible through bitching). The transactional investment demanded from a boyfriend conflicts with the investment demanded from friends. The girl might then be evaluated as a 'bad friend', in turn affecting their subjectivity. The most successful individuals in the informal realm are the ones who are best able to negotiate their investment in these fields in order to create the most value, in the most fields through their acts and transactions.

The debate over what constitutes positive or negative value is key to the processes of becoming a particular kind of person in school. As Evans highlights different groups of people in Britain have 'significantly different ideas about the appropriate ways to be in the world' (2006:11), and modes of establishing value are thus equally diverse. In school acts and practices, and the resulting evaluation between peers of what their value levels are, are key to bringing 'manifold categories of distinction' (Evans 2006) into being. Transactions create value and through these differing debates about what is valuable, pupils create a

constellation of differences which, through action, they embody, as particular kinds of people.

Furthermore, in Munn's account, the signs that come to represent value in Gawan society are also created and given meaning within the internal logic of Gawa (such as meanings of the body, the garden etc). The signs pupils in Collingson School utilise are drawn from a wide variety of sources including the media, family, London and religion. In this way it is more instructive to understand the use of 'signs' not as stemming from the same internally logical system, but drawn from many different places, brought together in creative ways. Comaroff (1985) exemplified this approach in her analysis of the Tshidi Zionism whose religious signs are drawn from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts:

'The resulting *bricolage* represented a particular instance of a universal process of symbolic construction – the repositioning of signs in sequences of practice, "texts" which both press new associations and reproduce conventional meanings' (1985: 253).

This diverse use of signs to represent value is brought into action within the shared context of the school and is another part of the differentiation process in which pupils come to see themselves as particular kinds of people. At the same time their use produces value within the specific context of the informal realm. For example when a group of friends, all from West African backgrounds, humorously compare their individual experiences of visiting West Africa, they are drawing on 'signs' shared because of their ethnic backgrounds. But they are producing value within their shared context, as friends who make each other laugh, as well as particular kinds of people who share a similar space-time heritage (chapter 7).

An approach that centralises the use of signs to represent value, and understands the informal realm as a place of value-production, helps to explain the flexibility of identity I observed in school. Pupils generate value through their transactions and practices, drawing on 'symbolic texts', but these do not necessarily directly reflect their 'objective' or 'inherited'<sup>33</sup> identity. For example 'ghetto' is a set of (contested) value producing

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<sup>33</sup> I use these terms with caution. I do not wish to imply that parents' identities are taken for granted or self-evident in contrast to pupils'. Instead I use these terms as an indication of the ways in which pupils might be

transactions, practices and signs that are informed by black, inner city styles and meanings, but pupils who identify as ghetto in school (ways of acting, speaking, dressing etc.) are not necessarily black or working class. However, as long as their actions are evaluated as legitimate by peers than they produced positive value (chapter 7). Regardless of their background, pupils are able to generate value for their position within the informal realm.

This relates to a more general process; acts and practices can produce different kinds of value simultaneously - while the debate over what constitutes positive value is an on-going dynamic, these practices also create social relations, a value-product that is agreed as positive by almost all pupils. For example bitching is an act that identifies and evaluates the negative value transformations of others (and is open to debate), but also creates positive social relations between those who are engaging in this practice (chapter 6).

### **Communal value**

I argue that positive value generating acts, and the visibility and policing of conventions which represent attempts to limit negative value production in the year group, contribute to the creation of communal value (Munn 1986). As I have previously discussed much work on the informal realm has focussed on pupils' differences, but in so doing has under-examined the converse practices of unity and connection. The 'growing together' discourse - the idea that over time the year group has grown closer and all 'get along' is a recurring theme among Year 11s who also define themselves as 'nice to each other' in contrast to other year groups.

This discourse can be interpreted as communal value made visible by pupils. Growing together also identifies this communal value-production as a process; when pupils are brought together in Year 7 they do not have communal value because they are a new community, brought together through external forces. But as they move together through the school, their value-producing acts and transactions – even though they are open to debate - gradually lead to communal value, through which Year 11s can define themselves as worthwhile as a group. It could be said that they go from a group in itself, to a group for

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differently classified or understood in, for example surveys or the census, in which parental identity (and these classifications themselves being only one kind among possible ways to understand identity) is used to define households.

itself - Year 11 is the 'agent of its own production' (Munn 1986). Furthermore the differences between pupils and peer groups are transformed in this process from negative value to positive value, and this enables pupils who define themselves as very different kinds of people to also identify themselves through notions of sameness and closeness.

As I will discuss (chapter 10) 'the last day at school' makes visible these more implicit, everyday process, as pupils celebrate together their community as a unified whole. Approaching the informal realm through notions of action and value production enables us to keep in view both processes of differentiation and of unification, which can be generated from the same acts. These processes are interconnected - moments of 'communitas' (Turner 1969) within the year often lead to a reconfiguration of the constellation of difference within the Year. For example pupils often talked about a week-long whole school trip in Year 9 (14-15) which was a catalyst for major changes in the peer groups that occurred afterwards (chapter 5). Unification leads to reconfigured differentiation and taken together the system can transform the possibilities within it.

### **The theoretical context: practice theory**

In the following section I intend to situate my preceding discussion on value-production and the informal realm within a broader theoretical context. As I have previously discussed, my approach starts from an analysis of action, and the understanding that intersubjective transactions are the essential constituting elements of friendships, peer groups and the informal social structure within school. My work is thus making a contribution to practice theory,

In an influential essay written in the 1980s Ortner identified a 'new trend that seems to be gathering force and coherence' (1984: 144). This trend involved:

'A growing interest in analysis focused through one or other of a bundle of interrelated terms: practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance. A second, and closely related, bundle of terms focuses on the doer of all that doing: agent, actor, person, self, individual, subject' (ibid).

Ortner contrasts these new approaches to practice (which are themselves diverse) with older action-based approaches, such as symbolic interactionism. In older approaches the social system is viewed as the setting for action but not determining of it, the newer approaches instead:

‘[S]hare a view that ‘the system’ ...does in fact have very powerful, even ‘determining,’ effect upon human action and the shape of events. Their interest in the study of action and interaction is thus not a matter of denying or minimising this point, but expresses rather an urgent need to understand where ‘the system’ comes from – how it is produced and reproduced, and how it may have changed in the past or be changed in the future’ (1984: 146).

Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, represents an explicit attempt to elaborate a practice-based model which explains the relationship between human action and the social system. It was, and remains, hugely influential, and its publishing in English in 1977, is identified by Ortner as the time when calls for a more practice-orientated approach became increasingly audible.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which is also inseparably a critique of domination (Wacquant, 2006) aimed to overcome the separation in social theory between two supposedly antithetical theoretical stances, objectivism (which does not take into account individual actors’ actions and intentions but views actors as determined by the social framework) and subjectivism (which focuses too much on individual experiences and their own interpretations without taking into account the social structure which shapes action). To these ends Bourdieu formulated a series of key concepts which he argued bridged the gap between the two stances.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus refers to the system of durable, transposable, dispositions, these stem from early life and are internalised, non-conscious and lasting, structuring the way people think, act and feel. According to Bourdieu, the relationship between structure and habitus is mutually informing - habitus is produced by an objective social environment, and habitus then reproduces that structure. Members of the same class will share habitus because they have been exposed to the same social conditions and conditionings, even if

their exact experiences differ. People may continue to acquire dispositions through life, but these will always be filtered by the habitus acquired in primary experiences. Thus habitus is the mediation between past influences and present stimuli (Wacquant 2006).

The habitus that people acquire depends on the position they occupy in society, and from this people are endowed with capital. Capital is a resource that enables the possessor to gain the profits that arise out of participation in social arenas. Bourdieu specifies four different types of capital; economic capital (for example material and financial assets), cultural capital (for example symbolic goods, skills and titles), social capital (gained from being part of a particular group or social network). Symbolic capital refers to any capital that is not recognised as such ('as when we attribute lofty moral qualities to members of the upper class as a result of their "donating" time and money to charities' Wacquant 2006: 7) (Bourdieu 1977). The position of individuals in 'social space' can be charted by the volume and composition of the capital they possess (Wacquant 2006).

Bourdieu uses the term *symbolic violence* to describe the multiple processes through which the arbitrariness of the social order is masked and perpetuated. Symbolic violence subtly imposes systems of meaning that legitimise and so continually strengthen structures of inequality. The dominant culture (the cultural arbitrary) is misrecognised as legitimate by all classes, however the dominant class will be in an advantageous position in relation to habitus and capital. They will possess more, the right kind and will have more access to capital and will thus be able to profit more than the dominated class. In this way structures of inequality are perpetuated and advantage is passed down through the generations.

Doxa is the experience of things being 'natural'. When there is a fit between the external structures and the internalisation of these structures (habitus), Bourdieu argues that the individual will misrecognise 'objective structures' as natural. According to Bourdieu Doxa will only be questioned when there is a crisis which results in divergent, competing or contradictory practices and discourses.

Although Bourdieu claimed his theory bridged the gap between subjectivism and objectivism, his theory of practice, and notion of habitus has been widely criticised for its

determinism (Throop and Murphy 2002). Subjective experience is seen as always structured by an internalisation of external structures, habitus is unconscious and so the social actor is again at the whim of the determining social structure. A variation of this critique emerges from my own study and I discuss this later. Regardless, Bourdieu's theory is one of the best known explications of practice theory and continues to be very influential.

### **Bourdieu and education**

Bourdieu developed a theory of education, and his wider theoretical concerns have been widely applied in educational research (Reay 2004). Bourdieu writes:

'The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences...; the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences... (Bourdieu 1972 quoted in Reay 2004).

According to Bourdieu, attitude to education, and attainment in education, is dependent on family background, and class identity, even though it is legitimated through ideologies of equality of opportunities and meritocracy. As I discussed earlier Bourdieu argues that the dominant culture is misrecognised as legitimate by all classes. However the dominant and dominated classes stand in different relationships to it due to their class habitus. Excellence and achievement in education will be defined in terms of the dominant cultural arbitrary. Pupils whose family background bestows them with the right kind, and right level of cultural capital will achieve more academically than those who are more distanced from this 'cultural arbitrary'. The habitus of the dominated groups will both legitimise the system's legitimacy and reinforce their disadvantage, as they tend to eliminate themselves from the education system and view it as 'not for them'.

Like habitus, his theory of education has been criticised for its determinism, and assumption of a mechanical replication of class structures within the educational establishment, with little attention to what happens in school on a day to day basis. Again the agency and conscious reflection of agents is not taken into account, with achievement at school premised on habitus from early years and the possession of the right kind of capital that is 'misrecognised' as legitimate.

## **Bourdieu, class and Collingson School**

In Collingson school class did not emerge as an ethnographic category in the same way as gender or 'where you're from' (which I gloss as ethnicity – see chapter 7). While these were central concerns of pupils - frequent topics of conversation and key to their understanding and categorisation of themselves and others - only a few pupils made reference to class in their positioning practices. Class identities were not self-evident and I did not want to impose my own categorisation onto pupils. As McRobbie, reflecting on fieldwork she undertook with girls in the 1970s, cautions:

'I brought in class wherever I could in this study, often when it simply was not relevant...but being a *girl* over-determined their every moment' (1991: 65).

Furthermore, while I could recognise that many of the symbols pupils drew on were class coded, the use of these symbols were not clear cut, there was often a combination of classed, ethnic and gender codes that could not be simplistically interpreted in class terms. And as I will discuss, objective identity markers are not deterministic of modes of practice in school, there is certain flexibility in the class codes that pupils draw on, and these claims are accepted as legitimate, as long as they are evaluated as such by peers.

On the other hand while class emerges an ethnographic category only rarely, it remains an important (but not central) analytic category. Research shows that there continues to be a wide divergence in achievement between pupils from different class backgrounds (e.g. Hollingworth and Williams 2010) and so social class is an important indicator of life trajectories (e.g. Evans 2006):

After a post-war period in which the prospects of social mobility for the working class expanded in many Western capitalist societies, education now appears to be entrenching patterns of social and economic privilege based on class and, to a large extent, on race and ethnicity. Imbued with the cultural capital recognized and rewarded within schools, and drawing also on their wealth and social contacts, the upper and middle classes are typically able to manipulate the education system so as to reproduce their advantage in the next generation (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004: 133).

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital seem to offer a framework through which to explain different experiences and attainments within school. Middle class pupils enter school with a habitus acquired in their middle class families and this enables them to succeed in the middle class establishment of the school, and acquire more capital which will determine their course in life. To some extent I did observe that middle class pupils often had ways of speaking and acting that fitted exactly with that which was expected of pupils within school, and often seemed to endear them to their (generally) middle class teachers. However habitus as an inculcated, enduring and unconscious disposition leaves much of my observations within school unexplained. As I have discussed previously there is flexibility in the way pupils are able to present themselves in school. This is often related to peer group membership, for example as I will discuss in chapter 5, members of the high status Mandom come from a variety of family backgrounds in terms of class, ethnicity, nationality etc. but they all speak in a black London vernacular that is not characteristic of any of these family backgrounds. These pupils then do not speak like their parents, but like their peers. As I argue in chapter 5 speaking in this way is an indicator of group membership and a shared frame of reference between friends.

Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that doxa is the normal state of affairs, with principles of habitus only becoming conscious when people are suddenly confronted by alternative ways of doing things, and jolted out of their usual way of doing things. For Bourdieu this is unusual, most likely to occur in times of crises. However in Collingson school we will see that pupils and peer groups are constantly comparing themselves to each other, and in the process making conscious and verbalising their way of doing things in comparison to those around them. Pupils are often clear about what makes them 'particular kinds of people' in contrast to the 'other kinds of people' they share a social space with.

The concept of capital again initially seems to shed light on processes within school. That capital is often defined as a form of value (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002) suggests that my framework of value could be analogous to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital. However there are some important differences, and I would argue that Munn's theory of value-production offers greater explanatory potential.

According to Bourdieu capital stems from habitus and is something 'possessed', and 'misrecognised' as legitimate because it is part of the dominant culture. Like habitus, forms of 'legitimate' capital are predetermined and the possession (or lack) of it is largely outside an individual's control. If we utilised this concept then we would expect middle class pupils, who possess the right kind, and the right amount of capital to be most successful and most valued in school. However by shifting focus away from the classroom and formal educational success, we see more complex processes at work.

The benefit of Munn's model is it shifts the emphasis to the creative potential of actions, and thus we can view value as being actively produced within the informal realm, rather than simply imported in from the wider context. As Munn argues value is that which is defined as such by the community, when we view this community as 'Year 11', the power of peer evaluations and definitions begins to emerge. As we will see throughout this thesis, pupils are active in producing and defining their own forms of value. What is recognised as positive by pupils often diverges from established, adult forms of value, and may not be recognised as positive by adults. Furthermore, pupils themselves often do not agree about what constitute positive value. Pupils are producing value in unpredictable ways and those forms that will lead to status in the informal realm are not necessarily those that lead to status in the 'dominant' adult world.

Furthermore, to a large degree these do not depend on the possession of external resources but instead on transactional success and being evaluated as legitimate by peers. Pupils' actions are not determined by their habitus but are observably flexible.

The fact that an individual pupil can transform the way they are seen by their peers (for example from low status to high status, or from 'ghetto' to 'it girl') attests to this flexibility.

In chapter 4 I argue that while a focus on capital does have some explanatory potential it is insufficient to understand the workings of the informal realm. Those pupils who have middle class privilege and can be seen to possess capital in terms of the wider context are not necessarily those that are most successful in the informal realm. If they are unable to transform their transactions in appropriate ways (as defined by peers rather than 'dominant

culture') they will not be successful or have status in the informal realm, regardless of how many external resources they possess. Pupils are 'making sense anew' (Evans 2006) of social categories and actively creating and defining forms of value rather than simplistically replicating them from the wider, adult context.

**However, it is important to recognise that pupils are required to engage in forms of exchange that demand the possession of adult-defined capital. Young people, even those sharing the same school, are differently positioned within broader structures of inequality, and once they leave school must engage in systems of exchange outside of their control (cf. Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). For example to gain academic qualifications requires working within this system and once they leave school pupils will be required to exchange their capital on the labour market. Once outside school those middle class pupils who possess capital but are not evaluated as successful within the informal realm may find themselves at an advantage to those peers who were adept at producing peer-defined value, but which value was at odds with that recognised by adults. This study is limited to school (see discussion in methodology) but a further study might question to what extent peer-defined value mitigates experiences of the labour market. Conversely, in this thesis we will see that knowledge of wider notions of capital outside school are used by some pupils as a strategy to deal with marginalisation within the informal realm (for example the Misfits, chapter 5). In general, within their everyday lives, all young people will be constantly negotiating between peer-defined, and adult-defined, forms of value.**

### **Phenomenology**

Bourdieu was critical of phenomenology, using it as an example of the subjectivist approach which focuses too much on individual experience without attending to the way it is powerfully shaped (determined) by the social structure, and that experience is the internalisation of external structures. However Munn utilises phenomenological insights to important effect in her study, and these dimensions are also relevant to my study.

Phenomenology originated as the philosophical study of consciousness (e.g. Husserl) but has since been taken up in a range of disciplines (for example sociology and anthropology). Phenomenology, as a study of 'phenomena' focuses on the appearance of things; how

things appear in an actor's experience or the ways in which an actor experiences things – the meanings things have in experience. Thus the experience of actors within their 'life-worlds' is centralised and meanings are interpreted as co-created situationally and lived as intersubjective reality. This experience is always intersubjective because as Schultz, a sociological phenomenologist argued:

'We can never detach ourselves from the thoughts, things and life-worlds that are created intersubjectively. The distinction between subject and object is itself a distinction made by our subjective consciousness that constitutes objects as things separate from it.' (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008: 56).

In phenomenologically informed anthropology, this emphasis on experience and the value of the (inter)subjectivity of those being studied has been a key attraction, enabling a focus 'on the way in which meanings become and *are* reality to the people themselves' (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008: 51). Proponents of phenomenological anthropology argue it offers a necessary counterpoint to previous anthropological theorists (such as Levi-Strauss, Geertz, Foucault) who primacy representations of culture over lived experiences. (e.g. Throop and Murphy 2002, Csordas 1990). In order to capture the sense of existential immediacy, Csordas coins the term 'being-in-the-world':

'The distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy. Representation is fundamentally nominal...being-in-the-world is fundamentally conditional (1993: 10)'.

Phenomenology has been utilised by anthropologist wishing to centralise embodiment, Munn was among those who highlighted a phenomenology of the body, which takes the lived body as a starting point and embodiment as the 'existential condition in which culture and the self are grounded' (Csordas 1993: 136). She still studies signs and representations in relation to the body, but that these two approaches become complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Csordas 1993).

Munn uses phenomenology to centralise experience, subjectivity and intersubjectivity in her work. Her concepts taking shape 'during her attempt to analyse Gawan value production in

theoretical terms that took account of the phenomenal or existential form of practices (1986: 7). Munn aims to emphasise the relation between practices and the acting self or experiencing subject, thus actors not only engage in action but are also 'acted upon' by that action. Furthermore action not only occurs in an arena but is constituent of that arena.

She utilises the phenomenological term *intersubjective* to highlight the way practices form self-other relations, and the way constructions of the self (or aspects of the self) are entailed in these relations. She recognises that social relations are also relations between subjectivities, Thus value transformations effected through practices are also transformation of the value of the actor's self, and value transformations involve the transformation of subjective states. Furthermore, it is a phenomenological insight that by their separateness, others become the organising field of the self through which it is experienced as subjective in contrast to other subjects (or object) In relation to embodiment, Munn highlights the way bodies take on qualities of the value produced, and so serve as condensed signs of wider value-production (they are iconic). For example negative value production is associated with slowness and weight, so consuming rather than giving food is seen to result in slow, heavy, sleeping bodies. These forms of bodily being are particular constructions of the actors self, and the self-other relations of which it is part. The self takes on an experiential form of being that epitomises the value produced, thus value signification (representation) and the constitution of the subject (experience) intersect.

### **Legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice**

Knibbe and Versteeg write that, 'participation in a life-world, through apprenticeship and ultimately as a capable actor, is at the centre of the phenomenological method' (2008: 52). This notion of participation, which also arises in Evans (2006) work, echoes the theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), which represents another variant of practice theory. Lave and Wenger focus on learning, but rather than conceptualise it as an individual practice of internalisation of certain forms of knowledge and as a result of teaching, they view it as something social that is ubiquitous in activity.

Lave and Wenger argue that learning is an integral part of social practice and cannot be separated from its situation. 'Legitimate peripheral participation' is the process by which newcomers learn and increasingly participate in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger argue that communities of practice are everywhere and we are generally involved in a number of them, they are formed by people participating in shared practices:

Peer groups can be considered communities of practice, as discussed in relation to Bucholtz earlier in this chapter. However unlike communities of practice in which older and more experienced member are more central, and younger novices are more peripheral, pupils are all constituting their communities of practice from ostensibly equal positions. However, as we will see issues of centrality and peripherality are recurrent themes within peer groups, and learning to participate appropriately is fundamentally important to centrality. Pupils are often in changing relations of centrality/ peripherality, and those at the centre are granted the power to decide on the legitimacy of others participation. Importantly the work of Lave and Wenger reminds us that the processes discussed in this thesis are all processes of learning – including learning how to participate effectively and how to be a particular kind of person.

### **Personhood and value**

The foregrounding of value-production amongst pupils, and the discussion of phenomenologically informed notions of intersubjectively, in which the self is always experientially constituted in relation to others implies a particular notion of personhood. By focussing on the informal realm in school, it becomes clear that processes of becoming a person are intrinsically relational. Pupils produce themselves as particular kinds of people in constant relation to those around them, organised in various relationships of sameness and difference, closeness and distance. This understanding challenges ideals of the Western<sup>34</sup> individual as autonomous, free and independent (Mauss 1985). At the same time, as the

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<sup>34</sup> As Ouroussoff (1993) points out, the concept of 'the West' is itself a product of the Western liberal tradition that also produced the ideal of the autonomous individual. The West is hardly ever defined in terms of specific countries or populations, and instead is delineated in contrast to an abstract 'non-West'. In this thesis I use 'the West' as a gloss, with awareness of its contentious and amorphous nature. It is used particularly in reference to its defining liberal tradition of thought and certain pervasive forms of institutional organisation, for example formal schooling with required attendance and segregation of young people into narrow-age specific groupings (Amit-Talai 1995).

dominant ideal of Western society, it is unsurprising that these ideas of the Western individual are in circulation within school. It is helpful to delineate between the circulation of this myth and the processes of becoming a particular kind of Western person, which I argue are essentially constituted through sociality.

Ouroussoff (1993) has argued that while anthropologists have closely examined divergences between ideologies and the range of ideas and values on which people act in 'exotic societies', they have not directed this same analytical gaze towards Western society. When comparing other societies to the West, anthropologists have uncritically accepted a version of Western society based on 'utopian fantasies of an intellectual elite' (281). A central tenet of this, the Western individual as autonomous, master of its own destiny and free, has been accepted as our Western reality and has not been subject to the same scrutiny as ideologies of the person from non-Western societies. While 'exotic cultures' are understood as constituted through practice, Western culture is accepted as constituted through ideas. As Ouroussoff writes:

'The refusal to locate western reality in the day-to-day experience of Westerners stems from the need to protect the irrational idea at the heart of the liberal story; the idea that there is or can be such a thing as freedom without constraint' (284).

In school, ideologies of individualism are in circulation, acutely visible in the way pupils are encouraged to view themselves academically, shaped through the New Labour discourse of success (Bradford and Hey 2007), which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4. In this discourse 'there has been an unrelenting focus on successful pupils and students, successful teachers and of course, successful schools' (2007: 595), but notions of a corresponding failure are obfuscated. In order to convince, this discourse necessitates an underlying concept of the autonomous individual constituted independently. Any notion that success is relative must be suppressed because this implies a notion of failure, if only some people can be successful the discourse loses its power.

In school this discourse is articulated through notions of 'doing your best' - pupils are encouraged to think of themselves as responsible hard-working individuals. Success is conceptualised individually as 'doing your best' rather than as relative. Subsequently it is

possible for everyone to be successful, as long as they work hard and take responsibility. However as I will argue, in school this discourse and its underlying premise is often disrupted, as pupils continue to produce themselves as certain kinds of pupils in relation to their peers.

As Ouroussoff writes:

‘A truly social concept of the Western person, one which sees men and women in the process of being related, cuts across the grain because it excludes the possibility of absolute freedom’ (1993: 284).

The focus on the informal realm, as a key arena of pupil experience allows no other conclusions. The processes of becoming a ‘uniquely particular person’ (Evans 2010), an ‘individual’ in an experiential sense can only emerge through sociality and relationality. In school it is in relation to others that pupils are producing themselves as particular kinds of people.

Through their networks of relations, value-producing actions and corresponding evaluative practices, pupils collaboratively bring into being ‘manifold categories of distinction’ (Evans 2006) and subsequently embody them in these practices. Scales of difference enable pupils to understand themselves as simultaneously united and divided with those around them. For example the intimate relations of girls’ best friendships are often conceptualised in terms of ‘closest sameness’, but bitching is accepted as an unavoidable characteristic of friendships. These practices enable the speaker to contrast themselves in relation to those closest to them, one process through which pupils can produce themselves as ‘uniquely particular’ (chapter 6).

Similarly, in her focus on the disruptive boys at Tenterground primary school, Evans illustrates how they bring themselves into being, constantly, in relation to their friends, constituting their idea of themselves in social relations (2010 in press). In terms of who they are and can be, and simultaneously in terms of who they are not, and have no intention of becoming. Evans argues that in this way pupils are completely ‘embedded’; working out their social relations vis-a-vis each other. Thus it makes little sense to describe them as individuals – authors of their existence.

Situated-ness challenges conventional notions that contrast the Western autonomous individual with other societies understood to be characterised by relational personhood:

‘So, rather than thinking about human relations in terms of a dichotomy between those societies characterised by situated persons engaged in personalised relations of exchange and those typified by autonomous individuals participating in the impersonalised relations of the market (Carrier 1999), we might more usefully think of a continuum of situated-ness’ (Evans 2010: 300).

Additionally, I would argue that ideals of individuality are also part of processes of becoming a particular kind of person in school; part of value-production, evaluative practices amongst pupils and their various conceptualisations of difference. As I have already discussed value-production is necessarily relational, it is through evaluation of others that value is made visible and assessed. In school a recurrent theme in evaluative practices is authenticity of self, pupils evaluate each other according to whether they are genuine or not, a notion that implies the existence of a true, pre-existing, inner self that may or may not be accurately expressed (chapter 9).

Pupils are also expected to negotiate between ‘individuality’ and relationality. Copying a friend too closely is often criticised and may result in exclusion, and those who innovate (within limits of acceptability) are often granted high status and visibility, becoming ‘famous’ for ‘individuality’. Defining yourself as an ‘individual’ is a way to produce alternative value apart from visible high status pupils who are defined in contrast as ‘sheep’ (“we’re a group of individuals, does that sound ironic”, says one Year 11). That these notions of individuality are dimensions of value-production, and evaluated in self-other relations, highlights that ideas of individuality are produced through sociality - they do not exist independently.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have situated my research in relation to the existing literature, drawing inspiration particularly from Evans (2006) and Munn (1986) to elaborate the notion of the informal realm as an arena of pupil action, value production and identity formation. I have situated my work in reference to the theoretical traditions of practice and phenomenology.

In the following chapters I will examine these processes in more detail; focussing on how the informal realm in Year 11 is constituted and three dimensions of the informal realm that are particularly salient – ethnicity, sexuality and appearance. In the next chapter I will discuss my methodology and the processes that lead to my focus on the informal realm in the first place.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

In this chapter I chart my research. My original proposal was concerned with body image and disordered eating among teenage girls, I discuss the personal and academic rationales that lead me to this subject. Once in the field, this study did not come to fruition, but themes of this original rationale continue to inform my research, and emerged in transformed forms during my fieldwork and writing up process. I discuss my original proposal at the start of this chapter, and my shift in focus in the latter part of the chapter, after discussing my experiences and strategies in the field. Before this I discuss the hurdles to gaining a field site in the first place. I end this chapter by considering my own experiences of school and the informal realm as a perilous place of power and possibility.

### **Initial research aims**

My original research proposal concerned body image and disordered eating among teenage girls. A number of writers have highlighted that a researcher's choice of phenomenon is often rooted in their life experience, for example Cohen writes that 'many anthropologists are motivated by personal problematic as well as mere intellectual curiosity' (1992, p. 223). Certainly for me, my research seemed to offer a chance to work through both personal and academic questions I felt had not been answered adequately elsewhere.

From an academic perspective the pervasive discourse of slender body ideals, fitness and dieting were made acutely obvious to me during Masters research on celebrity magazines. Within these magazines there is a dominant mode of female selfhood that is being constructed and circulated. This feminine selfhood combines independence and freedom with the imperative to achieve and maintain increasingly rigid body ideals; successful femininity is contingent on continuous self-surveillance. These magazines constantly police the boundaries of these ideals by focussing on those they classify as 'too fat', 'too thin', 'too flabby', 'too scrawny' or 'too wobbly', and even those celebrities who fulfil these ideals are described as constantly dieting and exercising. While these magazines represent just one strand of public culture, I found the force of such body imperatives hard to ignore. At the same time I felt dissatisfied with relying on magazines as my primary data source; limited to the media products without any understanding of how they are taken up in the everyday.

I found that in most quarters an unproblematic link between the media and individual body image had been assumed (see Bray and Colebrook 1998, Budgeon 2003). The British medical association report *Eating disorders, body image and the media* (2000) argues that young women try to emulate the distorted body ideal created in the media and this is resulting in negative body image, dieting at an increasingly young age and an increase in eating disorders. Rather than assume a direct causal relationship which tends to represent girls as 'pathologically susceptible' to the media (Probyn 1987), I wanted to interrogate these links. My intention was to pursue PhD research by reversing my original approach – to start with real girls and their everyday lives rather than the media texts – in order to ground these media discourses in empirical research.

In the literature on eating disorders I found a similar lack of attention to the embodied experience of real girls. In most medical, psychiatric and psychological approaches, anorexia is studied as an individual (or family) pathology disconnected from the everyday and cultural contexts of the sufferer. Further anorexia is viewed as a clinical entity distinctly different from the experiences and eating practices of 'normal' women (e.g. Bruch 1978).

In the feminist literature the meanings of the slender body ideal and the cultural construction of eating disorders have been interrogated and anorexia is argued to be a 'crystallisation of cultural pathology' (Bordo, 1993). Anorexia is viewed as the logical extreme of the contradictions of contemporary femininity - an attempt to control the unruly female body through the masculine values of self-control and individuality (McSween 1993, Bordo 1993). Despite the appeal of these explanations and their importance for providing a more thoroughly cultural understanding of eating disorders they continue to sideline real embodied experiences, focussing instead on cultural discourses. The result is that the anorexic body is rendered a passive site on which culture's pathologies are written<sup>35</sup>, little space is left in this analysis for the agency of the sufferer.

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<sup>35</sup> This primacy of the represented body over the lived body is part of a more general tendency for theories of the body to be one-sided – focussing on it as an outcome of social practices, subjected to forces over which it has no control and little to say about the body as a social agent – intercommunicative and active (Lyon & Barbalet, 1994), (Csordas T., 1994), (Lock & Kaufert, 1998), (Bray & Colebrook, 1998).

A more recent strand of feminist analyses attempts to redress the assumption of docile bodies; anorexia is viewed as an active oppositional practice to 'normative' femininity rather than an extreme extension of patriarchal ideals. Anorexia becomes an act of resistance, a parody of culture's impossible norms (e.g. Grosz 1994, Eckerman 1997). However this resistance is conceptualised as a fully oppositional stance dichotomous with power. As Warin (2005) has argued this conceptualisation of resistance falls prey to a 'romance of resistance' (Abu-Lughod, 1990) in which subversive acts are eroticised. Further, despite their aim to 'restore agency to the self-starver' (Eckerman 1997) these works do not pay due attention to the real everyday experiences of sufferers.

Despite 'eating disorders', particularly anorexia, being a subject of intense interest in clinical, academic and media publications I found that there were very few ethnographic studies on these issues. Those ethnographies that are written on the subject are predominantly focussed on the institutionalised treatment of eating disorders, and although important in their own right, they inadvertently and unavoidably reinforce a clinical definition by studying only those who have been 'diagnosed' (e.g. Gremillion 2003, Lester 1997).

An ethnographic study seemed to offer the ideal method through which to rectify the gaps in this literature. It would enable an analysis that centralised embodied experiences and attended to the practices of the everyday – offering the potential to analyse subtle configurations of resistance and power, reproduction and transformation rather than relying on unexamined dualisms. Starting with the everyday would also enable me to interrogate the spectrum of disordered eating; encompassing clinically diagnosed such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia and cultural mandated dieting practices.

### **The personal**

The lack of attention to real girls' experience, contextualised in their everyday worlds has resulted in a lack of attention to the interplay between disordered eating and important features of the everyday; interpersonal relationships, friendships, peer groups and school. The focus has either been the individual (and her family, mainstream psychological accounts) or the individual in relation to 'society' and the intangible worlds of the media,

western philosophy and consumer culture (feminist cultural accounts), what lies between this is left blank (Lester 1997). While friendships and peer groups are recognised as centrally important to young people, anorexic girls continue to be conceptualised as isolated individuals, either with a psychological pathology or moulded by forces outside their lived experience (see Evans et al 2004).

This way of viewing 'disordered eating' is not consonant with my own social experience. Within my peer network I have observed eating disorders in action, several of my friends have engaged in some form of disordered eating (binging and purging, calorie restriction) and one close friend has been clinically treated for anorexia. Even more of my friends and peers express unhappiness with their bodies, and 'body dissatisfaction' is a frequent topic of conversation. Moreover their stories from school days tell of peer groups which precipitate disordered eating as friends attempt to keep up with each other in weight loss or friends binge and purge together. At the same time friends are often the primary support structure for the person dealing with an eating disorder, while parents or teachers are kept in the dark. In my experience disordered eating is experienced as part of social relations as well as individually.

### **Choosing a field site**

With all this in mind I intended to approach these issues from a different angle. Rather than place anorexia at the centre, I wanted to understand girls' everyday lives with the tentative expectation (based on my own social experiences) that spending time with girls in their everyday worlds would lead to an opportunity to observe the workings of body issues, and disordered eating in action. I felt that this would allow me to pay attention to girls' interpersonal relationships and friendship groups – the social context as well as the individual and would not reinforce clinical definitions by studying only those who are diagnosed.

School, the place young people are compelled to attend for a significant amount of time, five days a week, seemed like a convenient place in which to encounter girls' everyday lives, and would enable me to have regular and time-intensive contact with a consistent cohort of

participants. Other options such as youth clubs would be less time-intensive (as they happen after school) and tend to have more transitory and less consistent attendance.

Further as part of my interest in disordered eating in the everyday, and drawing from my own social experience, I was interested in examining links between formal schooling, the informal realm in school and eating disorders. Evans et al (2004) argue that despite the recognition that it is middle class girls that suffer most from eating disorders<sup>36</sup>, no studies have investigated whether there might be a link between the middle class education experience and the constitution of eating disorders. They link this to a more general absence of analysis into middle class educational experiences. Likewise Walkerdine et al (2001) have highlighted that educational research has commonly pathologised working class failure, while assuming that those are achieving well at school, and going on to higher education do not need to be explained<sup>37</sup>. Similarly Power et al (2003) attribute the invisibility of the middle classes in educational research to their 'normalisation' within the field<sup>38</sup>; in much the same way as whiteness and masculinity have also been taken for granted.

To return to my own social experience, the friends who inspired my interest are all middle-class girls who achieved very well in school and went on to graduate from good universities and enter professional careers. I used to think 'why are my friends doing this to themselves when we are so privileged and have so many opportunities?' Thinking through my prospective research I began to consider that it might be because of, rather in spite of, our position in this specific contemporary context that these issues have become so prevalent. It seemed to me that my peers were enjoying unprecedented independence and freedom

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<sup>36</sup> Frost (2001) warns against an uncritical acceptance of statistics that assign eating disorders only to middle class girls, suggesting that there may be a class bias in referrals to specialist services and so may be to some extent self-perpetuating.

<sup>37</sup> As Walkerdine et al have argued 'Middle class girls' educational success seems to say it all, confirming the 'healthy normality' against which all other performances should be judged. But what does educational success actually mean, and what proportion of young people can be said to be successful? How do we disentangle success within the normative process of education from the subjective meaning of success in every other sphere of our lives? It is important to consider how in the numerous strands of 'youth' research, educational performance remains a starting point from which sociologists and psychologists go on to study the problems of young people' (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001, p. 164).

<sup>38</sup> As Walkerdine et al (2001) also discuss this is also symptomatic of a more general invisibility in youth research.

while at the same time experiencing their body as the enemy. At the same time my own experience warned me there could not be (and should not be) a simplistic or pat argument to be made; I had a similar life trajectory to my peers and did not experience my body as the enemy. However I wanted to ask if there is something about the experience of being a middle class girl, particularly in the context of school that produces eating disorders.

### **Approaching schools**

After identifying my research aims and intended fieldwork location the next step was to find a school that would permit me access. I began to make a list of schools that I felt would have a significant proportion of middle class pupils, based on my tentative understanding that it is middle class girls who suffer most from disordered eating, particularly those attending academically high-achieving schools. I researched both state and private schools within commutable distance that achieved well in league tables. As Tomlinson (2005) has argued market policies in British education system (such as league tables and parental choice) has exacerbated a hierarchy of more and less desirable schools, with more desirable schools more likely to be attended by middle class children. Ofsted reports also gave euphemistic clues to the class make-up of state schools by providing details of how many pupils qualify for free school dinners. Statistics show that private fee-paying schools are overwhelmingly attended by middle class children (Tomlinson 2005).

At first I wrote to schools, broadly laying out my research aims; I wanted to understand young people's experiences of school, friendship and the media through ethnographic research. My research would include participant observation and in-depth interviews with the aim of building my analysis from pupils' own understandings. I followed these letters with phone calls. When I had little success with this strategy I started to take my letter into schools in person, and again followed these visits up with phone calls.

Despite these strategies I still had no success. My dealings with Castleford girls' school<sup>39</sup> were typical of the hurdles I faced in trying to gain access to a school. Through this experience I learnt that access to school is guarded by a number of different gatekeepers,

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<sup>39</sup> This, along with all other schools mentioned in this thesis, is a pseudonym.

and although some gatekeepers may possess objectively less power in terms of the hierarchy of the institution, they can be equally effective in blocking requests for entry.

Castleford girls' school (a state school) was in walking distance of my house and fulfilled my criteria, so I was eager to set up a meeting. I visited the school with my letter and asked if I could talk to someone who would be able to facilitate this. The receptionist was friendly but said this was not possible, although she assured me she would pass it on to the relevant person. She also told me research had been permitted in the school before, so I was hopeful about the possibility of securing a meeting.

The next week I called and asked to speak to the head of year dealing with my proposal. I was put through to the heads' personal assistant (PA). After I had explained myself the PA was categorical in her response "no, we don't let people do research here". I reported the receptionist's comments, but the PA replied brusquely "well that person doesn't know what she is talking about". Despite the divergent information I had received, I had no further recourse, the PA was the gatekeeper to the gatekeeper and I had no way to make contact with them outside her approval.

I had always been concerned that my lack of credentials would make it hard to gain access to schools, and as I had no success in gaining any meetings, let alone access, these fears appeared to be well-founded. The feedback I got when I did manage to speak to heads was that they were incredibly busy and were not willing to take the risk on an unknown quantity such as myself, an added responsibility with little to offer in return.

Finally just as I was starting to despair at finding anywhere that would even consider my proposal, I had a stroke of luck. I made a follow up call to Fairfield school and was put through to a temp filling in for the head teacher's PA. Unsure what the normal protocol was she booked me an appointment in the heads diary for the following week. I was especially pleased with this development. The school, situated in an affluent suburb of London was a high-achieving comprehensive (regularly in the lists of top comprehensives in the country) - just what I was looking for.

I came to the meetings with few expectations as I had secured the meeting by fluke, so I was surprised when, after I explained my research, the head said he was happy to grant me access. We decided I would start in a few weeks at the beginning of the new term, this would give me enough time to get a criminal record check (CRB). As he showed me round the school he introduced me to the deputy heads and other teachers repeating my own words:

“Sarah is going to be joining us in January to do some research here, she wants to immerse herself in the life of the school, and she’s interested in getting to know pupils through informal, day to day contact”.

As we parted he said he was very excited about the research:

“I get approached a lot and I’m very cautious about this, I’m especially wary of media companies. There was a programme made that ended up reflecting badly on the school – just before I took over as head. But I like that you want to be part of the school, and give something back, so I think it will be good”.

The meeting had gone a lot better than I expected and although a part of me was worried it was too good to be true, I reassured myself with the certainty of the heads acceptance and his role as primary gate keeper to the school.

### **A major hurdle**

Just before the new term started I was informed that my CRB application had been mishandled and would take three more weeks to come through. As this delay meant I could not start when I intended, I organised a meeting in order to maintain contact and finalise details of access. I contacted the head who referred me to the head of sixth form – the person I would be reporting to during my time at school. I came to the meeting expecting to discuss these details but it quickly became clear that I would have to fight to retain my access.

As I explained my plans, for every idea I proposed (I’d like to sit in on classes, I’d like to spend time in the common room and playground) she responded with a reason why this would not work in Fairfield school (the teachers would not like being observed, the pupils do not spend time in the common room). We batted back and forth and as I defended everything from my research plans (“I don’t know why you’d want sit in on classes anyway,

what would that achieve?”), aims and general methodology (“you say you want to observe normal everyday life but won’t your presence make it artificial anyway?”), I began to feel I was fighting a losing battle. She was trying to catch me out and with every answer I gave she responded with another reason why it was unfeasible. A more sympathetic teacher sitting in on the meeting was consoling “you’re obviously an expert, and have thought through a lot of the pitfalls, and you’re battling our questions very well”. But this made little difference to the verdict, the teacher told me that this level of access was a “big ask”. I told her I was flexible on how much time and in what places within school I spent time but she told me that I would always mean extra work for her and I could offer nothing in return. Finally she told me that by giving me this open invitation, the head had been unfair - to her and to me - because he would not be involved. We left the meeting with the understanding that she would talk to the head, although I held out little hope, and my dealings with the school progressed little further than this.

Sometime later, through a friend with contacts in the school, I learnt that Fairfield school was a deeply divided institution, and I realised that I had inadvertently become entangled in these problematic dynamic. At the time he granted my access, the head teacher had been at the school for only six months and had alienated teachers, pupils and parents with unpopular structural changes to the school and with his leadership techniques. With this new information I could imagine that granting me access without consultation might have been viewed as another unilateral decision from an unpopular head. And while the teachers could not control the larger decisions he was making, I represented something they could make a stand against. I had thought that because I had been granted access from the top level gate keeper my access was secured, but institutional dynamics are complex and multiple gate keepers can be effective in restricting access.

At this point my despair in ever gaining access to a school reached a peak; weeks behind schedule with the teachers words “it’s a big ask” running through my head, my initial misgivings that no school would grant access to a random PhD student seemed confirmed.

## Eventual success

At this point I found out that a family friend, Sharon, was a teacher in a North London school – Collingson. When we met up to discuss my prospective research she was very enthusiastic, supportive and interested in my project. She also told me I had approached her at a good time; she had recently had a very positive appraisal and was feeling secure in her position within the school. She offered to talk to the head teacher and other relevant staff members for me, to introduce my research and set up a meeting. I believe her help was instrumental in facilitating my access into the school; she was a trusted colleague, well-established in the school and willing to vouch for me, so I was no longer an unknown quantity. When she approached the head teacher about the possibility of me doing fieldwork in school, he simply said “I trust you” and placed the responsibility in her hands. Further, as an insider she could direct me towards the teachers who would be most open to my research. With an insider guide it was less likely that I would inadvertently find myself in the middle of difficult dynamics like at Fairfield school. She also advised me on the most effective tactics to ensure my access:

“Keep the research clear and defined in order to get your foot in the door, once you’re in you will be in a better position to expand your role”.

My meeting with Mr Forster, the head of Year 10 (who was the head of Year 11 when I was following them) was a sharp contrast to my experience at Fairfield school. I explained I wanted to build my analysis from young people’s own understandings of school, friendship and the media through participant observation - Mr Forster was immediately enthusiastic about my project and asked no difficult questions or attempts to catch me out. Without prompting he began to tell me about the different groups within the Year:

“We have a very broad spectrum within the Year, you’ve got your grungy group, your academic high achievers, your problem kids [after each group he names individual pupils who fit into each group]”.

I was struck by how much he knew about each pupil, their personalities, friendship group and motivations. It seemed to me that he must have spent a lot of time observing and thinking about pupils. He told me that there were a few teachers who might not like me in the class but most would not mind; the head encouraged ‘open door’ teaching, where

classes are taught with the door open. This was typical of the contrast between Fairfield and Collingson School: both had gained a new head recently but - in contrast to Fairfield - at Collingson the head was seen to have made a positive impact on the school, was generally like by staff and pupils and morale was high.

The only limit Mr Forster placed on my research was that it did not extend beyond the school. He explained that within the school grounds, the teachers had responsibility for both me and the pupils, but outside school they could not supervise but might still be held responsible because they had given me initial permission to research Collingson pupils. This defined the boundaries of my research, on reflection bringing with it both limitations and benefits.

On the one hand research, such as Evans' (2006), who covers the home, neighbourhood and school, offers important insights into the different forms of participation and exchange required and valued in these different environments. School is not the only arena of young peoples' action. On the other hand Collingson School is a meeting place where different groups of people are brought together. Pupils often have no community ties to each other apart from school, and live within a large radius of the school. Focussing just on school enabled me to take this social space as the primary unit of analysis, and to understand the dynamics of this space in its own right. It enabled me to reflect pupil's own understanding of their informal realm at school, as a unique and powerful arena within their everyday lives. To attempt to extend this research beyond school, with the time and resource limitations of a single researcher, would have entailed presupposing which pupils, or groups of pupils are most important to study. Instead I have attempted to capture the workings of this realm as an community, created and maintained by an interconnected network of meanings, and linking all pupils within a hierarchical, interpersonal network.

### **Starting fieldwork**

When I eventually got to start my fieldwork, I was unsure about how to progress. I had spent so much time worrying about finding a school that I had lost sight of my research plans. Still tentative about my access and with confidence knocked from my dealings with Fairfield school, I decided to spend time with all different year groups so I did not burden

one group. I hoped in this way I would gradually build a network of classes and participants and could develop my fieldwork from there.

During this period I observed different age groups, academic abilities and subject lessons which gave me a variety of different perspectives on school life. However, although I was gaining a useful picture through this broad strategy, I felt unhappy about the development of my research relationships. Pupils were used to having adults observing in their classes (typically trainee teachers) and my presence was unremarkable. I found little opportunity to start conversations in class and without knowledge of pupils' networks and territories I found any connections I did make difficult to follow up in the vastness of the school.

Then one day I was observing two consecutive classes from the same year group, moving between the lessons, and when waiting in line outside the classroom I started chatting with a couple of girls. I realised that the best way to gain regular contact with pupils was to mirror how school was organised; focus on one year group and follow the full timetable in the same way as pupils. At this point I also felt more comfortable about my presence in the school. Sharon's advice had been correct, although it was hard to gain access to a school, once I was a ratified member I found I had a lot of freedom to manoeuvre within it, to approach teachers or direct my research as I wished.

I decided to approach Mr Forster about establishing a timetable as he had been so receptive to my research initially. He was happy to oblige and told me it would be easiest for him to duplicate a timetable of a pupil. He asked me if I would prefer a 'high ability' timetable or a 'low ability' timetable, drawing on my readings and the direction I still intended to take my research, I decided to follow a high ability one. He gave me Leah's timetable, and I started it on the first day of the new school year.

### **Progression**

As soon as I started in my new strategy I noticed a difference. After I went from one class to another with the Year 11s they started to talk to me and ask me questions about my research and I had many opportunities to start conversations. I had not intended to tell Leah I was following her timetable as I did not want her to feel singled out by an arbitrary

decision, however teachers had been informed of my presence in class through email, and this had specified I would be following Leah. When I went to introduce myself they often said “so you’re following Leah” and after a teacher said this in her presence I explained to her the choice was random, we started a conversation and she became an important and brilliant participant; analytical and articulate. Her peer group, the Misfits, were the first peer group I got to know, as Leah invited me to join them for lunch (in a hidden away place I would not have seen ordinarily) on my second day with Year 11.

Spending time with the same year group every day I was soon able to make sense of the social networks within the Year. Mr Forster had offered to introduce me to certain pupils that represented particular ‘types’ (high achievers, ‘problem kids’) but I decided to build relationships and get to know different peer groups organically through the pupils’ existing networks. I did not want pupils to feel obliged to participate in my research or associate me with the teachers. I also felt that without gradually making connections, I would more likely be seen as an imposition and my presence rejected, possibly precluding any future relations. I followed-up connections I had made through inter-peer group friendships or within the classroom and gradually got to know different peer groups in this way.

The advantage of this strategy was that I could gauge who might be willing participants - some pupils often engaged in friendly transactions with me while others did not, or did not return my friendly transactions. When I did ask if it was okay to enter their adult-free, peer group spaces, based on this initial contact, I was never rejected and always invited in pleasantly. It also mirrored pupils’ own ways of making friends (chapter 6).

The disadvantage of this strategy was that by building relations through inter-group networks I did not spend time with some peer groups (particularly the ‘Indian group’ and the ‘Blonde Barbies’) who, post-fieldwork, I came to understand as important to the structure of the Year. They were both relatively isolated groups but utilised a lot in other pupils and peer groups positioning practices. It was perhaps because of their isolated positions that I had little contact with them in my organic strategy. However when I came to write up I found that although it was important to include them because of their role in other peer groups understandings, I did not have their side of the story.

## **Finding a place in school**

I did not change anything about my appearance to fit in at school, but my age at the time of fieldwork (24-25, and I was often told I looked younger than this) and style of dress (similar to the way the pupils dressed) meant I was often assumed to be a sixth-former. Even Year 11's who knew I was a researcher often expressed surprise when they found out my age (they usually said they thought I was about 19) and maybe this was a factor in how easily they accepted my presence in their normally adult-free informal realm.

It was not only in terms of my appearance that my position within school was ambiguous. School is a hierarchically arranged institution in which everyone has clearly defined roles and there is a clear divide between 'children' and 'adults', but I did not fit into this categorisation. At first I found this lack of role difficult; in my previous experience with young people I was 'the teacher' and I had felt armoured by this role, even if I did not feel like a teacher inside. Without this I felt thin-skinned and self-conscious, feelings made more acute because I knew I was my main research tool and my key to getting good data.

But it was also my lack of 'pupil role' that made me feel self-conscious, during my time as a school pupil it had been very important to me to 'fit in'. Like most pupils at Collingson I would minimise the time I had to spend alone and apart from my friends. Although I knew intellectually that I could never 'fit in' at Collingson in the same way as I had in my own school, I still could not shake the feeling that I was a social failure (someone who spends time by themselves and doesn't 'fit in'). I felt how fragile my 'adult' self was and how powerful my fifteen year old voice could be. For example although I knew it was methodologically important to get to know different peer groups and not to become associated only with one, I missed the security and back-up of having a reliable group of people who would always wait for me or save a place for me in class.

In time I did begin to 'fit in' in my own way. Although I did not, or would never, fit in like a pupil, I became more comfortable with my own position and my increased familiarity with pupils made me feel like I had a place and was more 'myself'. I was able to join in with running jokes or add to discussions about events at school. Now I was reminded of all the

joys of school; always having someone to chat to or laugh with and I loved having guaranteed company every day.

My fitting in brought with it its own issues; pupils often transform lessons into opportunities for informal interaction and this is a recurring tension between teachers and pupils. As I was included more and more in these informal interactions I was conscious that I too was playing a part in hindering teaching. I enjoyed chatting to pupils and found it a good way to collect data and build relationships. At the same time I identified with the teachers' position, in addition they had been generous enough to allow me in their classes and I did not want to abuse this generosity. I always tried to be conscious of this and only engage in informal interactions when the teacher permitted it, but again there seemed to be a tension between my adult intentions and teenage desires (as a pupil I was a recalcitrant chatterer, and at times was separated from my friends by exasperated teachers because of this) and once or twice I was reprimanded along with pupils as our conversation spilled over into 'teaching time'.

By following 'my' timetable and spending time with pupils in their peer group territories I gradually became immersed in the sociality of the Year. Pupils' stories and reminiscences gave me an insight into their year group history, and significant events in peer groups' pasts. My position between and among peer groups also enabled me to observe the different versions of reality and interpretations of events that peer groups offer. For example I heard several retellings of episodes of bullying, but as I heard these stories over time - from different sources - I came to see that no claim to bullying was universally accepted. Each episode was interpreted in different ways as valid or invalid depending on the speaker and their roles in the events. By the end of my time with Year 11s I had become a knowledgeable member of the community, and was gratified when someone would say to me "did you know that so and so and so and so used to go out" and I could answer yes, or someone reported a recent piece of 'hot' gossip to me which I had already heard.

On reflection my 'emotional trajectory' was similar to that of any new pupil and offered me an insight into the miserable isolation of being 'the odd one out' and the pleasures and rewards of fitting in. Similarly the resources I had at my disposal (to make relations and do

good fieldwork), my embodied self and transactions (words, facial expressions, disclosures and jokes), although they initially felt woefully insufficient, are also the only resources pupils' have at their disposal, and with which they create so much.

### **Wrapping things up**

Throughout my fieldwork I had been taking notes at the end of the day. I had decided not to take notes during school time because I did not want pupils to feel self-conscious. As I became familiar with pupils this became an on-going joke between me and them, that I was only pretending to be a researcher (evidenced by my lack of note-taking) and really lived in a bush in the school grounds, coming in to class in order to stay warm!

Near the end of my fieldwork I intended to carry out a series of in-depth interviews with individuals or small groups of friends; I wanted to follow up specific points of interest that I had observed during my time at school. However although I managed to arrange interviews with the sixth-formers and some Year 11s, I found that because of the time-limitations of the school day, many pupils were reluctant to commit to the time-required, giving up time with friends and lunch to go to a private location for the interview. I realised I had to change my strategy, and rather than expecting pupils to come to me, I decided to take my tape-recorder to them. I took to carrying it with me everywhere and doing informal interviews in peer group territories in break and lunch-times. This worked well. I found that the presence of the tape-recorder directed the pupils focus towards me and my questions, and because of the informal nature of the interviews I got a good record of the interpersonal dynamics of the peer groups. Further pupils did not feel the same expectations as in one-on-one interviews; they often drifted off or returned to the interviews depending on whether they had something to contribute to my questions, and despite this fluidity I was never without at least one interviewee<sup>40</sup>.

### **Changing focus and letting go**

During my time at school it became clear that body issues, as I had conceived them in my research proposal, were not as salient a feature of school life as I had hypothesised. Despite

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<sup>40</sup> Conversations reported in the following chapters were recorded either verbatim (as far as possible) the same day or transcribed from tape-recordings.

being alert to these issues I did not often hear ‘fat talk’<sup>41</sup> (Nichter 2000), diet talk or talk of more extreme forms of disordered eating. As I argue in chapter 9 this does not necessarily mean there are not individuals in Collingson for whom body unhappiness is an issue but rather they have not become particularly salient issues in the interpersonal realm.

As I slowly came to accept that the focus of my research was changing, I asked questions and followed up leads on everything I found interesting. Although I did not realise it at the time, my interest was leading me towards an exploration of the informal realm. When I came to start my writing up processes, my initial outpourings were almost exclusively concerned with this realm.

I can see that while I had to let go of one set of question, I had taken the opportunity of being ‘back at school’ to address another set of questions I had yet to find satisfactory answers to. I had always been intrigued that regardless of the school they had attended, most people had experience of an intense informal realm rife with differential status, power and processes of inclusion and exclusion. Almost everyone seems to be able to reminisce in detail about peer groups and friendships, fallings out and fun. My fieldwork and writing up helped me to interpret this experience and allowed me to provide myself with answers to my own questions. The intense sociality of school is a consequence of institutional organisation but is also central to identity formation.

Furthermore my interest in the informal realm is closely connected to my initial research aims and the importance of friendships, peer groups and school in young people’s lives. I did not have to leave my initial ideas behind completely. In chapter 9 I argue that peer evaluations about physical appearance need to be understood as part of the more encompassing evaluative practices, intrinsic to value-production in the informal realm. Physical evaluations in school are embedded in peer transactions, and transformed into positioning practices between pupils. These practices operationalise notions of appropriateness, divergent values and strategically – dominant body and beauty ideals. For

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<sup>41</sup> Verbalisations of feeling fat or body unhappiness among friends.

girls particularly, these evaluations are in turn projected onto their surface – their physical appearance.

Thus, I argue that the approaches I discuss in this methodology, that understand girls in direct relationship with the ‘media’, without taking account of their everyday contexts will fail to do justice to the complexities of this issue. This concept of body image promotes a one-dimensional approach to these issues but through a focus on the informal realm we can see the multi-dimensional nature of ‘appearance’.

### **My own experience of school**

As I mentioned previously, my new focus still represents an attempt to shed light on my own experiences, this time at school. In the following sections I discuss these experiences, interpreting them in light of my subsequent conceptualisation of the informal realm.

Although in my thesis I approach this realm as an outside observer, I wish to highlight that I am not separate from these processes. During my time as a pupil I too was deeply invested in the informal realm, and engaged in my fair share of bitching, exclusion and boundary policing practices, as well as the more positive practices of this realm. I believe it is only fair to subject my own experiences to the same analytical gaze as I direct towards Collingson School. After having done so, I describe an episode during my fieldwork, in which I was acutely reminded of the perils of the informal realm.

Even before I started secondary school aged eleven, I was clear what I wanted from my experience; not only to fit in and make friends but to be a social success. I wanted to be ‘somebody’, visible in the Year, and a part of any ‘teenage fun’ - parties, drinking and events – that were going on. On my first day at secondary school I remember observing my new year-mates; judging them on their appearance and how popular they appeared, and pinpointing those I assessed as ‘cool enough’. I was especially alert because I knew I was at a disadvantage. I had moved from a small primary school with two other girls I did not want to be associated with, while the majority of the Year came from two large feeder primary schools. I quickly made friends with a pre-existing group of girls from my form group, and we started to have lunch together. They soon extended their invitations – to join them in their socialising at their houses and in other social activities. But they were not interested in

attempting to produce 'teenage fun' (parties, drinking etc) like me and after a few months I decided they were not 'cool enough' and set my sights on another (more visible) peer group. I transferred my friendly transactions to this new group, in class, engineering seats next to them and striking up conversations, as well as hanging around on the outskirts of their group at lunchtime. When these transactions had been legitimised (my new friends reciprocated, extending invitations – first to the informal realm within school and then to their houses, parties and sleepovers), I cut off my flow of friendly transactions with my former group altogether.

My new group and I desired to invest in teenage fun value-production but at our age (11 and 12) these initial attempts were often futile (too much parental control, nowhere to go). Bitching (the negative assessment and evaluation of others) was a key practice in our group, and as I became secure in my position within the group, I too started bitching - as a way to exert power and test my agency. Among our group Fiona became a target, as we assessed her behaviour as inappropriate (she was "too bitchy", she was not "nice", but more realistically, we were intimidated because she was powerful). I was instrumental in enacting her exclusion from the group; we reduced our friendly transactions (such as talk, disclosure and invitations) and she left the group.

During this time we continued our quest for 'cool' by smoking, drinking, shoplifting and giving 'attitude' to teachers (resisting or ignoring their directions, talking back). I found myself caught in a cycle of bad behaviour in school and was often in trouble with teachers. I was also unaware that Fiona was making a play to regain her status within the group, and was using the same strategies that had resulted in her exclusion to facilitate *my* exclusion. Behind my back (the definition of bitching) she had been busy positioning my behaviour as unacceptable and recruiting allies to secure hers.

I became aware of this shift, dramatically. One day I came into school and no one in my class was talking to me. They had withdrawn a key transaction and I was excluded. I had a horrible, lonely and confusing day before taking the rest of the week off 'sick'. Eventually my mother persuaded me to return. It was February, snowy and school was treacherous with

boys throwing snowballs. My class mates were talking to me to some degree but the flow of friendly transactions was not as it had been before.

At lunch time, as I trudged across the playground, two girls from my peer group called to me from the window of an empty classroom, and asked me to come up and talk to them. My spirits raised, an invitation was a friendly transaction and could be a positive sign that my exclusion from the group was temporary. But when I entered the classroom my heart sank as I saw Fiona sitting with them. Without ceremony, they told me that we were no longer friends and they did not want me to speak to them ever again. With snowballs flying past my head, I walked out of that school and never returned.

My tumultuous experience in the informal realm was not the only factor in my refusal to return to school. I felt trapped in a cycle of bad behaviour in class, I was often in detention and close to completely disengaging with my studies. So this rupture was also an opportunity to make a fresh start<sup>42</sup>.

My mother, concerned about my rebellious behaviour and my emotional distress, supported my refusal to return to school and helped me to find a new one. After six weeks (that felt like forever), I was offered an assisted place<sup>43</sup> at a private girls' school and started

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<sup>42</sup> In hindsight I can recognise that my mother's separation with my stepfather had compounded these events. But interestingly, at the time I did not recognise this. All my energy and emotional investment felt entirely tied to my problems within the informal realm - it was my primary concern. Now I can consider that perhaps I transformed my (unidentified) unhappiness at home - over which I had little control - into my actions and investment in the informal realm in which I could attempt to wield some power and exert my intersubjective agency. During my time at Collingson school, three girls I got to know well were dealing with close family bereavement or serious family illness. These upsetting events did not however become explicit in the informal realm in the same way as other 'private' experiences occurring outside school like sexual acts. It seems that certain personal experiences, particularly concerning family, remain submerged in the workings of the informal realm. Furthermore throughout these tragic family events, the girls continued to invest and engage in the informal realm, and in these group contexts transformed their transactions according to the preoccupations of this realm - you would not guess what they were dealing with at home. This highlights the limitations of this study because my research is confined to school. Family life is an important arena of experience, with a significant impact on pupil experience and motivations, however it is beyond the bounds of this study.

<sup>43</sup> Assisted places were a scheme of the Conservative government; the state paid an individual's fees and gave them a uniform and school lunch allowance to enable individuals who would not normally be able to pay for private education to get the chance. It was abolished by the Labour government in 1997. I mention this because it illustrates the interrelationship between my conceptualisation of the informal realm as an arena of pupil action and theories of capital as still relevant within the wider context. My mother had the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1978) from her middle class upbringing and education, even if she did not possess the

in the last term of Year 8. The girls in my new school were in the midst of a similarly turbulent period, and bitching and exclusionary practices were rampant in my new Year group - as I will argue Year 8 and 9 are often the most unsettled and discordant time in the informal realm (chapter 5).

Fitting in and the processes of friendship always include an element of risk but I did not put myself on the line in pursuit of power in the same way again. I gradually became part of a peer group with a solid position in the Year; we did not attempt to dominate but had connections to different status groups within the Year. We invested particularly in value fields of friendship and teenage fun but defined ourselves as alternative to the majority of the Year through our choice of music and clothes. Like the pupils at Collingson, we were also invested in the 'growing together' experience, and some of the most valued friendships that developed during this time were with those I had initially the most antagonistic relations.

However my teenage years continued to be characterised by friendship break-ups and peer group splits. I used to look back on these fissures with regret. How could I have been so invested in these friendships which then end so abruptly? Returning to school with my field study highlighted that these processes are common; the flow of transactions must be constantly maintained and to stop transacting is to stop being friends<sup>44</sup>. In the process of becoming a person, friendship offers a key way we can learn to exert agency, and the effects we can observe validate our expression of self. We learn to manage our transactions and we learn our transactions can create, effect and transform relationships.

Whatever my web of motivations, I risked a lot in my first school to gain power. Perhaps one of the reasons Year 8 is such a tumultuous time is because we have yet to refine our exertion of power. I remember clearly that I did not want to be invisible, I wanted to fit in and I wanted to have status. The informal realm offered these possibilities but was also - as I soon learnt - perilous. My memories of this time are often of deep unhappiness; sobbing myself to sleep or carrying around a sickeningly heavy stone in my stomach all Sunday, with

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economic capital, and this made it much easier to apply for an assisted place and so provide me with a wider array of options after my actions in the informal realm backfired.

<sup>44</sup> In contrast, as an adult, I might not have contact with a friend for a year but I would still consider them a friend.

the impending knowledge a new week at school. It is important to remember how deeply felt these experiences are because it reminds us how much is at stake in learning to enact an appropriate identity and how painful it is to be positioned as unacceptable. I also want to emphasise that I do not see myself as separate from the processes I describe. I see myself in my research, and was as much part of the informal realm in my time, as my participants in this study are now. It was a significant part of my formative experience.

### **Return to the perilous realm**

After I had been with Collingson Year 11s for about a month, I was a 'ratified participant' (Shuman 1986) in a conversation between Lexy and Leah about another pupil. Afterwards Leah invited me to walk with her to lunch and disclosed her history with this pupil.

Disclosure is an important transaction in the processes of friendship and indicates trust. I left school that day feeling very pleased that my relationship with Leah was progressing. But a few days later when I went to speak to Leah, she barely responded. She had withdrawn her friendly transactions and only replied to my attempts at conversation with cursory answers. The heavy feeling I had in the pit of my stomach quickly transported me back to my school days, and even back home, in my 'adult' world I could not shake the intensity of the feeling and how many memories it evoked. I racked my brain for any misdemeanour I might have inadvertently perpetrated and ran through all the events of the last few days that might have resulted in Leah's changed transactions towards me. I was reminded of how relentless the pressure of self-surveillance is and how exhausting and unsettling the mercurial relations at school can be.

This happened just before half-term. After we returned from the holiday, Leah had resumed her friendly transactions towards me and I accepted the episode as a mystery. A few weeks after this we were again ratified listeners as another pupil recounted problems with her friend. Once alone, Leah brought up the event. She said she was waiting for me to work it out but as I had not, she would tell me. She was upset with me because she had heard I had been speaking badly of her, saying that I thought she was "stupid and a bitch". I was amazed. I assured her that I had never said anything about her to anyone - not only was it against my research ethics but I valued our relationship and did not think those things about her anyway. Leah said that although she had initially believed this person, the more she

thought about it the more she thought it seemed strange. She told me she thinks now the person who told her was jealous of our developing relationship and made up these things to cause trouble. Leah did not tell me who had been saying these things and I did not push it - I did not want to place Leah in a difficult position. But afterwards I was unsettled: who had something against me? Was it someone I thought I was developing a relationship with? I was surprised that someone cared enough to make up something about me but now my position felt tenuous. However after the surprise and doubt had subsided, I could see the positive side to this episode. It was a sign that I was becoming included in the sociality of the Year, exposed to both its rewards and its dangers.

### **Conclusion**

When I initially formulated my research proposal I was critical of theories of anorexia which provided neat explanations, tying up all loose ends in a unitary theory that closed down potential variation and complexity of experience. My observations on the ground highlighted the fallacy of these neat conclusions. The power of ethnography is to reveal the complexity of real life, messy relations. Theories of anorexia make direct links between the 'individual' and 'society', but my fieldwork constantly reinforced the intensity and centrality of sociality. We become particular kinds of people only in relation to others. The messy picture on the ground meant I had to let go of my original research aims, but as I discussed, the processes that did emerge were still relevant, only in a different form. In the following chapters I explore the informal realm, as a complex arena of intrinsic sociality, starting with its context: the locality and institutional organisation of Collingson School.

## Chapter 3: Collingson School

SWR: So how would you describe Collingson?

Natasha: Really comfortable, you feel like when you're coming to school like you're at home. I like Collingson, I love it<sup>45</sup>.

### Introduction

In this chapter I contextualise the informal realm in Collingson School in various ways: Situating the informal realm within its locality, the school itself and educational policy. I then focus on daily life within school, the learning environment and the ways in which pupils seize transformational opportunities both inside and outside class in order to constitute their informal realm - understood as the production of value apart from that of formal schooling. Finally I discuss teachers' understandings and dealings with this pupil-constituted realm. Throughout this chapter, I explore more fully the informal realm as a network of actions 'shaped by but also pressing against the formal organisation of the institution of school' (Amit-Talai 1995: 153).

### Collingson - the area

Collingson School is located in the suburban area of Collingson in north London; the area is characterized by leafy tree-lined streets, attractive semi-detached 1930s houses with well-kept gardens, blocks of art-deco flats, parks and views over London.

Collingson has a large Jewish population, which includes a significant Hasidic community; on the high street, Jewish bakeries sell *challah* bread, smoked salmon and dairy-free cream cheese bagels, and advertise their kosher status in Hebrew. On high days and holidays such as Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) and Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year), the majority of businesses are shut and families walk in their festive best to the numerous synagogues scattered around Collingson, often located in knocked-together 1930s semi-detached houses. The Hasidic community is further visible through their distinctive dress and the high street typically bustles with mothers pushing prams wearing *sheitels* (wigs) and modest yet stylish clothes. Hasidic school children wait for the bus - the girls wearing long

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<sup>45</sup> This format (a name followed by colon and text) indicates a verbal quote throughout the thesis.

skirts and thick tights, the boys with *peyot* (ringlets) and *kapples*(skull caps) covering their short hair while old men walk slowly along the road with long beards, wide rimmed black hats and black silk coats.

Ofsted describes the area as 'relatively affluent with pockets of deprivation' and this is reflected in the census's socio-economic classification: 14% of residents are in higher managerial and high professional positions, 33.6% are in lower managerial and professional positions, while 11% are in routine or semi-routine occupations and 4.8% have never worked or are long-term unemployed.

The 2001 census of the area shows that 28% of residents describe themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority group (8% is the national average), the largest group of which is Indian (9.1%), followed by black African (4.7%), Other Asian (2.2%) and Chinese (2.1%). 55.9% of residents describe themselves as white British, 14% as white other and 2.7% white Irish. 35% of Collingson's residents were born outside Britain. In terms of religion, 31% of residents describe themselves as Christian, 30.4% Jewish (almost double the average for the borough), 7.0% Hindu and 5.8% as Muslim while 14.3% of residents did not state their religion. The census states that there is a correlation between areas with a high Jewish and white Other population and those who did not state their religion; so the Jewish population may in fact be higher than this<sup>46</sup>.

### **Collingson - the school**

Collingson is a large mixed-gender comprehensive with 1,250 students. It is heavily over-subscribed and intake is based on an entry exam which allocates pupils to three bands; 25% of the Year 7 intake are admitted from the top band, 50% from the middle band and 25% from the bottom band. As one teacher says:

"There's lots of selective schools in the area that cream off the brightest pupils, so they try to balance it to avoid becoming a 'sink school'".

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<sup>46</sup> The census posits that Jewish refugees from Fascism in Europe are likely to describe themselves as White but not British and may not wish to provide information about their religious beliefs with the state.

Collingson's ranking in the borough league table has been steadily improving. In 2008, 69% of the Year achieved 5 GCSEs A\*-C (including maths and English) which placed them in the middle of the league table for the borough which includes independent and selective schools (in 2007 this figure was 60%, in 2006 it was 45%). In contrast the neighbouring school St Bede's ('their rivals' according to many Collingson pupils) achieved 34%.

The school is situated just behind the high street on a quiet residential road. The original red brick school building, built in 1914, stands tall at the front of the grounds while entry into the grounds reveals several interconnecting utilitarian buildings built when the school was extended in the 1960s and 1970s. The school has a large field, as well as several courtyards and playgrounds.

Each department is collected in their own buildings; humanities (geography, history, religious education and citizenship), the expressive arts (art, drama, music, and physical education), ICT (information and computer technologies), business and social sciences (business, sociology, and psychology), languages (French, Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese), mathematics, English and technologies (food technology, design technology, textiles, electronics and child development). Pupils move around the school throughout the day, to different buildings to have their lessons in the appropriate classroom.

Inside the school many of the walls are painted bright pinks, purples and greens, and pupils' artwork is displayed on the walls as are photos of sentiment of the week (for example 'trust' or 'respect'), represented in sign language. The head teacher, Mr Firth, who joined the school the year before I started my fieldwork, made these changes and has a very visible presence in the school. The first time I was introduced to him he was busy putting students' pictures up around the drama department and, throughout my time at Collingson, he often popped his head into lessons and greeted pupils by name when passing them in the corridor. On becoming head, he encouraged an 'open door policy', and now most teachers keep their classroom door open when teaching. As one teacher said: "I never would have dreamt of doing that in other schools I've worked in but now I'm happy to do it".

As Segal, a Year 11 pupil, points out, Mr Firth's presence around the school is appreciated by pupils:

"When I first came here in Year 7 I just thought 'I want to go home'. The new headmaster has really improved everything; he's like one of us, he's always around asking us what we think, it's so much better than being behind a brick wall and getting one of their people to talk to one of our people, that's what it was like with the old head".

Staff too appreciate Mr Firth's positive leadership style. As Mac an Ghail has noted:

'Head teachers, as institutional 'moral gatekeepers', perform a major organisational role in structuring the self-experience of those who work in schools' (1994: 21).

Thus Mr Forster, the head of Year 11, not only acknowledges Mr Firth's effect in terms of leadership but also in terms of the knock-on effects on the school's atmosphere:

"The head teacher has brought a lot of positiveness, and the staff feel confident in him and people have raised their game a bit...I'd say that the atmosphere has changed, from the kids' side of things I'd say they like the head teacher, they see him as someone who wants to do well, and wants the pupils to do well at Collingson school... and staff also feel a lot more comfortable and confident with the new head teacher, things are going forward in the school".

More generally almost all pupils spoke positively of their relationships with teachers and the school's sense of community. For Lexy, another Year 11, the community atmosphere is "Collingson's strongest point". She explains:

"Nobody is on their own and there's a special bond between teachers and pupils...it's different, you don't find many schools where you can have a joke with the teachers".

Similarly Year 11 Leah contrasts the "positive human contact" she experiences with teachers at Collingson with her primary school:

"The reason they [the teachers at Collingson] are great is because they care and they encouraged me. In primary the teachers thought I was stupid and they didn't like me, they judged me and they weren't nice. When I wasn't good at the beginning of

Collingson that didn't matter because they saw past that... they never said 'well done' at my primary school".

Collingson is a diverse school with pupils from a wide range of ethnic, national, religious and linguistic backgrounds; English is not the first language for more than half the pupils. Around 20% of pupils are from white British backgrounds, 15% from black African and 15% from Indian backgrounds. There are pupils from a wide range of other backgrounds including Chinese, Cypriot, Greek, Caribbean, Malaysian, Polish, Russian, Portuguese, Iranian, Pakistani, Indonesian, Afghani and Columbian.

The ethnic make-up of the school does not reflect the make-up of the surrounding area. Notably there are few Jewish pupils in Collingson School, despite the significant size of the local community, and there are less white pupils in the school than live in the surrounding area. This outflow of white pupils is the case in many educational markets (Bradford and Hey 2007). Further Tomlinson (2005) has cited research suggesting many white middle class families express preferences for selective or independent schools, or schools with low proportions of minority pupils and often move their children away from schools with large numbers of minority pupils (Noden *et al.*, 1998; Abbas 2002 in Tomlinson 2005).

The relationship between the school and the surrounding community can be fraught with pupils expressing feelings of disapproval from the Hasidic community - anti-Semitism is apparent in school in a way other forms of racism generally are not (see chapter 7). There are a number of selective schools in the surrounding area, including two academically prestigious, non-fee paying Jewish schools, as well as several small independent Hasidic schools.

Mr Forster describes the feelings of the local community towards the school:

"That's a bit of an ongoing issue with the local community; I don't think the local community sees the school as that positive. They see the kids on the high street...at the end of the day they just want to get home, they walk in their gangs, members of the public get knocked, some of them go into shops and are a bit cheeky and again the school is labelled because two lads are rude to a shopkeeper and the whole

school is labelled, 'the school is going downhill', but it's only two kids out of 1200 kids."

### **Collingson - educational policy**

The history of Collingson School is reflective of general trends in British educational policy. It was originally a grammar school before being amalgamated with a neighbouring school to become a comprehensive during the early 1970s. Comprehensive education was conceived as a response to criticism of the secondary school system that had been in place since the Education act of 1944. The act provided secondary education to all in the form of an effectively bipartite system<sup>47</sup>; pupils were streamed on the basis of the 'eleven plus' exam with the top scoring 25% of pupils offered places at grammar schools, and the rest secondary moderns. Grammar schools were designed to offer academic education while secondary moderns a practical education.

The underlying ideology for this system was to offer all pupils an education suitable to their abilities regardless of background, and in line with contemporary thinking the IQ based 11+ was viewed as the most accurate way to measure 'ability'. However it became clear that this system was perpetrating social divisions; grammar schools primarily benefitted middle class pupils along with only a select few from the working class. Secondary moderns offered a basic and under-funded education with very few pupils going on to A Levels or university, and on the whole severely curtailed future opportunities (Tomlinson, 2001).

The comprehensive ideal was a response to this divisive system; conceived to offer mixed-ability, non-selective education to all pupils living in the local area divided into school catchment areas. The idea was that all pupils would be offered the same standard of education regardless of 'ability'. During Labour's reign (1964-1970, 1974-1979) this ideal was implemented in most regions until the 1976 Education act prohibited selection completely. Comprehensives offered hope - the potential to overcome social inequality through educational policy and as such represented a 'metaphor for social change' (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 16).

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<sup>47</sup> Although it was conceived as a tripartite system; grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical, few technical schools were built so the vast majority of pupils either went to grammar or secondary modern.

However the comprehensive ideal was short-lived. In 1979, the newly elected Conservative government implemented a significant restructuring of British schooling; selection was re-introduced along with the introduction of market choices and competition. This 'deregulated schooling 'market' was constituted by variable forms of privatisation, commercialisation and commodification' (Mac an Ghail 1994: p. 17). This, as Mac an Ghail argues, created:

'Hierarchies of schooling...within and between the expanding range of schools in the re-stratified league tabled social world of: comprehensives, grammars, independents<sup>48</sup>, grant maintained<sup>49</sup> and city technology colleges (CTCs)<sup>50</sup> ...restructuring was accompanied by the public re-legitimation of inequality of provisions for different groups of students, ideologically justified in terms of market diversity and parental choice' (Mac an Ghail 1994: p. 17).

In line with these changes, Collingson School was threatened in the late 1980s with closure from the borough, which claimed it was no longer a 'viable institution'. The school survived after receiving grant maintained status from the government.

Grant maintained schools were abolished in 1998 by the newly elected Labour government. However this 'New Labour' government continued to promote choice and differentiation in schooling;

'With market competition between schools fuelled by league table publication, school 'choice', the extension of a specialist school programme<sup>51</sup>, and enhanced private funding and influence in education' (Tomlinson 2005: 156).

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<sup>48</sup> Fee-paying schools

<sup>49</sup> Grant Maintained status was part of the Education Reform Act 1988, as part of the Conservatives aim to offer more choice in educational provision and to weaken the influence of Local Education Authorities (Tomlinson 2001); rather than being managed by the local authority they are owned and managed by a board of governors.

<sup>50</sup> State-funded all-ability schools which are controlled by central government rather than the local education authority. Private business sponsors provide one fifth of the initial costs and own or lease the school building, the rest of the initial costs and the running costs are paid for by the government. These schools focus on science, maths and technology (as well as teaching the National Curriculum) and have close links with businesses and industry.

<sup>51</sup> The specialist schools programme enabled existing schools to convert to specialist colleges (technology, maths and computing, science, engineering, business and enterprise, languages, art, sport, humanities and music). In 2001 a government white paper suggested the expansion of the programme to 50% of secondary schools by 2005, and the introduction of more specialisms and currently about 90% of maintained schools are

Additionally the Beacon Schools programme (later changed to 'Leading Edge Schools Programme'), in which schools received extra funding for recognised excellence and were partnered with less successful schools to share good practice (see following chapter), and the City Academies<sup>52</sup> programme (later just Academies), were both established in 1998.

Collingson became a specialist language college in 1998; in addition to the typical languages taught in schools (French, German and Spanish) Collingson also offers Italian, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese; and all pupils must take two languages (normally it is only compulsory to take one). There is an annual Japanese exchange programme, in which Year 10 pupils studying Japanese can stay with a Japanese family and visit a Japanese school, and in return the Japanese pupils visit Collingson school and stay with Collingson pupils. In line with New Labour educational concerns (see following chapter) this language college status is commended by Ofsted for preparing pupils exceptionally well 'for their roles as global citizens'.

Within the hierarchy of 'desirable schools' (Tomlinson 2005), Collingson's fortunes have varied. Between 2004-2006 the school was placed on 'special measures'<sup>53</sup> by Ofsted, the government educational inspection body, a mark of 'failure'. Special measures affect 'desirability'. Mr Forster said it was "derogatory for the school": even when those working in the school "didn't think the school was special measures", it affected the intake of the school with many parents avoiding the school, basing their opinions on the Ofsted report. However when I was undertaking my fieldwork, Collingson's positive Ofsted report and steadily improving league table result had the effect of marking it as an increasingly desirable school.

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specialist. This programme is conceived as a way to help schools 'develop identities through their chosen specialisms' (in a landscape of parental choice) and helps them achieve this through private sector sponsors and additional government funding (department for children, schools and families).

<sup>52</sup> Similar to CTCs, sponsors would partner the government to set up new schools; although the amount needed from sponsors was halved and could also be made up of goods or services in place of money.

<sup>53</sup> This is a term applied following an Ofsted inspection 'when a school is failing to provide an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school', the school then receive frequent inspections from Ofsted, intensive support from the local authority, extra funding and resourcing' ([www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk)).

## Daily life in school

From 8am the streets around Collingson School start to fill with pupils streaming in from the bus, tube or on foot. Pupils have a school dress code (sixth formers wear their own clothes) of black trousers or skirts (but no jeans), white shirts and striped tie or white polo shirt in the summer, a navy emblazoned sweatshirt or V-Neck jumper and a similarly emblazoned blazer. Despite the constant effort at enforcing this code by staff, many pupils attempt uniform variations outside of the accepted code and these often signify pupils peer-group identity: Un-tucked shirts, baseball caps, trainers, 'unsubtle' make-up, high heels, jeans, scarves worn inside, band patches sewn onto bags, and costume jewellery are all typical<sup>54</sup>.

Pupils cluster around the school entrance and in the playground chatting with their friends before the bell goes and they make their way to their form rooms for registration; form tutors take the register and circulate information, letters home or news. Once a week each year group has an assembly in the main hall during this period. When the bell goes again pupils make their way to their first class. There are five classes in the day, each fifty minutes long. Movement around school is structured through timetables and bells, pupils are expected to walk and not run inside school, sit down as soon as they enter the classroom and stop talking when the teacher speaks. A significant proportion of teachers' directions are aimed at organizing and ordering pupils bodies; they repeatedly tell students to sit down, line up, leave space, don't push, don't run. Bodies have disruptive potential within school; a lot of effort is devoted to training pupils' 'as bodies' to be orderly and well-behaved. However unruly bodies are a recurrent feature of school life (see appendix 1)

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<sup>54</sup> The battle over uniforms is constant; teachers are expected to enforce standard uniform codes while pupils try to get away with endless deviations from this standard. Teachers continuously and publically tell students to modify their uniforms; take off scarfs, coats and hats, tuck in shirts, tighten ties, change trainers for shoes and wear blazers. If pupils repeatedly resist this micro-adjustment of their appearance than a letter was sent home to parents. Girls' bodies present a particular problem as teachers tried to consolidate notions of the non-gendered school child with notions of appropriate femininity. Meanwhile girls are collaboratively negotiating their own ideas of appropriate feminine appearance. These intersecting intentions often created tension manifested in battles over the length of skirts, the height of heels and especially make-up. A teacher told me that in a meeting the teachers were briefed on what should be considered acceptable and appropriate make-up (subtle make-up such as mascara) and what was consider unacceptable and inappropriate make-up for school (black eye-liner, red lipstick). She described how her glib comment "so basically we don't want them to look like whores" was met with "a stony jagged silence".

At the same time, the organisation of the school day, in which all pupils move from class to class, along narrow corridors and stairways and all at the same time, results in an explosion of bodies pushing, jostling and squashing (and being pushed, jostled and squashed) in attempts to get to where they need to be. Returning to school, especially without the 'protection' of a teachers' identity, I often found myself stuck in the middle of this mass of bodies and was constantly reminded of the close physical contact (both voluntarily and involuntarily) pupils have with each other, in a way that is less common in the adult world.

After the first two hour-long lessons there is a twenty minute break; pupils find their friends and head to the canteen or their peer group territory - a specific place in the school grounds where the group always congregates. After another two lessons there is an hour for lunch. Younger pupils go to the canteen or eat their packed lunch in the playground. Year 11 pupils are allowed out for lunch and wait by the school gates for their friends before strolling in small groups to a nearby supermarket, bakery or cafe. Most buy their food and head back to school and their territory, although the smokers take this opportunity to duck into side streets away from teacher's eyes. After lunch there is one more lesson and then a final registration before pupils make their way out of school, stopping to chat with friends or wait for someone they normally get the bus home with. Again the streets around the school become full with pupils, this time leisurely making their way home.

### **The learning environment**

Like most contemporary comprehensive schools, the sixties ideal of mixed-ability teaching is only apparent in some non-core subjects. In other subjects pupils are streamed according to ability from Year 7, based on their Year 6 SATs<sup>55</sup> results. Now, as Mr Forster explained the "buzz word" is "academic differentiation". As such even within one school: 'the same stock of knowledge is not readily available to all pupils equally' (Wolpe 1988: 180). Researchers such as Wolpe have argued that this reinforces social inequality:

'Normalising judgements involving streaming and the demarcation of pupils on grounds of their 'ability', largely corresponds with class membership' (Wolpe 1988: 180).

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<sup>55</sup> Standard tests in maths, science and English taken by all year sixth primary school pupils (age 10-11) in maintained schools.

Before I focussed on Year 11, I observed a wide-variety of lessons, in terms of ability and age, the amount of pupil disruption that occurred and the amount of 'formal learning' that appeared to be going on. It is generally acknowledged by teachers that Year 8s (age 12-13) and Year 9s (age 13-14) are the hardest to teach and the classes with the most disruption, eruptions of peer arguments, upsets and resistance to learning (see appendix 2)

Almost invariably, in the classes I observe, teachers are well-prepared and enthusiastic, although the control they have over their classes does vary (even among the same groups of pupils). Teachers are expected to follow a lesson structure with a short starter exercise, a main exercise and a finisher exercise accompanied by visual stimulus. As one teacher told me, they are encouraged to make sure every lesson had the "wow factor". Lessons are often broken down into 'bite size' pieces, for example pupils are given a work sheet, instructed to stick it in and fill it out and then the teacher goes through the answers. Pupils often work in groups and are rarely expected to learn independently.

Pupils are instructed in the specific expectations of the national curriculum in each subject and teachers often make reference to 'levels' and numerical targets. For example a teacher might say "we're trying to reach level six today". These represent standardised national targets and standards set by the government, thus pupils' learning experience is continuously shot through with reference to these specific, hierarchical and intangible targets and their achievements (through SATs, GCSEs, A Levels) are also structured in this way.

The national curriculum also structures learning through discrete subjects and places the emphasis on the transmission of specific information, divided into topics. One teacher, who teaches psychology, describes her struggle in trying to redress this balance:

"I'm trying to get them to see how everything is joined up, that psychology isn't simply divided up into these different topics, that you can apply theories to different topics. They think when we do discussion lessons they're not learning, they say 'oh it's a wasted lesson' but I'm trying to get them to develop their skills. I don't want

every lesson to be just about knowledge. They have these lists, these tables of what they need to know, but they don't get that it all fits together".

Similarly when I share my observation about the insular nature of GCSEs with Michael, a Year 11 pupil, he offers this corroboration from his learning experience:

"It's like my English teacher was talking about A Levels linking with university degrees, and I was like 'linking? No everything is separate'. That's what school makes you think, when actually everything is linked together".

### **Value produced through formal schooling**

The top set science class are receiving their grades for a science module that contribute towards their final GCSE grade. Debbie says she is worried she will get a B and this will be a disappointment because she got A\* in her two other modules, Leah also thinks she will get a B. Normally chatty, the class descends into absolute silence as Mr Phillips goes around the class telling each pupil their mark. Mr Phillips makes his way to our table and tells Debbie that she got 100%. The class (all listening intently) burst into spontaneous applause and cheers; Leah gets an A. As everyone discusses their marks I hear many congratulations as well as exclamations of surprise (I can't believe I got an A\*), relief (I'm so pleased I got an A) and frustration (I only got two marks off an A\*). As we leave the classroom, other members of Year 11 are streaming out of their science classes asking their friends from different classes "so what did you get?" As I walk further along the corridor I see Nadia comforting Zohra who is crying, "don't be upset, a C isn't rubbish, it's a good mark".

Year 11 pupils are differentiated academically according to ability or attainment, but are also invested to different degrees and in different ways in formal schooling. Formal schooling is an important way to produce positive value, and is evaluated in a different way to value-producing processes of the informal realm, which are peer evaluated. Success is evaluated through 'objective', standardised and tangible markers (such as GCSEs, sets or SAT levels) and reinforced by teachers and the institutional structures of school. The end result is nationally recognised and standardised value-products – qualifications, that can then be exchanged for a higher level value-product – higher qualifications, a place at university and eventually a 'good job'.

While differentiated by teachers according to a set of objectively assessed markers, pupils also positioned themselves as different kinds of pupils. Both Michael and Leah are designated as high-achievers, but describe their investment in formal schooling in very different ways. Michael says he does just what he needs to get by, “blagging” his success - achieving without hard work. In contrast Leah says she works “really hard”, competing with herself to achieve her best. Her life inside and outside school is structured around this investment in formal schooling:

“I get home from school, do homework or see a tutor, then I have dinner, do a bit more work and then have a bath and go to bed. I work all day on the weekend, but I do go out on Saturday night, but that’s all really.”

The spectrum of investment ranges from Leah’s intense commitment, Michael’s (stated) effortless success, to conscientious investment without success, investing minimally or complete rejection of formal schooling (skipping lessons, not taking exams). Investment in formal schooling interacts constantly and variably with investment in informal value fields. Unlike the ethnographies of Hey (1997) and Mac an Ghail (1994), in Collingson, academic high-achievement does not result in marginalisation in the informal realm. Year 11 Tanya identified this as one of the most positive characteristics of Collingson school:

“The good thing about our school is that we really help each other [academically], like in other schools it’s like ‘oh she’s a geek’, but in our school it’s not like that”.

Those seen as the most popular people in the Year are often among the high achievers, although within friendship groups there is usually a variety of academic achievement. Academic high-achievement is not a prerequisite for success in the informal realm, but most pupils I meet invest to some degree in formal schooling. Socially marginal status in the year often corresponds to a rejection of formal schooling, but this could be connected to these pupils’ rejection of school as a social space as well - skipping lessons and avoiding school as much as possible. And these pupils who ‘opt out’ have a different status within the Year to those judged as social failures.

Pupils invest to varying degrees in both formal schooling and in school as a social space, and success in one system does not provide immunity from struggles in the other (Mac an Ghail

1994, Hey 1997). Like other forms of value-production, the degree and mode of investment in formal schooling interacts dynamically with other kinds of value-production.

The following episode is an example of the dynamic interaction between formal and informal value-production. When working on their group drama play, an important component of the GCSE, one groups' differential investment in formal schooling spills into the informal realm, having a detrimental effect on pupils' interpersonal relationships:

The drama class is working on performances of twenty minutes that contributes towards their final mark. The teacher has put them into groups of five and these groups can decide whether to do a scripted or devised piece. When the teacher originally reads out the group Lisa, Caroline, Jacob, Mario and Abeeku look pleased and excited; Caroline and Lisa are best friends and are friends with Jacob and Mario, who are also good friends, Abeeku is also friendly with all of them and they designate him as leader. However a few weeks' later things are not going smoothly, Jacob and Mario want to do a scripted piece because it will be less work, Lisa and Caroline want to do a devised piece because they think it is their best chance to get a high mark. Abeeku is in the middle trying to negotiate between the now warring camps. Sitting with the girls one lunch time, Caroline is filling her friends and me in on the next instalment of the saga:

“I spoke to Abeeku on the phone last night; he does want to do a devised piece but he doesn't want to say, he doesn't want to lose Mario and Jacob as friends”.

I am surprised by this, “it wouldn't affect their friendship though would it? It's only a lesson”. Caroline thinks it would:

“Jacob can be really immature, when I wouldn't agree to do scripted he wouldn't talk to me for two weeks...The thing is that me and Abeeku have places at Clare House [a selective and 'desirable' sixth form college] and I don't want this project to get in way of me getting an A. Jacob is bombing out, I heard he only got double Ds in his English mocks”.

This example illustrates that the informal realm cannot be understood as separate from formal aspects of school. At the same time it provides 'an important alternative source of social power and prestige' (Hey 1997: 126). Even the most academically committed and

focussed pupils find time in lessons for informal interaction; it is to these transformative opportunities I will now turn.

### **Transformative opportunities in the classroom**

While major disruptions (see appendix 2) are a feature of some classes, the most common form of disruption in all subjects and year groups is chatting. There is frequently tension in the classroom between pupils' desire for informal interaction and the teacher's imperative to teach (as a teacher said to me as her class worked away silently "there aren't many sets that spontaneously become silent like this group").

Teachers' attempts to limit chat are an almost constant feature of the classroom (with varying degrees of success), and rising level of chat is a more frequent and inclusive cause of class disruption than the oppositional resistant actions of a few individuals. Some teachers employ a seating plan in order to separate self-selecting groups and attempt to limit chat. On the other end of the scale the presence of a substitute teacher is viewed by pupils as an opportunity for unrestrained informal interaction which most substitute teachers permit as long as noise levels do not disturb other classes.

Pupils invest a lot of energy in extending the possibilities for informal interaction within the classroom. Any attempt by teachers to stop pupils self-selecting in the classroom is met with resistance; pupils often subtly shift their position in a seating plan so they can sit next to at least one friend. The day (teacher-decided) groups are announced for the GCSE drama projects the teacher warns me that emotions will probably run high; he explained that there are often tears as pupils are placed in groups with people not of their choosing.

Although pupils have no control over whether they are in class with their friends, the classroom is an important place for friendship work. To have no one to talk to (even within the classroom) is seen as a social failure and to be avoided as much as possible. Pupils often have 'class friends', who they reliably sit with and chat to in class but do not spend time with outside lessons. In this way they can ensure company even if they are not placed in classes with peer group friends (with whom they spend break and lunch-time). As Year 11 Lexy explains:

“In class everyone will talk to each other, but as soon as class is finished everyone will just go into their own social group. Because in class you’re not always going to be with your social group so you have to talk to different people.”

Thus relations within the classroom, as Amit-Talai argues:

‘Construct sociability through management of key institutional dialectics. It is a construction of sociability which works to bridge distinctions between private and public, personal and bureaucratic, formal and informal, which can never be fully reconciled, but equally cannot be allowed to remain separate. The person who cannot manipulate these distinctions, who cannot transform a schoolmate into a friend or a lesson into an opportunity for informal exchange risks being publically judged as a social incompetent’ (1995: 154).

### **Transformative opportunities outside the classroom**

A defining feature of school life is the immense effort pupils put into transforming every possible opportunity into a chance for informal social interaction: From walking to school together, to using the five minutes between lessons to have a quick chat, from linking arms on the way to lessons to waiting by the school gates, to grabbing a final few minutes before home time. At lunch and break time groups of students - small and tightly clustered or large and swarming – filled the playgrounds, field, canteen, halls and stairways. Every moment and space in school is utilised as a chance for peer interaction.

In her discussion of the informal, Amit-Talai (1995) argues that the institutional treatment of adolescents results in a compression and intensity of peer sociality. At the same time:

‘The identification and potential solidarity which this intensive contact engenders is treated with suspicion as subversive of bureaucratic order and adult authority’ (1995: 153).

While the intensity of peer sociality is clearly visible within Collingson school, I did not observe suspicion of these on the part of adults within the school. As I have suggested in the preceding sections, it is more that peer relations are shaped and restricted by the demands of formal schooling.

The school day is strictly regimented and pupils are instructed by bells to move between registration periods, lessons, breaks and lunch. Pupils are divided into classes and follow their own specific timetable, regardless of their preferred companions:

“So in a school environment, kids run to those bells, a bell rings – Pavlov’s dog scenario – end of lesson, got to go, they’re trained, that’s their boundaries, ‘this is what I have to do’ – a bit robotic really” (Mr Forster).

Friends are separated and reunited a number of times during the day, these meetings squeezed into the strictures of the school day. Some friends are not in any classes together and so will only have break and lunch-time as opportunities for sustained interaction.

During class, teachers attempt to restrict and suppress pupils peer interactions in order to teach. However during break and lunch-times pupils are predominantly left to their own devices. In Year 11 peer groups tend to have specific self-designated territories in which they spend these periods. As I will go on to discuss (chapter 5), these territories vary in visibility, some territories are hidden from both teachers and other pupils’ view, while others are in full view. Those in visible territories might call greetings to passing teachers (“Hi miss!”) but adult/ pupil contact during these times is minimal. Teachers spend their non-lessons in their shared offices or cafes outside school, and only intervene in pupils’ spaces when they are noticeably breaking the rules. Break and lunch-time are opportunities for intense, uninterrupted peer interaction.

### **Relationship between teachers and pupils**

Relationships between pupils and teachers are both personal and institutionally defined. Teachers often teach pupils for multiple years and get to know them well, frequently talking together, in private, about pupils’ personalities, motivations, backgrounds and social groups. On the whole teachers seem to care greatly about their pupils and are emotionally invested in their lives, Mr Forster who as the head of Year 11, had overall pastoral responsibility for the 230 members of Year 11, describes his job as “an emotional roller coaster”:

“When you see pupils succeed, when they’ve been rock bottom, obviously I don’t show this to the kids as much, but I get quite lump in the throat. You care for them, you nurture them, you want to be there when things aren’t going well for them and give them your worldly advice.”

At the same time teachers are expected to maintain clear boundaries in their relationships with pupils and usually reveal very little personal information about themselves. Pupils of all ages are very interested in teachers' personal lives and often ask or try to guess this information, getting a kick out of finding out even quite common place information like a teachers' first name or where they used to live. For example throughout the two years with her class, Miss Taylor proffered such broad brush information as where she used to live, where her parents have a house and what her husband does for a living. The pupils often referred to this knowledge within class ("Devon? That's where your parents have a house isn't it miss?"). When I mentioned this observation to Year 11s' Leah and Michael, Michael quipped, "it's because we're trying to work out if they're human or not".

Pupils also experience their relationships with teachers as personal, and I often hear pupils say the teacher "doesn't like me". The classroom is an ambiguous site of both objective and standardised learning and subjectivities and emotions. As Miss Gold reflects:

"Individual personalities in class have the power to make the class go well or badly, they have such forceful characters that they can make a big impact on the class and teaching...I take it personally, I mean I know on one level it's not personal but on another level it is, and it's that tension always".

While pupils often expressed their emotions in class (shouting, storming out, or bursting into tears are not unusual in the classroom), teachers put a lot of energy into emotion management, in order not to reveal emotion in class. When teachers do show their feelings in class (often despite their best efforts) the event is significant for both teachers and pupils. It can result in a temporary reversal of the conventional dynamics of the pupil-teacher relationship as pupils take on the caring, reassuring adult role:

I enter Miss Gold's classroom just as her class are leaving, two girls look concerned and are asking "are you alright miss?" Miss Gold replies with a shaky voice, "no, I'm not alright, how would you feel if someone spoke to you like that and then everyone was laughing?" The girls are consoling, "we weren't laughing at you, we were laughing at Binyamin", says one, her friend reiterating, "yeah at him, not with him". The girls go off and Miss Gold tells me

that when she asked Binyamin who was being disruptive in class to leave he called her “a washed up old bag, everyone else knows it and you should know it”. The whole class started laughing and Miss Gold was visibly upset by this, leading to concern from the girls.

Pupils’ revelations vary according to the individual teacher and pupil. Some teachers prefer to keep very strict boundaries and do not wish to hear about pupils’ lives outside lessons. Other teachers are more open to hearing what pupils wish to tell them. Likewise some pupils reveal very little to teachers, for example of their experiences in the informal realm or serious problems at home. One teacher tells me that although they are informed of the loss of a parent, other problems a pupil may be facing may be unknown to the lesson teachers. This she said is difficult for teaching, a pupil might be “firing off” in class but the teacher will not be aware that something significant is going on outside school. Teachers need to walk a delicate line between being sensitive to these possibilities and maintaining order in the classroom. Alternatively, some pupils tell teachers a lot, filling them in on the ever-changing dynamics of the informal realm or confiding in them about problems at home. Furthermore, some teaching roles such as mentor, form tutor and head of Year have a significant pastoral dimension and involve listening to and managing pupils ‘personal’ problems as well as academic ones. Thus teachers can frequently be party to pupil revelations, however these revelations are always lop-sided, with pupils revealing a lot more about their lives than teachers.

Often then, teachers have a good knowledge of goings on in the informal realm, including shifting friendship groups and pupils’ informal value-producing actions. Teachers usually observe these dynamics with a removed interest, and over the years come to understand well the constant transformations through which pupils constitute their informal realm. Discord, fallings out, friendship break-ups and their corresponding emotional effects are understood as a normal part of the school experience and pupils are offered a sympathetic ear by teachers.

Mr Forster as an approachable head of Year hears lots of information about goings on in informal realm:

“With my open door, I believe that 99% of pupils are happy to come and speak to me. I think I’ve built up that bond with them...I get all the gossip, which is quite a good thing, you know. You do see who hangs about with who and this that and the other, and you do see in lessons who sits with who and the social side, you see the small groups. But again that’s something which I respect and appreciate with the kids... I’m a total believer... that they chose their friends, I never ever say ‘why are you sat with her, she was slagging you off in my office yesterday’, you know what I mean. Even the other day a girl came to me about the prom and said I can’t sit at that table because I fell out with such and such, and again that’s all part of it, you know?”

Sometimes however, teachers must become actively involved in these peer relations. Accusations of bullying are taken seriously and teachers mediate in attempts to resolve these issues and protect the victim. Episodes in which teachers become involved are key stories that pupils in Year 11 retell to illustrate their past discordant relations. As I hear these stories from the viewpoint of different peer groups, it emerges that accusations of bullying are rarely accepted by the accused bully. The line after which teachers should intervene in pupils peer relations is often blurry and contested by the pupils’ involved.

The relationship between pupils and teachers is another tension that results from the institutional treatment of adolescents. The institutional organisation of schooling engenders invested and personal relationships between pupils and teachers. At the same time it demands the maintenance of boundaries and intense emotional management by teachers. The classroom is an ambiguous space; although primarily defined through the formal institutional requirements of schooling, it is often the site of powerful emotions, interpersonal transactions, and revelation.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have contextualised the informal realm and explored its constitution in relation to the everyday, institutional organisation of school. In this way we can understand that sociability in school involves the ‘management of key institutional dialectics’ (Amit-Talai 1995: 154). Pupils’ are active in negotiating the ambiguous spaces of the classroom, the

school grounds and relations with teachers - the blurred distinctions between 'private and public, personal and bureaucratic, formal and informal' (ibid). In the following chapter I examine the academic organisation of school in more detail.

## Chapter 4: Negotiating Academic Success

In this chapter I look at wider political ideologies that inform pupils' experience in school. I take a 'top-down' approach, examining prevailing ideologies which have informed New Labour education policy and the way in which these are taken up in school by the head, teachers and pupils. I argue that a focus on these ideologies shows a contemporary regime of the self that is consonant with the metanarratives of social theorists such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992). However I contend that the explanatory potential of these theories is only partial because they lack empirical grounding. I argue that these theories are a contemporary example of the ideology of individualism.

My data shows that although pupils do discuss their futures in terms of 'individual pathways' this does not capture the full story. Through their choice (and talk about choices) of sixth form<sup>56</sup> and the related discourse of 'fulfilling your potential', pupils show an awareness that future success is not simply a matter of individual choices. Rather that it is dependent on the possession of capital (economic, social, cultural), which they do not think they will gain at Collingson (a 'normal' comprehensive) even with hard work.

Further, although the concept of capital (Bourdieu 1973, 1977) is significant to our understanding of school, its explanatory power is again limited. A focus on some of the most 'privileged' pupils in Year 11 illustrates that although in terms of 'capital' they are among the most advantaged this does not necessarily correspond to success in the informal realm. As I discussed in chapter 2, Bourdieu's theory of capital relates educational success to family upbringing (e.g. 1973), but cannot explain how status is produced in the informal realm. This chapter expands the critique of Bourdieu's theories I expounded in chapter 2.

Further, as I argued previously, the possession of capital is principally out of pupils' control, closely related to parental identity and the home context. A reliance on this concept would view pupils' experiences at school as largely determined by wider social meanings and systems of value. In contrast, a focus on the processes of the informal realm shows pupils collaboratively creating a social world in which they can possess significant power. In this

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<sup>56</sup> Year 11 is the end of compulsory schooling, after this pupils choose whether to stay on at Collingson or move to other sixth form institutions such as other schools or sixth form colleges.

project, pupils utilise the resources they have in their control; their bodies, words and interpersonal relations. Success in this realm is primarily established through transactional success and value-produced through action rather than any predetermined identity markers. As it is through these actions and transactions that pupils create and maintain social categories that mediate their experience, sociality is intrinsic in pathways to adulthood. Thus the theories of Beck and Giddens are fundamentally flawed as they do not attend to this sociality in their explanations of pathways to adulthood or more generally in their theories of the social (see Hey 2002).

### **The changing fortunes of Collingson School**

Year 11s have been witness to, and subjects of, the changing fortunes of Collingson School. Prior to their entry into the school, there was seven years of upheaval - the head teacher of ten years left and was replaced by a series of new heads who stayed no longer than two years each. In 2003, when Year 11s joined the school, an Ofsted inspection judged it to have 'serious weaknesses' and in 2004 after another inspection it was assessed to have made 'insufficient progress and was placed on 'special measures', on which it remained for two years.

In 2006 Mr Firth became head of the school<sup>57</sup> and is seen by both teachers and pupils to have ushered in a more positive era for the school. The positive improvements in the school are recognised by the most recent Ofsted report in 2007 which described Collingson as a 'rapidly improving school' which had 'overcome many challenges' to offer a 'good standard of education' with 'outstanding features'. The Ofsted report particularly emphasises the 'outstanding standards' for personal development and well-being, including 'social, moral, spiritual and cultural development and appreciation of different cultures and faiths'. This is in contrast to 'achievement and standards' (academic success) in which it is assessed as 'adequate'.

Ofsted represents one of the key ways a school is judged externally<sup>58</sup>, and relates to the emphasis on 'standards, achievement and excellence' that is central to New Labour's

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<sup>57</sup> Previously he was deputy head in one of London's 'highest achieving' comprehensive schools.

<sup>58</sup> Along with league tables.

education policy (Bradford and Hey 2007). However this 'objective' judgement is taken up in different ways within school. Mr Forster, the head of Year 11, discussing this period, retains value for the school by questioning the validity of Ofsted's inspection techniques:

"Someone comes into your classroom, who hasn't been there before, doesn't know the kids that you've got, makes a judgement on you in 20 minutes".

Drawing on a sports analogy, he asks if a footballer would be judged in the same way as a teacher:

"If you go to a football match and after twenty minutes someone is having a bit of a bad game, you don't say they're a rubbish player when they are actually an elite performer".

In this way, he argues that the Ofsted judgement can be understood as "politics" and not a true judgement on the value of the school.

In contrast Mr Firth claims success and value through this 'objective' recognition system, emphasising the improvements the school has made in terms of this evaluative framework:

"One thing I think it would be good to look at is the current Ofsted report. What was great for us is that everyone was telling us that we'd only be satisfactory but by the end of the Ofsted report they said we were good with many outstanding features. And the outstanding qualities were the caring aspect of it and the quality of the time we give the kids and I think that sends a hugely powerful message and a very very important part of my vision for the school was that we were recognised by Ofsted."

What is particularly interesting about Mr Firth's statement is how he articulates the personal ('caring', 'quality time') through the public; as quantifiable transactions that can be transformed into objective markers of success. Likewise his vision for the future sees the school as, "one of the most successful schools in North London", in both "academic terms" but also in terms of "really helping to shape the loving whole child, the whole being, and fostering notions of kindness and support".

This interweaving of the personal and public is characteristic of contemporary schooling at all levels - from policy, through school leadership to relationships between individual pupils

and teachers. But it can also be seen as a more general characteristic of contemporary society. Mr Firth's vision of shaping 'the whole child' and the close connection between the personal subject and institutional forms clearly mirrors the metanarratives of social theorists such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Rose (1999). These theorists have argued that contemporary Euro-American society has seen a significant shift in the relationship between 'the individual' and 'society' and that these changes are fundamental to the construction of both.

Giddens (1991) argues that we are living in an age of reflexive modernity. Modern institutions differ from past forms of social order, and this modernity has radically altered the experience of day-to-day social life and the most personal aspects of existence<sup>59</sup>. According to Giddens one of the defining features of 'high modernity' is 'the increasing interconnection between the two 'extremes' of extensionality and intentionality: globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other.

Giddens argues that doubt and reflexivity are pervasive features of modern life, the certainties of tradition and habit have dissolved but have not been replaced by the certainties of rational knowledge. According to Giddens, 'the self' is fundamentally implicated in this reflexive moment:

'Modernity institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of a hypotheses...Systems of accumulated expertise – which form important disembedding influences – represent multiple sources of authority, frequently internally contested and divergent in their implications. In the setting of what I call 'high' or 'late' modernity – our present day world – the self, like the broader institutional context in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet

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<sup>59</sup> Giddens' argues that 'high modernity' is characterised by three key changes. Firstly, the articulation of social relations across wide spans of time and space - social relations are now not confined to a particular location between people sharing a time and place but have been dislocated through new technologies (for example email or air travel). Secondly, institutional reflexivity - in which the knowledge about social life is an important part of its organisation and social life is subject to revision and transformation in light of new knowledge. And finally, disembedding mechanisms which separate interactions from the particularities of locales. Two of these mechanisms are central to high modernity; symbolic tokens, 'media of exchange that have a standard value and are thus interchangeable across an indefinite variety of contexts (1991: 244) (for example money). And expert systems, systems of expert knowledge, of any type, depending on rules of procedure transferable from individual to individual (1992: 243) (for example medicine).

this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (1991: 3).

In this context of uncertainty and choice, trust and risk become central notions. For example in high modernity we rely on, and must place our trust in, expert systems, as they provide us with knowledge that in the past would be passed on by elders (situated in a specific time and place). These are central not just to the institutional order of modernity but also to the formation and continuity of the self. Giddens argues that the rise of therapy and counselling exemplifies these processes:

'Therapy is an expert system deeply implicated in the reflexive project of the self: it is a phenomenon of modernity's reflexivity...Therapy should be understood and evaluated essentially as a methodology of life-planning. The 'capable individual' today not only has a developed self-understanding, but is able to harmonise present concerns and future projects with a psychological inheritance from the past' (1991: 180)

Beck also argues that industrial society is undergoing a process of reflexive modernisation. According to Beck this constitutes an epochal shift, he argues:

'Just as modernisation dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernisation today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being' (1992: 10).

While a consequence of developments in science and industry is a set of risks and hazards that were unprecedented in previous generations, for Beck, these risks can potentially be dealt with by reflexivity. For example the 'Green' movement is a reflexive critique that can lay a moral claim to rationality in order to contest these developments.

Like Giddens, Beck argues that these changes have impacted significantly on social agents, and their relationship to social structures. Beck argues that in high modernity actors tend to become more individualised, social change forcing them to become increasingly free from structure (for example class, family or gender structures). For modernisation to advance successfully these processes of unshackling are essential, individuals must release themselves and then actively shape the modernisation process.

Individuals freed from social constraints then make decisions about their lives and so reflexively construct their own biographies:

‘People are *set free* from the certainties and modes of living of the industrial...The system of coordinates in which life and thinking are fastened in industrial modernity – the axes of gender, family and occupation, the belief in science and progress – begin to shake, and a new twilight of opportunities and hazards come into existence – the contours of the risk society. Opportunities in the risk society the principles of modernity are redeemed from their separations and limitations in industrial society’ (1992: 15).

Like Giddens, Beck argues that while social actors become increasingly individualised they also become more dependent on institutions, which span both the private and the public sphere. According to Beck, ‘Individualisation becomes the *most advanced* form of societalisation dependent on the market, law, education and so on’ (1992: 131). Thus ‘the apparent outside of the institution becomes the inside of individual biographies’ (1992: 130).

Rose (1999) presents a less optimistic view of the changing relationship of self and society. Rather than conceptualising our contemporary context as one of increased freedom, Rose highlights the ways in which our selves are ‘intensively governed’ (1990: 1) and argues that this governance of the contemporary ‘soul’ is distinctive. Firstly, subjectivity has entered directly into political discourse and the practice of government:

‘The most obvious manifestation has been the complex apparatus targeted upon the child: the child welfare system, the school, the juvenile justice system and the education and surveillance of parents. But the regulation of subjective capacities has infiltrated wide and deep into our social existence’ (1990: 2)

Secondly, the management of subjectivity has become a central concern of modern organisations, demanding the ‘calculated management of human forces and powers in pursuit of the objectives of the institution’ (ibid). And thirdly an expertise of subjectivity has been born, and grown to be centrally important in contemporary society.

Thus like Giddens, Rose centralises the importance of the 'psycho-therapeutic domain' in 'contemporary regimes of the self'. He points to the massive expansion of this domain in contemporary society and argues that vocabularies of the therapeutic are increasingly used in practices that address human problems, and a number of new professions claim expertise over the human psyche. This new domain makes the individual knowable, calculable and administrable: 'A general science of the individual no longer appears a paradoxical project; individuality has been made amenable to scientific judgement' (1999:145). Rose argues this is one such process that has enabled new ways of speaking and acting: 'Our very sense of ourselves has been revolutionised. We have become intensely subjective beings' (1999: 3).

Mr Firth draws on 'vocabularies of the therapeutic' and the psycho-therapeutic realm in his strategies for the school, and positions "the social and emotional aspects of learning" as central to his remit as head teacher:

"The social and emotional aspects of learning really teaches children the importance of emotional intelligence, and that it's something you can learn; understanding your feelings, being sensitive to others, conflict resolution and understanding what the self is. Understanding things like alienation and the whole notion that feelings do actually matter and how you can find space to interpret them. And how reaching out to try and understand someone else is just as important too - getting kids to understand what empathy is is another important thing".

In line with Rose's argument that the individual is now 'knowable, calculable and administrable', Mr Firth is able to offer an "evidence base" for the efficacy of these personal modes of education. He is confident in the school's ability to offer pupils "systems, procedures and structures" to deal with their emotions and personal relationships:

"What has been a great evidence base for us is that in the year group we started this in there has only been one recorded fight with the Year 7 boys, in the Year previously we had about fifty. So while pupils will always have issues, and they'll always be robust and challenging things going on... at least we've given them systems and procedures and structures to unpack those issues".

## **New Labour education policy**

Rose argues that the contemporary regime of the self is an essential component in modern networks of power, and in turn the regulative dimensions of the modern state have fundamentally reshaped how individuals experience themselves and their lives. New forms of political rationality, have transformed the relationship between individuality and society:

‘The political subject is now less a social citizen with powers and obligations deriving from membership of a collective body, than an individual whose citizenship is to be manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options’ (1999: 231).

This contemporary conceptualisation of the political subject can be observed in New Labour education policy. Year 11 pupils have been schooled for all but one year under a New Labour government and while the party (and New Labour ‘vision’) is now increasingly beleaguered, New Labour education policy significantly shapes Collingson pupils’ educational experiences.

New Labour educational policy is underpinned by ‘Third Way’ politics which was conceived as a response to a rapidly changing world including globalisation and ‘reflexive modernity’<sup>60</sup>:

‘Third way politics circumscribe a new ‘ethics’ and seek to emphasise a duality of freedom and responsibility appropriate to a radically altered world. As such the third way is essentially a normative ethical framework situating welfare policy including education’ (Bradford & Hey, 2007, p. 596).

Bradford and Hey argue (referencing Gewirtz 2002), that these policies retain a body of ‘New Right’ ideas such as marketisation, privatisation, managerialism, the promotion of work and central control of schools and curriculum’. Combined with the ‘Social Democratic’ emphasis on ‘social inclusion’ (generally defined through the prism of labour market participation), ‘social cohesion’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ (597):

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<sup>60</sup> In a neat example of ‘reflexive modernity’, Giddens has not only observed and discussed the changes of ‘high modernity’ but has been a key proponent of ‘Third way’ politics as a response to these changes and advisor to ex-prime minister Tony Blair .

‘Our vision is to build a new culture of learning which will underpin national competitiveness and personal prosperity, encourage creativity and innovation and help to build a cohesive society’ (DfEE, 1999<sup>61</sup>, quoted in Bradford and Hey).

Education is positioned as a key means of achieving government objectives, by bringing into line economic, social and personal goals. As Bradford and Hey argue, implicit in this discourse is the notion of the ‘responsible citizen’:

‘Maximising their own human capital in constructing a viable and rational identity that incorporates ambition and aspiration as principal elements of the self. Schools and other educational institutions are enjoined to encourage their students to think of themselves as ambitious and aspirational subjects, in charge of their own futures’ (2007, p. 597).

In the orientation of the ‘leadership team’ at Collingson school, we can clearly see an educational direction that goes far beyond the academic - aiming to shape and direct ‘the whole child’, and teach pupils to become ‘responsible citizens’. Mr Firth emphasises that he takes, “the whole idea of global citizenship really really seriously”. He explains:

“I think it’s very important for our young people to see that there’s a school and a society that they’re responsible for and they can change and improve”.

Similarly Mr Forster frames his role in moral terms:

“Yeah, in a certain way I believe that the subject teachers give the pupils the knowledge and the year heads give the pupils the ethos, the morals, the citizenship side of things, to make them good citizens in the community...and to make them aware that when they do go into society they have to take the responsibility of leading what’s right and what’s wrong”.

### **Notions of success**

SWR: What is the vision for the school?

Mr Forster: The vision for the school is to become a Leading Edge school, which is your top bracket school, not just in the borough but in the country. The head teacher

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<sup>61</sup> White paper from the department of Education and Employment.

has a five year plan which he's working through, because it won't just happen overnight.

Bradford and Hey (2007) argue that the 'Leading Edge partnership programme' exemplifies New Labour's policy objectives; and is designed to be at 'the forefront of the drive to reform secondary education' (DfES, 2004)<sup>62</sup> in Bradford and Hey 595). The programme designates success<sup>63</sup> and requires the successful school to collaborate with less successful schools in order to help raise educational standards. Thus the Leading Edge programme exemplifies the Third way by combining the social democratic commitments of collaboration, community and inclusion with the 'modernist' values of standards, achievement and excellence (Bradford and Hey 2007).

However as Bradford and Hey contend, despite the centrality of collaboration, successful schools are necessarily defined in contrast to those that are mediocre or failing - competition and hierarchy remain inextricably central to this programme. This contradiction, Bradford and Hey argue, is representative of New Labour policy in general, the focus is on success - all notions of success necessarily produce a failed other, but this other is frequently obfuscated:

'In New Labour's Britain it seems impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful. In education there has been an unrelenting focus on successful pupils and students, successful teachers and, of course, successful schools' (2007: 595).

When discussing the school's time on special measures, Mr Forster initially uses the language of failure ("our school wasn't doing very well") but quickly corrects himself, reframing this period in terms of "struggle", a more dynamic and less defeatist turn of phrase:

SWR: But did you think it (being put on special measures) was fair?

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<sup>62</sup> White paper from the department of Education and Skills (formerly the DfEE, currently education is dealt with in department for Children, Schools and Families)

<sup>63</sup> And this designation brings with it extra funding and resources.

Mr Forster: I didn't think the school was special measures...But our school wasn't doing very well, not *not* doing very well but was struggling but that was due to the change in personnel...

### **Transmitting notions of success**

In Year 10, pupils begin to work towards their GCSE exams which they take at the end of Year 11. GCSEs are positioned as a key foundation for success in individual life trajectories as well as a key indication of the school's success, disseminated through league tables, published among other places in national newspapers. Thus a significant amount of effort and resources are directed towards helping Year 11s achieve well in their GCSEs<sup>64</sup>:

Mr Forster: My focus and vision is...individually that every pupil has those doors open to them when they come in for their exam results on August 21<sup>st</sup>. ...and obviously the knock on effect that the school sees that they've improved again which goes to the data side and the league tables, we move up the league tables and they see that we've given them value for money. So it's good for the academic side, for the league tables, for the borough, for the next intake, for the prospective parents, so the head can say 'look at this we've hit the seventies'<sup>65</sup> when a few years ago we'd just hit the sixties. So to show the school is moving forward.

Year 11s, working towards their exams, which will take place in the summer, are subject to frequent pep talks on the importance of working hard and achieving well. This is especially apparent in the weekly assemblies (normally led by Mr Forster), the weekly mentoring sessions<sup>66</sup> and occasional PSHE<sup>67</sup> days. The emphasis on success is clearly articulated in

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<sup>64</sup> Pupils are told repeatedly in class, assembly and form time that GCSEs are very important for their future. Class teachers prepare pupils by tutoring them in exactly what will be required of them in their exams, including the standards of specific grades ('this is an A\* answer, this is a C grade answer' etc). Every Friday pupils have 'interventions' in different subjects to give them further preparation specific to the GCSE exams. In the spring and summer terms, study rooms and revision sessions are organised for pupils outside school hours, teachers attend these sessions to offer pupils additional support. Mr Firth runs an English revision session over two days during the May half term. In an assembly just before the year 11s go on study leave, Mr Firth gives each student a set of highlighter pens and blank revision cards to 'inspire' them to revise.

<sup>65</sup> The percentage of pupils gaining 5 GCSEs grade A\*-C. The key standard set and disseminated in the league tables.

<sup>66</sup> Compulsory, after school sessions with a teacher and a group of about five pupils (grouped together according to their shared orientation towards school). In these sessions pupils are given pep talks on studying, encouraged to make study plans or discuss their aspirations. They are also told they can talk to their mentors at anytime about any academic or personal issues. The idea is that each student has as much support as

these talks, the year group is repeatedly told that they are the best year group in the school and that they need to live up to these high expectations. In a typical assembly, Mr Forster tells the year group:

“I’ve told you before, you’ve got the best form tutors in the school, and that’s because you’re the best year in the school. And we want you to celebrate, strive and succeed. But we will never give up on you”.

To a backdrop of inspirational quotes<sup>68</sup>, projected onto a big screen behind his head, Mr Forster emphasises the need to “be professional” and the importance of working hard:

“You’re not coming to school anymore, you’re coming to work...school isn’t for friends anymore, it’s not for hanging out, you can all do well, but you need to focus”.

In line with this promotion of work and marketisation, pupils are offered monetary rewards in exchange for academic success. After their GCSE mock exams each Year 11 receives an actual grade for their exam, a predicted grade for each subject and an ‘aspirational grade’ for each subject; as one teacher tells his class, “the grade you could achieve if you work really hard”. When they receive their GCSEs, if they improve on their actual grade they receive one point, if they improve on their predicted grade they receive two points and on their aspirational grade, three points, these points are converted into money which pupils receive directly<sup>69</sup>.

One PSHE day, a ‘motivational speaker’ comes to speak to the pupils, his speech reinforcing much of the emphasis on hard work and success. The speaker is tall, black, good looking, about forty and wearing a sharply cut suit. His speech is animated, humorous, engaging and well-practiced. He first acts out a sequence that illustrates ‘the thinker and the prover’:

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possible, and can go and see their mentor about anything; “If you have any problems, about academic things, personal things, or just if you did well in something and you want to tell someone” (Mr Forster).

<sup>67</sup> Personal, social, health education days, when normal lessons are suspended and activities are focussed on aspects of PSH subjects.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Edison: “Most of life’s failures are those who didn’t realise how close they were to succeeding before they gave up”. And Muhammad Ali: “I hated every minute of training, but I said, ‘don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion’.”

<sup>69</sup> One teacher commented that she found this scheme shocking:

“It motivates children by money, bribery, like the rest of our money motivated society, the value of education for its own sake is lost, and no one else is questioning it, and I find that really depressing”.

“What your thinker thinks, your prover proves, so if you think you can’t do something then you won’t be able to, and if you think you can, you will”.

He then goes on to emphasise that success is about self-belief:

“You have to believe in yourselves, because you have to take the power, older people want to keep you down so they can keep the power for themselves.”

With will power, self-belief and organisation:

“You can all pass your exams; you can all get As. If you start improving, people won’t think you’re dumb anymore, they’ll see you in a different way, and you’ll be a different person. There is no try, there is only do or don’t”.

Like Rose, Bradford and Hey (2007) have discussed how governmental modalities of power can shape and govern the individual self. They argue that New Labour policy aims to foster ‘psychological capital’ in individuals - by instructing schools to encourage students to think of themselves as ‘ambitious and aspirational subjects, in charge of their own futures’. Bradford and Hey conceptualise psychological capital as an extension of Bourdieu’s concept of capital (1977); and argue it is constituted in practices such as self-esteem, confidence and self-belief. In the notions of success being transmitted to pupils at Collingson school, we can see an effort to foster this form of capital. As Bradford and Hey argue:

‘By fostering psychological capital the potential reach of governmental power is also extended by increasing the capacity (and, potentially, desire) of the subject to work on their self under the specific tutelage of the authority of success discourses’ (2007: 601).

Further, in line with the social democratic dimensions of the New Labour project, these attempts to cultivate psychological capital:

‘Represent a new twist on redistribution in the sense that the discursive tactics entailed seek to inscribe young people from *disadvantaged* backgrounds with confidence and resilience in the face of psychological and social pressures’ (ibid).

Pupils I spoke to did appear to have taken up these ‘vocabularies of success’ (Bradford and Hey 2007), presenting themselves as ‘ambitious and aspirational’ subjects. GCSEs are viewed as essential building blocks for future success, even if what this future entails is

unknown. Thus for Lisa and Keely, exams are their top priority, a necessary step to future success:

Lisa: At this minute, the exams [are most important]...When my exams are over I can worry about stuff that's not important, like boys and what I'm going to wear. But now all I have to think about is my exams.

SWR: So why is it important to pass your exams?

Keely: For your future.

Lisa: To have a good future you need to do well, to go further, and do more...well exams really but...

SWR: And do you know what you want to do in the future?

Both: No, no idea.

Pupils I speak to predominantly express ideas that as long they pass their exams and continue to work hard then their imagined future promises opportunity, freedom and choice. As Natasha, Tanya, Muhammad and Nihal express when I ask about the future:

SWR: So do you think you'll be able to do whatever you want in the future?

Natasha: Yeah, if you do your A Levels.

Muhammad: The sky's the limit.

Tanya: I don't know, because when you're young you think 'I want to be this, I want to be that' but when you get to it you realise how much work it is, it's not just a dream it's something you have to put work into.

SWR: So do you think if you put in the work you'll be able to do what you want?

Tanya: Yeah...I don't think it's easy but everyone has the opportunity, it's not like you don't have the opportunity, everyone has the opportunity, they have to be able to take it up and use it wisely, some people might not do that.

SWR: So do you think everyone in the Year has equal opportunities?

Nihal: Some more than others, like some people really don't care...I think self-motivation is the main key; if you don't have self-motivation then you really won't get anywhere.

Thus pupils' 'vocabularies of success' appear to evidence the theories of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) who argue that in high modernity individuals, disembedded from their

communities and fixed social roles, are increasingly called on to invent their own pathways. Without structured routes to follow, choices must be made internally and individually, and life is structured through self-monitoring practices. This capacity to 'plan one's own life' is accompanied by an enlargement of choice and freedom.

### **Doing your best**

How can *everyone* be successful in a non-selective comprehensive with a wide variation of abilities among pupils, all being assessed according to the same standardised criteria? The discourse of 'doing your best' can be viewed as an attempt to manage these contradictions; through this discourse pupils are encouraged to view themselves as individuals (and not compare themselves to others). Working hard, taking responsibility and doing your best are foregrounded as the criteria for success:

In their first mentoring session, Miss Wheeler tells her five mentees:

"I picked you because I think you need a kick up the backside, you're all very close to getting your five grade A\* to C, but you're not achieving to the best of your ability, you can all do it, so I'm here to give you a bit of extra motivation".

Lisa agrees with Miss Wheeler's interpretation:

"I know I'm not doing the best I can do, I just do what I need to do, and sometimes I do a bit extra but not as much as I could do, I could achieve more".

In a mentoring session a few months later Miss Wheeler again extols her mentees to "slog away" and "just work, work, work":

"Don't drift around talking to your friends; they'll be there when you're done...when you get your results it will affect the rest of your life".

But Marina answers that even hard work is not enough:

"I got shouted at by my mum about my grades. I worked as hard as I could but it just wasn't enough for my mum, or my teachers".

Miss Wheeler responds by reinforcing the do your best discourse:

"But if it was good enough for you then that's what's important".

This emphasis on personal choice and hard work answers the New Labour remit; centralising 'responsibility' and seemingly promising the possibility of 'success' for all, as

long as they self-manage sufficiently. The individualising discourse shifts the focus from objective, competitive numerical categorisation (grades) to qualities of the self:

In the lowest Year 10 geography set, the pupils are working on their coursework, the class is working hard and pupils speak in muted tones as the teacher supports individual pupils. Many pupils in the class need extra support to understand the exercise and the teacher patiently explains concepts again and again to enable them to get on with the task. At one point a girl complains, “I can’t do it, I’m stupid”, to which the teacher replies, “now we don’t say that do we”. After the class, the teacher mentions to me one of the pupils in class who needs the most support, “he finds the work most difficult but then he doesn’t try, which makes it worse”. In a later lesson she tells me how pleased she is with the class because, “they’re really taking responsibility for their learning”.

Pupils also draw on these discourses. Both Segal and Leah are deeply invested in formal education, working hard in lessons and at home, in top sets and predicted predominantly As for their GCSEs. They frame their academic aspirations in terms of ‘doing your best’. Leah tells me:

“I work hard but I’m not after As, I just want to do my best. If I work hard and I do well then I know I’ve done my best. If I didn’t work hard and didn’t do well then I’d only have myself to blame and I’d be angry at myself...but getting my mock results (almost all As and A\*s) was brilliant, it made me happy and showed me that all my hard work was worth it”.

Similarly chatting with Segal in class, she tells me she has been predicted all A’s and A\*s, I ask her if she would be disappointed if she did not achieve these grades. She answers:

“I don’t think I would, because I’d still know I did my best, I would be disappointed if I got a C though, because that would mean I wasn’t achieving my best”.

Despite their claims that ‘doing their best is achievement enough’, it is unsurprisingly impossible for Leah and Segal to totally expel reference to objective and quantifiable grades. As we will see in the next section pupils are extolled to ‘just do their best’ in the context of relentless academic differentiation (another key part of New Labour educational policy) and categorisation. As Bradford and Hey argue:

‘There is no place in this account (and its policy imperative) for the inevitable consequences of a competitive exam system or the differential distribution of capitals (educational, symbolic, material and psychological); all can be winners, if not then the fault ‘oft doth lie within’’ (2007, p. 609).

Thus if success becomes a quality of the self, so too does failure, and the personal nature of this failure means it is especially painful:

At the end of the day, in which Year 11s got their mock results, I see Sam at the tube station on the verge of tears. As we get on the train I ask her what is wrong, she tells me that she’s upset about her results, although she wasn’t expecting to do well she still feels bad. She shows me her results which are mainly Ds and Es:

“I even got an D in English and I’m supposed to be good at English. All the teachers go on and on about how GCSEs are the most important thing, so if you don’t do well it makes it even worse. And I did revise, but when I get into the exam everything just goes blank...and it’s especially hard when everyone is going on about it, and being best friends with Segal because she always does well”.

### **Academic differentiation**

Although the focus is frequently directed towards the individual discourse of doing your best, pupils are differentiated academically in a number of ways, and so placed in hierarchical relations to each other. The prominence of the doing your best discourse is in tension with its contextualisation within academic differentiation which defines pupils through notions of ability and attainment (e.g. low ability, high ability, low achiever, high achiever). Although notions of relative ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are unspoken (by teachers at least), they remain ever present.

Further, it appears the case that demarcations based on ‘ability’ and streaming are accompanied by different forms of knowledge. For example it appears from the notably different mock results, that pupils designated less ‘able’ are directed towards vocational (and less prestigious) GCSEs or to replace some GCSEs with BTECs (which again are less prestigious). In humanities, drama and art between 70 - 90% pupils achieved grade A\*-C, while in electronics, business and ICT this fell to between 30-40% of pupils, while in child

development only 17% of pupils achieved these grades. Thus it seems likely that these are significant in marking divergent life trajectories for pupils<sup>70</sup>.

While transcribing my interview with Mr Forster, I was struck by his use of these categories to describe individuals. He often described pupils in terms of their academic attainment levels, for example referring to “a group of high attaining girls”, and their mixing with “with low attaining girls”. These categorisation practices co-existed with his clear emotional investment and concern about pupils well-being and his hard work in ensuring even the most ‘disruptive’ and ‘low-achieving pupils’ could feel safe and supported in school:

“Another pupil I can think of has a home life that is absolutely dire, home life has ruined her life but always, always came into school, would have massive kick offs with people...but knew that people in school actually cared for her and would get her through it, and realistically shouldn’t have got through school...but we got her through school, got her that first step”.

Pupils are simultaneously viewed as both ‘achievers’ (both low and high) within a competitive system, with a direct impact on the ‘data’ that will be produced by the school (and the main way the school will be viewed as ‘successful’)<sup>71</sup>:

Mr Forster: I have my data targets which I’m supposed to hit, set by the borough for that particular year group, in a certain way that’s what I’ll be judged on...school is judged on data, simple as that, when Ofsted come in data is a massive part of what they judge on.

And individuals in a network of personal relationships (including those with teachers), collaborating to create a ‘loving’ collectivity:

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<sup>70</sup> As I have discussed social class is rarely addressed directly within the informal realm; pupils rarely classify themselves or their peers in terms of class and do not like to answer questions about parental occupation. As I wanted to respect pupils’ understandings I did not push them to classify themselves, and further, as I will argue, there was a certain flexibility in pupil’s self-presentation so I do not want to assume straight-forward class classifications based on observations. At the same time based on the body of research on social class and educational achievement (e.g. Wolpe 1988) we could surmise a correlation between these less prestigious academic trajectories and social class.

<sup>71</sup> Teachers were often critical of the targets set by the government and that ‘data’ was the primary way the school was judged; For example Mr Forster felt that being judged on data targets was ‘wrong’ because it only measured one aspect of school.

Mr Forster: My big thing was that I wanted them to be one big family, I've got lots and lots of clusters of different students, of different groups you know? But they always pulled for each other all the time, but again they totally respected each other... The year group collectively have grown together, which is really nice, they have their closeness and their love for each other really.

The importance of 'data targets' and pupils' knowledge of these further stretches the plausibility of the do your best discourse:

I'm walking to the tube station with Segal, Sam and Caroline, we have just had an afternoon assembly in which the pupils were given another pep talk about the importance of working hard in their GCSEs. Caroline is complaining:

"Teachers keep pressurising us to get A\* but it's not because they care about us, it's just because it will look good for the school. Like they keep going on about the year having to get over 75% A\*-C, but it's just to make them look good".

On another occasion Nihal describes feeling demoralised by academic differentiation, overriding teachers' emphasis on personalised achievements:

"Just branding someone as, like, a level 5 at SATS and then not be able to do higher sciences, that's the main thing people were down about in GCSEs, not having the motivation to do better...There's no way people will be comfortable working at a higher level if people have been branded already as foundation, that's a thing I don't really like, that you can brand someone as 'that'...you ruin people's motivation by doing that".

Academic differentiation has been an aspect of the pupils experience since, at least, Year 7, when they were streamed according to their Year 6<sup>72</sup> SATS in core subjects (maths, English, science). Pupils do another set of SATS in Year 9 and this effects streaming for GCSEs and the level of GCSE taken. For example, a pupil with a level five in science (one being highest, five lowest) would only be allowed to take the foundation level GCSE. In Year 11, pupils are streamed in even more differentiated ways, with each set divided into two and linked to expected GCSE grades. For example what was once two classes of set A, became A1 and A2,

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<sup>72</sup> The last year of primary school, age 10-11.

A1 pupils are expected to get an A\* in their GCSE and A2 pupils to get As. Pupils are told about these expectations and teachers often reinforce these in lesson. For example, after introducing an exercise to the top geography set Ms Taylor added, “you lot are A\* students so you shouldn’t find this too difficult”.

In Year 11 the form groups<sup>73</sup>, which have been together since Year 7, are also mixed up and reformed according to ‘achievement levels’. High achievers, key marginals<sup>74</sup> and low achievers are grouped together into form groups. A teacher tells me that although pupils were not ‘told’ they were being streamed, they knew these new divisions were according to ability. For example when a certain boy’s name was read out for the “crème de la crème” form the pupils exclaimed “what him? Are you serious? He’s not even that clever”. After pupils’ reactions, including many exclaiming, “I’m in the thick form, I’m in the thick form”, the strategy was changed slightly, and high achieving boys were placed with low achieving girls and vice versa (although the highest and lowest achieving forms remained as they were). In line with the ‘leading edge’ logic (responsibilities as well as rights) high achieving pupils were told that this was so that they could “inspire, encourage and support” their lower achieving form mates.

Each form tutor has a coloured list of their students, those marked with green are expected to get five GCSEs or above, those marked with amber are marginal and those marked with red are expected to get below five. The number of GCSE each pupil is expected to get is also on this list. Pupils are sometimes shown their colours, for example Miss Taylor shows her group of mentees their colours (which are amber) as a motivational strategy.

Pupils are acutely aware of their positioning within these hierarchies and often define themselves as pupils through these differentiating practices, especially when they are positioned as ‘unsuccessful’ in this categorisation system. This conversation one lunch time is typical of the transformation of academic differentiation into peer transactions:

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<sup>73</sup> Pupils are registered at the beginning and end of the day in their form group. They normally stay in the same groups with the same teacher from year 7 to year 11. Pupils identified form groups as key to friendship formations in their first three years at Collingson. The move to stream form groups as well as subject groups was unprecedented in the school.

<sup>74</sup> Key marginals are those pupils that are assessed to be on the borderline of achieving 5 GCSEs grade A\*-C, the league table ‘magic number’.

Lexy: I worked really hard on my maths coursework so I could move up a set, I hated being in that set because people in it were just struggling to get a C because they didn't try. Now I've been moved up, I'm in the third set, I might *even* get a B (sarcastic tone).

Sam: I'm in the sixth set, I'm the dumb one.

Segal: I'm in A1.

Tom: I'm in A2 but I think we've got a better teacher, so even though you lot are supposed to be getting A\*s I think we've got a better chance of getting them, which isn't really fair on the people who worked really hard to get into the top set.

These academic categorisation practices both reflect and structure pupils' more general evaluative practices, enabling them to position themselves and others in hierarchical relations through reference to these 'objective' categorisations. Unlike other peer evaluative practices, these categorisations are explicitly installed and circulated by teachers and the institutional structure:

In Spanish class (which is not streamed), Lexy is talking to Katy about her form - the 'highest achieving' form. Katy says, "my form's not that bad, there are some quite clever people in it". Lexy contradicts this, saying that Katy's form is the "key marginals' form". Katy seems upset by this, she replies, "stop putting me down, I'm going to tell Mr Forster that you said that".

In geography Lexy and Georgia are sitting next to each other. Lexy (who describes her relationship with Georgia as an 'intolerant tolerance') is baiting and teasing Georgia, nudging her pen, and telling other people on the table that Georgia, "loves me, she can't be without me". When Georgia tells Lexy to shut up she replies, "you love me really don't you Georgia?" A few minutes later Miss Taylor tells the class to work more quickly and talk less, Lexy responds, "look, I've done two pages!" Georgia quickly and loudly challenges this, "no you haven't! You've only done one line". Lexy replies in a proud but mocking tone "I'm an A\* pupil", to which Georgia again contradicts "no you're not, you got a B in geography".

## **Fulfilling your potential**

The work of Giddens and Beck has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the persistent inequalities that continue to exist in 'high modernity'. While emphasising the freedom and flexibility of contemporary experience they fail to attend to relations of power that situate people with varying degrees of access to the (supposed) choices and opportunities of 'reflexive modernity' (e.g. McRobbie 2004). Furthermore they fail to attend to the uncertainty, pain or loss that might accompany the demand for self-invention (Walkerdine et al 2004).

Bourdieu's concept of capital, with its intrinsic critique of inequality and domination can offer an important counterpoint to these individualised theories, and highlight the way pupils are differently positioned within broader structures of inequality. In this section I discuss the way the discourse of 'fulfilling your potential' suggests pupils' understanding that the possession of 'capital' (economic, social and cultural), is important in defining life trajectories.

Year 11 marks the end of compulsory schooling, throughout this year pupils are deciding whether to stay on at Collingson (to do A Levels or the less academic BTECs), to move to another school for sixth form, to a sixth form college (academic or vocational) or to leave education altogether (although few pupils chose this option). These choices result in physical separation as well as academic differentiation and are an indication of the divergent life trajectories pupils from the year will be taking.

Most of the 'high achievers' are planning to move to other more academically 'successful' sixth forms. The majority to the selective sixth form college Clare House, among the top 3% of colleges countrywide (and a Leading Edge institution). Pupils discuss their options frequently and choice of sixth form is often framed in terms of 'fulfilling your potential'. While individual choices are still central to this discourse, there is also recognition that educational institutions can offer capital not available at Collingson school.

It is through these conversations that pupils' awareness of the differential distribution of capitals and the connections between economic and symbolic capitals emerge. It is interesting that although most of those speaking are predicted predominantly As and A\* they still feel they could be excluded from certain prestigious educational institutions because of their lack of economic capital. This can be viewed in reference to psychological capital; despite their success in terms of academic qualifications they still feel lacking compared to 'rich people'. Segal, Nadia, Lionel and Dominic are discussing their plans for next year, and what grades you need in order to get into Clare House:

Segal: You need As to get in, even though they say you need Bs, because there are so many people applying you have to really get As to get into.

Lionel: Apparently Sefton Park (a nearby 'high achieving' comprehensive) is a better sixth form than Clare House.

Segal: Yeah but it's in a really rich area, and full of rich people. It's really hard to get into anyway, but rich people are cleverer so...

Dominic: Rich people aren't necessarily clever, some of them can be quite stupid.

Segal: Yeah but if you're rich your parents can pay for private tutors, and stuff, so they can make sure you get into a good school.

A few weeks later a similar conversation takes place, as William, Natasha and Segal chat during class. William tells Segal that he would be annoyed with her if she didn't go to Clare House because she, "wouldn't be fulfilling her potential". Then he says to Natasha, "and you can go anyway because your house is big enough". This leads the conversation on to another (absent) pupil and the size of her house which is apparently "massive" with a butler. William says he does not want to go to Clare House because he wants to be spoon-fed and at Collingson, "the teachers tell you exactly what you need to get an A". Segal disagrees, "Clare House does spoon-feed you, that's what they do, they tell you exactly what to do to get an A".

Similarly, some pupils' view of themselves as lacking sufficient capital to be part of elite institutions emerged when they talked about their plans for university. Tom asks me at what university I'm doing my PhD, I tell him Brunel and he tells me he's never heard of it: "I don't know that many universities, the famous universities, that I'll never get into. That no-one in

this school will ever go to<sup>75</sup>". "So no-one from here goes to those places" I question. "Well we can't afford to go to private schools, so we can't afford to go to Oxford can we?" In a science lesson, Ishwar and Ahmed are asking the teacher Mr Phillips where he went to university, he tells them that he went to Imperial College. They're clearly impressed but after he leaves the conversation Ishwar says, "why's he teaching here if he went to Imperial College? It's like Miss Taylor (the geography teacher), why's she teaching here when she went to Cambridge?"

However, pupils position themselves in different ways in relation to these discourses. In the following conversation Lexy and Rhiannon bring up notions of 'fulfilling your potential' but reject other pupils' understandings that attending a more 'successful' institution will help in this quest. Lexy justifies this choice through the notion of 'spoon-feeding', also discussed by William, Segal and Natasha, dismissing it as an invalid way to gain qualifications (and in contrast to the discourses of working hard and taking personal responsibility):

SWR: So do you think at Collingson you get a good education?

Lexy: Yeah, if you listen and you don't have a class full of knob heads then you generally do get a good education...All these people that want to go to Clare House and go 'the teachers are shit', but they're not. I mean, 'I'm not going to get good grades here, I'm not going to fulfil my potential', well no because...

Rhiannon: You weren't born with A\*, you work for that.

Lexy: Exactly, you got those marks yourself, so why do you suddenly think that going to a different school is going to get you better grades. It's stupid really because that's what they all think, they deny it when you confront them but that's what they think.

SWR: That Clare House will give them a better education?

Lexy: Because Clare House is supposed to be one of the best colleges in London or England or whatever. It's like staying here and getting a good education will probably be harder, because Clare House spoon-feed you, they don't care about their pupils, they care about the grades their pupils get, so they spoon-feed them to get A\* and stuff. Here you do the work yourself, the teachers teach you, they don't spoon-feed you, and they care about you.

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<sup>75</sup> This was his perception; actually one or two pupils in the last two years have got into Oxford or Cambridge.

## Middle class experience

Although class membership was opaque in the informal realm, I was still able to make certain observations about the relationship between pupils' class position and their orientations, aspirations and future choices based on the biographical information they volunteered. Year 11s Leah and Georgia are both from privileged, middle class backgrounds; their parents are professionals, who attended prestigious universities, and own houses in particularly affluent areas of London. Both girls are predicted A\* and As in their GCSE, and so could hardly have achieved better. However, their opinions of Collingson suggest that they feel a comprehensive education fails to generate the same capital as other educational institutions; they view this lack as both social and academic. In Year 11 both girls are planning to leave Collingson and unlike many of the other pupils, they have among their range of options private education. Georgia is deciding between Clare House and the competitive and prestigious private school Milton Girls<sup>76</sup>, while Leah has gained a place at the equally competitive and prestigious private school Childers College.

Both have friends who attend private schools and often position themselves in relation to these educational alternatives. The first day I meet Leah, during a conversation about my research, she suggests I contrast Collingson with a private school. She tells me:

“In private school, everyone works hard and wants to do well, so everyone is competing against each other. It can be a really bitchy environment, I mean I've seen people cry because they get an A, an A is seen as a failure, you have to get A\*. To get a B, you might as well get a U, it's a complete failure. But here if you work hard you're seen as arrogant, it's not cool to work hard in lessons here”.

Leah also feels she missed out socially, she says she if she had gone to another school she would have been “in the centre of things”. Similarly, Georgia tells me that she will be “glad to leave Collingson”:

“I don't really like it, the people are limiting, none of them share my interests and the teachers don't really push you academically”.

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<sup>76</sup> In one conversation she tells me that she's deciding between Clare House where she has a place and Milton Girls' but, “there's thousands of applications for only forty places so it's really competitive to get into” (later in the year she is granted a place). Her parents would prefer her to go to Milton because “it's very academic and has a really good reputation”, but she would prefer to go to Clare House because “it's mixed” (gender).

Leah is also looking forward to leaving Collingson, and feels that Childers College will provide her with the capital that Collingson has not:

“I know there are a lot of people who are better than me in each subject...but they (her fellow ‘high achievers’ at Collingson) are different to me, they didn’t think about things in the same way as me and they’re not interested in the same things as me. They’re good at geography, they can deal with the syllabus, but do they read the newspaper about geography? Do they put it into their spare time? The answer is no...People in those schools [like Childers College] don’t separate the academic from the interest, and that’s the power of education, they don’t just see results, they see education... When I went to visit Childers College, it was much more intellectual and I think my school isn’t... I think teachers come from different backgrounds and those teachers that choose to teach in comprehensives are generally the ones that went to those schools”.

Similarly, Michael, who possesses similar ‘class markers’ as Georgia and Leah, expresses his views on the limits of the education he is receiving. One lunch time I asked him if he thought there was value to school apart from getting GCSEs, a question that had been on my mind. “No”, he answers, “it’s just like a factory that prepares you for GCSE’s, the purpose is to teach you how to pass the exams, nothing more”. He feels like they’re being “schooled in mediocrity, they’re not teaching you to think, they just want a population educated up to a certain standard”.

However, middle class sixth-formers Megan, Eleanor and Jane (who self-defined as such) claim value for their school experience, especially in reference to the socially, culturally and ethnically diverse environment which other schools did not have. Thus they see Collingson offering social capital of a different kind. The story Jane tells about her friend who attends private school suggests this ‘real world’ experience is something to which pupils in more rarefied environments might wish to emulate:

Megan: But I’m glad that I came to Collingson, as opposed to say, Sefton Park. I know Collingson has a reputation to be quite bad...

SWR: What sort of bad?

Megan: Like rough, but I'm so glad I came here because it's so diverse and you understand how to deal with people in the real world, if I'd have gone to private school than I would have just known rich people.

Jane: I know someone who goes to private school and she's just trying to pretend that her school is a lot like mine. She actually copied the story of me being mugged and told it to other people, she stole my story in front of me and I was just going 'wow, we have very similar stories there' [sarcastic tone]. Because there was really specific details that she told, because she was just trying to say 'oh yeah we're really crazy, it's pretty rough in our school' and I'm like 'whatever' because I've seen her school and it's in the countryside, it's not the same thing at all.

Eleanor: It's not like our school is proper rough though...

Megan: I mean it is quite rough but not as bad as other places...

However, it is likely that as the life trajectories of pupils at Collingson increasingly diverge, for middle class pupils like Leah and Georgia, the diverse environment of Collingson will stand as unusual. Leah recognises this when she describes living in a "different world" to most of her fellow pupils:

"Mostly I don't regret that I've had this experience [attending Collingson school], because I think it's been a fantastic experience for understanding the world...I wouldn't have seen it because I live in a different world to them (her fellow Collingson pupils) and when I entered the school gates that was a different world. But I do think that my confidence and social life up until now has suffered".

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have focussed on discourses that can be located within the wider political, social and cultural landscape. Discussing how these are articulated at the level of policy, school leadership and teaching and transmitted to and taken up by pupils. In this we can see the workings of the 'contemporary regime of the self' and its use as a modality of power that aims to shape subjectivities at the level of policy. Further the arguments of Giddens and Beck - that pathways through life have become individualised - do appear to be evidenced by pupils who see the sky as the limit as long as they work hard.

Pupils *imagined* futures may well be individualised, but I would argue that this is only part of the story. In the latter half of the chapter I discussed how the discourse of ‘fulfilling your potential’ suggests pupils are already aware that life trajectories are not simply free-floating choices, but instead are dependent on capital (economic, social, cultural) that they feel they will not gain at a ‘normal’ comprehensive, even with hard work.

Meanwhile, Georgia and Leah do not see Collingson as offering sufficient capital, to which as members of ‘middle class’ families they feel entitled. However their class membership gives them more opportunities to gain capital outside school, through family, social networks and economic resources. For example Leah has private tutors and did work experience at a national newspaper, organised through a family friend. Georgia also has private tutors and does a number of extra-curricular activities such as singing in a prestigious choir that offers cultural capital outside of school.

Again however, I would argue this is only part of the story; Bourdieu’s notion of capital, though significant (especially in terms of life trajectories) represents something that is often beyond young peoples’ control. A focus on the powerful sociality that goes on within school offers a different perspective, in the informal realm pupils draw on the resources that *are* at their disposal; primarily themselves, their bodies, their words and their interpersonal relationships to co-create a social world in which they can have significant power.

Through these transactions, pupils create status through systems of value that to a large degree do not rely on the possession of external resources. Instead value is produced through action (evaluated by peers) and the successful management of interpersonal transactions (also evaluated by peers). In this social world pupils have the freedom to present themselves in ways divergent from their background. For example suburban middle class white pupils can manage their transactions through ghetto (which is coded as black and associated with inner city deprivation) and as long as their peers evaluate them as such they will be authentic (chapter 7).

To view Leah and Georgia in the context of wider society (and in terms of capital) they are among the most advantaged pupils in school. However both had significant problems ‘fitting

in' in the informal realm. After a brief 'best friendship', Leah and Georgia chose very different strategies to deal with their lack of status in the informal realm. Georgia invested heavily in the informal prestige system and gradually learned to manage her transactions successfully enough to gain a (tentative) place in the highest status girl group, the It girls (chapter 5). Leah on the other hand rejected this system and is a key member of the Misfits who produce alternative value apart from the status systems valued within school.

Thus class membership (or any other identity marker) is not deterministic of status within the informal realm; instead value-producing actions and peer transactions are key to status. Further, it is through these transactions that pupils collaboratively constitute social categories, bringing 'manifold categories of distinction' (Evans 2006) into being in particular ways. Pupils are 'making sense anew' (Evans 2006) of social categories, and while the categories they constitute draw heavily from the wider context, this is not a case of simplistic replication, but an active process of meaning-making between peers.

To return to the theories of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), their theories represent a contemporary circulation of the myth of individuality, conceptualising the Western person as autonomous and free. As Walkerdine et al write:

'For Beck then, self-invention is a way to move beyond a stultifying traditionalism, and in this respect it shares much with bourgeois individualism. It is only by recognising themselves as individuals that people can become the autonomous subjects through which progressive social change can be accomplished (2001: 24)'.

Without researching the lives of real Westerners, they continue to perpetuate these myths basing their theories on ideas rather than practice (Ouroussoff 1993).

Discourses in school, encourage pupils to think of themselves as individuals, free to do anything as long as they work hard and take responsibility for themselves. These discourses can be maintained to a degree. But as we have seen, the relentless academic differentiation by which pupils are organised in relation to each other, is an ever-present feature of school, undermining teachers' exhortations to 'just do your best'. Moreover, the informal realm in school is an important place for anthropological study, because here we can see clearly that pathways to adulthood have in no way become individualised, and instead how intrinsically

relational 'growing up' is. In the following chapters I examine the constitution of this realm in more depth, starting with peer group organisation and inter-peer group relations.

## Chapter 5: Peer groups and inter-peer group networks in Year 11

SWR: And what are the different groups in the Year?

Lexy: Well you get the boys who...

Rhiannon: The Man-dom.

Lexy: Yeah the Man-dom.

Rhiannon: The people who wanna be really cool and on the streets and all that crap...

Lexy: Then you get the It girls, they're the attractive ones... Then you get us, we're like the funny people, we keep everyone laughing. We're quite cool actually...we're quite popular in our own way. Then you get the people by the back wall, you can't really describe them...well they keep to themselves a lot...the back wall is generally associated with grunge.

Rhiannon: You get the ones that hang out at the library.

Lexy: Yeah you get the ones who go to the library every lunch time, ever since Year 7 they go there...Oh yeah and you get the guys that just wander around.

Rhiannon: They're the guys that don't want to play football.

Lexy: Yeah, they just talk, they talk in a massive circle...The blonde Barbies are the sexually charged people in the Year. The Barbies, they go and get drunk at parties, whore themselves out.

SWR: And what about you guys?

Lexy: We're like the crazy smart group, we make everyone laugh.

This fluent rundown of peer groups within Year 11 is typical of pupils' accounts. Peer groups are key to the organisation of the informal realm and tell of the way the constellation of differences established by pupils are taken up in collective as well as individual ways. Peer groups are networks of friendships and particularly dense flows of peer transactions, acts and practices that enable pupils to define themselves as a group in contrast to other groups. Conventions require members to invest a significant amount of time and transactions in their peer group, and in Year 11 all peer groups have a designated territory – a place in the school in which they spend most lunch and break times. Munn (1986) argues that actions not only occur within time and space, but they also create the time and space within which

they go on. Through their actions, Year 11s produce particular relations of time and space. Space relations are exemplified by these different territories which are in a configuration unique to the Year group, and reflect the social order they have communally manifested.

As Lexy and Rhiannon's account above highlights, peer groups are a key way pupils organise and understand difference within the Year. Members of peer groups are collectively involved in particular modes of social action and value-production, and in turn come to be seen in particular ways. These value-producing actions are primarily distributed within the organisational fields of sociality, heterosexuality, 'teenage fun' and appearance. Different peer groups might be particularly invested in certain fields, invest in different ways within the same field, or define the investment of other groups in these fields as negative value transformations.

As I have previously discussed, the institutional organisation of pupils, which divides them into one year age-grade cohort, is reflected within the informal realm. Peer groups are almost always made up of pupils from the same year group and the social order of the informal realm – the hierarchical arrangement of peer groups and individuals – is a year-group structure and there is no comparable school-wide structure. In this chapter I focus on four peer groups within Year 11: the Man-dom, the It-girls, the Misfits and the Green corridor girls<sup>77</sup>, in order to illustrate the way multiple 'categories of distinction' (Evans 2006) are enacted and defined within peer groups and inter-peer group relations.

Although important, peer groups are just one way in which pupils organise difference. As I will go on to show, pupils operationalise multiple scales of difference in order to understand themselves as concurrently united and divided. They are adept at shifting these scales of difference depending on the impression they wish to convey. Individuals, peer groups, year groups and schools are all units which pupils use to organise difference.

Furthermore, while pupils are engaged in intense debate over what constitutes positive value, and the organisation of peer groups is central to these mutual and contrastive

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<sup>77</sup> These peer group names are those used by pupils, although groups are often known by a few different names, for example the Misfits are also known as Grungies.

definition processes, I argue pupils are also producing communal value. I understand Year 11 as a community, initially brought to together through external forces but then through members' actions. They gradually produce a communal value through which they can define themselves as worthwhile as a group. The 'growing together' discourse, which I discuss at the end of this chapter, is one way this communal value is made visible by pupils.

First, I examine status in the informal realm. Different modes of social action and the different evaluations of the value they produce create the hierarchically arranged social order of the informal realm, conferring certain peer groups and individuals with high status and some with low status. In the following section I explore in more detail how status is created, conferred and evidenced.

### **Status in the informal realm**

"Well for me there were hierarchies...like I was at the bottom" (Jane, Year 13)

Sometime toward the middle of my fieldwork, the subject of popularity came up in a conversation with the Misfits. Leah spontaneously starts giving me a rundown of the status hierarchy within Year 11:

Leah: We're pretty low down in the hierarchy.

James: But we're not the lowest.

Leah: You're right, I can go through the popularity from bottom to top, at the bottom are Elaine, Rose and Fatima. Rose is alright, she's a nice girl but...

James: They're strange, odd, not quite there.

Leah: Then there's Talia and Deepa, they're the people who haven't really managed to make any other friends so they hang around with each other. Then there's us. Then there's Marina's group, you know like Francesca and Beth, they're close to being popular but not quite and then there are the popular group like Ruby and Natasha and that lot – the It girls, and the boys Chimmi, Davros Jacob, there's loads of them, we call them the Man-dom.

As this conversation illustrates, the informal realm is organised hierarchically, and this hierarchy is recognised by all pupils, regardless of their relative status. As Munn (1986) has

argued value-production is a hierarchising process, because value is by definition relative. Some individuals and groups will produce more value and in turn be evaluated more favourably by peers. Value-producing actions which lead to status in the informal realm create particular value-products – visibility. The way this visibility is achieved varies according to the conventions of the informal realm, as I discuss later.

When I ask about ‘popularity’, most pupils are quick to correct me. Although they recognise a hierarchy in the informal realm, they explain the term implies ‘most liked’. Instead, they evidence status in terms of being ‘seen’ and being ‘known’. As Megan (Year 13) says:

“It’s not popular as in everyone likes them but the loudest, the most powerful group, not popular, louder, louder and more well known” .

Similarly after Leah and James recount the social structure of Year 11 for me, I ask what makes these groups popular? Although they continue to use the term popularity, they evidence it in a similar way to Megan:

“They’re the ones with presence, the ones who have the attention on them, they’re loud, people look at them”.

The distinction pupils make between ‘being known’ and ‘being liked’ is instructive. While pupils like Megan, Leah and James recognise the actions of high status pupils produce visibility, they do not necessarily recognise that this represents positive value. In fact they usually dismiss these status/ visibility producing actions as pointless and unimportant. Involved in their own value-producing practices, they do not wish to invest in this year-wide prestige system. ‘Liking’ is a resource which is reserved for those who they *do* evaluate as producing positive value, and not simply those that have status – although liking and status are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In turn, prestige legitimates acts and practices which produce visibility and extend ‘intersubjective influence’. Leah gave me some hints on how to spot popularity:

“What would happen if Elaine [low status] asked someone if she could borrow a pencil? Even if they had a pencil case full they’d probably say no. And what would happen if Ruby [high status] asked? They’d give it to her, even if they had no other pencils, they were walking in the other direction and were late for their lesson”.

High status pupils are rewarded with recognition and the validation of an expanded self. They are also legitimised in enforcing social definitions, as the extension of intersubjective influence can be used to exclude those who do not conform to conventions. In this way status within school is comparable to Munn's notion of fame (1986); the extension of 'virtual' influence over space and time resulting in becoming seen and known.

In describing how the highly visible position of high status carries with it pressures and increases vulnerability to scrutiny, Jerome, a high status sixth-former, also analogises in terms of fame:

"It's like being Michael Jackson or something. You can be at the top of the mountain and everyone is trying to get you off that mountain and climb up the mountain themselves. It puts you under a lot of pressure sometimes, because you don't want to be popular, you don't want to be known, you just want to get on with your life".

Shola, another high status sixth-former, describes the increased imperative for self-surveillance, the intensified importance of continuously enacting an appropriate identity:

"You're more of a target because everyone knows you, everyone talks about you...You always have to have the latest fashion, how your hair is, how your tie is...always being on top of your game – like always looking good, always making sure that you look your best".

### **Low status**

In contrast those with low status are expected to be 'invisible' within the year-wide system; seeing and knowing but not seen or known. Sixth-formers vividly recollect moments when this one-way system was disrupted. Jane, who describes herself as once being in the 'bottom-rung' of the hierarchy, recalls the time when Shola [high status] addressed her by name and started chatting to her in a lesson:

"Afterwards I was like 'I can't believe it, I just had a conversation with Shola! And she knew my name!'"

Equally, Eleanor got pleasure from purposefully disrupting these expectations:

"Jada [high status] said something to me once, and I knew her name, obviously, she was speaking to me and I was like 'oh yeah sorry, what was your name again?' and she was really shocked, that made me feel good".

Conversely Shola's experience at school is of being the known, and not the knower. She says:

"It's really bad but some people I didn't even know existed. I was more with the popular group and what not. I didn't pay attention to the other groups, I was never horrible to them, I just didn't really pay them any attention".

In school the same acts are evaluated as legitimate or illegitimate depending on the status of the pupil performing them. Acts which lead a low status pupil to become seen and known are viewed as transgressive - evaluated as negative value transformations – and further decrease a person's status. In Year 11, Elaine is known as the pupil with the 'lowest' status. She occupies this position because she is visible within the Year, a position conventionally occupied by those with high status. Unlike most low status pupils, Elaine refuses to maintain invisibility and instead expresses and asserts herself by storming out, slamming doors, talking back and not deferring to those with higher status:

It's a German lesson and the teacher leaves the classroom to do some photocopying, telling the class to get on with their work quietly. As the door swings shut, Davros – one of the highest status pupils – jumps up and starts doing an impression of the teacher. Some of the class carry on with their work while others laugh and encourage him with whoops and claps. Elaine looks up from her work. "Why don't you shut up, Davros, no one likes the sound of your voice except you", she says. Most of the class avert their eyes and fiddle nervously, no one laughs or backs her up. Davros responds quickly, "Well, no one likes your face except for you, so we're all suffering". The class laugh and Elaine, seemingly at a loss for a comeback, suddenly gets up and storms out of the class, slamming the door behind her. As the door slams, the class laugh further. A moment later the teacher re-enters the classroom, "Where did Elaine go?" Davros, still standing at the front of the class replies, "you know what she's like, there's always something". The teacher goes to find Elaine and Davros, smiling, slips back into his seat.

Elaine's behaviour is transgressive because she refuses the conventions that position self-assertion - becoming seen and known - as contingent on high status. Her refusal to take up the expected position of invisibility within the status hierarchy of the Year leads to the

evaluation by many that her position 'is her own fault'. Discussing a different episode involving Elaine, Aabida comments, "I really don't like her, no one does, she's got a really bad attitude problem, she's always horrible". I ask Aabida which she thinks came first – Elaine's attitude or people not liking her:

"I don't know, maybe she got like that because people weren't nice to her, but it's her own fault because she's horrible to people. Like there was this time when she stormed out of class, she slammed the door and then we could hear shouting and screaming outside the classroom, like who does that?"

Dominic is another pupil who often gets a hard time because he transgresses conventions of visibility. One lunch time his friends start to coach him on how to avoid trouble. Leah starts: "Dominic, you complain things are bad, and they are bad, but you make things worse. Telling Peter [high status] to come out of the closet, it's just drawing attention to yourself, people were laughing at you, not with you."

James backs her up, "yeah, there's a difference between not giving a fuck and shooting yourself in the foot". Although joking at someone else's expense is behaviour frequently engaged in by high status boys such as Davros and Peter, Dominic's behaviour is illegitimate because he does not possess the necessary status. James and Leah argue that Dominic could reduce the difficulties he has at school by "not drawing attention to himself" – by becoming invisible.

### **Symbolic texts, status and ethnicity**

Peer groups in school are often associated with particular kinds of symbolic texts, and are identified by such things as taste in music and style of dress. In this diverse school, there is a variety of signs that can be brought together, but these tend to cluster around 'black' and 'white' coded symbolic texts<sup>78</sup>. However, as I will discuss, there is no simplistic correlation between symbolic texts, heritage, peer group composition and status.

Gilroy has noted that:

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<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of blackness, whiteness and definitional issues of race and ethnicity see chapter 7.

‘Rather than associating blackness with nationality, it is now viewed as post, trans and inter-national, more a matter of culture and style than citizenship, rights or fixed, contractual obligations’ (Gilroy 1993: 3).

He uses the term ‘the black Atlantic’ to describe these connective cultures, emphasising the influence of black America in these flows<sup>79</sup>. These cultural forms are taken up and transformed in specific localities, such as London:

‘The histories and cultural politics of the Caribbean and black America form the raw materials for a creative process that defines what it means to be black within a distinctly British setting. This results in a sequence of syncretic cultural processes in which ‘[b]lack culture is actively made and re-made’ (Gilroy 1987: 154).’ (Back 1996: 184).

Thus Back argues cultural meanings and meaningful forms need to be understood both in terms of these international cultural flows and in relation to their meaning in specific local contexts. In Back’s south London ethnography, black cultural forms are taken up by both black and white young people, their shared experience of the local context and active making of meaning, drawn from local and international, predominantly black cultural forms, resulting in a syncretic culture (1996, see also Wulff 1988)<sup>80</sup>.

So there are specific global, national and local historical processes by which symbolic forms become coded as black and likewise white. It has been noted that ‘whiteness’ is frequently culturally unmarked (Peery 2001, Back 1996), viewed as representing the norm rather than one particular group. However in ethnographies of young people’s cultural consumption it

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<sup>79</sup> Rap and hip hop music is a good example of these flows, drawing on black Caribbean, African and American influences, it emerged as a distinct genre in urban America, in the 1980s. Through transnational networks, the genre is not only consumed globally but produced in specific contexts around the world. Through these creative processes the genre is constantly remade, shaped by the specifics of locality (Back 1996). So in hip hop produced by Londoners, the lyrics speak of the specific experiences of growing up in the British capital, and the music is transformed into novel, specifically British genres such as Grime. Meanwhile American rappers such as Jay Z and Fifty Cent are global superstars, and British stars, such as Dizzee Rascal, who started in the London Grime scene have a central place in the British cultural mainstream, enjoying a string of number one singles. Hip hop and related genres are coded black but are consumed and (to a lesser extent) produced by white people as well as black people.

<sup>80</sup> A good contemporary example of these processes is the band N’Dubz, currently enjoying chart success and much popularity among young people, including pupils in Collingson school. The hip hop band hail from Camden Town, London and their name is a slang abbreviation of the Camden postcode NW (North West). Cousins Dappy (the rapper), Tulisa (the singer) are from Greek backgrounds, and Fazer (rapper) is from a black Caribbean background. The band met at a NW comprehensive school and all speak a black London vernacular.

does appear, in multi-ethnic contexts, symbolic texts are marked white (e.g. Wulff 1988 and 1995, Bucholtz 2001). In Collingson school certain genres of music such as Rock and Indie music, and certain styles of dress such as Grungy and Emo are often described as 'white'.

However, this coding of signs does not reflect a simplistically divided interaction between black and white pupils<sup>81</sup>. In Collingson school the peer groups that draw on black symbolic texts, such as the Man-dom and the It girls, consist of members from a range of ethnic origins, some of whom define themselves as black, some white and others in a spectrum of other ways (I discuss this in more detail in chapter 7). As Back writes, the picture that emerges is 'infinitely more complex than the polemical black-white race relations model' (1996: 14). These groups tend to be more ethnically mixed (although not necessarily predominantly black) than those that draw on more comprehensively 'white' symbolic texts, but there is flexibility in this organisation<sup>82</sup>.

Pupils maintain a space between symbolic texts and value-production and 'heritage'<sup>83</sup> that enables them flexibility and agency in the kind of person it is possible to become in school. This flexibility also enables pupils to argue that friendships and peer groups are not determined by shared race or ethnicity but shared tastes and value-producing actions. Although, as I discuss in chapter 6, older pupils are more alert to the overlap between these two sets of distinctions. Furthermore, in Collingson school, notions of status are intertwined with these processes, high status groups are associated with black cultural practices so students of all ethnicities adopt these practices.

Similarly while symbolic texts may be associated with white class groups this does not necessarily mean these match the class background of those drawing on these texts. For

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<sup>81</sup> A contrast can be seen in Perry's ethnography of an ethnically diverse high school in California: 'The style, slang, vernacular and demeanours that marked identification with a particular clique or subculture simultaneously inferred racial identification. In a word peer group activities *racialised* youth...Gloria, an immigrant from El Salvador said... "For my race, if you start wearing a lot of gold, you're trying to be black...I'm scared to do things 'cause they might say, "that's black!" Or if you're Latina and you listen to...Green Day – that [alternative rock] kinda thing. If you listen to that, then you wanna be white"' (2001: 75).

<sup>82</sup> As I will discuss in chapter 7, the Indian group are defined primarily by their shared ethnic identity, but this identity arguably transgresses the conventions of the informal realm because they are positioned as an outside group, self-isolating from the peer network of the informal realm.

<sup>83</sup> In terms of class, ethnicity and parental identity.

example Sophia is part of a small group of girls known as 'chavs', a style and mode of value-production that is associated with white, working class backgrounds. In school her way of speaking, bodily comportment, gold jewellery and Burberry style bag are all signs drawn together in a chav 'symbolic text' and consequently she is seen in a certain way in school. Near the end of my fieldwork Leah tells me that she attends the same synagogue as Sophia, her parents are well-off professionals and outside school she dresses and behaves like a 'Bec'<sup>84</sup>, very different to the way she appears in school.

Language is another example of these flexible practices; through global, national and local historical processes a particular vernacular develops, coded as black (see Hewitt 1986, Back 1996). But in a location like Collingson School, this vernacular is taken up by all members of certain peer groups - such as the Man-dom - and not just black pupils. This linguistic style, where 'grammatical rules, pronunciations and lexical items that are associated with a socially defined group of speakers' (1996: 129), is a 'black London vernacular' in which standard English words are invested with altered meanings, along with specific pronunciation and inflections (Back 1996: 130). For example 'boyd off' (disrespected or insulted), 'bare' (really, a lot), 'blud' (friend, mate, brother), brethren (friend/s) and shank (stab).

Both within and across peer groups there is a spectrum of ways in which these language codes are taken up. For example some members of the Man-dom comprehensively use these forms of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. While others use them selectively or switch between more or less exaggerated versions depending on the context in which they are speaking. Across other groups these codes are taken up to varying degrees with some words (like 'boyd off') in common usage and some groups take up more features of this code than others. These language practices are also associated with status, with higher status groups using more of this code than lower status groups. For example the low status Misfits do not use any of these practices, even words in common usage.

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<sup>84</sup> A 'Bec' is shortened from Beccy or Rebecca. It is a colloquial term used to describe a certain kind of North London Jewish girl who is materially privileged and draws on symbolic texts associated with designer labels and conspicuous consumption. They are also known as Jewish Princesses.

## The Man-Dom

In Year 11 the two highest status peer groups are the Man-dom and the It girls. Although both groups are seen and known, this renown is established differently, and speaks of the conventions of appropriate masculinity and femininity in school.

While the Man-dom is a group of about twenty boys, not all of its members have equal status - about five key members are particularly visible. The group are ethnically mixed, including members from black African, black Caribbean, Greek, Cypriot, Chinese, white English, white European, Pakistani and Iranian backgrounds. Unlike the Macho boys in Mac an Ghail (1994), who are all in the lowest sets, and anti-school, members of the Man-dom occupy a whole range of positions within the academic spectrum. Some are 'high-achievers', in all top sets, while at the other end of the spectrum, some are labelled as 'low-achievers', in bottom sets and actively oppositional in class.

By Year 11, peer groups have established different territories, fixed places in the school where they congregate at lunch and break times. The Man-dom's territory, a tarmac football pitch bordered on three sides by school buildings, reflects their high status. It is desirable as the only designated space for football, in which games can be played without interruption. Sporting competency, particularly football, is central to their status within the Year, and some members have become visible as 'sports stars' through sporting achievements. In this large group there is a spectrum of other routes to visibility. Some members have status as 'buff' (good-looking) heart-throbs, others through connections to well-known 'gangs' outside school and rumours of criminal activity. Collectively the peer group are viewed by pupils as the most 'masculine' group - the 'man men' – producing value through masculine modes of action and leading to year-wide status. As Jerome explains:

“To get status as a boy, you have to act masculine, you know like being sporty, dating various females, trying to get laid”.

These practices are exemplified in conversation in which Samiya, an It girl, questions Kemal, a member of the Man-dom, for my benefit:

Samiya: The boys talk about their penis size don't they?

Kemal: Yeah.

Samiya: So what else do boys talk about?

Kemal: Between us lot yeah? It's who's got the most money, who looks the sharpest, who's got the most girls, who's got the least girls...it's about competition.

### **Visibility in Class**

In class, Jacob is talking loudly to a friend sitting next to him. After repeatedly asking him to stop talking, the teacher tells him to move seats, away from his friend. Jacob does not acknowledge her and continues talking to his friend. After asking him again, Jacob locks eyes with the teacher, rises very slowly and pauses, facing her in the middle of the classroom maintaining direct eye contact. The teacher repeats her request and he slowly sits in a new seat, only to carry on his conversation across the classroom.

On this occasion, Jacob exhibits his confidence and nerve by standing his ground in a battle of wills with the teacher. This is one way in which key members of the Man-dom became visible in class. On other occasions they confidently address teachers or ask direct questions about their personal lives, make loud jokes and comments often at the expense of lower status pupils. They can direct the class in obedience ('Miss just told everyone to shut up') or resistance (instigating class-wide jokes or conversations), depending on their mood, or how much they like the teacher. As one teacher comments to me, "big characters in the class have a lot of influence, they can decide whether the class goes well or not".

Notably, this behaviour is sanctioned by other pupils who do not resist the leadership position these boys occupy. But although they do not resist within class, pupils do express opposed opinions in the safety of their peer group territory. The Misfits are particularly critical of the behaviour of the Man-dom, accusing them of "abusing their power", and "intimidation":

Leah: "I don't like Jacob, I don't think he's a very nice person. But he has the attention on him, and the power, he can control the way things go".

As I will discuss, apart from these high status groups, other pupils are engaged in producing different kinds of value and are not usually interested in producing value that would lead to status within the year-wide prestige system.

Leah tells me she finds it interesting to observe Jacob's and Davros' interaction in class: "They're always trying to out-do each other because they're both power hungry". However she concludes Davros has the most power because "he is the most rude, the most outrageous, but he's also intelligent". Leah's insights reflect Evans' analysis of the disruptive boys peer ground within Tenterground school. Evans (2010 in press) argues the boys' friendships are constituted through twin processes of participation – commonality and conflict. The boys have things in common, including daring in class and skill at football, but are also competing against each other within these shared concerns. There is an inevitable degree of tension between these processes. The extent disruptive boys can remain friends depends on their ability to manage these tensions – continuing to compete without falling out irrevocably. A principle dynamic is aggressive competition.

As Kemal describes in the preceding section, the Man-dom are in competition. For these older boys, competition now includes 'getting girls' and 'who has money' but the tension between commonality and conflict remains. The Man-dom boys agree on what constitutes positive value but compete in the hierarchising processes of producing it. Additionally like Evans' disruptive boys, and the lads (Willis 1977), when the balance tips in favour of conflict, the boys need to show willing to settle this conflict with physical violence<sup>85</sup>. After Kemal describes the competition between his friends, I asked if this is serious. Kemal's answer evidences the tentative balance between commonality and conflict that these boys must strike, and the recourse to violence that is the conventional means to resolve an imbalance:

Kemal: We all take it as a joke, but obviously sometimes we're being serious.

SWR: And what happens when it gets serious?

Kemal: Between boys? Fights. But we hardly ever get to the point where we start punching each other.

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<sup>85</sup> Although in Collingson school, it is difficult to judge how much this is a matter of masculine rhetoric. Other pupils I spoke to could only remember one fight in the year, and that was between two girls. At the same time both Evans (2006) and Willis (1977) comment that the resort to physical violence is used rarely. 'Fighting might possibly be more about a display of bravado than it is about actual bodily harm' (Evans 2006: 112). Willis argues that refusing to fight is 'disastrous' to social standing, but physical violence is also understood as dangerous and unpredictable, symbolic and verbal forms of violence are preferable. As Willis highlights, an 'ambience of violence' pervades the lads culture: 'The physicality of all interactions, the mock pushing and fighting, the showing off in front of girls, the demonstrations of superiority and put-downs of the conformists, all borrow from the grammar of real violence' (1977: 36).

As Leah observes, it is usually Davros who establishes himself as number one in the pecking order, because he is 'the most outrageous' but also the most 'intelligent'. As Evans writes:

'When the climate is one of ruthless domination, it is often the brightest amongst the tough boys who quickly becomes peer leader. It is not simply a matter of brute force; it is also to do with the combined skills of daring and personal charisma' (2006: 86).

Success in the competitive system of disruption 'inevitably implies the destruction of a boy's chances of doing well at school' (2006: 116). Interestingly, the boys at Collingson have struck a different balance in terms of prestige-seeking and educational investment. Although there are similarities between the 'competitive equality' of the disruptive boys and the Man-dom, several key Man-dom members including Davros and Jacob do well at school - they are in top sets with good predicted GCSE grades. Both have been offered places at Clare House, the selective sixth-form college. Their dominance in class is not necessarily at odds with what teachers require. As discussed, their 'intersubjective influence' enables them to decide whether to conform or resist and to direct other pupils accordingly.

### **Syncretic symbolic texts**

The Man-dom is an ethnically mixed group, with no one ethnicity predominating. Their value-producing actions and *bricolage* of signs represent an intermeshing of masculine modes of value-production with ethnic modes. Despite the varied parentage of members, and the importance of these distinct backgrounds to individual Man-dom members, as a *group* these are clustered around two particular ethnic modes – white working class, and black London. The group's style – sequence of signs – is variously described as 'chav', denoting a white working class style, and 'gangster', 'ghetto' or 'street', denoting a black inner-city style.

Within the Man-dom, all the boys share a linguistic style which contains a significant amount of 'black code', speaking a 'black London vernacular. As Back argues, these 'ethnically marked' forms of speech and style mark both the 'boundaries of adolescent peer networks' and the 'cultural frames of reference in which multiracial friendships exist' (1996: 130). In Collingson school, these forms of speech and style are ways of producing and representing forms of value associated with high status:

Leah: The main group are the chavvie group, they all wear those sorts of clothes, and like the same sort of music, anyone who doesn't fit into that is excluded, you're on the outside.

This syncretism can also be seen in the boys' music taste (hip hop and R'n'B), hair (patterns cut into their short hair) and dress (over-sized baseball caps, Nike trainers and diamond earrings in both ears).

As a peer group, the Man-dom define particular kinds of transactions, acts and practices as valuable. In this way, presenting themselves as particular kinds of boys: structured through wider notions of dominant masculinity, including sporting competency, physical bravado, extension of intersubjective influence, domination and competitive exchange (Connell, 1995). In turn these value-producing actions result in visibility, and are a gender-specific route to status within the informal realm. Such dominating practices are normally evaluated only as legitimate for boys. The same acts by girls are evaluated as negative value transformations - 'acting big' as an inverse of acceptable femininity.

### **The It girls**

The It girls are the status equivalents to the Man-dom within their year group. Their eight core member group is ethnically mixed; Grace is from a Nigerian background, both Kadia and Samiya have Kenyan mothers and English fathers, Natasha is from a Malaysian background, Ruby and Georgia are from white English backgrounds and Leila and Cheryl are from Columbian ('Latina') backgrounds. Academically they are mixed - some are in high sets for everything, while others are in middle sets, although all are invested to some degree in formal school.

Their peer group territory – an elevated bench at the front of the main school building - reflects their highly visible position within the Year. It also provides them with a position from which to judge those passing, frequently in terms of success or failure of appearance. These critiques are often highly specific concerning minute details such as eyebrow shape ('look at her eye brows today, they look like McDonald's arches') or make-up choice ("she's quite pretty actually, she wears red lip-liner though").

Unlike the Man-dom, the It girls are not viewed by other pupils as ‘intimidating’, and in class prefer to chat to classmates and go with the flow rather than dominate. Their visibility is understood to stem from a different source – their appearance:

Lexy: Natasha and that lot have been popular since Year 7, because of their looks basically. Those guys have got their looks and stuff so that instantly gives them status...Although it depends what kind of status you want.

The girls are visibly invested in their appearance. They arrive at school everyday looking polished, fully-made up and hair-styled, getting their mirrors out in class to maintain their immaculate appearance. They transform the basic uniform requirements into current fashion; exchanging shapeless school trousers for ‘skinny’ jeans, *Clarks* shoes for ballet-style pumps and blazers for fashionable jackets. This investment has been a feature of their peer group practices since Year 7. Georgia, who joined the group recently, speaks of how the girls seemed older than the rest of the Year - they signified mature femininity with their make-up and hair styles, while the rest of the Year looked “really youthful”.

With visibility comes increased scrutiny, and when younger, the It girls were labelled ‘plastics’, a term originating from the American film *Mean Girls* (2004). The protagonist, Cady, previously home-schooled by her zoologist parents in Africa, starts at an American high school and must get to grips with the power and politics of female peer group relations (with many parallels drawn between this and her Serengeti experiences). ‘The plastics’ are the high status girl group, so called because they have Barbie-like good looks, but are vacuous, fake and shallow (and get their come-uppance at the end of the film). For the It girls then, the label ‘plastic’ simultaneously recognised their good looks while devaluing this and them as inauthentic. The girls themselves did not reject the label itself but rather questioned its applicability:

Samiya: They called us plastics, all of us. But we’re not plastics, we don’t have bleached blonde hair.

The girls’ status as good-looking is closely linked to their status as the most sexually desirable group in the Year. As Dominic phrased it: “The good looking girls get all the attention. Everyone wants to do them or go out with them”. Producing value within the

field of heterosexuality takes active management. The girls need to carefully manage their transactions – chatting, flirting and ‘showing interest’ in their appearance, clothes, make-up, demeanour, and boys – without going too far and appearing ‘desperate’ or ‘slaggy’. This is evidenced primarily by the attention they get from high status boys, including several high status relationships between members of the two groups (pupils tell me cross-status relationships are rare). The girls’ high status is viewed as contingent on the judgement of the high status boys:

Leah: The reason those girls are popular is that they’ve been deemed attractive by the popular boys.

SWR: So they’re the most attractive girls in the Year?

Leah: Not necessarily, they’re just the ones who are seen as most attractive by those boys, and that’s what matters.

Being conferred with desirability means the It girls are legitimated in extending their intersubjective influence in alternative ways. As Hey argues:

‘Taking up positions within heterosexuality confers differing (if troubling) forms of social power associated with girls’ differing claims upon its prestige’ (Hey 1997: 13).

As discussed in following chapters, the girls are able to transform their desirability into influence, and they achieve fame in this way, their desired position (and its transformation into communicational transactions) becoming a ‘mobile, circulating dimension’ of their person (Munn 1986) within the Year and beyond.

### **Becoming an It girl**

Peer groups are not static. Groups gain or lose members and new groups form, while old ones fracture. Changing peer groups involves two key processes; firstly, as peer groups define themselves in contrast to each other, moving groups involves making a convincing claim to the values of the new group. Secondly, moving involves redirecting the transactions of friendship towards the new group, at the expense of the old group.

In Year 11, Francesca, a member of the ‘floating popular girls’ starts to make a play for the It girls. Spending more and more time with them in their territory, and less and less time with her old group, whom she alienates through her failure to enact the transactions of

friendship (Marina: “she hardly talks to us anymore”). Francesca’s move towards the It girls is facilitated by two factors. Firstly, she has recently started going out with one of the most sexually desired members of the Man-dom. In this way she has proven herself successful within the value-producing field of heterosexuality and appearance, central to the It girls’ peer group identity. Secondly, she shares a Latina background with the It girls Maria and Cheryl and as she starts to spend more time with them, I observe that the saliency of this identity increases within the group as the girls start speaking Spanish between themselves and visiting Latina night clubs.

However, by emphasising the Latina dimension of her identity, and increasing its saliency within the group, Francesca creates new inclusions and exclusions. While she cements her alliance with Cheryl and Maria, other members of the It girls group are not convinced and resent the time she spends in their territory. Sitting on the bench with some of the It girls (minus Cheryl and Maria), Samiya comments as we watch Francesca approach: “Oh God, Francesca is coming over again, she’s always hanging around here”. Samiya’s remark highlights that the transactions of friendship (such as investment of time) only become valid if they are sanctioned by the object of these transactions, otherwise they breach conventions and become ‘annoying’. The unequal nature of these transactions is also emphasised by her aggrieved old friends. Sitting with Marina and Jenny on the field, Marina points out Francesca as she chats to the It girls: “Look at her, she’s always licking their arse, I can’t really be bothered with her anymore”. At the end of the year Francesca is in a vulnerable position, she has alienated her old group but does not have a secure position within her new group. I was not there to see whether her gamble for high status played off.

The It girls and the Man-dom represent the highest status peer groups within the Year, their differing modes of value-production, shaped, respectively, by the conventions of femininity and masculinity leading to the same results – visibility. In contrast the Misfits, who I will now go on to discuss, are not high status within the Year. They are involved in different forms of value-production, and their peer group territory offers them a safe space from which to develop and validate their practices and value-products.

## **The Misfits**

The Misfits claim as their territory the 'back wall', a hidden-away location at the outer edges of the school grounds, far from busy thoroughfares. Leah, one of the founders of the group, tells me she specifically chose this location because it is so "out of the way". Between twenty to twenty-five pupils spend the majority of their break and lunch times in this territory. Within the Misfits, there are sub-groups of friends, including the only other girls in the group, Sam, Segal and Nadia. In common with most of the (predominantly) male peer groups the group is large, fluid and constantly in motion.

Members of the group tend to be in the upper sets within lessons but there is no uniform orientation to school; the group contains high-achievers who invest deeply in formal schooling, 'coasters' who do what was needed to get by (and no more), and those who invest little in formal schooling. The group contains a majority of white pupils, two from Jewish backgrounds and one from a Russian background. There are also members from Chinese, mixed Chinese-English parentage, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds.

The group are often described as 'the grungies', and while they recognise this label, only some of them wear the style characterised by long hair, baggy, unkempt clothes and rock or heavy metal band names on t-shirts, wristbands or patches sewn onto bags or coats. Other boys do not wear any 'subcultural' style, and their non-investment in any form of youth fashion sees them labelled as 'geeks'. This divergence of styles within the group initially seems incongruous but can be explained by their identification of themselves as 'misfits' outside of the style and music tastes associated with the more prestigious groups in the Year.

This 'misfit' identity means the group and territory is a refuge for those who do not fit in anywhere else. Talking about the history of the group, Leah tells me that in the last few years a number of people who "were on their own before" had gravitated there because "it was an easy place to go". The large, fluid nature of the group and its hidden-away location means pupils can blend in, away from the crowd.

And in line with their self-identification as misfits who are “all dumped in the same kind of bin”, many of the boys in the group and Leah are explicit about the hierarchy within the Year, and their place within it, which they see as “pretty low”. The boys in the group are also clear about why they have less prestige than other groups in the Year, offering explanations that draw on their lack of typically masculine value-producing practices:

SWR: So what makes boys popular?

Richard: If you’re good at sport, or funny and clever then you’re popular. If you’re just smart then people think you’re boring. Loads of the boys who are popular are sports stars, like Chimmi and Abdul (members of the Man-dom).

SWR: Why does that make them popular?

Richard: Maybe because people idolise them, because they see what they can do.

Dominic: They’re like sports personalities.

Richard: Maybe because it’s not that people actually like them but like what they can do, because people see what they can do.

Dominic and Richard highlight it is the Man-dom’s value and visibility producing actions that create status; people can “see what they do”, and even though they may not like them, they “like what they can do”. The Misfit boys define themselves in contrast to the high visibility Man-dom. When I ask them what it’s like to be a teenage boy, Tom replies “we’re the wrong people to ask really...we’re not exactly the norm”.

The Misfits talk of their experiences of being dismissed, ignored or laughed at by high status boys in class, who “misuse their power”. And they say this makes them feel marginalised and alienated within the Year. The boys are frequently accused of ‘homosexuality’, a pervasive label in school used to signify failure of ‘appropriate’ masculinity. I discuss the workings of the gay discourse in more detail in Chapter 8. These relations highlight the importance of focussing not just on ‘masculinity as complementary to femininity but how masculinities are developed in specific institutional contexts in relation to and against each other’ (Mac an Ghail 1994: 61):

‘Gender discipline is not imposed only on women: normalizing programmes for men are also steeped in assumptions about masculinity...young men constructed as being

less than 'masculine' are also likely to come under suspicion and surveillance' (Carlen et al 1992: 102 in Mac an Ghail 1994: 60).

### **Alternative value**

While the Misfits often experience marginalisation within the informal realm, they also have strategic resources through which to position themselves as superior, to claim alternative value and thus to resist the compression of self that the Man-dom's dominating expansion of self precipitates. As Mac an Ghail argues, peer groups provide 'a material and symbolic safe space to develop social and discursive practices enabling pupils to validate their identities amongst themselves' (1994:53).

While the boys often speak of feeling marginalised or threatened within class, their territory allows them a safe space to transform these feelings. And while they recognise that certain typically masculine modes of value production can lead to status within school, they draw on other notions of value from wider society. They emphasise that while the value-production they are involved in might not lead to status in the informal realm, beyond school this investment will pay off. Likewise they also emphasise that while the practices of the man-dom might result in status within school, this will not translate so successfully in the wider context:

Michael: We're the smart ones and the rest are retards, that's why we hang out round here...We would spend every waking minute mocking the rest of our Year because we believe them to be no-brainers with no hope in life. Basing all our corny jokes on crude stereotypes that unfortunately turn out to be true.

James: Yeah, when you get to know people like that...their intelligence is lacking and they're not that charismatic, they've only got status because they're sporty.

One lunch time, Leah starts to do an impression of the Man-dom, accurately imitating their macho swagger and black London vernacular (Back 1996). This leads to a tirade of insults from Tom, Michael and James as they label the Man-dom 'idiots', 'dickheads', 'wankers' and 'wastes of space'. Tom, breaking off from this collaborative invective adds thoughtfully:

"You know what I was wondering the other day? What happens to people like that after school? You can't really imagine them after the age of twenty two".

Leah replies authoritatively:

“They end up in prison, or they stay at home on benefits”.

While Leah and the Misfit boys often make it clear they are aware of their low status within the Year and the reason for this, they simultaneously maintain a sense of superiority by drawing on middle class value systems from beyond school. They use this knowledge to construct an imagined future where status is reversed. This strategy does not necessarily reflect an objective reality. As I discussed, members of the Man-dom vary in their orientation towards formal schooling and future ambitions - some of the highest status members are also among the highest-achievers in school. At the same time it illustrates how positioning practices are a group project that enables peers to validate their identities between themselves.

Another strategy the Misfits use is to devalue the status hierarchy that positions them as inferior. Status in the informal realm is evidenced by visibility, being seen and being known. At the same time there are other ways to evaluate value; themes of authenticity are a recurrent in school. While appearing in appropriate ways is centrally important in school, being ‘true to yourself’ regardless of what others think, is also valued. However authenticity itself is constituted within the logic of the informal realm, and so is also subject to evaluation by peers. These appraisals evidence success in terms of ‘being yourself’ and failure in terms of ‘fake’, ‘try-hard’ or ‘attention-seeking’.

The Misfits often shift the emphasis of their evaluation practices towards themes of authenticity, and in doing so define the status system within the Year as superficial. While the Misfits are “genuine friends”, other groups are evaluated less favourably, the big group evidence that they lack confidence, “they just want to be in a big gang, have lots of friends, they need constant validation”.

### **Being a different kind of boy**

Despite being positioned as less masculine within school value-production, the Misfit boys are still invested in developing a masculine identity. While their disinterest in sport, their non-dominant behaviour in the classroom and their alternative clothes and music tastes

exclude them from dominant modes of masculinity within school, social practices within the group allow them to affirm and emphasise other aspects of masculinity.

The group is constantly in motion, with boys chasing, play-fighting and throwing things at each other. Not all the members of the group take part in this rough play; all of the girls and some of the boys stand around talking in closer, more stationary groups. However because they occupy the same territory, the 'chatters' have to contend with flying missiles or charging boys, which they generally endure with resigned good humour. Although the Misfit boys do not behave aggressively outside their peer group territory, play-fighting within the territory is a peer transaction shaped by notions of masculine value – physical bravado and the suggestion of physical violence.

The boys also engage in acts of imagined violence within their safe space. Discussing a recent Ofsted report, Tom repeats a rumour that the 'psychos' were asked not to come in on that day so they did not affect the school's report. Lionel tells me they had come up with a better solution, "a cull!" On another occasion, discussing their position in the Year, James offers an example of their marginal position: "We're the sort of people that if we put our hands up and say something then everyone groans or complains". In response Ibrahim transforms this real experience into an act of imagined violence:

"So we formed our own little tribe and when we over-populate them in their classroom then we tend to do the same thing to them, instead of a sigh or a groan we end up shooting them".

The boys' inter-embodied performance is frequently sexual and particularly phallogentric. They often pretend to get out their penises, hold phallic objects to their crotches or 'play-rape' other boys (but only the ones that also engaged in this form of play). Like the male peer groups in Mac an Ghaill's study (1994) 'sex and sexuality were compulsively and competitively discussed and played out' (90). However, unlike the boys in Mac an Ghaill's study, the predominant form this takes is not 'performance stories' (92), but boundary-pushing talk and humour, often concerning extreme sexual activities such as bestiality, paedophilia or necrophilia. Examples of jokes told by the Misfits include:

Q: What's the best thing about having sex with twenty eight year olds?

A: There are twenty of them.

Q: What times does Michael Jackson go to bed?

A: When the big hand touches the little hand.

As Back (1996) argues, joking exchanges such as these have more significance than just play for play's sake; they mark those who are included in a peer group: 'acceptance of a person's joking is an indication that he or she is part of the social group' (Apte 1985: 54 in Back 1996: 75). The boundary-pushing nature of this humour amplifies these indicators of group belonging. Further, the sexual form this takes, closely linked to the 'categorical imperative to act like a heterosexual man' within school (Mac an Ghail 1994: 91) both defines the boundaries of the peer group and marks them out as masculine; inclusion in this joking validates a masculine identity.

None of the girls and not all of the boys take part in this form of humour, and sometimes the non-participating boys are set up to be the foil for the jokers. In the following exchange, Ibrahim and James set Tom up (who is not taking part in the joking):

James: How are your fish, Tom?

Tom: They're dead actually.

James [it becomes clear that he knew this before and was asking a leading question]:  
Well you shouldn't have pushed it in so far.

Ibrahim: Yeah, you fucked them so hard they must have died from internal bleeding.

Like the 'wind-ups' among south London youths in Back's ethnography (1996) this set-up results in public gain for Ibrahim and James at the expense of Tom. It also illustrates that even among non-dominant boys, status continues to be worked out within peer groups.

### **The Green corridor girls**

The Green corridor girls are a core of five girls; Caroline, Lisa, Keely, Jess and Debbie. The group has a large number of periphery members who spend varying amounts of time in the girls' territory. The core group are from white English backgrounds, and academically, the girls vary: Caroline, Jess and Debbie are among the highest achievers in the Year, in top sets for everything, while Lisa and Keely are in middle and lower sets, although they all invest in the formal aspects of schooling.

The girls' territory is 'the green corridor', a large hallway on the ground floor of one of the main school buildings. Although this territory is less immediately visible than that of the It girls', it is a busy thoroughfare and the girls have lots of 'visitors' because their site is close to lessons, the girls' toilets and the Man-dom's football pitch. The location of the girls' territory reflects their position within the Year as a central linking group that connects different peer groups within the Year. All the girls have strong links to other peer groups and connect such status diverse groups as the Man-dom and the Misfits, the It girls' and Talia and Deepa second from bottom in terms of year status, the Opt-out rebels and the Floating popular girls. Because they 'fit in' so well, most of the Green corridor girls report their time at school as enjoyable and fun. They do not experience the marginalisation of the Misfits, or suffer the particularly intense scrutiny of the visible It girls.

While the three other peer groups I have discussed enact, or are invested with, specific peer group practices, values and images that are defined in contrast to each other, the Green corridor girls are engaged in a spectrum of value-production. Thus as a group they encompass and mediate forms of value that are normally opposed, taken up by the other, mutually contrastive peer groups. Their collective investment and success in a variety of different value fields - including formal academic achievement, sport, teenage 'fun' (parties and drinking), heterosexuality, friendship and the 'authenticity' of low status relationships—facilitates their linking function, enabling pupils to identify with particular facets of the group identity and not alienate with an 'either/ or' group identity. This is reflected in the girls' own descriptions of their group:

Lisa: I don't think we have a proper stereotype because there is a bit of everything in our group...We're all interested in different things but we all just get along.

While Lisa and Caroline often attend parties with the Man-dom and the It-girls, Keely said she prefers to stay at home. Lisa explains "she just doesn't like what goes on there, like the drinking..." Keely adding "and the humping" (sexual acts). Lisa continues "we don't mind, we're still close friends". The girls recognise they are invested in different forms of value-production, but simultaneously their shared investment in the transactions of friendship create enough value to sustain the group.

Caroline is one of the individuals in the Year who is conferred with the most status, she is an academic high-achiever, active in drama and successful in value-producing fields 'teenage fun' (drinking, parties and going out at night) and heterosexuality. She is 'known' within the Year but because of her position within a linking peer group, rather than a high status peer group, her visibility is rarely positioned as 'inauthentic'. Instead she embodies and negotiates divergent values that are often in tension within the Year. As Leah discusses:

"Caroline was a popular girl but not for the same reason [as the Man-dom]. I think because she was so strong and appeared so confident and people respond well to really confident people, because no one would mess with her. She asserts herself and she's strong, people think she's like a rock. She will stand up for herself and if she's angry you'll know about it, and at the same time she can be very kind. And at the same time as being very clever she fits into being a party girl so she's sort of got it all. She had a core group but apart from that she could go anywhere in the school, she could be part of any group. So really she didn't have a personality, she was everything".

As Leah's observations highlight, Caroline not only successfully produces value in a number of key fields but also in ways typical of masculinity and femininity. As Leah describes she asserts herself and deals with things in a face-to-face way, defined as masculine vis-à-vis 'behind the back', bitching which is defined as the feminine way of dealing with problems. Although this is tempered with 'being kind' (defined as feminine) what this attests to is Caroline's transactional capabilities; she is able to manage and manipulate the transactions and conventions of the informal realm at school, to act in 'untypical ways' without being defined as inappropriate and unacceptable.

As a key linking group, the Green corridor girls also have an important role as information conduits, acting as a sort of switchboard for the speedy spread of information within the Year. The centrality of their territory and their connections within the Year mean they are often among the first to get the 'gossip':

Lisa: Sometimes we'll run up to each in the hall and we'll be like 'I've got to tell you something! Then it spreads rounds the whole school, but it's not our fault!

I see this information exchange in action as I sit with the Green corridor girls one lunch-time, we are chatting about last night's *HollyOaks*<sup>86</sup> when our heads are turned and the conversation is halted by Candice, one of the Opt-out rebels, storming past and muttering loudly, "I can't believe they've done that!". Gemma swiftly jumps up and follows her into the girls' toilets. Our conversation resumes until ten minutes later when Gemma emerges triumphantly from the toilet and we all stop talking and look up expectantly. She does not disappoint, making herself comfortable she tells us, "right, I've got the gossip". Everyone listens intently while she recounts the story she's just heard:

Gemma: You know at Indigo's party they all took E tablets?

Keely: I didn't know that.

Rest of the listeners: Yeah.

Gemma: Well the teachers found out.

Listeners: How?

Gemma: One of the Year 10s grassed them up. And now they're following those people around, up Brent street and stuff, because they all smoke Cannabis as well, so they're following them around with walkie-talkies and stuff and they just found this out, so they're pissed off.

This is the first telling of a story that becomes hot gossip within the Year, combining drug use and teacher surveillance, favourite topics of gossip. After lunch the group all go to their respective lessons, and sitting with their class friends, from different peer groups, the story is transformed into transactions to enthral friends in the slow afternoon lessons. The following day as I spend break-time with the Misfits this story is again transformed into a peer group transaction, this time embedded in evaluation which assesses the Opt-out rebels as irresponsible and wild.

As I've argued peer groups are key to the enactment of 'categories of distinction' and divergences in positive and negative value. At the same time, the case of the Green corridor girls highlights that even when pupils are invested in different value-producing practices and fields, the transactions of friendship produce positive-value. This also happens on a wider

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<sup>86</sup> A British teen soap opera

scale, and it is this communal production of value, evidenced particularly through the growing together discourse that I will now go on to discuss.

### **Growing together**

“It’s about identity, like when you’re younger you’re trying to establish your identity, to find out who you are, so you’re more likely to focus on the differences between people. When your older you’re more secure in your identity so you’re more likely to look for the similarities between people” (Megan, Year 13).

On my second day with Year 11, I have the following conversation with Sam and Segal:

SWR: Do you like Collingson?

Segal: Every school has positives and negatives...socially everyone is really nice to each other, but then we’ve got a really nice year, we’re particularly nice.

SWR: What about the other years?

Segal: Well Year 10 have got a reputation, a group of boys got excluded last year, that gave the Year a reputation, and the rest of the Year are just rude. Year 12, they’re just not very friendly. Our Year just accepts everyone.

Sam: It used to be that there was this bitching and you had to have sides, it’s not like that anymore, we have our separate groups but everyone talks to each other...the grungies talk to the chavs, the chavs talk to the slags, and well, the emos don’t even talk to each other!

In this conversation, Segal and Sam offer a discourse drawn upon by pupils of all peer groups; that the Year has grown together and now gets along well, especially in contrast to other years. As Back writes, discourses have different organising themes and project contrasting images:

‘They give meaning to the flow of everyday life and reflect how social differentiation is talked about at a micro level. They provide a number of resources that can be used strategically’ (Back, 1996, p. 121).

In the growing together discourse, pupils frame their Year group as a harmonious whole in relation to other years, who have not produced positive values such as ‘acceptance’ or ‘niceness’. But as this conversation also illustrates the discourse can be articulated

simultaneously with the co-differentiation of each other in terms of peer groups. Pupils' are able to work with a number of scales of difference at the same time, emphasising certain scales at particular times and for the service of divergent aims.

In this discourse, pupils also position themselves temporally, in contrast to their former selves. By highlighting the distance between their individual and collective behaviour in younger years and the present, pupils are able to validate their claims to having 'grown-up'. Looking back on younger years pupils identify difference as more divisive and the distance between groups as bigger:

Bart: I remember Year 7 and this guy came up to me and said 'what are you?' And I was like 'I don't know what I am'.

Natasha: People were asking you, 'are you a townie or are you grungies?'

Tanya: I was just talking to Leah and someone came up to me and said 'are you a grungy now?'

The growing together discourse relates to the end of a year-group journey that has seen them go through a number of "stages". Pupils are in predominant agreement about these stages which start when they are brought together as Year 7s, from a number of different primary schools in the area.

Michael: Everything changed from primary to secondary, and everything that happened previously disappeared. I know it's hard to believe but at primary school I was at the top, then I got here and I was like 'hey where have you gone'.

There is a clear difference between the behaviour of the different years and these differences are frequently discussed by pupils and teachers. When I ask a group of Year 8s the differences they have noticed since Year 7, Jake says, "in Year 7 I trusted everyone but now I've learnt you can't trust many people", this comment was met by vigorous nods of recognition by the rest of the class. The striking differences between Year 7s and Year 8s can be understood as the end of one dominant way of being; childhood, and the start of a journey that will eventually lead to 'adulthood'.

Year 8 and Year 9 can perhaps be viewed as a sort of 'wild west', a period of relative 'lawlessness' in which the old ways of being, acting and knowing of childhood are disintegrating and before pupils gradually reconstruct order through their collaborative processes of 'growing-up'. "In Year 7 we were naive, we didn't really know what was going on" reflect Lisa and Keely, "but then when you get to Year 8 you realise that nothing is that bad in school, and then everything just exploded... Year 8 was the bitchiest year, everyone was sort of like bitching, proper, proper bitching. Boy fights, bitch fights, everything". In this period relations are frequently uncertain, mercurial and discordant.

Year 11s cite an activities holiday with the whole year in Year 9 as a catalyst for a major shift in the peer group organisation within the Year. School trips are often identified by pupils as key events in the transformation of the organisation of the informal realm - away from the institutional structuring of school, trips can be understood as liminal occasions (Turner 1969) suspended from everyday norms of time, place and structure<sup>87</sup>. Away from school and the separation of peer group territories pupils have more freedom to make connections with others, regardless of peer group membership. On the Year 9 trip form groups, which had been central to peer group formation in younger years were broken up, and away from their established groups many pupils made new friendships with people they felt were more 'like-minded'.

Back at school, the informal realm had been configured, some new peer groups formed (the Green corridor girls formed after this trip), some groups combined (the Misfit girls and boys previously separate merged into one group), and many cross-peer group relationships were formed which were maintained with friendly transactions from then on. But as Georgia and Grace highlight, these seismic shifts were not easy, there was a lot of pain in this reconstitution of the informal realm:

Georgia: Year 9 was a hard year, there were massive fights.

Grace: That's when everyone was breaking up, in Year 10 was the time when we dealt with the fact that we'd separated but in Year 9 it was just like 'you're leaving me out'.

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<sup>87</sup> I discuss Turner's model in more detail in chapter 9.

SWR: Why were you separating?

Georgia: Because people change.

Grace: Yeah, people change.

Georgia: It's just that time when everyone is growing up and changing and they realise they don't want to hang around with those people.

By Year 11, conventions and categories have been completely reconstructed, and while pupils may be excluded or low status there is a general understanding of the way their social world works. Pupils, regardless of status, are able to claim value for their position through reference to their own view of this system. In their journey together through the school, pupils have produced communal value which enable them to view themselves as a valuable year group in contrast to others. This process is interpreted by Keely and Lisa as indicative of growing up, the tumult, "just a phase, in a way we needed to get it out of our system and now it's not going on...". Things stopped being "bitchy" because "we grew up" and growing up means "not being bitchy". The growing together discourse is a way in which pupils' project this unified image, and it is an important resource in their negotiation of difference, for example ethnic difference which I discuss further in chapter 7.

### **Cross peer group links**

Communal value is produced by pupils in the constant flow of transactions which connect pupils and groups together in a network of actions. For example, cross peer group friendships are highly valued by pupils, and although peer groups demand the investment of time and commitment to territory, other resources can be utilised to maintain these bonds. Pupils use resources of friendship such as loud and happy greetings to mark cross group bonds without having to commit to others, like investments of time. Hugging is a frequent social practice within the Year, pupils from different peer groups hug each other as they pass in the corridor<sup>88</sup>, often with no words spoken.

Classrooms are key places for the maintenance of these intergroup bonds; they are not territorially marked and the class friend is a recognised type of friendship which does not bring commitment to the peer group into question. The neutrality of the classroom provides

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<sup>88</sup> Girls hug each other, boys and girls hug each other but boys don't hug other boys.

a space for incongruous friendships to grow, away from the similarity in style expected within peer groups. For instance Aabida and Daisy have a valued friendship despite the outward differences in their peer groups, style and orientation towards school. Head-scarf wearing Aabida, from a Somali back-ground is quiet and conscientious and part of a small peer group of Somali girls; Daisy, from a Japanese and English background is part of a small alternative group. She is often openly resistant in class and refuses to stop wearing red lipstick despite being constantly reprimanded by teachers.

Inter-peer group relations are also a way through which pupils can validate their claims to an appropriate identity. Although peer groups define themselves in contrast to each other, and invest in divergent value-producing actions, inter-peer group relations enable pupils to define core values that they share, and reinforce the conventions of the informal realm. Pupils strategically negotiate relations of difference to position themselves and others on different sides of (un)acceptability. Inter-peer relations offer a different kind of proof of acceptability; 'we're different but in acceptable ways, they're different but in an unacceptable way'.

In these ways pupils maintain a network of peer groups and inter-peer group relations, the continuous flow of friendly transactions creating positive value, even if in other ways the pupils are engaged in divergent modes of value-production. Further, transactions, acts and practices can produce different kinds of value simultaneously. As we will see in later chapters, transactions by which pupils define themselves as different to each other, for example a shared joke about the ethnic differences between the jokers, also produce positive value as a transaction of friendship. In this way differentiation and unification processes happen simultaneously, and by shifting scales of difference pupils can choose to emphasise the former (discussing the differences between peer groups) or the later (by defining the year group as nice in contrast to other year groups). Throughout their years together pupils create communal value that enables them to view themselves as a united community despite the 'manifold categories of distinction' (Evans 2006) that are equally salient in the informal realm.

In the following chapter I will focus on girls' friendships, a smaller scale of difference through which girls can situate themselves in processes of both unification and differentiation in order to define themselves as particular kinds of people. But first I will discuss the different transactional conventions of boys and girls.

### **Boys' transactional conventions**

Boys tend to transform information and facts into transactions. This material is often drawn from outside their everyday worlds, and the non-personal nature of this material means that conversations tended to be less exclusive and exclusionary. Conversations within class often involve boys from different peer groups, and do not exclude girls, as long as the participant possesses relevant information that they can transform into transactions.

In science class a conversation about football, involving boys from different peer groups, is taking place. Leah, looking up from her work offers her opinion on the specific game they're discussing and the boys unquestioningly include her in their conversation. The pupils debate the performances of different teams and players, key moments in recently played matches, differing management techniques and predictions for future outcomes of matches and leagues. They speak as 'we' when discussing their own team's performance (they support different teams and know which team each other supports) and back up their points and counter points with specific and verifiable information.

While for boys Leah's entrance into the conversation is unremarkable, for me it is memorable because although I had talked a lot with Leah this is the first time I have witnessed Leah transact in this way. It is not only Leah's possession of accurate facts that allows her to easily fit in to this conversation but her ability to transform these facts and information into conventionally appropriate transactions. For their part, the boys make no comment on her entry into this typically male domain. It seems they are familiar with her knowledge and interest in football (for example they knew what team she supported) and indicated their respect for her opinions by engaging in earnest debate with her.

The Misfit boys are not interested in football but while the source material is different, the way information and facts are transformed into peer transactions remain the same, and in

this case conversations often focus on 'alternative' music from the sixties until now. The boys again engage in debates backing up their points with specific information such as the dates and locations of famous gigs, the date and title of albums released, original and replacement members of bands and the instruments they used. While I cannot join conversations about football, possessing no relevant information, in these conversations about music I have (just) enough material to transform into transactions. The first time I take part in one of these conversations represents a turning point in my interactions with the Misfit boys. In contrast to girls (the Misfit girls and girls more generally) who quickly included me in 'friendly transactions' (see following section), boys until this point have generally ignored me. During our conversation I observe a change as (like Leah) the boys indicate my acceptance in the conversation by asking me questions, engaging in debates with me and deferring to my information.

Boys' peer transactions are often non-verbal. For example members of the Man-dom play football most lunch times, transforming their physical skills into peer transactions. Football in school represents a key means of masculine value production, and being evaluated as a good football player is a way in which boys gain visibility and status; high status boys are often described as "the sports stars". The Misfit boys also engage in a lot of non-verbal transactions, in this case their play fighting and sexualised play does not require specific physical skills and this play does not lead to year-wide status. However, as I have argued, this form of play does reinforce certain aspects of masculinity and is also a marker of group belonging.

### **Girls' transactional conventions**

Girls tend to transform the behaviour, appearance, words and emotions of themselves and those around them into peer transactions. More of their material is drawn from their everyday worlds and because of this their conversations tend to be more exclusive and guarded. In line with girls' peer group relations these conversations also tend to involve fewer numbers of participants.

Girls draw on previous conversations, events, arguments and incidents; retelling and analysing them. They discuss the status of current relationships (both friendships and

heterosexual relationships) and predict future relationships or discuss changes in people's behaviour, possible motivations for this and whether it is justified. In this way previous interpersonal transactions (either first hand or second hand) are 'recycled' into new peer transactions, becoming part of the constant metacommentary on violations of appropriate speech and action (Shuman 1986):

At break time Segal, Nihla and Nada retell an incident that happened earlier that day when Georgia approached Sam after assembly and "had a go at her" for saying something "out of order" to Ling, who had forgotten Sam's birthday. They transform this series of transactions into an evaluation of appropriate behaviour, Segal questions Georgia's right to speak, "it's none of her business". And Nihla further reinforces that Ling was in the wrong, "how would she feel if Ling had forgotten *her* birthday". Nada adding that Ling is guilty of recurrent transgressions in this respect "Apparently Ling never remembers anyone's birthday".

Girls also engage in a lot of friendly transactions, which signifies friendship and inclusion. Right from the start of my fieldwork, girls at Collingson engage with me a lot more than boys, smiling at me if we make eye contact, saying hi or waving if we pass in school and asking me how I am when we met in class or in the playground. In contrast even the boys I spend a lot of time chatting to in their territory barely acknowledged me when we pass around the school. These transactions enact 'niceness', which are centrally important to the performance of appropriate femininity, and enable girls to sustain friendly relations with a network of peers without necessitating the transactional investment of close friendships (chapter 6).

### **Boys and girls transactional conventions**

Boys and girls thus tend to transform different material into peer transactions. As Evans (2006) highlights learning how to participate effectively in a peer group entails working out what the appropriate relations of exchange are. The difference between what it is to be a boy and what it is to be a girl is constituted through this kind of participatory differentiation. By focussing on action we can retain a flexibility in understandings of gender. Leah is a girl but by transforming her transactions in the way I describe above, she is producing value shaped by masculine conventions, becoming a valued person among boys. However this

investment does not preclude her transforming her transactions in different ways among girls, and becoming a valued person among girls.

Furthermore, while constituting gendered differentiation, these transactional conventions also lead to similar results, the creation and sustenance of social relations and the production of positive value among peers and friends in the informal realm. Additionally boys and girls often interact together, so these transactional conventions are in no way absolute. Mixed gender conversations often centre around the shared experience of school; opinions of teachers, work to be done and retellings of incidents (often funny) that occurred in school or other year group occasions (like school trips). Television programmes, particularly those aimed at the non-gender specific 'youth' market such as *Skins*<sup>89</sup> and *HollyOaks* are dissected and debated. Pupils also discuss and evaluate the talk or behaviour of others. These conversations represent the 'constant metacommentary on appropriate speech and action' (Shuman, 1986, p. 2). These conversations reinforce the conventions of the informal realm, which although often gender differentiated are subscribed to by most pupils.

**The rhetoric of growing together is drawn on by pupils to project a diminishing distance between the genders, as well as the diminishing distance between peer groups. Despite the continuing spatial differentiation between male and female peer groups outside of lessons, I often hear girls and boys describe themselves as 'good friends' with members of the opposite sex. Hugging is a key friendly transaction which I often observe between boys and girls as they entered their classrooms or passed each other in the corridors. Another key location for these transactions of friendships is the classroom (as it is for inter-peer group friendships in general) which is not territorially or gender defined.**

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed the structure of the informal realm, which is made up of hierarchically defined peer groups. Munn's model of value-production offers a way to

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<sup>89</sup> A channel four drama series based around a group of British sixth-formers, the show depicts them engaged in wild parties, casual sex and recreational drug use. The pupils often talk about this show although most dispute that it represents their teenage reality, and gives a misleading impression to adults of what teenagers get up to.

conceptualise this social order, Value is a hierarchising process because value is relative, those pupils and peer groups who produce the right about and the right kind of value will have higher status than the groups who do not. In the informal realm actions which lead to status in the informal realm are those that create visibility.

Two of Munn's concepts are particularly apt for understanding this context; fame and the extension of intersubjective influence. Fame is 'a mobile, circulating dimension of the person', a way to extend influence beyond the immediacy of acts. In school being seen and being known are value products that result in status, and pupils analogise status with fame. High status further legitimises the extension of intersubjective influence.

In line with the Munn's emphasis on the dialectical nature of value-production, the same acts carried out by low status pupils are evaluated as negative value transformations and further decrease the person's status. These actions contravene the conventions of the informal realm in which those with low status should be unseen, and should not attempt to exert intersubjective influence.

The four peer groups I discussed represent different status levels within the informal realm. The Man-dom and the It girls are high status, 'famous' – seen and known throughout the informal realm. As I discuss, this renown is achieved in different gender specific ways, and is an example of the powerful gendered conventions being constituted by pupils. The Misfits, in contrast, are low status, however they are producing different forms of value and do not wish to engage in the actions that result in visibility and hence high status for the Man-dom. Furthermore they use their knowledge of middle class forms of 'capital' valued outside school to mitigate against their experience of marginalisation within the informal realm. Finally the Green corridor girls, who link different peer groups of different status together and are engaged in a spectrum of value production.

In this chapter I have illustrated the ways in which different peer groups are involved in different forms of social action and value-production and in turn come to be seen, and see themselves, in particular ways. In contrast to Munn's study, in which she conceptualises the positive and negative value as a consensus among the community, a focus on peer groups

highlights that pupils in Collingson school are involved in different kinds of (inter)action and forms of value production. However in line with Munn, I argue that value production also results in subjective transformation. Through their divergent value transformations pupils in different peer groups come to value themselves as particular kinds of people. This offers further evidence for my critique of Bourdieu's theory of *doxa* (1977), peer groups define themselves in contrast to each other, and so 'knowledge of other ways of doing things' is the normal rather than exceptional state of affairs.

At the same time however, pupils are also producing positive value agreed on by all peer groups - social relations. Similarly boys and girls transactional conventions, while constituting gender differentiation, also both result in the constitution and sustenance of social relations. I have argued in the latter part of this chapter that all these actions and transactions contribute to communal value. Communal value enables Year 11s to define themselves as positive and worthwhile as a group. I discuss how this objectification of themselves as a 'good group', who are 'nice to each other' in contrast to other year groups, is viewed as a positive transformation from their former selves. Year 11s reflect on younger years when they were divided and antagonistic and their gradual 'growing together' throughout the years. Friendly transactions, class friendships and inter-peer group links are important resources in this transformation. I have described this transformation as the production of communal value – through which Year 11s can define themselves as worthwhile as a group.

This is one of the strengths of Munn's model of value-production as applied to the informal realm - it enables us to view processes of differentiation and unification as simultaneous. Different kinds of value can be generated from the same acts, these may work to define peer groups in contrast to each other while at the same time producing positive social relations and networks that contribute to the production of communal value.

## Chapter 6: Girls' Friendships

Friendship is one of the least studied relationships in the social sciences (Oakley 1997). Vered Amit-Talai links the scarcity of sociological and anthropological studies of friendship with a persistent view that friendship is asocial. She argues that anthropological studies such as Paine (1974) and Jerrome (1984) have conceptualised friendship as a voluntary personal relationship beyond social control and not subject to cultural prescriptions (see also Allen 1989). As Amit-Talai argues, these studies uncritically adopt a conventional and idealised view of friendship and this asocial notion justifies friendships' peripheral position within the theoretical concerns of social science. The neglect of friendship within anthropology has also been related to the disciplinary concern with kinship, at the expense of more informal bonds between people (Bell and Coleman 1999).

A focus on friendship<sup>90</sup> within school presents a challenge to these conventional notions of friendship. Firstly, it cannot be understood as isolated in the private sphere; friendship in school is structured through the institutional organisation of school (Amit-Talai 1995) and pupils are active in manipulating these boundaries to maximise their opportunities for friendship transactions. Secondly, the continuous flow of friendship transactions, and the vital importance of sustaining this flow to maintain friendship within school, demonstrates the nature of friendship as a process. In contrast, according to Amit-Talai (1995), a recurrent feature of much literature on friendship is attempts to categorise types of friendship in a static classification system. Thirdly, as we will see, girls' friendships offer gender appropriate ways to extend intersubjective influence and exert power, and so necessitate a definition of friendship that extends beyond conventional accounts that define it as purely personal and asocial.

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<sup>90</sup> In this chapter I focus on girls' friendships. There are two reasons for this; firstly, I found during write-up I had much more data on girls' friendships than boys'. Secondly, because for girls, friendship offers opportunities to exert intersubjective influence in gender appropriate ways. In contrast boys (depending on status) are legitimised in extending influence more widely. As Hey (1997) has argued, the personal and private nature of friendship, as a way to exercise power and enforce social definitions, makes it particularly potent. Boys' friendships are constituted differently to girls', for example boys' peer groups tend to be much larger and less exclusive. Practices such as exclusion and not speaking are more frequently engaged in by girls. In contrast, as I discussed in the preceding chapter, boys are more likely to engage in 'wind-ups' or draw on a 'rhetoric of violence'. Boys and girls both proclaim the centrality of friends in their lives.

## Friendship and personhood

It has been noted that the Western ideal of friendship – ‘a personal, spontaneous, private relationship’ (Paine 1969: 513 cited in Bell and Coleman 1999), ‘based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment and affection’ (Carrier 1999: 21) – implies a corresponding notion of the self (Carrier 1999, Paine 1999, Spencer and Pahl 2006). This self is an independent individual existing prior to social relations (Carrier 1999). Ideals of friendship thus rest on the notion of personhood discussed in chapter one – the person as an autonomous, free and independent individual.

Carrier (1999) starts from these ideals, and argues that without people who can be friends (i.e. autonomous individuals), we cannot speak of friendship. Thus Carrier argues, social groups who do not conceptualise selves in this way (for example Melanesians or working-class people in Britain), have a notion of the self that is unsuited to the notion of friendship:

‘This is not to say that working-class people have fewer amicable relationships, that they live lives that are emotionally impoverished. Rather, it is to say that their relationships are organised, thought about and talked about differently, in terms of mates, neighbours and kin rather than friends’ (1999: 33).

Carrier starts from a narrow ideal of friendship and so establishes a correspondingly narrow definition of ‘selves who can be friends’. I would argue for a different approach to these questions. In chapter 1, I argue that a focus on the informal realm highlights that growing up is intrinsically relational – pupils are producing themselves as particular kinds of people in constant relation to those around them. The workings of friendship in school exemplify this argument. Thus, I argue it is more productive to challenge conventional understandings of friendship, and subsequently the ideals of the Western individual these imply. Pupils in school talk a lot about friendship, but their understandings and expectations of it challenges definitions of friendship as spontaneous, personal and private relations of affection. As I will discuss, friendship is viewed as essential, is governed by conventions and is a way to exert intersubjective agency.

In this chapter, I argue that while sentiment and affection are certainly a characteristic of girls' friendships in school, to understand them only in these limited terms (Allen 1989) would fail to do justice to the complexity and range of 'affects' (Evans 2010 in press) the constitution of friendships in school entails. I argue that friendship is a key, gender appropriate way, through which girls can exert power and police gendered conventions in school.

Similarly, Evans (2010 in press) questions the idea that friendship is always based on relations of affection. The 'disruptive boys' friendships are based on relations of admiration and 'competitive equality' and are 'fiercely rivalrous'. To understand these friendships in terms of 'amity and intimacy' does not do justice to their constitution. Furthermore, the disruptive boys' friendships are an illustration of the 'situatedness' of personhood - the boys are bringing themselves into being in relation to their friends, constituting their idea of themselves in social relations.

Likewise, Hey (1997), finding previous accounts of girls' friendships over-romantic, over-political or over-simplified, offers a multifaceted account of girls' friendships. She views them as a social base which enables the elaboration of forms of subjectivity. A site 'for instilling...specific kinds of value, discipline, behaviour, and response in human subjects' (Eagleton 1985: 6 in Hey 1997: 23). Rather than view the personal and private nature of girls' friendships as evidence of a-sociality, she contends that this nature makes them a particularly powerful force for the installation of a 'gendered cultural hegemony'.

Friendships in school are one form of intersubjective relation through which pupils are producing themselves in relation to those around them. As I will argue, the personal nature of girls' friendships entails an intimate scale of difference through which girls' can define themselves as 'uniquely particular' (Evans 2006) in relation to those closest to them. This is especially apparent in bitching, the practice of talking badly about a friend behind their back, understood as an inevitable part of girls' friendships.

## Friendship in school

The Year 11 drama lesson is a non-starter, half the class are absent getting their tetanus jabs, slowly trickling in when they have had them done. The teacher offers me this opportunity to ask the class some research questions. I ask them what is most important in their lives, the class do not hesitate. "Friends". Paige explains: "friends are the most important thing, you'd do anything for them, they feel more like your family than your family". "Yeah", agrees Francesca, "your friends are going through the same kinds of things as you so they don't disapprove like your family do". Lisa adds, "your friends understand you and you can tell them everything".

Willis (1977) and Mac an Ghail (1994) both argue that peer groups are the infrastructure of the informal realm. But friendships are the units on which peer groups are built. Friendship is the cornerstone of the informal realm, it is both a value product in itself, and a necessary prerequisite for producing other kinds of positive value. It is between friends that value is produced, evaluated and conferred, and without friendship many forms of value production are viewed as invalid.

In school, the actions of friendship are observable everywhere. Throughout my time in school I often observed friends holding hands, kissing and hugging, offering advice about a boyfriend, consolation after a disappointing mark, or tutoring in a difficult subject. Making plans for weekend fun, listening to a friend vent about a fight with a parent, standing up to their enemy, making each other laugh with a private joke or helping to negotiate after an argument with another friend. In school friends offer fun, laughter, support, intimacy, advice, protection, companionship, affection and love.

In the last chapter, I discussed how pupils make a distinction between status and liking. Status is evidenced by visibility and intersubjective influence. Liking on the other hand is a personal evaluation dependent on the qualities of the self. This is the premise on which friendship is ideally based within school, while much evaluation in school is premised on visibility and surface – being judged on the way you appear. Friendship is idealised through

notions of depth – knowing the ‘real’ person and being able to express your ‘true self’ without fear of judgement.

As these notions highlight, the conventional understanding of Western friendship as emanating from a pre-constituted inner self is, unsurprisingly, in circulation within school. These ideals of friendship are one way in which the ideal of individuality, one which centralises a genuine inner self (chapter 9), is made sense anew in peer relations. Further the expression of this ‘inner self’ is evaluated within self-other relations and is an example of the way in which ‘individuality’ emerges through sociality.

Talking about friendship with sixth formers Eleanor, Megan and Jane, Eleanor explains:

“I’m really really shy, it doesn’t really show when I’m in front of my best friends and stuff because they’re the only people with who I feel completely comfortable”.

I ask why they feel comfortable with friends in a way they can’t feel comfortable with strangers? Megan answers, “because they know you”, Jane adding, “because I know they like me”.

But this correspondence with conventional understandings of Western friendship is not the whole story. These idealised notions of friendship, co-exist with the harsh realities of exclusion and break-ups among friends. Girls govern and police their friendships according to the interrelated conventions of friendship, gender and communication. The transactions of friendship can offer gender appropriate ways to police these boundaries; the power to exclude is an acceptable way for girls to extend their intersubjective influence. And ‘bitching’ (talking badly about someone behind their back) is understood by girls as an unavoidable consequence of friendship. Its effect is to shift the scales of difference in order to make visible hierarchical distinctions between friends.

School is littered with tales of the rise and fall of friendships. Peer groups are shaped and transformed by ruptures, splits and reunifications as friends fall out, sometimes permanently, sometimes temporarily, and factions are formed. Lillian, now in Year 12, tells me a story of a best-friendship she had in Year 8, her story highlighting how deeply felt these relations are:

“I remember when me and Lara first started to become friends, we were working on a project together in French, we started chatting and it was like, everything she said was just like ‘yes!’ You know? we totally got each other. We started spending all our time together, I’d get off the bus early and she’d wait for me so we could walk to school together. We’d always be on the phone or MSN, or having sleepovers at each other’s houses. It’s difficult to explain but she was like a drug, it was all a bit of a blur but she was the most amazing person to be with, she made me feel amazing about everything, it sounds strange but I just had to be with her.

Then one time, I said something, it must of been wrong but I didn’t know it. She became venomous, she wouldn’t tell me things and one time I came into German and she was sitting with Katia, and there was no space for me, she was like ‘oh sorry’. After that it was alright for a bit, me, Lara and Katia were a group and we went shopping together and stuff. But then Lara and Katia had a sleepover and didn’t tell me. Then one day I came into school and she wouldn’t talk to me, I didn’t know what I’d done wrong and she wouldn’t tell me, I couldn’t understand, she just cut me off ‘bam’. I was really depressed, I used to dread coming into school and every day I used to cry after school...Afterwards I found out she’d been bitching about me with Katia, saying I copied her all the time and was really annoying. I think she wanted to be friends with more popular people, because she dropped Katia pretty quickly and after that became friends with Lola and that lot, it was like a ladder going up”.

### **Sameness and closeness**

As Lillian’s story identifies, her friendship with Lara was established through recognition of similarity, ‘getting each other’. In this section I will discuss the ways in which friendship in school is often premised on notions of sameness and closeness. According to pupils, friendships in primary school and younger years of secondary school are usually based on physical proximity; “Who you sat next to in the classroom” in primary school or “who was in your form group” in secondary school. After the dissolutions and reconstitutions of Year 8 and 9 (chapter 5), friendships are now formed with people who are “similar”; hence pupils emphasise the importance of sharing “priorities”, “tastes”, “values”, “sense of humour” and

“opinions on other people”. Segal tells me that friendships are based on “what people wear and what music they listen to. But also more and more, on what people say and do”. Jenny, listening offers an example, “like some people only care about drinking, they don’t think GCSE’s are important, they’re not the sort of people we’d be friends with now”.

Pupils also position their friends in degrees of closeness, with the understanding that even in a group of friends, different people will be ‘closer’ than others. Best friendship is the designation for the closest degree of friendship, and is generally an exclusive partnership. When I start at Collingson School, girls often declare their best friendship as one of the first things they tell me about themselves. Their description of best friends as, “my other half” or, “like we’re one person”, attests to the centrality of closeness in notions of best friendship. Closeness to friends also enables a distancing with family, and is viewed by pupils as an important indicator of growing up:

SWR: ...and what does growing up involve?

Jane: Splitting from your parents, because instead of going shopping with your mum you go shopping with your friends.

Megan: I think finding your own social world.

Friends are centrally important in the process of becoming a particular kind of person. As Munn (1986) has argued through the recognition of positive value in others, value is made visible and reflected back to the person. In recognising shared positive value, friends define and validate themselves as particular kinds of people. As Leah put it, “it’s all about identification, if you positively identify with someone then you become friends with them”. When Natasha returns from an induction day at an academically successful sixth form college she is unsure about what to do, whether to stay at Collingson or move to the college. She tells us:

“I might leave, because I got into Clare House...but I didn’t like the people, they were upbeat and nice but I really don’t feel they were my kind of people”.

Pupils describe friendship in terms of shared interests, ‘symbolic texts’ and values but rarely explicitly link this to ‘inherited’ aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity or class. Especially among younger years, the emphasis of friendship is on the value-produced and signs drawn

on, and as I argue in the previous chapter, pupils maintain a certain flexibility in the relationship between symbolic texts and inherited aspects of identity.

The sixth formers I speak to are more explicit about the links between background and who they became friends with in school. Value-production remains important but these processes are seen as being shaped by background, as Shola say:

“Most of my friends are the same background as me [West African], it’s like you bond even more because you understand each other even more...Your friends are people you have lots in common with, the way we dress, the things we do, I think that’s to do with background”.

Similarly good friends Jane and Megan agree that friendship is, “a lot about a shared background”. Jane says, “with our group of friends, I think that we talk properly, and that I share a sense of humour with them”. Megan adds, “but I think it’s also to do with class, because I think we’re the most middle class group, so I think that must have had something to do with it”. Jane agrees, but says that this is something she has only just become aware of:

“A while ago I was just going through everyone in our group, thinking ‘white, middle class’, ‘white middle class’. Well, when I think about it, it’s a lot about sharing a similar background. Like I’d never really thought about it like that before but actually all my friends are white, middle-class, dual parent<sup>91</sup> backgrounds”.

However, not all friendships are based on notions of sameness. For example a ‘class friend’ is defined by pupils as someone you often talk to within class but rarely spend time with outside class, although you would always exchange friendly transactions when you saw them around school. Class friendships are an important way through which pupils extend their interpersonal networks within the growing together discourse. These friendships do not depend on the shared factors described above, and are often valued especially because they are between people who previously saw themselves as too different (for example

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<sup>91</sup> Meaning that parents are still married and living in the same house.

chapter 7). In the process these friendships result in positive value, the strengthening of links between different peer groups and communal value.

### **(Not) Fitting in**

As I have argued so far, friendship is a foundation of the informal realm, both a value product and a necessary prerequisite for producing other kinds of positive value. In recognising shared positive value friends define and validate themselves and each other as particular kinds of people. Consequently, being without friends in school is both an unequivocal sign of social failure and a lonely and isolating experience.

Leah is academically high-achieving and from my perspective has a respected and secure position as one of the 'founders' of the Misfits. However she tells me that she feels peripheral in the social realm. She describes her experience of "not fitting in":

"They [her peers at Collingson school] didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. I understood them in an anthropological way, or if I had to be a psychologist I could explain their behaviour...I had different interests and values to them as people".

Leah observes her peers from an 'academic distance', and as one of the pupils I spend most time with, I am constantly impressed with her incisive analysis of her peers. However, she does not enjoy feelings of closeness and sameness with her peers and consequently does not experience her intersubjective relations in terms of friendship. Leah is invested in different value-producing actions, and recognises different kinds of value to her peers, she does not invest in typically feminine practices such as clothes or make-up, or typically teenage practices such as drinking or parties. Without friends to share her practices and values she feels lonely and isolated.

Further, Leah is critical of the very conventions of feminine friendship at work in school. Whereas other girls accept 'bitching' as an inevitable dimension of their friendships, Leah finds these practices duplicitous and evaluates girls' friendships' as inauthentic. While other girls are willing to play the game, work within the conventions of friendship in order to enjoy

its rewards, pleasures and potentials, Leah cannot bring herself to invest in these practices she evaluates as invalid:

“I find friendships with girls really difficult, they’re really pathetic, like they hold onto every little thing, every little thing becomes an issue because they won’t let go of anything”.

However, despite her feelings, Leah continues to associate with the Misfits, sitting with them in lessons, hanging around in her/ their peer group territory and engaging in a constant flow of transactions with them. Despite “not feeling I fit in”, and “not particularly liking quite a few of them”, Leah says she continues because, “I have no choice, I’ve got nowhere else to hangout”. Being on your own for an extended length of time in school is an action of immense negative potential, and entails negative visibility, isolation and vulnerability – for Leah, in spite of her opinions of her peers, it is not even an option that she would consider.

Friends offer insurance against this position, minimising the negative outcomes of being alone at school, as Megan puts it, “to have a group of friends, it’s like a safety net”. If being alone is a sign of social failure than being with friends is evidence (at least some degree) of social success and acceptability; framed by pupils as ‘fitting in’ or ‘being liked’.

The importance of friendship at school highlights what is at stake in terms of fitting in, friendship is both contingent on being assessed as acceptable and a necessary pre-requisite for being viewed as acceptable. To reject the conventions of what it is to be an appropriate (gendered) person is to risk sacrificing the pleasures, rewards and securities of friendship. The vulnerability of this position is intensified because it is through those that are not fitting in that pupils can further secure a position for themselves as fitting in:

SWR: Why do you think people are sometimes so horrible at school?

Petra (Year 12): I think it’s about identity, about finding out who you are, you’re so desperate to feel like you belong somewhere, that you fit in, so you all turn on someone who doesn’t fit it because then you’re part of something.

### **The transformations and transactions of friendship**

So far I have discussed the central importance of friendship within school, emphasising the energy and emotion pupils invest in their friendships. I will now discuss in more detail the transactions of friendship. Girls are active in making, maintaining and breaking friendships. They draw on the resources available to them in order to effect the transformations of friendship; primarily their actions, words and bodies. Spending time together, talk and disclosure are key resources used to continually constitute friendship. These resources work equally effectively in reverse, to end friendships, and are also effective in ensuring friends conform to the conventions of an appropriate identity.

Friendship in school is a particularly salient example of the inadequacy of approaching friendship as a static category, as in school the processes of friendship are particularly visible. To stop enacting the transactions of friendship is to terminate it. Pupils often say, “we don’t talk anymore” to signify that a friendship has been terminated. This also exemplifies the way friendships are shaped by the institutional organisation of school; pupils are compressed together for a significant amount of time each week, providing opportunities for constant transactional flows between friends (Amit-Talai 1995).

### **Spending time together**

As in Amit-Talai’s Canadian high school, ‘friends are made by extending the range of opportunities for interaction’ (1995: 155). Within school, time spent with a friend is a key indicator of the closeness of a friendship. For example a ‘class friend’ - while valued and fulfilling an important function - would not be considered a close friend until time spent together extended beyond the classroom.

At the same time, classroom friendships can provide a good foundation for becoming closer friends. Lessons provide a guaranteed amount of time together each week and from this base pupils can increase their transactional flow and extend their interactions to other settings. Lexy and Linda have been in the same school year since they were eleven, but they only became friends when they started GCSE art together age fourteen. They now spend every lunch and break together, as well as seeing each other outside school and describe themselves as ‘best friends’.

However, the potential for extending interaction with a new friend is limited by obligations to the primary group of friends. Spending too much time with a new friend or group of friends is viewed as a conflict to the loyalty expected by the primary group of friends. If, like Francesca in the previous chapter, time spent with new friends is seen to outweigh commitment to the existing peer group, the individual is often seen to have made a permanent choice to leave the latter and join the former.

Peer groups are constituted by a mutual investment of time, and shared territorial space. As such, attempting to extend friendships beyond the classroom into break and lunchtimes - by spending significant time in another groups' territory - makes a major statement about where one's loyalties lie. Jane explains:

"You're friends with a lot of people but you just don't hang out with them at lunch because there are just set places. There are such specific places that if I was to go specifically from the canteen to the field it would be like saying [in mock serious voice] 'bye group, I'm going with this group', it would be such an extreme thing".

Some pupils do choose to maintain an independent 'middle man' status, and do not ally themselves with one particular group, instead spending time with different friends in different groups. This has advantages; while peer groups project and are invested with a particular shared identity, often defined in opposition to each other (chapter 5), a middle man avoids these associations and has more freedom to choose their company. Tanya explains her decision to occupy this position:

"I like to spend time with different kinds of people, not just spend time with people who are my friends. It's not that you'll get bored but if you're in an environment with lots of different kinds of people why would you stick to that kind of people".

However while being a middle man offers the freedom of not having to commit to one group, it also means that no one had reciprocal loyalty for you - heightening the risk of finding yourself alone.

While spending a significant proportion of free time in your group's territory is an indicator of loyalty to a friendship group, closer friends make an extra effort to maximise time spent

together throughout the school day. Close friends race across school so they can meet their friend from their lesson, or risk being late to their next lesson so they can wait for a friend talking to a teacher or finishing off their work. In Year 11 pupils are allowed out of school for lunch, and subgroups always wait for each other in school before going out to the shops or café. Natasha, Georgia and Ruby are a best friend subgroup that formed at the beginning of Year 11, within the It girls. Although they still spend time in the It girls territory they indicate their newly formed closeness by waiting for each other after lessons, physically expressing their proximity by linking arms as they walk around school and always going to lunch together in their special café.

Friendship also means extending interaction beyond school. There is a spectrum of activities that indicate closeness of friendships; interconnected peer groups such as the It girls, the Man-dom and the Green corridor girls socialise together at parties or gatherings in the park. On an increasingly intimate level, groups of friends will go shopping together, or hang out at each other's houses, close friends will stay over and best friends will go on holiday with each other (and family).

### **Talking and not talking**

Talk is central to the processes of friendship. Talk is productive and fundamental to the construction of intimacy (Hey 1997) and, 'for children and young people 'talk' is a primary medium of social exchange' (James 1995: 49). Pupils use every possible opportunity for talk, talking up to (and often beyond) the last second before the demands of formal schooling are imposed by teachers. Whether discussing last night's TV, passing on a juicy piece of gossip, making plans for the weekend or offering advice - friends talk.

The closer the friendship, the more talk is expected, and the more effort is made to ensure opportunities for talk. Close friends ensure they walk together to create a private moment in school for talk or talk after school, either in person, on the phone, or on MSN. When Kadia tells me the story of her friendship group, she explains that within the group some people are closer to each other than others. She illustrates this in terms of talk, Samiya and Grace are, "not that close, they had a falling out a few years ago they're alright now, but they still don't speak on the phone or anything".

To stop talking to someone is both the clearest sign that a friendship has been terminated and the most frequent sanction against unacceptable or inappropriate behaviour. Segal, Nadia and Sam are a close subgroup within the Misfits; I know them well so I am interested to hear that until Year 11, Nadege had been part of this close group. I would never have guessed that Nadege and the Misfit girls formerly had such a close relationship, I had never seen them so much as acknowledge each other, even though they are in many of the same classes.

Segal later tells me that her, Nadia and Sam “stopped talking” to Nadege because she was “talking behind their backs” and because she liked to “mess with people”. Now Nadege won’t speak to them either. In a lesson, now more alert to the interactions between these former friends, I observe Nadege whisper to Jenny, Jenny sighs and asks Segal to pass the paper. Jenny is required to act as a mediator so that Nadege can avoid even the most functional transaction with Segal.

Not talking is also a more temporary state to express disapproval with a friends’ actions. Maria makes visible her evaluation of close friend Cheryl’s behaviour as unacceptable by withdrawing her communicational transactions. Maria had recently split up with a boy, “she liked a lot”, when she found out Cheryl had started going out with him. Maria explains to her other friends, but not to Cheryl, that she finds this unacceptable because, “Cheryl doesn’t even like him that much” and because, “she’s always doing things like this”. After a few months, having made Cheryl’s negative value-production clearly visible, Maria decides to start talking to Cheryl again because, “he’s only a guy and it isn’t worth losing a friend over”.

The talking spectrum is a subtle tool for expressing varying degrees of disapproval/unhappiness towards friends, without having to tell them directly. One Monday Nadia is ‘hardly talking’ to her best friends Sam and Segal. Although she does not tell them anything directly, her reduced interaction with them – answering direct questions but not engaging them in conversation, meeting their eye, waiting for them between lessons or chatting with them at lunch and break – provokes Sam and Segal to reflect on what they might have done

to upset her. They decide that she is probably upset because she did not approve of Segal and Sam drinking at a party they went to on Saturday night. After a couple of days Nadia resumes her flow of friendly transactions with Segal and Sam and the girls put the incident behind them.

Even if a friend's behaviour does not directly impact on their friends, it may still be sanctioned. As friendships are viewed primarily through relations of sameness and closeness, inappropriate actions are seen to reflect on friends. And friends often feel a responsibility to sanction a friend's inappropriate behaviour, in order to limit wider and more permanent damage to a friend's reputation. Shola's friendship group stopped talking to one of their members because there were "rumours" that she was behaving like a slag, "basically doing this with this person, with that person". Shola explains they took that course of action because, "it's your friend, you can't believe your friend would do that sort of thing, so you react to that". They started talking to her again when they judged that she had desisted, and regretted her actions sufficiently.

### **Disclosure/ non-disclosure**

Disclosure is another key resource in friendship. Like the girls in Amit-Talai's study: 'Intentional disclosures were made to deepen the intimacy of friendship. Friends deliberately divulged material that would not otherwise be readily available through school interaction' (1995: 156). It is not only the information that is important in disclosure but also the act – within school disclosure is embodied as friends physically remove themselves from the rest of the group, turned their backs or whisper in each other's ears.

Disclosure is expected to correlate to the closeness of the friendship, with the understanding that best friends "tell each other everything". Pupils accept this spectrum and rarely challenge being excluded from a disclosure, as long as it matches their perceived closeness to a friend: Marina and Samiya (who are class friends) are chatting as they walk to lesson, as Jacob (who is a 'close friends' of Samiya) comes to join them Samiya says to him "I've got something to tell you but you can't tell anyone". Turning to Marina she tells her that she'll meet her in class. Marina walks on without question while Samiya and Jacob drop back so she can disclose her information in 'privacy'.

The flow of disclosure is not always equal. Best friends are expected to tell each other everything, even things that other friends have disclosed to them. After Kadia tells Grace something that Jacob has just told her, something suddenly strikes Grace. "I've just thought, if you tell me everything that Jacob tells you, does that mean that you tell Jacob everything I say?". Kadia reassures her, "no of course not, don't worry". In this way Kadia and Grace are negotiating the dilemmas of exchange, disclosures are risky and sometimes it is necessary to verbalise an agreement on disclosure flows.

Just as disclosure is a key resource to effect the transformations of friendship, non-disclosure, or disclosing less than before is a key resource for ending friendship or expressing distance. A friend withholding information that they share with other friends (of comparable closeness) is viewed by pupils as a clear indicator that something is wrong in the relationship. When Lillian and her friend made-up after an argument, Lillian knows there was still something wrong because, "she stopped telling me things", shortly after her friend stopped talking to her completely and their friendship ended.

Disclosure ensures that an informational state (Shuman 1986) is shared with friends, while non-disclosure maintains a hierarchical inequality. Georgia and Leah used to have a close friendship before Georgia "stopped talking" to Leah. While their friendship is over, their relationship continues to be an invested one, somewhere between intense interest, competition and mutual annoyance. The girls are required to sit next to each other in science class, so they often interact despite their mutual antagonism. One lesson, as they discuss some mutual friends from a different school, Georgia asks Leah what she thinks of a boy that her friend is interested in (fancies). Leah tells Georgia that she wouldn't recommend him because he did something she didn't like, but follows this by saying, "I'm not sure if I want to tell you what it is, I might decide later but I'm not sure". By holding back her disclosure Leah is maintaining a superior informational state and at first Georgia defers to this, trying to convince Leah to share. Shortly, however, she tires of Leah's upper hand and devalues the state Leah is protecting; "You're such a drama queen, either tell me or don't tell me. Obviously I'd rather you did tell me but I don't actually care that much".

## **The power to include and exclude**

The delineation of these resources shows girls as active in exerting power through friendship. These resources can all be understood as forms of inclusion and exclusion, by which girls are able to position themselves and negotiate their relations with others. The transactions of friendship enable girls to extend intersubjective influence in gender appropriate ways, the intimacy of these processes side-stepping the transgressions of 'acting big'.

Furthermore, as Hey argues, girls possess differing abilities to command and demand exclusion and inclusion (1997: 58). Transactional competence, the production of positive value, close friendships within the group, and adeptness at exerting influence without 'acting big' are all factors which contribute to centrality within a friendship group. As Evans (2010 in press) argues, within peer groups social positions are established through who has enough influence to define what constitutes appropriate exchanges within the group and who will be able to make those exchanges. Centrality in a friendship group enables a person to command inclusion and exclusion, and conversely those in more peripheral positions are not only less able to do this but are more vulnerable to being excluded.

Exclusion is premised on contravention of multiple sets of conventions, including communication, gender and female friendship. Firstly, the resources of friendship require a knowledge of the conventions of communication in school, especially questions of entitlement - who is entitled to speak, who is entitled to listen, and the management of differential knowledge (what does everyone know? what do only some people know?) (Shuman 1986). As Shuman writes 'school interaction is accompanied by a running metacommentary on violations of appropriate speech and action (1986: 2).

Exclusion is also premised on perceived transgressions of the interrelated conventions of girls' friendship (what it is to be a good friend) and appropriate gender behaviour, as well as the more specific conventions of particular friendship groups. Those who have the power to demand and command exclusion and inclusion are the ones who are most adept at

understanding, and negotiating the conventions of groups, gender or communication, while those excluded are often the ones who can't get to grips with these conventions.

When Megan, Jane and Eleanor describe the exclusion of a member of their group (through withheld invitations) they explain that she was 'annoying' - she could not get to grips with the transactional conventions of the group:

Eleanor: There was a girl who used to hang around in our group, and it's not like we didn't like her but she was just really annoying... And then she eventually got the message and stopped hanging around with us.

Jane: Because we went out a couple of times without her...

Megan: She was invited though...

Jane: She was usually invited but...and then she said 'you guys, I don't know why you're ditching me all the time, blah blah blah'... and then she sort of left the group of her own accord and stopped talking to us.

The girl in question was 'annoying' because she was unable to transform her transactions in ways valued by the group – quick and witty verbal exchange. She was unable to participate appropriately even as an observer, "she didn't really say anything" explains Eleanor. "And when she heard people laughing, and it was after a really long joke she'd look up and go huh?" continues Jane.

In Year 9, Georgia was excluded completely from all friendship networks. Rhiannon, who were instrumental in her exclusion recounts this exclusion:

"You know Georgia? Well all band two<sup>92</sup> hated her and they made her come into our band but we all hated her as well".

Her misdemeanour was transgressing the feminine imperative to act modestly:

"She just thought herself better than everyone, so then me and some of our friends didn't want her talking to us so we were just really rude to her so she said we were bullying her and then there was this massive thing like *Mean Girls*<sup>93</sup>".

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<sup>92</sup> In the first three years of Collingson the year group was divided into two bands that were organised separately and so had little contact with each other.

<sup>93</sup> An American high school comedy that focuses on the power and politics of girls' friendships.

However Georgia managed to rehabilitate her position in the Year by learning to work within the gendered conventions, as Lexy, Rhiannon's friend says:

"Georgia has changed a lot, she's really different. She was really annoying. No one really liked her before".

By Year 11 she had managed to secure a place for herself among the high status It girls, although her past transgressions mean she is never in a secure enough position to command inclusion and exclusion like some of the more established members of the group.

### **Bitching; "Girls just have a bitchy nature"**

"I think with girls they're just analytical about how other girls act and they're just judgemental... It's because of bitchiness, girls know that they're going to be analysed about everything they do. I think with girls it's mainly like, 'did you see her wearing that', 'she's talking to that person and I don't like it', 'she's talking to that boy what does she think she's doing'" (Caroline).

As I have argued, friendship is a gender appropriate way to express power. However as Hey writes:

'Girls' tangible desires for power through friendship have to be reconciled with its ethical rules. These rules are premised on the exact opposite of undisciplined individualism...The central premise of girls' friendships are: reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing' (1997: 65).

Bitching – "when you talk bad about other people, when you're nice to someone's face and then the next thing you're talking about them" (Tanya) - is a key practice that helps girls to handle the tension of friendship as simultaneously an expression of 'individuality' and relationality. Like inclusion and exclusion, it is also a key practice that enables girls to define their position by fixing each other in varying degrees of closeness and distance, sameness and difference.

Furthermore bitching is an example of the dialectical nature of value-production (Munn 1986). Bitching makes visible the boundaries of acceptability, and identifies those who have transgressed this and are producing negative value. In bitching

those listening are constantly reminded of the potential for negative value production, and the ways to avoid it (by not replicating the actions of those bitched about).

Bitching is seen by pupils as a 'natural' quality of girls, and is thus another acceptable way to negotiate status and power within the conventions of femininity. While it is acceptable and expected for boys to exert power through (the threat of) physical force or overt displays of power and domination, girls who do this are accused of 'thinking they're big' or 'acting hard', traits viewed as unfeminine. As I have argued, girls extend their intersubjective influence in more intimate ways, often within friendship groups rather than across friendship groups. Michael articulates these strategies when discussing the difference between boys and girls:

"Girls being friends with girls is a really nasty kind of relationship. Most of what you hear is girls bitching about other girls. A guy will try to be really macho but actually there is the same kind of thing for girls, not trying to be macho but to do with your status and how you outwardly appear...there is a hierarchy but it exists behind the groups, the groups are kind of like a front. Like a girl will be in a group of supposedly 'best friends' and will then go and bitch to some other girls about their 'best friends'".

Both boys and girls share the rhetoric that girls deal with their differences by 'bitching', while boys 'have it out'. However, pupils need to reconcile this rhetoric of gender distinction with their observations that boys actually do bitch. Pupils handle these contradictions by positioning boys bitching as a feminine practice, and often use this as a form of critique:

Georgia: Well girls are bitchy and boys aren't. If boys have a problem they'll have a fight and if girls do then they'll bitch.

Lexy: Some boys are, Nihal is bitchy.

Georgia: Yeah, but he's quite effeminate.

Likewise girls do sometimes deal with their problems through overt confrontations, but these practices are defined as unfeminine. Although pupils claim that boys sort their differences out through fighting, when I ask the pupils how many physical fights there had actually been they could only remember one, and that was between two girls! This

complementary opposition is one way in which the divisions between masculinity and femininity are understood and policed by pupils.

Although bitching makes visible a friend's negative value transformations, it is not seen to impact of the positive value of the friendship. As Ruby explains, "It sounds funny but they *are* your friends, it would never go to they dislike you, it's just that you annoy them a little bit". "Yeah, because there's a difference between not liking someone and bitching about them" adds Samiya. Bitching makes visible small infractions of convention or instances of transactional failure, but as long as the positive value outweighs the negative value a friendship can be maintained.

Consequently, girls generally see no contradiction in heavily investing in a particular friendship, and at the same time bitching about that friend. For example Natasha and Georgia enact all the actions of close friendship. At the same time, in Georgia's absence Natasha joins with Lexy (who described her relationship with Georgia as an 'intolerant toleration') in bitchy behaviour, often imitating, and laughing about, the distinctive facial expressions Georgia makes when she is concentrating. And in making visible Georgia's failings, Lexy and Natasha are producing positive value between themselves, as friends who make each other laugh and share opinions (even if this is at the expense of another friend).

Bitching enables girls to distinguish themselves from their friends whilst simultaneously enacting the practices of inclusion and fulfilling the demands of friendship. Bitching is a practice that enables girls to negotiate the tension within school between desire and demand for individuality ('being yourself') and relationality (fitting in, being a good friend). The covert nature of bitching allows girls to fulfil the demands of friendship whilst hierarchically distinguishing themselves from their friends - the expression of negative judgement of a friend defining the speaker by what they are not. In the following example Tanya and Natasha define themselves as non-bitchy through their positioning of Samiya as bitchy:

Tanya: There were some people that made other people bitch, because they were such bitches.

Natasha: Like Samiya.

Tanya: When you're around her you bitch a lot.

Natasha: She influences you a lot.

Tanya: It's not even in our nature.

Natasha: She'll say something and you'll be like 'yeah, yeah, yeah, I didn't even realise'.

Tanya: We're not bitchy people but when we we're with Samiya then you might end up saying something and you'll be like 'oh my god did I just say that', because you wouldn't say that normally. But because she influences you...we're bitching right now.

Natasha: Yeah I know, but we're not saying it like that.

In this way, we see that girls are producing themselves in relation to those around them, both those they are bitching about and thus distinguishing themselves from, and those they are bitching to and thus creating positive value with. The relations of closeness and sameness that characterise friendship produce particular tensions, bitching helps ease these by enabling girls to fulfil the demands of relationality and individuality that are both required of girls within school. Individuality emerges through sociality, and so these processes cannot be understood independently. Leah exemplifies these tensions as she describes the difficulties that accompany a close friendship:

"It's like I'm me and I know who I am, then when you're friends with someone you're like 'don't be you, be me'. But then it's like 'no, don't copy me, be you'...friendships are so much easier at the beginning, they're much more difficult later on".

### **The dangers of 'being known'**

"I think everyone bitches about their close friends, because they know the most about them so they know what to bitch about, they know more, I think everyone bitches about their friends" (Lexy).

While friendship offers the pleasure of 'being known', bitching represents the dangers that this also carries. As Amit Talai writes, friendship poses a 'delicate see-saw between concealment and revelation' (1995: 156). On the one hand, self-exposure is necessary for

the creation of intimacy and the continual constitution of friendship. On the other hand, bitching is a continuous reminder of the vulnerability of this position, especially painful because it is so personal. Thus, despite the ideal that friends know you and accept you 'for who you are', bitching represents an intimate transaction through which girls shape each other. Even among friends then, it is important to be seen in the right way, to be recognised in appropriate ways.

Bitching acts as a constant reminder of the micro-surveillance that girls place each other under, the minutiae of bitching increasing its effects; every detail of the self might be flawed so nothing can be taken for granted. Samiya describes:

"Girls will bitch about everything, from your features to your personality, even your toes! Like there was this rumour going around that Samiya's got ugly toes. Even your nails! Like so and so has got such dirty finger nails".

Girls need to undertake constant self-surveillance to manage this see-saw successfully, and the covert nature of bitching further intensifies the imperative for self-surveillance. Words and actions need to be constantly examined in order to pre-empt any misdemeanours that could cause 'bad talk' behind your back. Girls must comprehensively and continuously scrutinise themselves in order to pre-empt the scrutiny of others:

Segal: I hate the way that everything between girls is implied. You spend all your time trying to read between the lines, you don't know if someone is annoyed or angry with you, and even if they were they wouldn't say. You're always worried you've done something wrong, and you go over what you've said or done just in case. It can be really tiring.

Bitching is a practice that enables girls to position themselves in relation to their friends in reference to the conventions of appearance, behaviour and talk. Transgressions that are subsequently bitched about are a key way that these conventions become visible, and the boundaries of acceptability are policed:

When Katy starts to spend time with Jack at lunch and break, and seeing her friends much less, they express their dissatisfaction by bitching about her behaviour. While we are sitting

on the field they notice her, a little way off, engrossed in a conversation with Jack, and started to criticise her recent behaviour; “she’s being so gay<sup>94</sup>, she just walked past and she didn’t even say hi”. Their bitching makes visible the expectations of friendship (that she is not fulfilling). Bitching functions not just as a verbalisation of mutual surveillance, but also as a form of micro-management; once the boundaries of acceptability have been made visible, they can be acted upon. In this example hierarchies of value are also made visible - it is more important to produce value between friends than with boys.

### **Policing the conventions of bitching**

Bitching is itself subject to conventions, particularly questions of who is entitled to speak and who is entitled to listen (Shuman 1986). Girls are differently positioned within these conventions, and a secure position within a friendship group is required for ‘safe’ bitching. Bitching from an insecure position is a more risky tactic: while it might strengthen alliances, it is also more likely to backfire.

When Nadege was excluded from friendship with Nadia, Segal and Sam, one of the reasons they gave was that “she was talking behind people’s back”. But if bitching is seen as an inevitable feature of friendship, why did this practice result in her exclusion? The girls’ accounts suggest that Nadege had not balanced this practice with the demands of female friendship (such as loyalty, commitment and sharing) and had thus diminished her social power gained through friendship. Consequently, her bitching was used against her as ammunition to justify the exclusion. Her friends framed it as “messing with people”, indicating that her actions had crossed over from ‘normal’ venting to a conscious manipulation of the people around her. Without sufficient positive friendship value, her bitching was turned against her. Subsequently, among Nadia, Segal, Sam and their allies, Nadege’s negatively evaluated actions became crystallised as her personal value, and she was viewed as incapable of producing positive value.

Girls need to be constantly vigilant of shifting alliances that might result in a change in entitlement rights: Leah and Samiya are ‘class friends’ and are chatting in class. In a story

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<sup>94</sup> As I discuss in more detail in chapter 8, gay is used as a general term of denigration, unrelated to sexual activities/ orientations.

Samiya is telling she mentions Georgia. Leah takes the opportunity to tacitly assess Samiya's opinion on Georgia: does she have an ally in her antagonism? "Georgia has started hanging around with you guys hasn't she? Are you friends with her?". Samiya's answer suggests Leah is wise to tentatively gauge Georgia's position in the group. "Yeah, she's hanging around with Natasha and Ruby, but I'm not really friends with her. She's nice though". Although Samiya does not classify her relationship with Georgia as one of friendship she indicates she is not interested in bitching about her by her closing statement with "she's nice though", implying she had been assessed as appropriate and acceptable. Leah does not push the point any further and the subject changes. If she started bitching about her without testing the water Samiya might not have accepted Leah's entitlement to speak and reported her back to Georgia.

So while girls accept bitching as an inevitable part of relations between girls, the question of who is entitled to bitch and to who, is a matter of constant flux and negotiation. As Shuman writes, if girls challenge each other for 'talking about me behind my back' it means that the speaker was not entitled to speak (1986: 25). However as we have seen a lot of bitching goes unchallenged because it does not contravene entitlement.

This concern with entitlement can 'shift the focus of attention from the content of the message to the identities of the participants listening to and telling the account' (Shuman 1986: 25). Tanya told me that when Samiya was "bitching so bad" about her friend Maria - claiming that she was trying to steal another friend's boyfriend - Tanya decided to tell Maria: "So I told Maria the truth, that Samiya was bitching about her and it turned back on me and they said that I was the culprit". The focus shifted from the original content of the bitching to her entitlement to convey this information, and Tanya ended up bearing the brunt of these bitching transactions.

The potential of bitching to become a misdemeanour is also manipulated consciously by some girls, the conventions of bitching becoming another source of power that canny girls can utilise. Samiya recounts her conscious strategy:

"Basically I didn't like them anymore because they were really bitchy, but so was I. I pretended they were the biggest bitches and everyone turned against them. We

made up rumours, like ‘they’re really bitchy, they bitch about everyone’. But that’s the thing, we were all very bitchy then, very bad. I just used to, I used to heat it up a bit”.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have focused on girls’ friendships as a cornerstone of the informal realm, both a value-product and a means for producing other kinds of positive value. In terms of value-production in school, friendship is fundamental. As such friendship is also fundamentally significant for the constitution of the self (Munn 1986) and central to becoming a particular kind of person in school (Evans 2010).

I argued that starting from narrow ideals of friendship, premised on ideals of the individual is unproductive. Girls use the notion of friendship but its workings in school reveal it extends far beyond conventional understandings of friendship as voluntary relations of sentiment between two autonomous individuals (e.g. Carrier). While sentiment is a dimension of girls’ friendships, it is not a sufficient frame through which to understand these relations. Friendship is also a gender appropriate way to exert power and extend intersubjective influence.

In the previous chapter I discussed high status as comparable to Munn’s notion of fame (1986), the extension of an actor’s power and influence over space and time. This year-wide extension of intersubjective influence is normally only available to boys, a girl attempting the same thing actions for girls would be evaluated as negative value transformations. In this way we see an example of Munn’s argument that the governing premises of a society set the parameters of value-production and are embodied in the value-producing processes themselves. Definitions of appropriate masculinity and femininity mean the same actions by boys and girls will be result in positive or negative value respectively.

However, girls have recourse to different practices in order to extend their intersubjective influence and consequently experience an expansion of self. Friendship is a key means by which girls can exert power and increase their prestige, it creates a more intimate space-time scale than the practices of high status boys, but not necessarily less potent. The

personal and intimate nature of these extending/ exerting practices can in fact make them particularly effective and compelling.

Throughout this chapter I have illustrated the ways in which girls friendships in school challenge conventional understandings of Western friendship as personal, asocial and voluntary relations of affection between independent people. Furthermore I argue that this challenge to the Western ideals of friendship, is also a challenge to the corresponding Western ideal of the autonomous individual. Friendship in school exemplifies my argument that individuality is necessarily constituted through sociality. For example as we have seen girls differentiate themselves through bitching, which is necessarily interpersonal. Focusing on friendship illuminates the ways in which pupils are producing themselves in relation to those around them (Evans 2010).

So far I have explored the organisation and constitution of the informal realm, examining peer groups and girls' friendships. In the following chapters I examine two categories of distinction through which pupils define themselves and organise the world around them. Ethnicity and sexuality are two particularly salient categories in the informal realm in Collingson school, and I explore the ways they are brought into action and embodied by pupils. I then go onto discuss notions of appearance among pupils, arguing that beyond physical appearance, these notions make visible evaluative practices and positive and negative value-production.

## Chapter 7: Ethnicity

### *Vignette one*

In a Year 8 drama class the pupils are working in small groups on an improvisation based around a book they have been studying. The teacher directs me towards a group in the corner, the “problem group” she says. I look over, Lisa’s blonde hair is gelled back into a high pony tail, she sits with her arms crossed scowling, the two boys, Shaun, black and Blake, white, both with short hair and a gold earring in one ear are attempting to push each other off their chairs. It does not look like they are getting on with the task set, the teacher suggests I go over and give them some support and encouragement<sup>95</sup>. As I walk over and pull up a chair the group stops what they are doing and look at me, I ask what characters they are playing. Lisa responds in a beat, pointing to Shaun she says, “he’s a nigger”, at Blake “he’s a honky” and at herself “and I’m a chav”, her expression inscrutable. As I attempt to formulate an appropriate response to this statement, the teacher comes over and hustles them into action.

### *Vignette two*

It is a hot summer’s lunch-time and most pupils are sitting on the field. Away from their established territory the It girls are divided, Samiya (who had shortly before told me she is a bit “fed up” with the others) sits with Jacob and Kemal a little way off from Maria, Cheryl, Ruby, Natasha and Georgia. As Grace approaches she seems unsure about which group to join, she goes over to the girls and asks why they’re sitting separately. Maria in an insouciant tone answers, “that’s the black group, so we can’t join them”. Grace smiles, “well I’m black so I’d better go over”. A few minutes later Ruby gets up and in a similarly light-hearted way says “I’m not black but I’m going to go over anyway, I’m a rebel like that!”.

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<sup>95</sup> Generally I tried to avoid the ‘teacher’ role in the classroom, and with year 11s I always distinguished myself from authoritative adult behaviour, for example my not telling them off, sitting with pupils, entering and leaving the class with them and talking minimally with the teachers. With younger years, in lessons I sat in sporadically, I found my role sometimes became more blurred, usually due to the wishes of the teacher, such as in this case.

## **Anthropological approaches to ethnicity**

Ethnicity has been a key concept in anthropology since the sixties. There has always been and still is, a spectrum of different understandings of what ethnicity is and how it relates to other concepts such as 'race' (Banks 1996). Early anthropological accounts and explanations of ethnicity were concerned with non-Western contexts; Barth's approach has been particularly influential in anthropological approaches to ethnicity<sup>96</sup>. Barth argues that ethnic groups are socially constructed and the content of ethnic groups - in terms of the people and their 'culture' - is not self-evident or stable. If these groups are studied in isolation then a false impression of stability and bounded coherence is perpetuated. Instead, the boundaries between groups should be studied. In this way, the movement of people, cultural forms and information across boundaries becomes visible. Barth contends that groups do not exist in isolation but in contrast to other groups. He also argues that in different contexts actors will choose which features of their culture they emphasise - 'situational ethnicity' - so to attempt to construct lists of ethnic content is not very helpful.

Despite his criticism of previous anthropological understandings of ethnic groups which presented them as biologically self-perpetuating, bounded, sharing fundamental cultural values and conscious of a group identity that is recognised by others (Barth 1969: 10-11), Barth has been critiqued from a tendency towards primordialism. Banks (1996) comments that although Barth endorses situational ethnicity, this is only in terms of the form ethnic identity takes. Ethnicity is seen as an identity that transcends or is equivalent to, other identity such as gender. And so ethnicity is permanent and essential: [t]he constraints on a person's behaviour which spring from ethnic identity...tend to be absolute' (1969: 17 quoted in Banks 1996: 13).

Further, Back (1996) has argued that a lot of the work influenced by Barth - the focus on boundaries, and the way in which ethnic emblems are used to mark boundaries - has resulted in a tendency to underplay the creation of cultural meanings. The Barthian

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<sup>96</sup> Banks delineates three particular approaches to ethnicity which 'in some sense 'discovered' ethnicity as a new approach' (1996: 11). In addition to Barth, the Manchester school who were concerned with the changes precipitated by urbanisation and colonialism in southern, central and western Africa, and the Soviet ethnos theory which takes a macro-historical perspective, ethnicity is seen as strongly resilient, persisting over generations and in a variety of social forms. These three approaches had very few links to each other.

approach to identity and ethnicity is out of step with the 'ceaselessly changing and multiple inflected forms of social identity that are being expressed in cities such as London' (1996: 3). At the same time, Back highlights that Barth's insistence that ethnicity is produced through contact, is an important anthropological contribution as it reminds us that ethnicity is always about negotiation.

Drawing on the work of Hall (1996), Back uses the term 'new ethnicities' as a way to acknowledge the simultaneously local and trans-local nature of identity formation:

'This way of framing ethnicity can be seen as radically different from the situational model prevalent within anthropology and sociology of race relations, for it avoids the tendency to define ethnicity in primordial ways' (1996: 4).

In his ethnography of young people in two multicultural neighbourhoods in South London, Back understands his participants as active in processes of negotiation and cultural production. Their actions resulting in a rich and dynamic syncretic culture. At the same time he emphasises the importance of being sensitive to the political, historical and ideological context in which these processes takes place. As Back writes:

'This approach seeks to report sensitively the processes whereby British youth of various lineages work out and give meaning to their heritage in the context of daily experience. Also it is vital to see how ethnicities are made through associations, friendships and cross-affiliations' (1996: 14).

In a similar way, I aim to capture these processes among pupils in Collingson School. The complexities of social identity that are often classified under the rubric of 'ethnicity'<sup>97</sup> - including nationality, religion, language, place of birth and race - are a favourite preoccupation among pupils. Ethnicity is an on-going preoccupation among pupils, and one of the key ways in which they classify and evaluate each other. Their on-going debates about ethnic classifications highlights the intricacies and non-self evidence of ethnic categories, and exemplifies the importance of the informal realm as a place where the social

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<sup>97</sup> I use ethnicity here as an analytical rather than ethnographic category. Pupils often discuss, and bring together in complex variations the dimensions of identity described but do not necessarily term this 'ethnicity'. However I would argue that there is significant overlap in pupils' use of these dimensions and definitions of ethnicity to warrant using it as a glossing term.

is indexed (Hey 1997). In their discussions, without necessarily terming it as such, pupils are attempting to sort out the complexities of 'ethnicity', which on an academic level has also been an on-going debate among scholars (Banks 1996). Ethnicity is articulated within school through peer transactions, and ethnically-coded value-producing actions and symbolic texts. In these ways we can see that ethnicity is not absolute but is brought into being through action.

### **Race and ethnicity**

In vignette one, in response to my question, "which characters are you playing?", Lisa draws on derogatory racial labels: Shaun is a "nigger" – one of the most offensive terms for a black person, Blake is a "honky" – a disparaging term for a white person, and Lisa herself is a "chav" – which although not directly connoting race is associated with white, working class style and is often used in a derogatory way. Was Lisa railing against their collective labelling as 'problem'? Or making a comment on labels such as these which make 'characters' out of people? I was not able to find out, but the speed by which a twelve-year old is able to draw upon these terms does attest to the continuing salience of racial categorisation, and associated relations of power and domination, in twenty-first century Britain.

Like ethnicity, race and the relationship between race and ethnicity has been the subject of much debate. Banks (1996) comments that a division of labour can be detected in academic studies of minority groups in Britain. Sociologists have tended to frame their studies in terms of 'race', focussing particularly on the black population in Britain, often with a problem-centred focus. Anthropologists tended to frame their studies in terms of 'culture', focusing particularly on Asian<sup>98</sup> communities who were seen to 'have culture', in contrast to the black community who were viewed as 'uninteresting' and 'lacking culture'.

Banks suggests that the caution with which anthropologists have approached race, in contrast to ethnicity or 'culture', can be associated with a confusion between race as an idea - a concept with explanatory power and race as a concrete thing – a group of

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<sup>98</sup> Which, in Britain, is a popular term used to describe people of South Asian descent, from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but which does not include people of Chinese, Japanese or Korean descent (Banks 1996).

biologically related people. Similarly, Pollock, writing about the US, has argued that as 'the anthropological deconstruction of biological race groups as human-made "myth"' has become increasingly mainstream many Americans 'now express uncertainty about the validity of 'race' as a form of categorisation' (2004: 30).

In addressing these issues, it is helpful to consider race as a part of ethnicity (Alexander 1992 cited in Banks 1996) - created, negotiated and contested like all its other dimensions. In this way we can continue the extremely important deconstruction of race as a self-evident, primordial and unquestionable biological category of difference. At the same time we can avoid the tendency to replace ideas of essential difference with 'colour blindness' which fails to do justice to the continuing salience of race in everyday categorisation practices, as Back writes:

'Perceptions of skin colour play a vital part in the relations of power and domination that exist between minority groups and the white 'host' populations (as well as between minority groups)' (Banks 1996: 100).

In acknowledging the importance of skin colour in everyday categorisation practices, it is important to ensure 'whiteness' is visible. A number of writers have commented that whiteness is often invisible; a normative, hegemonic and unmarked racial identity against which other races are defined as abnormal (for example Back 1996, Peery 2001)<sup>99</sup>. As Back argues:

'White ethnicity is implicitly present but explicitly absent. The result is that whiteness is equated with normality and as such is not in need of definition, thus being 'normal' is colonised by the idea of 'being white'' (1996: 55).

In a related point, Pollock highlights that:

'Research questions about race and schooling regularly frame "race" ...as the implied property of students of colour, rather than as a communal practice involving people of all ages and "races" (Pollock 2004: 38).

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<sup>99</sup> Although Bucholtz (2001) cautions that by viewing whiteness as a normative and unmarked racial position, scholars might inadvertently reify whiteness as singular and static. She points out there can be different styles of whiteness in different contexts.

In the context of Collingson school, at least, skin colour is a key factor in evaluative practices. As we will see, pupils negotiate between these 'always already' dimensions of ethnicity and their value-producing actions and symbolic texts. In their constant flow of transactions pupils utilise notions of race and other aspects of ethnicity depending on the context, who they are interacting with and the subject of conversation. In general racial categories 'black', 'white' and 'Asian' are often used to categorise people simplistically, even when the complexities of ethnic identity are a constant source of conversation and interest among pupils. Pollock, in her ethnography of Columbus School, an ethnically diverse California high school, identifies similar processes:

'The confusion of such endlessly crisscrossed parent-group and national boundaries coexisted with the discursive simplicity of six described "groups." Despite the "mixed"-up roots and global routes (Gilroy 1993b) central to the Columbus youth experience, these young people... worked daily in school to squash their diversity into six groups they called "racial." Although identities at Columbus were infinitely complex, racial identification was an accepted process of social simplification' (2004: 35).

In vignette two, at the beginning of this chapter, the It girls use racial difference to ('jokingly') explain their divisions one lunch time. Race is brought into action in this specific context as a short hand explanation for divisions in the group, it makes sense because races are known to be frequently divided (although not necessarily within Collingson school). In this example, racial differences are used as an idiom through which to express divisions in the group and an incident of exclusion: Samiya, Kemal and Jacob could have joined the other girls but did not, and Ruby's ability to choose to follow Grace to the other camp, highlights her hierarchical centrality among the It girls.

Furthermore, while in this incidence the It girls simplistically divide themselves according to race, in other contexts the girls' navigate their way through the complexities of ethnicity. Samiya tells me that her mother is from a coastal region of Kenya where, "loads of people are mixed, mixed Chinese and African. My mum's really mixed, she's got Indian, Arabic, African in her". As I will discuss in this chapter, Samiya says she, "doesn't look black" and actively claims a black identity. Kadia and Samiya both have 'black' Kenyan mothers and

white British fathers, and variously define themselves and are defined by others as black, “mixed race” and through their Kenyan heritage. For example in a geography lesson Kadia and Nihal (who is of Indian heritage but lived in Kenya), are having an animated discussion about Kenya, comparing it to Tanzania, the country being studied in this lesson, Kadia claims Kenya is better than Tanzania because “our government isn’t corrupt”. Meanwhile Cheryl and Maria, both from Columbian parentage variously define themselves (and are defined by others) as Latina and white.

Moreover all the girls’ have negotiated different routes through ethnically coded value-production in school, and drawn on different symbolic texts in these processes. I will discuss the It girls’ various dealings with ‘ghetto’ practices in this chapter. The ghetto style exemplifies the flexibility of ethnic performance in school. Although identified with notions of blackness, this identity is not only available to black pupils, and is not the only way to act black. These value-producing actions are evaluated according to the logic of the informal realm and in debates over what constitutes positive or negative value.

In this chapter, I argue that these processes are part of the manifestation of a constellation of difference, which enables those sharing a social space and school experience to produce themselves as different kinds of ethnic people. At the same time these shared experiences and spaces enable pupils to produce other kinds of positive value together, and enables the transformation of difference into the transactions of friendship. I illustrate this through a focus on sixth-formers Shola, from black Nigerian parentage and Megan, Eleanor and Jane (the Alternative girls), all from white British parentage. Their friendship exemplifies the workings of the growing together discourse, and the ways in which this discourse enables pupils to project a particular image of ethnic relations<sup>100</sup>. Through friendship and humour the girls are able to negotiate value tensions and maintain the dominant story of ethnic harmony that is central to the growing together discourse. Humour and joking is an

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<sup>100</sup> The growing together discourse is one way that ethnic difference is managed by pupils in Collingson School. In a similar way to the harmony discourse, in Back’s south London neighbourhood, the neighbourhood is viewed as a place where harmonious relations exist. White and black people in the neighbourhood use the harmony discourse to reject the legitimacy of racism - while they recognise racism as socially significant they reject its applicability in this context (1996: 239).

important tool for the negotiation of difference and I explore this in more detail in the following section.

The growing together discourse is one way in which difference is organised. But an exploration of the position of outside groups - the 'Indian group' and Jews highlights the complex processes whereby the growing together discourse is managed by pupils. It also illuminates alternative conceptualisations of difference that are at work in the informal realm - ones that draw on essentialised meanings and notions of insurmountable distance.

But first I discuss the constant debates about ethnicity in the informal realm, and pupils' strategies in transforming unspoken classificatory practices into transactions over which they can have control.

### **Dialogues about ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a favourite preoccupation among pupils and one of the key ways they classify themselves and people around them. While only a few pupils explicitly discuss social class, and gender is seen as more self-evident, for pupils in the diverse environment of Collingson School, ethnicity provides endless opportunities for discussion, debate and humour.

Between themselves pupils are constantly attempting to sort out the complexities of what comes to be classified as 'ethnicity'; nationality, religion, language, and race and how these elements are entangled with prejudice. The on-going debate and negotiations between pupils emphasises the non-self evidence of ethnicity as well as vividly illustrating the 'social indexing' (Hey 1997) that goes on between pupils.

Pupils have different strategies to classify themselves in ways they wish to be seen, and that encompass their specific space-time heritages. Ling confidently proclaims that she is "fully BBC", to Charles, who sounding confused says "what, British broadcasting company?", "no silly", corrects Ling, "British born Chinese!". Meanwhile Muhammad and Ibrahim cannot agree to share a classification. Although both born in Somalia, Muhammad chooses to define himself as Somali, while Ibrahim insists they define themselves according to the country they have lived the longest, in his case Britain, and in Muhammad's America. On

another occasion, after Ishwar asks me about my research, and I explain to him what anthropology is, Ishwar suggests I talk to Ahmed:

“We’re both from Pakistan, but we’re totally different types, you’d learn a lot from Ahmed... He’s coming from a totally different place, he’s Pakistani, I’m Pakistani but he grew up there so he’s really traditional... I’d say I’m more English than Pakistani, I mean Pakistan is my roots, but I’ve lived here all my life, so I’d say my culture is more English”.

Through these communicational transactions, pupils are collaboratively constructing a constellation of differences through which they can produce themselves in relation to each other as particular kinds of ethnic people. This constellation establishes pupils as part of particular space-time relations that span the world, and at the same time fixes them in this specific place and time, in a unique arrangement of difference. These practices are embedded in the transactional flow of the informal realm and are often transformed, producing different kinds of positive value along the way:

Waiting for the teacher to arrive, the drama class sits around in a circle chatting, the class are debating how to define where you’re from. Karl, from white European background states confidently, “Chimmi is the only real Nigerian here”, Joseph retorts proudly, “but I’m a real Ghanaian”. Chimmi responds “you’re not a real Ghanaian, you haven’t been there, you’re not a citizen”. Joseph, initially sounding a bit affronted, replies “I’ve got a Ghanaian passport”. But recovering himself he gets up and walking towards Chimmi he transforms into ‘Uncle Joseph’ a character that often makes an appearance when Joseph is clowning around in class. Joseph is a talented comic and as he takes on the persona of this avuncular character, his gait changing from that of slender, agile fifteen year old to a portly, elderly man, voice booming in a strong Ghanaian accent, the class break into laughter. “Who says I’m not a real Ghanaian” booms Uncle Joseph, staring pointedly at Chimmi, Chimmi playing along, bows his head and in a chastened tone answers “not me Uncle, sorry Uncle”.

In this series of transactional transformations, the boys are initially debating the complexities of belonging and origins. Joseph then transforms this debate into a performative opportunity, drawing from signs from his specific space-time heritage and

turning them into positive transformative actions which produces the visibility by which he has become famous within the Year, as one of the highest status boys. In the following example, Shola and her friends define themselves as similar kinds of people, through their shared recognition of signs drawn from their similar space-time heritages:

I'm sitting with Shola and five of her friends, all from West African backgrounds in the sixth-form study room. They are trying to study but the short periods of silence are always broken by a question or comment, a cue for the group to erupt into chat. The conversation turns to their respective experiences in Africa, all the pupils have been there to visit family. Rachel starts describing foods she ate and the others join in listing food brands they have only come across in Africa. These shared experiences turn to laughter as Olo does an impression of a woman selling food on the roadside, mimicking their accent and sing song tone, he mimes carrying a basket on his head, calling, "banana, banana, peanut, peanut". Resuming his normal tone he comments, "isn't it ironic that they carry the peanuts alongside the bananas, and they'll always be trying to get you to buy both". Returning to his impression he mimics an increasingly insistent tone, "banana, banana, peanut, peanut, banana, banana, peanut, peanut", the others laughing hard and nodding vigorously in recognition.

In their laughter, Shola and her friends indicate their membership of a 'community of humour', transforming past and separate experiences into a series of transactions which brings into being a shared ethnic experience that is both inside (they all have family connections to West Africa and have visited there) and outside (they found their experiences funny in their strangeness). They are drawing on signs shared because of their ethnic backgrounds but they are producing value within their shared context, as friends who can make each other laugh, as well as particular kinds of people who share a similar space-time heritage. As I will argue later in this chapter, these same transactions of humour can also be used to transform difference and negotiate value tensions, enabling pupils to define themselves through notions of closeness, if not sameness.

While pupils are in a frequent dialogue with each other about ethnicity, and are active in defining new formulations of identity through interaction with peers, they are also acutely aware that they are being continually assessed, evaluated and categorised in terms of their

ethnic appearance, regardless of any kind of value-production they are actively engaged in. In the following section I will discuss one strategy through which pupils negotiate these dimensions of ethnicity, transforming passive 'always already' evaluation practices into active intersubjective transactions.

### **"Where do you think I'm from?"**

It's a science lesson, chatting to Daisy and Aabida. They spontaneously engage me in an identity guessing game:

Aabida: Where do you think Daisy is from? No one ever guesses right!

SWR: I don't know.

Daisy: Well where do you think Aabida is from?

SWR: I don't know, where are you both from?

Daisy: Well I'm English but my dad is Japanese and my mum is English.

SWR: And where do people think you're from?

Daisy: Loads of people think I'm Chinese, they think I'm from Asia somewhere but they always say Chinese, why Chinese? No one ever thinks I'm Japanese. Someone even thought I was Jewish, I'm like "Jewish?!" [screws up her face].

SWR: [To Aabida] Where are you from?

Aabida: I'm from Somalia. [To me] Are you English?

SWR: Well my mum is Jewish and my dad is English [Daisy laughs embarrassedly]. But no one thinks I look Jewish<sup>101</sup>.

Aabida: No, I thought you looked English.

Daisy: But you do look like Leah and Leah looks Jewish.

In the sixth-form common room one lunch time, Jat directs the conversation towards me:

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<sup>101</sup> My fieldwork and writing up gave me cause to reflect on my own articulations of my Jewish identity; by contrasting it against my 'English half' in this conversation what notion of Jewishness am I consequently articulating? Jewishness as religion, ethnicity or nationality? And I too play the guessing games, 'I don't look Jewish', what difference does it make to my experience to not diverge from the Anglo-Saxon norm (but instead fit it pretty squarely)? My relationship with Leah also gives me cause to reflect, as I discuss later in this chapter Leah is proudly Jewish, and not afraid to challenge me on what she sees as my duty as a British Jew. Leah argues I should still be part of a Jewish community even if I do not believe in god because it is my "culture" and my "roots", and Jews are "dying out". As I get out my sandwich, one lunch-time during Passover, the Jewish festival in which only unleavened bread (i.e. without yeast) should be eaten, Leah looks at me disappointedly and says with a sigh, "I wish you'd take your religion more seriously".

“So if you’re anthropologist what race are we? What about him (referring to Amal). I’ll give you a clue, he’s not Ethiopian. Come on then, you should know if you’re an anthropologist. Ok he’s Somalian. What about him? (pointing at Josh) he’s Jewish - that’s why he’s got a big nose... Josh adds “and Jat is Indian and Jewish”.

These exchanges are typical of conversations pupils engaged me in during my time at school. They represent a playful strategy through which pupils can transform the ‘always already’ dimensions of ethnicity into interactions within the informal realm<sup>102</sup>.

Evaluative practices are pervasive in school, and as I have discussed are intrinsic to value-producing processes - it is through the recognition of others that value is made visible. At the same time certain dimensions of the self are ‘always already’ present in school evaluative practices, particularly gender, body weight and divergences from white, Anglo-Saxon physical norms, and pupils are aware of this. One lunch time I am sitting with Jerome as he discusses this, “it’s always like ‘oh yeah, you’re the big black guy, you’re Jerome’”. As he is speaking a boy from his year walks past our table, Jerome stops him “hey man, how would describe me?”, the boy replies “um, tall and black” and continues on his way, “see, not good looking, not smart, no, just “you’re black”.

Jerome, with his knowledge of ‘always already’ evaluative practices, relishes challenging the assumptions of self-evidence that these practices entail. In the common room we are talking films. Jerome is trying to remember the name of a particular actress, “I remember she had an Irish surname...”, Amanda interrupts him, “don’t say anything offensive, remember I’m half Irish”. Jerome responds triumphantly, “I’m Irish too! And Scottish, Chinese, Jewish. Jewish! Where did that come from? Not that I have anything against Jewish people but where did that come from?”, he addresses me, “you don’t believe me do you?”.

Jerome ‘looks black’ but challenges classification systems by transforming his mixed heritage into communicational transactions. Daisy (in the conversation at the beginning of this

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<sup>102</sup> In her ethnography of Columbus high school, Pollock found that students engaged her in very similar ‘guessing games’. She notes that these practices, ‘expose race group memberships as infinitely malleable and multiple’ (39). At the same time these categories are reinscribed:

‘Indeed, even to answer routine peer or adult questions such as “What are you mixed with?” and “What are you?”, students had to describe themselves or others using one or multiple simple race terms, as the sum of numerable matter-of-fact parts’ (39). Pollock terms this ‘race bending’ (2004).

section) and Samiya, who has a Kenyan mother and Welsh father both confound appearance-based classifications, but this does not mean they evade classification. Rather, their experience is one of being projected with a number of identities they do not identify with. Samiya explains, “no one ever knows where I’m from, everyone thinks I’m from different places, some people say that I’m Iranian, others that I’m Latin or from Brazil, others say I’m from India”. Samiya says most of the time she does not mind this, enjoying the ambiguity of her ‘always already’ appearance, “I think it’s kind of mysterious”.

However, like Daisy, Samiya dislikes it when she is seen ‘in the wrong way’:

“The only thing I don’t like is when people think I’m from not very good places, like I don’t like it when people think I look Indian”.

Samiya dislikes being seen in this way because there is hierarchy of ethnicity within Collingson School. As I will go on to discuss later in this chapter, both Indians and Jews are often evaluated more negatively than other groups. When Samiya’s evaluative practices, which assess Indian as an undesirable identity, meet with others’ evaluations of her ‘always already’ appearance, Samiya’s experience is negative. And in line with tensions between surface and depth, even when she enjoys the mysteries of eluding classification, she also wants to be seen in the right way, drawing on ethnically coded signs in order to signify who she ‘really’ is:

“The other thing is that no one knows that I’m African, because I don’t look black at all so I used to have to wear the African colours on a chain so people would know”.

African colours are one sign through which ethnicity can be expressed. Ghetto, as I will now go on to discuss, represents a more comprehensive style, encompassing ways of speaking, dressing and acting. Ghetto is a style associated with ‘blackness’ but as I will argue, it exemplifies the flexibility in ethnic symbolic texts apparent in the informal realm.

## **Ghetto**

Shola: When you’re black, people expect you to act in a certain way.

SWR: How do they expect you to act?

Shola: Ghetto.

SWR: And what does Ghetto mean?

Shola: The way you look and act and everything.

One hot spring day I'm sitting on the school field with Samiya and Mariam, who as a Year 10 is a year younger than Samiya. As I have discussed, pupils normally socialise exclusively within their year group, so Mariam is unusual in spending most of her free time with Year 11s. Across the field a peer group of five other Year 10 girls, two white and three black are in our eye line. Even in uniform their style is distinctive, their hair is gelled closely to their heads, pulled up into high pony-tails with tight curls slicked close to their faces. Their large gold earrings, shaped like hollow-centred hearts are glinting in the sunshine.

Indicating the girls Samiya comments to Mariam, "your Year is really ghetto-fabulous", "my Year is fucking shit" replies Mariam. I ask Samiya what she means, "well like in their Year they're ghetto in the way they dress, they'll clip their hair, gel it, they'll slick it and then act like they're really minxy, but they're not, they're nothing special, they're ugly as well". Mariam adds "they act ghetto, but they'll live in Chimes hill<sup>103</sup> or somewhere like that... they have houses, they have good cars". Samiya continues "they act rowdy you know? talking back, they're always giving attitude".

As I have argued, for pupils ethnic identity is more than just 'always already', it is also seen as shaping and informing value-production. Ghetto is a way of talking, acting and dressing and a mode of producing value in the informal realm<sup>104</sup>. It is a recognised way of acting black and the signs it draws on; fashion, hairstyles, vernacular and music tastes are markers closely associated with black, inner city culture. Acting ghetto is a way to gain visibility, as Shola says, "people act ghetto because they wanna be cool, wanna be known". At the same

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<sup>103</sup> An affluent area close to the school.

<sup>104</sup> 'Ghetto girls' typically wear their hair 'slicked', gelled closely to their heads, often with 'afro combs' in them and big gold jewellery. 'Ghetto boys' wear 'cornrows' (hair plaited closely against the head so it looks like corn rows), or tramlines (lines or patterns cut with a razor into their hair), jewellery such as diamond earrings, and clothing brands such as FUBU and Phat farm. 'Ghetto' speech is a particularly emphasised form of black London vernacular, including grammar, pronunciation and lexis. 'Ghetto' behaviour is identified by pupils as loud, oppositional and confrontational; "talking back" and "being rowdy" both inside and outside school. Pupils also discussed the interconnections between 'ghetto' and gang culture, including mugging (jacking), physical assault (rushing) and knife crime (shanking).

time, ghetto is not the only way to act black, and being black is not a prerequisite for being ghetto.

Ghetto is a way of producing value and is evaluated within the logic of the informal realm. And as Samiya's opinion indicates, it is a contentious way to produce value. Samiya has evaluated the girls negatively, she does not think they 'look good' and indicates this through judgements that project this negative evaluation on to the girls surface – their physical appearance. The ghetto girls are being evaluated on these terms rather than on the authenticity of their ghetto backgrounds. Mariam comments on the discrepancy between their ghetto appearance with its connotations of inner city deprivation and their privileged backgrounds, but within school the girls continue to be primarily identified by their ghetto identity. The ghetto girls evaluate each other as successful (or unsuccessful) according to this logic, rather than according to who has an authentic ghetto background. And other pupils, like Samiya and Mariam, are more concerned with challenging the idea that acts, practices and transactions shaped by ghetto produce positive value, than the discrepancy between this style and their background.

While pupils recognise it is a route to producing visibility and becoming known, ghetto is especially contentious because it is seen to limit the production of value in other fields, particularly formal schooling and in the imagined future, to getting a job. 'Acting rowdy', 'giving attitude', 'chatting back' and 'being rude' are all attributed by pupils, to acting ghetto and conflict with the participation required in class. Ghetto is a way of producing value that is opposed to the production of value through formal schooling. As Year 10 Angelo, a friend of Samiya and Mariam, explains:

“People think it's cool, but I don't act ghetto, I don't act bad...it's dumb, because after a couple of years of doing that then you're not going to get anything out of it...you're going to spend your whole school time being bad, getting expelled and then you come out into the real world and you ain't got nothing”.

Similarly while Shola recognises it is a way to gain status, she highlights how it can be limiting to other actions. Like Angelo, she argues that while ghetto produces short-term value and visibility, in the long-term, and beyond school, formal value represents the better

strategy. She invested in formal schooling and is now planning to attend university next year. However she also recounts how her priorities have shifted as she has grown older. When she was in primary school she had to choose between attending Collingson and a neighbouring school, St Bede's:

“St Bede's has a lot of black people and it's more ghetto...Like we [Collingson School] have a reputation as having bare, I mean a lot of white people and Asian people, which makes it not a good school, people say 'oh there's not a lot of black people, I don't want to go there'”.

Initially she regretted her decision, not attending St Bede's meant forsaking the ghetto reputation which confers increased visibility on St Bede's and its pupils - the extension of fame beyond the school into the surrounding area:

“Because there were more black people there, they seemed to have a good time, they were always in the limelight, well not the limelight but everyone knew that school, everyone knew that school”.

However now she is older Shola believes that attending this 'ghetto school' would have impacted on positive transformative potentials in other value fields:

“Now I'm really glad I didn't go there...because of the way that they turned out; pregnant at school, only some of them did A Levels”.

Furthermore, ghetto is particularly oppositional when taken up by girls. Conventions of femininity in school require girls not to exert overt power, attempt to extend intersubjective influence – ‘act big’, or enter face-to-face conflicts. In contrast ghetto is associated with straight-talking, assertiveness and willingness to resort to physical violence. As Hey (1997) argues the repertoire for ideal girlhood ideologically converges on notions of ‘niceness’ – being good natured, never getting angry, not exerting power - but this represents a *particular* classed and Anglo version of femininity<sup>105</sup>. Being ghetto is particularly transgressive for girls, and is another example of the tension between ‘always already’

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<sup>105</sup> Similarly during her fieldwork Evans (2006) was confronted with divergent definitions of appropriate femininity when her participants recounted a fight that her daughter had been involved in on their estate in Bermondsey:

“At the boundary of distinction between the genders and classes, the taboo about participation in violence becomes part of what distinguishes men from women and boys from girls, but also ‘nice’ girls from common-as-muck ones like Sophie...” (54) .

appearing (in terms of gender) and evaluations based on value-production. Conflict at the intersections of gender and ethnicity, and divergent opinions over what constitutes positive value-production in these terms, is played out in the history of It girls peer group. It is to this history I now turn.

### **The It girls: resolving value tensions within a peer group**

The history of the It girls peer groups tells of tensions between the friends over what constitutes the appropriate performance of ethnicity and gender. Friends in the first two years of Collingson, the group splintered over these tensions in Year 9. One lunchtime Kadia, Ruby and Grace<sup>106</sup> recount their history for me. Ruby starts, “I wasn’t really friends with Kadia and Natasha because we thought they were ghetto, me, Samiya, Cheryl and Maria were friends although everyone called us ‘the plastics’”. I asked why they were seen as ghetto, Kadia replies, “slicking our hair, ‘I’m gonna bang you<sup>107</sup> up because I’m looking at you”. Ruby continues “and Grace, you were never really ghetto were you? You were in the middle”. Kadia replies quickly, “she was! Remember what she was like in Year 10, she was so black, whoops, I mean she was hanging around with Monique and Tanya<sup>108</sup>”.

The split between the plastics and the ghetto girls was not one between the black and non-black friends over the legitimacy of non-black pupils ‘acting black’, or this identity only being available to black pupils, but whether the value produced through ghetto was positive. For Ruby and her fellow plastics, the ghetto girls’ behaviour was too significant a challenge to the conventions of appropriate femininity for them to remain friends. However when I got to know the girls in Year 11, the group had reunited, and Kadia, Natasha and Tanya viewed ghetto as a “phase” which they had now grown out of. The girls no longer challenged the conventions of femininity and this enabled the group to reunite with shared notions of what it means to be acceptable and appropriate. In Year 11, the It girls as a united group do not exert overt power or aggression, and instead invest in dominant notions of appropriate femininity (for example niceness, sweetness, modesty).

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<sup>106</sup> Kadia is from Kenyan and white English parentage, Ruby from White English parentage, Grace from Nigerian parentage, Natasha from Malaysian parentage, Samiya from Welsh/ Kenyan parentage, Cheryl and Maria are both from Columbian parentage.

<sup>107</sup> Slang for beat you up.

<sup>108</sup> Both from black Caribbean parentage.

At the same time, the girls continue to monitor each other in terms of appropriate and sufficient ethnic value-production. Although they reject ghetto, the black It girls still expect each other to produce value in ethnically coded ways, otherwise they become vulnerable to accusations of acting 'too white'<sup>109</sup>. Kadia's comment, which she quickly corrected, that Grace was 'so black' in Year 10, is revealing. It suggests that in navigating between the 'always already' and value-producing dimensions of appearance, the girls are in a process of trying to establish a balance between acting 'too black' and 'not black enough':

One lunch-time on the bench Kadia tells the group about her misadventures with hair relaxants the night before, tipping her hair forward to show partially-relaxed roots, describing how she'd washed it out before it had time to work properly because it hurt too much, Grace reprimands her, "you must be pretend white or something, of course it hurts, you just have to keep it on".

The black It girls use selective engagement in black coded symbols and value-production in order to position themselves as appropriate. But these symbolic texts and forms of value-production are not only available or utilised by the black It girls, hence there is a flexibility between the expectations of an 'always already' ethnic identity, and the actions that pupils are engaged in, within the informal realm. Black cultural forms such as music, dress and language are important in transactions between all It girls. For example in contrast to those who invest fully in 'ghetto', all the girls engage in a black London vernacular selectively, depending on the context and who they are speaking to.

They also make visible their interpersonal connections to those who are ghetto without identifying fully with this position. One lesson Kadia and Ishwar<sup>110</sup> fill me in on the 'crews' in the area who have 'reputation'. They tell me that members of the black Stapleton Rise crew<sup>111</sup> recently turned up at Natasha's birthday party, held at a community centre. The crew had started jacking (mugging) people at the last party they had been at, so the Man-

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<sup>109</sup> Terms in circulation within school like 'coconut' and 'Oreo' indicating "black on the outside, white on the inside" are applied to pupils evaluated as acting 'too white'. Shola describes these peer expectations: "People say I act white, and I'm like "why?" because of my facial expressions and stuff like that, you get that, you really do...they say I should act more black".

<sup>110</sup> Ishwar is a member of the Man-dom, whose membership is also multi-ethnic, and whose symbolic texts also cluster around notions of 'blackness'. At the same time Ishwar also identifies himself as of Pakistani origin, as discussed in dialogues about ethnicity.

<sup>111</sup> Named after the estate in which they live, there's also a Portuguese SR crew.

dom told Kadia to go over and keep them entertained. Kadia says that she knows some of them and, “they’re alright” but some of their crew mates are, “really crazy, they think they’re in the Bloods<sup>112</sup> or something”.

So far I have discussed the ways in which pupils articulate their ethnicity, embedded in the constant flow of transactions within the informal realm, negotiating what it means to be an appropriate ethnic and gendered person in the diverse context of Collingson School. An important way ethnic difference is organised and understood within Collingson is through the growing up, growing together discourse. During their progress through the school, pupils’ shared experiences and communal value-production enable the transformation of difference, from notions of distance into notions of closeness. In the following section I focus on the friendship between sixth formers Megan, Eleanor, Jane (the Alternative girls) and Shola. Their friendship highlights many of the processes, negotiations and strategies pupils in Collingson used to create and maintain the growing together discourse that is central to the positive transformation of ethnic difference within Collingson.

### **Negotiating value tensions through friendship and humour**

It’s the A-Level psychology class. Most of the small class are already seated and the teacher is getting ready to start the lesson. Then Shola makes her entrance. Listening to her iPod, she ‘wines’ towards her desk, rolling her hips, stomach and backside in sinuous and sensual movements, all eyes are on her. Jane addresses the class and exclaims jokily, “and she calls us slags!”. Shola still standing replies, “you are but I’m not going to dance like a white person”. Illustrating her point she starts to dance in an erratic rhythm, flaying limbs and eyebrows knitted in a mockery of intense concentration. Jane takes up the challenge, “no you’re dancing liking this”, and starts to parody Shola’s dancing, wining her body in an exaggeratedly sexual manner. Shola laughing turns her attention to Eleanor, pointing at her T-shirt, “you’re wearing the colours of my country, green and white”, raising her arm, she mimes shooting into the air “bullet, bullet”. “Oh its bullet, bullet now!” laughs Megan, “before it was bang, bang”. Addressing the whole class Megan concludes “and she says

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<sup>112</sup> An infamous LA gang.

she's trying to breakdown stereotypes!", before the teacher calls time on these transactions and attempts to start the formal learning.

In younger years, the girls were in different peer groups of divergent status. Jane joined Collingson in Year 9 and described her position as 'bottom rung' until she became friends with Megan and Eleanor who were in the predominantly male 'grungy' group (comparable to the Misfits in Year 11). The group splintered and the girls are now part of the Alternative girls peer group. Meanwhile Shola was and still is part of a high status group comparable to the Year 11 It girls. In line with the conventions of hierarchy within the informal realm, Shola was highly visible, seen and known but not seeing and knowing, and she admits that she "didn't really know they [the Alternative girls] existed". Conversely the Alternative girls saw and knew Shola and her peer group but resented their visibility-producing practices and felt intimidated by their extension of intersubjective influence. As Megan expressed:

"I was scared of Shola and her crew, I wasn't scared of her because she was black, I was scared of her because she was so aggressive".

The transition into sixth form is a catalyst to the growing together process. As peer groups adjust to the loss of members (to other schools, college or work), previously spatially dispersed peer groups begin sharing the common room and subject choices result in new pupil combinations within class. Shola describes:

"A Levels, everyone was a lot more together, I knew a lot more people, I wasn't so caught up in my social circle...because you're doing subjects you'd never done before so you'd have everyone different in your class and it would be like 'oh my gosh I've never seen you before, are you in my year?'"

Shola and the Alternative girls were all placed in psychology and drama class together, and with these increased transactional opportunities, started to become friends.

The story of the girls' friendship exemplifies the processes of growing up, growing together that occur within school. Peer groups are engaged in different value-producing practices, and define themselves in terms of difference and distance, but as they move together through the school, the Year group also produces shared communal value. As Megan says:

“In Year 7 it’s all different cultures...because you’re growing up, and you’re finding out who you are and what your values are, so you’re all clashing...but eventually everyone meshes together”.

Increased interpersonal connections and the continuous flow of transactions within this network enables the creation of positive value within the informal realm. Positive value is produced even while different peer groups and individuals are engaged in divergent forms of participation and value-production and are in constant debate about what constitutes positive value. In this way pupils who define themselves as very different kinds of people can also understand their relationship through notions of closeness, if not sameness.

Shola and the Alternative girls define themselves as friends through this growing together discourse - valued relations between those who previously saw themselves as ‘too different’. But this notion of friendship does not replace the dominant conception of friendship that is premised primarily in terms of sameness and closeness (chapter 6). The girls continue to define friendship in this way; in her peer group Shola draws on symbolic texts associated with blackness and high status (like R’n’B music), while the Alternative girls draw on white symbolic texts (like Rock and Indie music). The girls are also involved in different kinds of value-production and often disagree on what constitutes positive value and appropriate disposition. As Shola says:

“Your friends are people you have lots in common with, but with these guys [referring to the Alternative girls] we have really different knowledge and sense of humour and stuff... We come from really different backgrounds and we know about really different things. The way we dress, the things we do, like they’re all about drinking and partying and me and my friends just don’t do that”.

So the friendship between Shola and the Alternative girls, developed within the growing together discourse, is not premised on notions of sameness. Instead it is based on the positive transformation of difference, achieved through transactions of friendship. The girls value their friendship exactly because it is premised on difference, and often emphasise how much they had learnt from each other. As Shola tells me:

“They listen to different music, we talk about those kinds of things, you know ‘that’s your kind of music, that’s my kind of music’...we joke about that kind of thing, it’s

kinda cool, we have our differences and we make fun out of those differences. Because I'm always with people who like the same music as me, who have the same outlook as me, so it's cool to be with people who don't like the same music as me, and make fun of it and I laugh at them and they laugh at me, it's cool".

As Shola's comments highlight, one of the key practices that enable this positive transformation is humour. As I've discussed previously, joking marks boundaries of inclusion; '[a]cceptance of a person's joking is an indication that he or she is part of a social group' (Apte 1985: 54 in Back 1996: 75). Joking is used by the girls to make explicit, and explore, their differences while simultaneously uniting them in a community of humour. As Eleanor says:

"If you use laughter, if you get rid of the barriers with laughter than it just brings you together. Because we're much closer to Shola than we were last year. Like in Year 11 I spoke to her but nowhere near as much".

A recurrent matter of debate and tension is over what constitutes appropriate investment in the field of heterosexuality. For the girls' these divergent modes correspond to ethnicity. The Alternative girls are positive about sex when embedded in loving relationships, but Shola feels it always constitutes negative value-production outside of marriage<sup>113</sup>. As the

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<sup>113</sup> The girls associated this with ethnicity, different groups have particular reputations. This is a good example of how value-production becomes associated with ethnic identity:

SWR: Do you think different cultures have different approaches to sex and drinking and stuff?

All: Yeah.

Jane: If you're classifying it by group than the Chavs would be like sex and drugs and alcohol and then the blacks are normally quite 'no' because they're usually quite religious.

Megan: If they found out that someone was having sex then they'll be like "oh my god!" and they'll proper judge you about it.

Eleanor: And they'll think that you're sleeping around and that you'll sleep with anyone and it's like even if you're in a relationship with someone than it's still frowned upon.

Megan: Like when one of them found out that I'd had sex with my boyfriend then she started saying stuff like "oh are you going to married" and then she said "I suppose it's ok because you've been together for such a long time" and I was like 'is it any of your business anyway'.

Likewise Shola highlights these differences:

SWR: What do you think is affected by your background?

Shola: I'd say it's my lifestyle but I don't know how to explain it, you know there are certain things in my family that I'm not allowed to do. I don't want to be too specific about it but no sex before marriage. I know people do it but with me and my friends we know that our families don't really like that thing, it's a real cultural thing, like where you come from. It's really different for different backgrounds, it's like not trying to be rude but for the white background they don't really care.

scene at the beginning of this section, in which Shola and Jane parody each others' dancing style, illustrates, the girls are able to mutually explore these differences within the boundaries they have negotiated through friendship and humour. Within this space, Jane is able to express her opinion that there is a discrepancy between Shola's evaluation of them as slags and her own embodied behaviour. Shola stands by her evaluations and differentiates between the expectations of white and black bodily comportment (in this case dancing).

Shola calls the Alternative girls sluts and the Alternative girls insist that sex is not a negative transformation and "cuss" Shola for not engaging in it. Shola:

"Jane was cussing me the other day, she was like 'you should really start having sex' and I was like 'whatever Jane', so yeah they cuss me all the time but I don't mind".

Reciprocity is vital to this humour, and in this way both Shola and the Alternative girls affirm their own values, through which they are defining themselves as different kinds of people, and simultaneously sustain the flow of the transactions of friendship.

Humour also gives the girls a chance to interrogate their shared histories; both in terms of their shared history within school and historical relations of inequality that connect pupils of different ethnicity. As I've discussed, in Collingson School, symbolic texts associated with blackness are linked with high status groups, and pupils' negotiations of ethnic meanings are intertwined with notions of popularity, status and peer group identity. The girls' relationship not only connects them in relations of closeness and difference but also represents a reconstitution of the conventional hierarchical relations of the informal realm (which position those with low status in a non-reciprocal relationship with those of high status through a series of one-way transactions):

One lunch-time, on the high street near the school, Shola is amidst a big group of friends laughing and joking. On the other side of the road the Alternative girls, with some of their friends call over, "Shola are you embarrassed to speak to us outside lessons? You said we were your white homies<sup>114</sup>!". Shola responding to their challenge crosses the road and

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<sup>114</sup> Homies, short for home girl or home boy, is an American slang term for close friend, or a friendly acquaintance from the same neighbourhood.

starts joking with the girls, pointing to Megan's boyfriend stood smoking a little way off, she says, "he looks like a bad man, Megan your boyfriend is a bad man!". Backed up by relations of friendship the Alternative girls are able to openly challenge the enduring conventions of the informal realm. In turn Shola accepts this challenge by making an open show of her interpersonal connection to the Alternative girls and reciprocating in what is conventionally a non-reciprocal relation.

At the same time, within their space of friendship and humour, Shola often highlights wider relations of inequality and the historical connections between ethnicities:

In class, when the teacher asks for a volunteer for an unappealing task the Alternative girls quickly nominate Shola, sparring back she quips, "I'm not your slave anymore" before volunteering Jane for the task. In another lesson, the teacher holds up an essay, and without revealing its author, explains she had singled this essay out because it is an example of excellence, she then reveals the author as Shola. As the class claps, a smiling Shola jokes, "and I'm black!" to laughs from the rest of the class. A few weeks later the teacher highlights another excellent piece of work, as she returns the essay to Jane she exclaims "and I'm white!". Shola's joke highlights wider assumptions of black educational underachievement. Jane's makes her whiteness visible, like the white young people in Back's ethnography through association with black peers, Jane breaks the 'spell of white invisibility'(1996: 55).

The importance of friendship and humour in negotiating ethnicities is highlighted by the different ways these tensions emerge outside these relations. This is illustrated by the relationship between the Alternative girls and Pearl, a friend of Shola, and fellow member of their drama class. While both Shola and Pearl frequently invoke their ethnicity in terms of choices, identity and values, between the Alternative girls and Pearl these issues are not transformed into relations of friendship but instead are a cause of antagonism:

The class are deciding on a play to watch for their class trip. Scanning the newspaper, Jane suggests a play about "sexual awakening". Shola and Pearl protest, "we're not interested in seeing a play about sex", Shola takes the paper and suggests a play called *The Brothers*.

After an animated discussion between the class, the teacher steps in and decides on an alternative to both these suggestions.

In the end, Pearl does not attend the play, and after the class has dispersed from the theatre, I spend the rest of the evening with the Alternative girls - including two other members Kate and Ali. The girls spend a significant proportion of the evening bitching about Pearl (and not Shola). Eleanor says, "we'll tell Pearl she missed a really good play. She only wanted to see a play with black people in it, she wasn't interested in it when we decided on something else". Jane adds, "she would've been really disapproving of us having a drink as well, she'd be like [putting on a self-righteous tone] 'I'm a virgin, I don't drink, I'm really good, I believe in god'". The girls' project their critical evaluations of Pearl onto the surface of her body – casting her as a failure in terms of physical appearance. Ali: "Pearl's got a figure like a boy, did you see when she was wearing that blazer in drama, she looked like a big round barrel". Later, as we walk across the bridge back to the tube, they spot a buoy floating in the Thames and all the girls started shouting "Pearl, Pearl is that you?".

The girls' antagonism towards Pearl stems from conflict over what constitutes positive or negative value, particularly her views on sex and drinking. But these are the same value tensions they manage to negotiate with Shola - in relations with the latter their transactions of friendship create positive value even when they mutually define themselves as different kinds of people, engaged in different and often conflicting forms of value-production. In contrast, with Pearl, the conflict of values becomes definitive of relations: negative evaluations are no longer taken as humour but become evidence of judgemental and exclusionary behaviour stemming from ethnic identity.

### **Humour and difference**

The negotiation of difference through humour is a common strategy among pupils in Collingson School, particularly in older years. This can be understood as part of a more general form of humour in which aspects of identity and stereotypes are operationalised within joking spaces in order to transform their dominant meanings. As Back argues:

'In this process (of play) comments, practices and actions that are invested with non-play meanings are subverted and inverted by collusion. Through play, a

negotiated alteration of meaning takes place that dislocates practice from what it “stands for” in wider society’ (1996: 74).

Jerome describes these processes of play among his friends, contrasting their collusions with the reaction of his mother who is not familiar with this form of play:

“With my group of friends, literally if we didn’t like each other then you wouldn’t be able to tell, we say some of the harshest stuff to each other. Like we were playing video games and my mum was there, and one of my mates stepped in front of the TV and one of them was like, ‘you fucking cunt, your girlfriend is a whore’ and my mum was like ‘oh my god are you two going to fight’ and we all look at her and go ‘no, this is the way we speak to each other’.”

Pupils I spoke to say that they have not heard or experienced racism within Collingson School<sup>115</sup>. Like the young people in one of Back’s south London neighbourhoods, pupils ‘reject the legitimacy of racism. While they recognise racism as socially significant, they reject its applicability in this context’ (1996: 239). In Collingson school, it is often through play that the presence of racism in wider society is acknowledged and explored. Jerome describes the ways in which he and his friends temporarily occupy racist positions to this end:

“We rip the piss out of everyone, like with our friend Tariq we say he’s a terrorist, or with a friend who’s Irish we’ll say ‘alright pikey’...If you go somewhere that’s blatantly racist than that’s rubbish, if you make a joke out of it and say ‘why aren’t you talking to me, is it because I’m Iraqi, do you think I’m going to bomb you or something?’ or ‘why aren’t you talking to me, is it because I’m black, do you think I’m going to mug you?’ then that’s ok...Because it’s in society and it’s a very hurtful thing so you make fun out of it, to downplay it”.

In the common room the pupils are sitting around chatting in a large circle. When a game they invented, called ‘SNTN’ comes up, pupils animatedly reminisce about the long running game in which two teams fought to retain control over the common room. Jerome: “Do you

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<sup>115</sup> Leah was the only person I spoke to who disagreed; I discuss her identification of racism against Jews later in this chapter.

remember when it got so crazy in the summer, everyone was joining in and you couldn't even sit down without someone jumping you!". I'm sitting next to Blair (white American) and I ask her what SNTN stands for, "say no to negroes", she answers. Her friend Alice (white British) corrects her, "don't you mean 'say no to niggers?'" "I was trying to be polite" explains Blair. "The thing is" says Alice, "we weren't being rude, it's all a joke...we basically had to guard the common room, to try and stop any of them coming in, if any of them got past then we had to fight to get them out again". The game had become one of the defining stories of the Year, and the pupils often talk about it, retelling specific incidents within this long-running game to the delight of those listening.

The game is premised on racial divisions and the potential for racism between the groups. Through play, the pupils transform these potentials into positive value for the Year, and by temporarily occupying racist positions they can confirm themselves as not racist. After another SNTN conversation, Lucy (white British) turns to me and says, "we're all quite racist here, but it's only because we love each other", Josh adding, "and they're racist to us, it's really joking at those people who are really racist".

In SNTN, wider relations of prejudice and inequality are transformed into transactions of friendship and in their participation pupils illustrate their knowledge, acceptance and use of the altered meanings created through play – knowing how to play is a marker of belonging. Their use of nigger exemplifies this. It is arguably one of the most inflammatory and offensive words in circulation, especially when said by a white person, and its use is seen as a marker of racism<sup>116</sup>. In contrast the use of nigger by these pupils in Collingson School becomes a marker of membership and investment in a non-racist, multi-ethnic community.

Humour is used by pupils as a tool for exploring socially sensitive terrain and relationships of inequalities that exist between social groups. In this way historical relationships of

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<sup>116</sup> For example In June 2007 Big Brother was at the centre of a race controversy after a nineteen year old white contestant encouraging the singing of a black contestant said "push it out nigger". The producers acted swiftly and severely, waking the contestant, Emily, up at three-thirty in the morning and evicting her from the house, still in her night dress, for use of the "unacceptable word", while she adamantly protested that she was "not a racist". Afterwards Emily claimed that the word was used by both black and white peers in her group, and in the Hip Hop music that they listened to. However the press offered her no leniency and she was briefly the tabloids favourite villain.

difference and inequality can be remade as markers of belonging within the informal realm. Additionally for the white pupils it enables them to develop an identity that is 'anti-racist' without denying the history of power relations that defines them both. While for ethnic minority pupils it enables them to actively explore and deal with the pain of being positioned in derogatory ways in a racist society.

As Back argues:

'In operating this kind of play the sensitive lines of significance are policed. On one side of this line is the meaning that the word or exchange stands for in wider usage, on the other is a meaningless denotation guaranteed by play' (1996: 74).

This delicate balance is recognised by pupils and they are conscious of how jokes like SNTN might be perceived by those outside their friendship networks; hence Blair's initial self-censoring, Alice picks her up on this because by, "trying to be more polite", she potentially de-validates the collaborative subversion of meaning. As Alice insists, "it's not rude, it's a joke".

The sensitive lines of significance are further exemplified when an exchange is considered to retain its wider meaning, and jokes are perceived as actually racist. Jerome tells me about an incident in which he felt offended by a racist joke written on a MySpace bulletin<sup>117</sup>. The joke used the word nigger and I ask him why this is different to other jokes, like SNTN, that also used this word. He thinks about it and answers:

"It's probably because, if she'd kept it confined to her friends than that's okay because they wouldn't have said anything, but because she said it over MySpace, on a bulletin and there are a lot of people who are going to see that, and a lot of people who are going to get offended by that".

Extending beyond friendship networks and unmoored from the co-created space of the informal realm, the joke is perceived as 'actual racism'. In jokes that walk the sensitive line between significance and subversion, face-to-face transactions enable pupils to police these boundaries. Jerome:

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<sup>117</sup> A bulletin is a message automatically sent to all MySpace 'friends'. MySpace is a social networking site, a precursor (although still in use) to Facebook.

“All my friends are pretty vile with our jokes, but we know where there’s a line...With my friends it’s sort of like a look, you’ll get a look that’s a pure evil look and you’ll be like ‘right I won’t say that again’, but if you get a laugh, a bit of banter from it then it’s ok”.

The subversive meanings of SNTN are collaboratively sustained by pupils, played out between friends, interactive and reciprocal, and moored in the co-created space in which collective actions have already produced positive communal value. Consequently these transactions of play sustain networks and produce positive value for the year.

### **Managing the growing together discourse**

As I have previously argued, the growing together discourse is frequently drawn on by older pupils as a set of ideas that ‘give meaning to the flow of everyday life and reflect how social differentiation is talked about at a micro level’ (Back, 1996, p. 121). Growing together represents a unifying discourse within school that enables pupils to emphasise ethnic harmony through notions of investment, inclusion, shared value and transactional involvement in the year group and school. However discourses do not simply reflect the truth, but rather can be seen as one way that pupils talk about and understand difference. Beneath these claims there, ‘exists a complex process whereby the imagined politics of community is manufactured’ (Back, 1996, p. 121). While growing together represents one of the most prominent discourses in circulation, it needs to be actively managed by pupils.

The centralisation of a shared school identity (fundamental to this discourse), entails pupils shifting scales of difference in order to define a Collingson School identity in hierarchical contrast to the inferior identity of neighbouring schools. While within school, static ethnic stereotypes are explored within the framing of this discourse, essentialist notions are strategically drawn on in positioning practices in order to define ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and mark the boundaries of exclusion. St Bede’s, a neighbouring school is often positioned in this way, and Jerome, who moved to Collingson from St Bede’s for sixth form, often discussed feeling stereotyped as a result:

“When you’re from St Bede’s you’re automatically put in category...So it’s like you’re black, you’re from St Bede’s... People pretty much look down on you and think

you're just another face that causes problems for society, 'why aren't you a drug dealer? Why aren't you having babies at sixteen?'"

Within school, the growing together discourse is also actively managed, in order to ensure that ethnic harmony remains the dominant story within school. James touches on these management practices when he comments:

"Race is another interesting thing [about Collingson school]...The thing is, even if people are lying by saying they get on with everyone and don't hate anyone then that's still better, it's better to have half truths than everyone fighting each other".

One of the central premises of the growing together discourse is that all groups invest in building links, value these links as important evidence of growing up and contribute to the production of positive communal value through these transactions. However, the Indian group present a challenge to this premise as they remain a self-contained group. In order to deal with the threat this presents to the conviction of the growing together discourse, pupils conceptualise the Indian group as self-segregating with a 'strong culture' that makes it more difficult for them to fit in'<sup>118</sup>. In this way 'culture' becomes essentialised as an insurmountable challenge to growing together:

SWR: So this school is really multicultural, do you think there are divisions between people from different backgrounds?

Both: No.

Keely: There's the Indian group.

Lisa: There's the Indian group and everyone else just gels together.

The Indian group<sup>119</sup> consists of about twenty pupils and is one of the most even and integrated in terms of gender. The group's territory is just outside the entrance to one of the main school buildings and close to a playground where the boys sometimes play cricket. The girls wear matching brightly coloured pashmina scarves that they are repeatedly told to

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<sup>118</sup> I had little contact with the Indian group; the downside of my 'organic' mode of getting to know individuals and peer groups (through interpersonal networks) was that I lacked systematic contact with all peer groups in year 11. This section focuses on the way they were positioned by other peer groups.

<sup>119</sup> The Indian group was so-named by pupils, the group was Hindu but this and other aspects of identity were glossed over by the national moniker.

take off by the form teacher<sup>120</sup>. All pupils in the Indian group are Indian (unlike other peer groups that are mixed ethnically) but not all Indian pupils are part of the group, these pupils are part of other peer groups and are not positioned in the same way.

“Certain people do segregate themselves but it’s like their own choice to segregate themselves, a lot of the Indians segregate themselves”. Like Lexy, pupils tended to justify the Indian group’s segregation through notions of choice, deflecting potential accusations of prejudice, pupils talking about the Indian group often precede their comments with ‘I’m not being racist but...’. This segregation is explained in terms of ‘Indian culture’ and reflects ‘the new racism that defines ‘outsiders’ in terms of cultural difference’<sup>121</sup> (Back, 1996, p. 67):

Jane: I don’t think there’s a cultural divide at all...apart from the Indians. I’m not saying that in a racist way.

Megan: I guess ‘cos their culture is really different.

Jane: Yeah, I think they have a proper strong Indian values.

Megan: Because they’re more about families...

Jane: Because most people when they come over here, if you’re looking at sort of, Africans, or that sort of thing, than they’ve lived here all their lives and they just sort of adopt, they have the same values as us. But Indian people will still have the Indian values and all that and it’s a proper culture.

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<sup>120</sup> Scarves, coats etc are not allowed in class. The scarves were part of general fashion and did not particularly signify an Indian fashion but did clearly indicate the girls’ shared peer group identity.

<sup>121</sup> As Back argues during the 1980s the Conservative government started to extol an English cultural aesthetic. This contrasted the ‘mythical “British/ English” way of life’ that needed to be defended against threats from outside (“Frogs”, “Krauts”, “Iraqis”) and threats from within (“black communities”, “Muslim fundamentalists”). This was termed by critical commentators “cultural racism” or “new racism”. Gilroy commented that a consequence of this new racism was that blackness and Englishness become defined as mutually exclusive (1987). In the 1988 educational reform act culture rather than skin colour became the key referent (Back 1996: 9). This cultural racism continues to the present, Kundnani (2007) argues that this is particularly directed towards Muslims and Asylum seekers. He argues that just because this is now based on culture and religion, rather than skin colour, does not make it any less real for its victims. The BNP (British national party) led by Nick Griffin is increasing in popularity from no elected representatives in 1997, to sixteen councillors by 2003, to two MEPs in 2007), and is making a bid for the mainstream through the focus on these groups. Kundnani argues liberals are actually playing into their hands, Gordon Brown borrows from the nationalist rhetoric of the far right by stating “British jobs for British people” (2007), and mainstream newspapers legitimise the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim messages. Trevor Phillips, the head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, argued that Britain’s current approach to multiculturalism is causing Britain to “sleepwalk towards segregation” (*The Times* 23/09/2005). And on another occasion argued that rather than support multiculturalism, we should “assert a core of Britishness” (*The Times* 03/04/2004). As Kundnani argues this new racism, is driving the erosion of the rights of those whose cultures and values are perceived as ‘alien’.

Megan: Because they're family orientated, because they have their whole family living with them, because our next door neighbours - who aren't like the Indians here because they talk to us - they have a house the same size as mine but they have loads of extensions and stuff, they have loads of people living with them so it's really cramped...

Jane: Stronger, stronger culture.

Megan: It's also harder to get away from I think, because from what I know about Indian culture, it's very strict and they sort of have to stick to it I think, so it could be harder to merge with different groups.

This conversation exemplifies how pupils can strategically shift scales of difference. In a previous section we saw how the same girls operationalise notions of difference in relation to their friendship with Shola. They negotiated tensions presented by divergent value production through humour and friendship; highlighting and channelling ethnic differences in order to position their friendship in terms of the growing together discourse. However, in this conversation, in order to explain the Indian group's non-investment in this discourse, the girls shift scales of difference to position 'Africans' as 'adopting' British culture in contrast to 'Indians'. Indian values become all-defining and the possibilities of producing shared positive value with Indian pupils is seen as untenable.

Beneath pupils' claims to ethnic harmony we can see a more complex process in action, within the same social space difference can be conceptualised in alternative ways. In previous sections we have seen how difference is negotiated through interpersonal transactions in order to frame unity in terms of closeness if not sameness. In this section however, we have seen how pupils strategically draw upon essentialist ideas in order to conceptualise difference as non-negotiable and resulting in distance as well as difference. These varying conceptualisations of difference are further exemplified by the position of Jews, both in the surrounding area and within the school.

### **Being Jewish in Collingson**

Two Collingson School pupils from Year 8, a boy and girl, are walking home from school past Collingson Park where girls' from a local Hasidic school are playing netball. They are wearing

a modest games kit of leggings, calf length tunics and long sleeve T-Shirts. The Collingson boy points them out to his friend:

Boy: They must really stink after that, with all the clothes they're wearing.

Girl: Yeah, you know they don't finish school 'till four, and they don't have any half terms, they only have a four week holiday around Chanukah, that's it! And why don't they watch TV or use lights on a Saturday?

Boy: Dunno

Girl: To save money on electricity. Why don't they drive on a Saturday? To save money on petrol. And d'you know why the men wear those big hats? So that when it rains they can turn them upside down and collect water so they don't have to pay for it.

Collingson School's location within a predominantly Jewish area, and pupils' experience of the visually distinctive Hasidic community, creates a specific conceptualisation of separateness. For many non-Jewish pupils in Collingson School the Hasidic presence in the local area represents their main (and sometimes only) experience of Judaism and many pupils think it represents the Jewish norm. A teacher told me that when she told her class she was Jewish, they expressed great surprise, exclaiming, "You can't be, you're so normal!". The class continued drawing on the Collingson Hasidic stereotypes they had taken to be typical of all Jews: "You can't be Jewish, you don't wear a wig, you don't drive a Volvo, you're not really rich and you don't have seven kids!"

In contrast to processes within Collingson School, where difference can be channelled by transactions in school into a shared identity, there is no contact between Collingson pupils and the Hasidic community in the local area and the relationship remains one of distance. While ethnicity is a constant source of conversation among pupils, without the transactional dimensions, the local Jewish community remains unknown. When I tell Aabida and Daisy I am Jewish they are full of questions that have so far been unanswered, despite their spatial proximity to this community. Aabida asks "is it true that the women all wear wigs?". I tell her that most do not, but some very orthodox women do, although you do see lots of women in Collingson wearing wigs. I explain that it is a religious thing, that they wear them

in order to cover their heads. Aabida who wears a headscarf, touches it and like she is connecting these two practices for the first time says thoughtfully, “like I do”.

Pupils often express feeling judged, looked down upon and ignored by the Hasidic community with whom they live in close proximity<sup>122</sup>. Within this dynamic, anti-Semitic comments and practices often remain unchallenged among pupils, as the example at the start of this section illustrates. Leah, who is proudly Jewish, tells me:

“I’ve witnessed racism against Jews... I usually hear it on the bus, so if I’m sitting on the bus upstairs it’s like ‘oh why do they have to come up here, oh bloody Jews are up here, why can’t they just go’ and you wouldn’t say that about anyone else”. I ask her why she thinks this is: “Because they don’t have proper access to people, and when you don’t have proper access to the people, then people become alienated and that’s when prejudices really form, and they’ve really formed”.

Meanwhile Jewish pupils within Collingson school are in a unusual position; they are part of a small minority in school and in the country, but part of a majority in the local area. As I have argued previously, ethnicity is intrinsically transactional, and within school peers are active in facilitating and monitoring the performance of appropriate ethnicity. Leah feels that her Judaism is central to her identity, but within school, without peers also willing to invest in this identity, she is unable to perform her ethnicity as she wishes. Although there are a few other Jewish pupils in Year 11, Leah feels she is the only one who is proud of being Jewish:

“Michael isn’t proud he is Jewish which isn’t good and Ben is Jewish as well and everyone knows he’s Jewish but no one talks about it. He doesn’t want to be ‘I’m Jewish’, I wanted to be ‘I’m damn Jewish, get over it!’, I wanted to be in their faces ‘I’m Jewish!’.

Without transactional opportunities, Leah is unable to stake out a Jewish peer group identity. Further, because of the lack of Jewish pupils, and the status of Judaism within

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<sup>122</sup>It is likely these feelings are mutual, Collingson high road becomes full after the school day with pupils from Collingson School and St Bede’s. Community members and business owners (a significant proportion of whom are Jewish) often complain of misbehaviour and unruliness. These tense relations are reported in the local newspaper.

school due to the local context, she is unable to produce specifically Jewish positive value in the informal realm. She contrasts this with the position of other groups:

“If there were more of me and we were the ‘Jewish crew’ then they would get used to it and we would be cool, but there’s me and then they see nutters in black hats. And that’s why, because you’ve got a couple of Indians, you’ve got more than a couple of blacks, and that’s why. Because you’ve got a couple of everything and in the end you get accustomed to it, however weird it is in the beginning, you get over it”.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have illustrated the ways in which issues of ethnicity are discussed and negotiated within this comprehensively multi-ethnic informal realm. I argue that ethnicity is articulated through peer transactions, value-producing actions and positioning practices. Ethnicities are made meaningful through interactions between peers, and like other aspects of identity, pupils are active in producing themselves as particular kinds of people in relation to their peers and monitoring each other in terms of appropriateness.

As I have argued, on the one hand, ethnicity is important in the construction of different identities, seen to shape action and value-production and viewed as an unavoidable aspect of evaluative practices, an ‘always already’ dimension of the way someone will be perceived. On the other hand, claims to harmony emphasise notions of closeness and unity. These processes are negotiated within and intertwined with the growing together discourse, which, as I have discussed previously, centralises unification through investment, inclusion, communal value and transactional involvement in the year group and school. ‘Sameness’ is not necessary for these processes, growing together channels difference into a shared identity through networks of interpersonal transactions. Investment in the growing together discourse becomes the ground on which inclusion and exclusion within the year group are premised. For example being able to ‘share a joke’, or ‘laugh together’ is offered by pupils as evidence of belonging and shared investments.

Furthermore, I would argue that the intertwining of the processes of growing together, growing up and ethnic harmony raises the stakes. The stalling or regression of these

processes would have an impact on pupils' collective and individual self-conceptions. And in the uncertain tangle of these processes, the 'double-edged or ambivalent nature of joking, which precludes the fixing of meaning or leaves it to be teased out by actors (Osella and Osella 1998: 203), offers a frame within which things can be said 'lightly' and sociality can be opened up to examination. In the very act of examining their differences, pupils constitute a convivial sociality (Rosengren 2010), produce communal value and sustain a group identity based on transactional investment rather than inherited identities.

However, as I have also discussed in this chapter, the growing together discourse is actively managed by pupils and essentialist ideas of difference can be utilised by pupils to conceptualise difference alternately as non-negotiable and resulting in distance. The Indian group who remain self-contained and so represent a threat to the growing together discourse, are positioned by other pupils as outside in these terms.

In the following discussion I discuss sexuality, another salient category of difference being produced, defined and policed through pupil action in the informal realm.

## Chapter 8: Sexuality

In this chapter I focus on the heterosexual value-field and the ways in which pupils create, transform and manage their transactions in order to produce positive value, and protect themselves against accusations of negative value – a particular danger in this field.

Heterosexual value is fundamentally structured through, ‘the prevailing politics of normative gender difference (girls and boys as opposite sexes)’ (Hey 1997: 129).

Conventions of sexuality in school define appropriate masculine and feminine sexuality in opposition to each other, and boys and girls must manage their transactions in very different ways in order to produce positive value in this field. Transactions of sexuality extend far beyond the physical act; they are constantly transformed into talk, humour, rumour, bitching, play and ‘reputation’, each with their attendant conventions.

Positive value is made visible in relation to negative value, and success in the heterosexual field is defined in contrast to those who are evaluated as failures. As Munn (1986) argues morals are reinforced through representations of immorality - in everyday life the articulation of negativities often becomes part of the process of positive-value production. Discourses of failure – particularly the ‘gay’ discourse directed towards boys and the ‘slag’ discourse directed towards girls – have a pervasive strength within school. As we will see, defining others as unacceptable is a key practice through which pupils can produce themselves as acceptable.

The repetition and power of discourses and transactions of sexuality (both successful and unsuccessful) highlights the centrality of sexuality to identity. Moreover, within school the conventions of sexuality and gender are mutually constituted and failure in the conventions of sexuality often comes to stand for a more general failure in conventions of gender. The repetition and constant commentary on transgressions of appropriate sexuality attests to ‘all the narrative and symbolic energy and work’ that it takes to ‘stabilise and fix’ (Hall 1992: 16) the dichotomous categories of masculine and feminine sexuality within school.

I start by discussing the circulation of sexual knowledge within school before discussing the different ways in which boys and girls transform this knowledge, and manage their

transactions in order to secure an appropriate position, as well as evaluate those who fail in this task.

### **Knowledge about sex**

It is the start of a Year Eleven drama lesson. The class are sitting in a large circle in the studio, and after taking the register the teacher asks some of the pupils to report on their homework assignment, which was to research the life story of a celebrity they admire. Paige volunteers enthusiastically, “oh me Miss, me”, taking out her piece of paper she starts to read, “today I’m going to talk about the porn star Jenna Jameson”. Several of the boys nod in recognition, while some girls roll their eyes, no one seems particularly shocked. “I admire Jenna Jameson because she grew up poor in a small town, and when she was sixteen she got raped. But then her Uncle helped her to become a porn star, and she never does anal!”. “Never does anal?” Paul interrupts incredulously, “what sort of porn star is she?” Paige answers triumphantly, “she’s the most famous porn star in the world!” The teacher is nonplussed by this exchange, “ok thank you Paige, right who wants to go next?”

Research done in schools during the 1980s (for example Lees 1986, Hey 1997 and Mac an Ghail 1994) highlighted the pervasive and powerful constraints on female sexuality, particularly the slag discourse. As Lees argued, this discourse was fundamentally structuring of girls experiences and acted as, ‘an ever present force, censoring and constraining behaviour irrespective of the presence or absence of boys’ (1986: 82). However pupils at Collingson School are operating within a wider context that in the last two decades has seen a massive shift in the representation of sex and sexualities in popular culture. Television fiction and documentary have explored a spectrum of sexualities and sexual practices and the pornography industry has expanded greatly, with the internet enabling easy access from home. In Giddens’ (1992, see Tincknell et al 2003 and McRobbie 1997) meta-reading of public culture, he argues that sexuality is now characterised by an individualisation of moral choices, the increased visibility and commercialisation of a spectrum of sexualities and notions of ‘sexual rights’ and ‘sexual citizenship’. These position sexuality as a key part of the ‘actualisation of the modern self’ for both men and women.

However, I argue that the picture on the ground is far more complex. While knowledge of a wide range of sexual activities and identities are in circulation among pupils, these co-exist with prescriptive and powerful conventions governing sexuality. These conventions mark the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate sexual identities for pupils, and both boys and girls are active in policing these boundaries.

### **Becoming a heterosexual boy**

For boys the demonstration of sexual knowledge and involvement in sexualised humour is a key peer transaction that enables the production and validation of a heterosexual masculine identity. 'Sex talk' is frequent, repetitive and does not need to be based on real experiences. As Mac an Ghail argues this talk:

'Appeared to be a crucial element in setting the parameters of the prescriptive and proscriptive sex/ gender boundaries that served to police school boys' performance by making them act like men' (1994: 92).

As I discussed in chapter 5, boys in the Misfit peer group experience marginalisation in the informal realm. But while their disinterest in sport, their non-dominant behaviour in the classroom and their alternative clothes and music tastes exclude them from dominant modes of masculinity within school, social practices within the group allow them to affirm and emphasise other aspects of masculinity. Like the male peer groups in Mac an Ghail's study, 'sex and sexuality were compulsively and competitively discussed and played out' (1994: 90). However, unlike the boys in Mac an Ghail's study, the predominant form this takes is not 'performance stories' (ibid: 92), but boundary-pushing talk and humour<sup>123</sup>. The boys' inter-embodied performance is also frequently sexual and particularly phallicentric. They often pretend to get out their penises, hold phallic objects to their crotches or 'play-rape' other boys (but only the ones that also engaged in this form of play).

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<sup>123</sup> The boys' jokes often concern extreme sexual activities such as bestiality, paedophilia or necrophilia. Examples of jokes told by the Misfits include:  
Q: What's the best thing about having sex with twenty eight year olds?  
A: There are twenty of them.  
Q: What times does Michael Jackson go to bed?  
A: When the big hand touches the little hand.

As Back (1996) argues, joking exchanges such as these have more significance than just play for play's sake; they mark those who are included in a peer group: 'acceptance of a person's joking is an indication that he or she is part of the social group' (Apte 1985: 54 in Back 1996: 75). The boundary-pushing nature of this humour amplifies these indicators of group belonging. Further, the sexual form this takes, closely linked to the 'categorical imperative to act like a heterosexual man' within school (Mac an Ghail 1994: 91) both defines the boundaries of the peer group and marks them out as masculine; inclusion in this joking validates a masculine identity. For the Misfits, sexual boundary-pushing humour is a key social practice that enables them to produce masculine, heterosexual value within their peer group.

Boundary pushing sexual humour is predominantly a masculine practice within school, and like other forms of play and humour has different effects depending on the conditions of the joke and the relations between the joker and their audience. The above examples took place within a hidden away peer group territory and between friends. The following example occurred in a lesson, and was not between friends, and resulted in different effects.

It is a science lesson, Keely and Ameesha are sitting near the end of the long desks chatting quietly, the rest of the desk is taken up by six boys larking about boisterously and loudly, attempting to push each other off their stools. Billy breaks off from the messing around, and leaning over the desk says earnestly, "Keely, can I ask you something?" She looks up and nods, the whole desk is now focused on this exchange, "do you give head?" The boys on the desk break into laughter, Keely, blushing says, "do I look like the sort of person who would do that?"

Talking about it afterwards Keely tells me, "I think he did it to make himself feel better because he'd just got slapped by a different boy. So I just think he wanted the attention drawn off of him but it was such an unnecessary comment to make, and I was just like 'you're just a stupid little...'" Lisa, listening to Keely, adds for my benefit, "like that might not offend some people, but for Keely that's offensive". She compares this to a similar conversation she had been part of, "[addressing Keely] it's weird though because you don't

like it when someone says that to you, but my friend said that I liked anal and drew a picture and everything, but we're really good friends so I just took it as a joke and laughed at it".

Lisa highlights that friendship is a necessary condition for these sexualised transactions to be 'taken as a joke', and Keely agrees, "it's when you don't know them".

Rather than an indicator of group belonging, in this case joking is an act of domination, in which Billy makes a public gain at the expense of an offended and embarrassed Keely (see Kehily and Nayak 1997). However despite the different effects these instances of 'sex talk' provoked, in both cases the boys transform knowledge of sexual acts into verbal transactions and in so doing reinforce their masculinity.

While real sexual experiences are not necessary for sex talk, sexual encounters with girls are still a primary aspiration. While these encounters usually happen outside school and away from the peer group, they are transformed into a currency for male peer group interaction. Jerome was eleven when he lost his virginity. He tells me that from a very young age there was pressure between boys to lose their virginity, "I was the first one in my year to get rid of that pressure". But at such a young age the experience was underwhelming, "I regret it now...it was a horrible experience, afterwards I was like 'yeah I've done it, I've done it', but then I was like 'it wasn't all I'd psyched it up to be'". This experience produced the most value when he was able to transform it into a peer transaction, "you sort of feel like 'yes it's over and done with and now I can brag about it at school' but it wasn't that great".

Sex-talk and sexual encounters are operationalised by boys to demonstrate a sexuality that is potent, active and 'never off their minds'; to position themselves within the boundaries of an acceptable (necessarily heterosexual) masculine identity. Like friendship, these transactions need to be constantly enacted. Heterosexual masculinity is never secure but must be continually demonstrated. To stop transacting in this way is to risk falling outside the bounds of acceptable masculinity, primarily framed as being or acting gay. Boys' almost compulsive repetition of these sexual discourses belies the high stakes involved in appearing as acceptably masculine. In the following section I will discuss the policing of these boundaries by both boys and girls, and the consequences of insufficient, or unsuccessfully managed heterosexual transactions for boys.

## **Policing the boundaries of masculinity**

The gay discourse is a powerful and pervasive force within school and represents the transgression of conventions of masculinity, masculine sexuality and the failure of boys to transform or manage their transactions successfully in order to produce sufficient heterosexual, masculine value. Being gay is constructed as mutually exclusive to a successful masculine identity which is viewed as necessarily heterosexual. The gay discourse gains further power from its dual usage, as an indicator of homosexuality and as a more general indicator of failure, disparagement or criticism<sup>124</sup>. As Michael explains:

“People will use gay for anything, people don’t just use gay as in ‘you’re homosexual’, they use it as an insult...people associate gay with something crap, so it’s a general way of telling someone that you think they’re bollocks”.

The negative connotation of the word gay is one expression of an intense homophobia among many peer groups. In the following conversation Misfits James and Michael link these together, and express homophobic opinions despite often being at the receiving end of accusations of homosexuality because of their low status and non-dominant masculinity:

James: Yeah, I’m fine with it [gay being used as a general derogatory term]. A lot of people say ‘oh you can’t say that’ but hey whatever. For someone who finds homosexuality physically repulsive, and scientifically wrong...

Michael: And religiously wrong; ‘thou shalt not lie with another man’.

James: Screw religion, it’s scientifically not right, you cannot have children naturally through homosexuality.

Michael: Let’s get it straight, we have nothing against gay people per se, we just find the idea of seeing or imagining the physical actions that take place between two gay men, emphasis on the men, is wrong! Is disgusting!

The ever-present threat of being labelled gay means boys have to manage their transactions carefully and most pupils I speak to, both boys and girls, think boys’ behaviour is more restricted than girls’. As Richard tells me, “there’s more pressure on boys than girls, like for girls it’s just about how you are, but for boys it’s about how you are and what you do. If you

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<sup>124</sup> For example ‘my mum was being so gay, she wouldn’t let me go out last night’ or ‘that TV programme is gay’.

do this or you do that then you're gay, it's different for girls". Dominic adds, "like girls can say they think another girl is attractive, but if a guy did that they'd be called gay straightaway". Pupils recognise that girls have more freedom to show affection to each other, and to understand and express their feelings, whereas this same behaviour from a boy will be labelled gay. Shola:

"If you're a guy and you interact the same way as girls do - say a boy gives another boy a hug or kisses or something, they might say 'okay, are you gay or something?'"

It is not only boys that police each other in terms of an appropriate gender identity, girls are also active in policing these boundaries, enforcing an understanding of masculinity that defines it in opposition to femininity. In the classroom or the playground girls are often quick to publicly make a joke at the expense of boys judged as acting 'too girly'; pouring over women's magazines, expressing concern about their appearance, putting on lip balm or complementing a girl on an outfit:

Leah: I like people who are masculine, I think if you're a boy you're a boy, I don't like all that rubbish...Any boy that doesn't want to be macho, ok this is going to sound bad, is probably gay.

Georgia: Boys generally don't know how to interact with girls ...

Lexy: ...Some of them are a bit effeminate and they start talking to you about really girly things and it's like urggh.

It is not just unsuccessfully managed transactions that result in being labelled gay but also an insufficient amount of transactions – both sexual and 'masculine'. The mutually constitutive nature of heterosexuality and masculinity means it is not only the boys who do not take part in sexual transactions (such as sexual encounters, boundary pushing sexual humour or sex-talk) who are more likely to be labelled gay, but also those who do not take part in typically masculine activities/ transactions (like sport, play fighting or 'taking the piss').

The interconnections between status and dominant masculinity means that the same behaviour is often labelled in different ways depending on the status of the individual, and their transactional success in demonstrating a dominant masculine identity. Dominic says

with resignation, “whatever I do someone calls me gay because I have long blonde hair and that automatically means that I’m gay”. However, the similar hair style of high-status Mandom members Karl and Nathan (who both have established sexual reputations due to previous relationships with desired girls) although seen as ‘girly’, does not result in them being labelled gay, or excluded from an appropriate, dominant masculine identity.

As Mac an Ghail argues:

‘Although there was much student policing of sex/ gender boundaries at school...it was contingent on specific location and most significantly on individual male students’ established sexual reputations’ and as such ‘there was a certain contextual fluidity in the construction of ascribed meanings that mediated the institutional signifiers of what it means to be masculine and feminine within the school and across other sites’(1994: 93).

Jerome offers this example, to illustrate a similar point:

“There’s this thing when you’re playing football, it’s weird, if you go to a guy when you’re in Year 10, or maybe a bit older, and you slapped a guys arse than it’s ‘you’re gay’ but when you do it playing football then you’re not gay. It’s a weird situation, people are very weird, they’re the weirdest things around”.

Despite the pervasive and powerful imperative to enact an unambiguous heterosexual masculine identity within school, this contextual fluidity enables some pupils to occupy more flexible sexual identities (although these are not available to most). Jerome, a Year 13, is such an individual. He has a reputation within school as sexually active and confident and hence successful in producing heterosexual, masculine value. He often regales the common room with stories of his sexual exploits. After the summer break he tells us about a twenty-two year old trainee teacher he was dating (and sleeping with) who dumped him after she found out her was only seventeen. On another occasion he shares with us that he once tried to give up sex for a year for a bet, but had given in with three weeks to go because, “it was too hard, there’s just too many beautiful girls in the world”.

However, on a number of occasions I see Jerome switch from these typical enactments of male heterosexuality to a more playful and ambiguous expression of sexuality that

encompasses the possibilities of finding both sexes attractive. In the common room he engages me and a group of girls in a conversation of our “top five hottest men”, starting with his list, “I’ve got strange taste in men, but then some people are so good looking they just transcend everything”. On another occasion he tells us about kissing a male friend: “I really didn’t like the stubble, it was so rough against your skin, I can understand why most women prefer to kiss other women”.

Although these two types of performance may initially seem incongruent, it is his successful heterosexual reputation that enables this playful presentation. Having produced sufficient heterosexual masculine value he is able to play like this without being labelled as gay or excluded from an appropriate masculine identity. Jerome is also high status, and while high status is premised on success at working within conventions within school, this same aptitude can be directed towards more innovative modes; the transgression of conventions whilst remaining within acceptable limits.

### **Girls’ sexual identities**

So far I have argued that boys transformed the circulation of sexual knowledge within school into a key currency within peer relations; the constant re-articulation of sexual discourses enabling the presentation of an active, assertive and potent sexual identity. Meanwhile, the gay discourse is operationalised to police the boundaries of this acceptable, heterosexual identity. Behaviour deemed ‘effeminate’ or insufficient performances of heterosexual masculinity are labelled as such and are inevitably denigrated as failure in both masculinity and heterosexuality.

In the following sections, I will discuss the very different ways in which girls transform the same circulation of sexual knowledge and manage their transactions in order to enact an appropriate feminine sexual identity. While for boys, the expression of sexuality is rarely evaluated as too strong or too compulsive, girls walk a finer line. They are caught between the demands of a properly contained, controlled and guarded sexuality, policed by the pervasive and powerful ‘slag’ discourse and expectations of a sufficient expression of a heterosexual and attractive feminine identity, policed by the ‘lesbian’ discourse.

For girls, the sexual knowledge in circulation within school needs to be actively managed in order to ensure they appear in appropriate ways. The constant and wide-ranging circulation of sexual knowledge in school means that few girls position themselves as sexual innocents. Rather they balance knowingness about sex with a constant commentary on transgressions of appropriate sexual identities by other girls or statements which define their own position as appropriate:

One break time, as I approach the It girls' territory, I see that Kadia, Grace and a couple of members of the Man-dom are crowding around focussing intently on a mobile phone. As I come closer I see they are reading something, their silence occasionally broken by exclamations of disgust or disbelief. As I approach, Grace looks up and explains that they are reading a blog by a seventeen year old from Hackney, "I'll blue tooth it to you, you've got to read it, you won't believe it!" She transfers it to my phone and that afternoon on my way home from school I start reading it. The blog, a diary written in a black London vernacular and abbreviated 'text speak' is an explicit account of the diarist's sexual exploits, recounting in great detail her sexual transactions with a series of boys<sup>125</sup>. The blog, which originally came from MySpace<sup>126</sup>, is transferred from pupil to pupil and is transformed into a communicational transactions, as pupils debate whether it is true and rumours of the authors identity circulate ("my brother's friend knows someone who goes to her school").

Next time I see Grace she's eager to find out if I read it, I tell her I have and ask her what she thought of it. She is unequivocal in her response, "I thought it was absolutely disgusting, that girl is a complete sket<sup>127</sup>". This episode exemplifies the way girls handle the circulation of sexual knowledge within school. Generally they do not shy away from it or claim innocence, instead they make a clear and public judgement on whether it constitutes acceptable or unacceptable sex.

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<sup>125</sup> Recently, while writing up, my cousin, who is the same age as my participants in Collingson, and at school in Bristol, mentioned a blog she had read. She told me the gist of the story and that it had been passed from phone to phone in her school. It turned out to be the same story. It had made its way across the country through mobile technology and interpersonal networks.

<sup>126</sup> MySpace is a social networking site; users have a personal profile and can upload things, such as blogs, to share with others.

<sup>127</sup> Slang for a slut.

## Acceptable sex

Sex itself is not necessarily unacceptable, but depending on the way it is transformed through various types of transactions (both outside and inside school) it can be made to appear in appropriate or inappropriate ways. Girls usually define sex contained within a committed and emotionally invested as appropriate. Georgia:

“People think that sex is bad but in a relationship you’ve made a commitment to that person. But if you’re doing stuff outside of a relationship then it’s kind of, what people see is different, like you’re not going to commit to that one person”.

In the context of a long term and committed relationship it is possible for girls to talk openly to their friends about sex. When Gemma got serious with her boyfriend from the year above she would report back to the Green corridor girls about the progress of their sexual activities, discussing what colour underwear she should buy (“white is too virginal but red is too slutty”) and her worries about her first ‘sleepover’ with him, particularly him seeing her in the morning without make-up and straightened hair (she was considering setting her alarm so she could perfect her appearance before returning to bed). Francesca reassures her, “for some reason boys like you when you look like that, even though you feel really bleurgh”. She promises to give the girls a “blow-by-blow account” when they returned to school on Monday.

It has been argued that ‘to instigate sexual pleasure, perhaps even to demonstrate sexual pleasure, seem still to be forbidden roles for girls to take’ (Frost 118, see also Lees 1986). But I would argue that investigations of young sexuality need to take into account contextual variation, in school the same act can be invested with very different meanings depending on the transactions that surround it.

At the same time however the boundaries of acceptable feminine sexuality are policed strongly and constantly by both boys and girls. The slag discourse is a pervasive force within school and its power makes visible the coercive imperative on girls to manage their transactions successfully in order to perform (and be seen to perform) an appropriate feminine heterosexual identity. It is these issues I go onto discuss in the following sections.

### **“She’s not a sket because she only had sex once”: Policing the boundaries of femininity**

It is the middle of the drama lesson, and the class have divided into groups to work on their end of year play. The teacher is occupied with a group on the other side of the classroom, so the group I’m sitting with start messing about and chatting. Samiya stuffs a blazer under her jumper, “look, I’m pregnant!” I ask her if anyone in the year has had a baby, no-one has she told me, but Peter volunteers that someone that went to the same primary school as him and Samiya is pregnant. Samiya thinks she knows who it is: “Is she black? I know her but she’s not a sket because she only had sex once and it was an accident”.

All peer groups operationalise the slag discourse, which is only applied to girls. Like the gay discourse, it is an ever-present threat that intensifies the imperative for self-surveillance and the appropriate creation and transformation of transactions:

Jerome: Yeah man, sex is forbidden in Collingson...If you’re not going out with someone [when you have sex], than it’s like ‘shock horror!’

SWR: And why do you think it’s like that?

Jerome: Because they’re very conservative.

SWR: And where does the conservative come from?

Jerome: The need to not be called a whore or slag.

As I argued previously, sex in itself is neither appropriate nor inappropriate; its meaning cannot be isolated but is embedded in transaction. ‘Slagginess’ is made salient by pupils when a series of transactions, structured through a set of interconnected conventions are evaluated as inappropriate. Sexual acts are evaluated by pupils in context: when, with whom, with how many people, how many times and in what time frame the sexual acts occurred. These considerations are all important in the operationalisation of this discourse:

SWR: So would you be a slut if you’d had sex with, like, one boy?

James: It depends why it happened, if you’re being really cheap about it, like if it was a drunken one night stand, then that can get you branded as a slut.

SWR: So if you’re in a long term relationship with your boyfriend then that’s ok?

James: Yeah, it doesn't tend to be such a big thing. I mean if you're going out with somebody and you just happen to be doing other guys as well, then you'd definitely get branded as a slut, and I'd agree with that.

Michael: You can't say that a slut is a girl who's slept with a lot of men, because it depends on the time period and the situation. If you've been mainly completely pissed at parties and you've slept with a different guy every night for three weeks then that is a slut.

The appearance of the slag discourse is not limited to sexual transactions; the discourse gains momentum when it is transformed into communicational transactions, becoming part of the information exchange within school, attendant with other sets of conventions, like those of covert bitching:

One lunch time Caroline (one of the Green corridor girls) is spending time in the Misfits territory, and in conversation about what it means to be a slut, Michael asks Caroline, "who's the biggest slut in the Year?" Caroline answers categorically "Tamika", Michael expresses surprise, "I would never have thought that". Caroline, fulfilling her role as a key link in the informational network within the Year, then proceeds to tell us the story.

Although Tamika had told me about this incident, this was the first time I had heard it discussed outside Tamika's friendship group. This transaction between Caroline and Michael re-activates this story and transforms it into a communicational exchange. After lunch I am walking to lessons with Segal. She was not part of the conversation, and I did not know she had been listening, but after we are out of the earshot of the others, she turns to me and says in a confidential tone, "I'll be looking at people differently now, some people look so innocent".

Moreover, the appearance of the slag discourse often does not originate with sexual acts at all, but stems from dress and behaviour evaluated as inappropriate, often framed in terms of sexual availability. Like the gay discourse for boys, slagginess comes to stand for more general transgressions in the conventions of femininity. This highlights the importance of

aesthetics in school; it is as important to appear, and appear to be behaving in appropriate ways, as to actually behave in appropriate ways. Georgia:

I think a lot of people base it on how someone dresses, because if you're constantly dressing quite suggestively, I think it's quite degrading, it's one thing wanting to look good or you're going somewhere and you want to look a certain way, but there are some people who dress like that all the time.

At school I often ask the question, "what makes someone a slag?" And I am surprised at the difficulty pupils have of pinning down a definition of a concept they use so frequently. On reflection, I think that the slipperiness of the concept reflects its processual nature, it cannot be categorically defined because it is so contextually dependent. It is part of a series of transactions and transformed in a number of different ways within school. Further, it is used by pupils to signify transgressions of conventions within school and often does not originate in any sexual acts at all.

I ask some of the Misfit boys what it means to be a slag. Michael initially attempts a definition that relies solely on a classification of sexual acts:

"What I'm saying is that a girl being slutty is not the way she looks but the way she acts, there are sort of general things slutty girls wear but a slutty girl is mainly determined by her actions".

But then he draws on a more ambiguous definition that centralises the way things appear, "it's a combination of two things; they wear unbelievably revealing things, like to church". James continues, "and you say like 'hello' to them and they have their legs open".

Being a slut is the active production of negative value. It is evidenced in terms of the transactions that produce negative value (so assessed according to how, when, with who, how many people etc). But is also based on negative evaluations – appearing in the wrong way - regardless of the origins of this evaluation. In line with the contrastive way masculine and feminine sexuality are defined in school, the same acts and transactions that produce positive value for boys, produce negative value for girls:

Richard: [Girls who are slags] sleep around a lot and they couldn't care who they do it with...

Michael: The idea of sex is never far from their minds.

This same behaviour by boys would see them evaluated as, “heroes” (Michael).

While slaggy behaviour is recognised as a strategy for gaining visibility, it is viewed as an illegitimate strategy. Although it is an attempt to produce value within the field of heterosexuality, the evaluations of peers lead to it being defined as negative value-production, and so as ultimately self-defeating. Caroline explains:

“Some people become more popular with it. Like if a younger girl is a slag then older guys will start to hang around her a lot more. But no one is going to view anyone nicely because of it, they’re always going to view people negatively...I think most girls who do that are insecure anyway, that’s what they want, they want the attention and they think that they’re getting it, they don’t realise they’ll be viewed negatively”.

As Munn (1986: 15) argues, value-producing practices co-ordinately form the actors who engage in them, value production is evaluated and can consequently come to ‘crystallize the value of actors’. The negative evaluation of a girls (sexual) transactions, in turn, is perceived to define their identity, “you know how you get an FDA stamp of approval on chicken and stuff, it’s like that” (Michael).

### **Othering**

I’m on the Southbank with the sixth form Alternative girls, we have just been to see a play and are now watching people walk by on this bustling bank of the Thames. The girls point out a couple of girls of a similar age, dancing as a busker plays. To me, the dancing girls who are also similarly dressed and the same ethnicity as the girls from Collingson, look like they’re having fun and are not behaving particularly sexually. So I’m surprised by the girls’ alternative and vitriolic interpretation of their behaviour. Kate comments with a tone of disgust:

“She’s so desperate, she obviously really wants sex, why doesn’t she just wank off or get a vibrator or something. And what about her friend? She looks so slaggy”.

The coding of 'slag' as a transgression of conventions, and an inappropriate identity, means that it is a powerful positioning tool for girls. Applying this label to others enables girls to position themselves, in contrast, as appropriately feminine. As Hey writes, 'it is all those other girls who are made to carry the bad bits of femininity' (1997: 75). Slag is a frequent insult between girls and along with the wider circulation of this discourse attests to the centrality of sexuality to identity and the importance of an appropriate sexual identity to successful femininity. Girls are walking a fine line, between being attractive and evaluated as desirable in the heterosexual field, and being over-sexual or out of control and thus being inappropriate. Girls' constant positioning of others, as crossing the line of acceptability, validates their own position as appropriate and can shift the scales of difference in order to invest individuals, peer groups and other schools with this slaggy identity.

The 'Blonde Barbies' are a peer group that are often positioned by others as slaggy and thus inappropriate. The Barbies, all white from English or Eastern European backgrounds, are so called because their hair is dyed a peroxide blonde with no attempt at naturalism. Despite their peer group name, the girls do not have a polished, well-groomed appearance described within school as 'plastic' (like the It girls). Instead their messy blonde hair, dark roots, thick black eyeliner and short skirts present a more 'alternative' punky appearance.

Rumours abound about the Barbies' sexual antics outside school. Lexy:

"They have these parties every weekend, they go around saying 'do you want to have sex with me? Do you want me to give you a hand job?'"

Regardless of the accuracy of these rumours, within school they are transformed into communicational transactions that validate the Barbies' labelling as slags. However, the Barbies' labelling as slags is not solely a result of rumours which bring outside events into school. The Barbies positioning stands for a number of transgressions of the conventions of femininity and not simply transgressions of sexuality.

The Barbies do not invest in the value of 'niceness' and are overt in their attempts to exert power and extend their intersubjective experience, as I have discussed previously, these all contravene conventions of femininity in school. Paige, one of the central members of the group, tells people what to do, overtly criticises others (rather than covertly in the gender

appropriate form of bitching), and is not afraid to confront anyone speaking badly about her. She openly admits she likes to “stir things up”. The girls do not engage in friendly transactions (smiling greetings, hugs, checking how a person is and compliments) and are not generally evaluated as producing positive feminine value.

One drama lesson, allowed to chat by a supply teacher, I enter into a long conversation with Marina (a floating popular girl), Leah (a Misfit) and Samiya (an It girl). Marina tells us the story of her on-going altercation with one of the Barbies. As Shuman (1986) has argued, storytelling in school not only conveys information and reports past events, but also demonstrates the relationship between tellers, hearers and characters in the story. As ratified and sympathetic listeners, Leah and Samiya are positioning themselves as connected (despite their membership of different peer group) and in opposition to the Barbies. In this way they are sustaining inter-peer group transactional flows and defining themselves as ‘different but appropriate’ in contrast to the Barbies who are ‘different but inappropriate’:

Marina: She’s been telling people I go with loads of different boys, when actually that’s what she’s been doing...Then on MSN<sup>128</sup> she was saying, ‘you’ve got not friends, no one likes you, you’re just jealous of me because I’ve got a life and you haven’t got a life’. And I was like, ‘I wouldn’t want your life, all you do is get drunk every night’.

Leah: Do they really get drunk every night?

Marina: Yeah.

Samiya: They just think they’re big, you know. Like they’re not scared of anyone.

Marina: No one likes them, they’re only friends with each other. But no one stands up to them, and everyone pretends to like Paige because she has these parties every weekend. And the thing is, all the boys like her because she’ll give them blow jobs.

Leah: Does she really do that?

Marina: Yeah, for the buff, good looking boys

Samiya: Ugggh, Paige is so rough. And fat.

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<sup>128</sup> An instant messaging computer program, people can ‘converse’ in writing, in real time, using the internet.

Marina: And none of them are real blondes, none of them are pretty either, except Kayla

Samiya: She's quite pretty I suppose...not that pretty though.

In this conversation, Marina, Samiya and Leah affirm their shared values in contrast to the Barbies. The Barbies are not only positioned as slags, but also as disliked and only friends with each other – as not creating value through inter-peer group transactions. In the argument between Catherine and Marina, the girls dispute who is producing positive value (“she was saying ‘you’ve got no friends, no one likes you’”) and what constitutes positive value (“I was like, ‘I wouldn’t want your life, all you do is get drunk every night’”). Samiya and Leah affirm the negative evaluation of the Barbies, and project this evaluation onto the surface of their bodies – onto their physical appearance. The girls do not think the Barbies ‘look good’. They are also criticised for, ‘thinking themselves big’ – the expansion of self - as a transgression of appropriate femininity<sup>129</sup>.

The positioning by other girls (from different peer groups) of the Barbies as unacceptable makes visible the boundaries of appropriate gendered and sexual identity. By differentiating themselves from the Barbies, girls can thus secure a position for themselves as appropriate. In the following example, Lexy and Rhiannon differentiate themselves from the unacceptable Barbies in order to validate their investment in the values of formal schooling:

Lexy: The Barbies, they go and get drunk at parties, whore themselves out. Some of them are decent but they're all pretty nasty, even the nice ones. They're quite nasty people, they just bitch about people, they judge people a lot on nothing...we don't go around doing that, we're here to learn.

Rhiannon: Exactly, we're here to learn, we're not in school to give guys blow jobs.

Lexy: We're not here to whore ourselves out to as many people as we can in a week. We're in school to learn, that's why we're in school, to get good GCSEs.

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<sup>129</sup> Hey (1997) identifies links in understandings at school between notions of ‘hardness’ (‘acting hard’, ‘not scared of any one’) and notions of inappropriate sexual identity. The active pursuit of a sexual identity can lead not only to the scrutinisation of girls as ‘slags’ but is also ‘pathologised as unfeeling and therefore as promiscuous’. The way such girls have been ‘read’ as ‘hard’ highlights a ‘powerful ideological resistance’ to the idea of femininity as emotionally disconnected (1997: 96).

### **Boys' responses**

The frequent, powerful and pervasive circulation of the slag (girls) and gay (boys) discourse illuminates the way in which appropriate masculine and feminine sexuality are defined vis-à-vis each other in opposite ways within the informal realm in school. Masculine sexuality should be active, pursuing and potent. Female sexuality should be controlled, contained and guarded. The discourses of slag and gay are mobilised by both genders to police these boundaries, in order to contain appropriately gendered identities and maintain the rhetoric of differentiation.

However, for boys this state of affairs represents a particular problematic. On the one hand, appropriate masculinity is premised on an active and pursuant sexuality, one that should take advantage of any opportunity for sex. On the other hand, they are invested in policing the boundaries of female sexuality, necessary for the maintenance of the system that gives meaning to their masculine sexuality in the first place. These issues are discussed by Michael, James and Dominic. Michael contemplates that, "boys should actually love the idea of sluts", but in the end he concludes otherwise, "when we truly like girls we don't like to imagine them as a slut". And although relations with a 'slut' would prove masculinity in terms of sex, it does not confer value within the field of heterosexuality. Slags produce negative value and this is seen to taint their boyfriend. Dominic, "that's the thing, no guy genuinely wants to go out with a slut properly". "Yeah", confirms Richard, "they'd get the mick taken out of them a lot for it".

Boys often negotiate this contradictory rhetoric within school by pursuing a girl seen as a slag while continuing to articulate her identity as such. Thus, they are policing the boundaries of feminine sexuality (by identifying certain girls as outside this) and simultaneously reinforcing masculine sexuality as pursuant and potent:

### **Controlling the It girls**

The male practice of policing the boundaries of feminine sexuality is acutely illustrated in the relations between the Man-dom and the It girls. The girls tell me that the Man-dom act enmasse to sanction behaviour that they decide is unacceptable. Primarily this concerns perceived transgressions of appropriate sexual behaviour. The girls say that most of them

have been “terrorised” by the boys at one time or another. The sanctions are often determined by a leader and other members of the group are expected to follow suit. If they “break out” and talk to the girl then they might be “rushed” (beaten up), thus members of the Man-dom are also subject to active control within these peer group practices:

Gemma: The boys are judgemental, like I went to this party and I was really drunk, I’d had about three little bottles of vodka, and I kissed loads of people. I counted eleven in total, nine guys and two girls. When I came back to school about half the boys weren’t talking to me because apparently, I’m a ‘big hoe’.

As I have argued, peer groups with differing positions in the hierarchy have correspondingly differing relationships to each other. As popularity is structured through expectations of visibility and invisibility, not all peer groups ‘see’ each other equally. The high status It girls are highly visible and are ‘seen’ by all groups. As a consequence, their ‘equivalency’ to the high status Man-dom, results in them being subject to more active judgement, control and sanctions at their hands. Furthermore, as I have discussed high status boys are legitimised in extending their intersubjective influence and as such can powerfully enforce social definitions. Negative value is seen to undermine positive value and threaten ideal constructions, and it is the visible members of the community who most vocally renounce these ‘negative’ practices and take responsible for guarding community value (Munn 1986).

I ask the It girls why the boys are so concerned with their actions (or believed actions) when from my perspective it is none of their business. Kadia’s answer is that the boys do not see it this way because:

“We’re like their girls, I think they feel that we kind of represent them, so if we do things that make them look bad then they don’t like it”.

The boys are invested in maintaining a system that gives meaning to masculine sexuality. The continuous monitoring and sanctioning illustrates that dominant hegemonic masculinity, ‘is never secure but must always be won’ (Connell 1987: 183 in Mac an Ghail 12).

Furthermore, the connections and hierarchical correspondence between the Man-dom and the It girls means that they are defined in relation to each other. As the most visible and

prestigious girls within the heterosexual value field, they have the potential to undermine (or overwhelm) the whole field (and possibly the communal value of Year 11) if they produce negative value. Pupils are aware that whole year groups and schools can become marked with a 'skettish' reputation and this is what the boys, as high status 'moral guardians', perceive themselves as guarding against.

However, the girls do not view themselves as victims. They do not express feelings that their identity is dominated, or even defined by the actions of the boys and often said that they felt more powerful and independent than them. The girls contest the boys' negative evaluations and redefine situations, morals and positions in order to diminish the boys' power. They draw on alternative moral evaluations defining their own actions as acceptable, "what I did wasn't bad, it was just something between two people" (Kadia). Further, the girls refuse to acknowledge that they experience the boys' actions personally, and in so doing, resist the impact it has on their sense of self. In this way, we can see that evaluative processes do not inevitably result in subjective conversion, but can also be resisted. The girls also place the impact in the past, transforming it into a productive experiencing that contributes to their positive self now, "it's made me stronger. It used to upset me but I don't really care anymore" (Samiya). Finally they challenge the assumptions of the power balance within the relationship, even as they accept that the groups are defined in relation to each other. Samiya:

"The thing is, the boys say we depend on them, but really they depend on us, for friendship. And they don't really have a life outside – they want us to bring girls to their parties".

### **Outside opinions**

Unsurprisingly, considering the intense observation and monitoring that goes on between pupils in the year group, the relations between the Man-dom and the It girls do not go unnoticed but instead are noted and evaluated by others outside the two groups. For example Leah is critical of the balance of power between the It girls and the Man-dom, interpreting their relations in terms of power and domination:

It's strange, it's an alien world. The girls were being walked all over...I think it was about (the boys) asserting themselves. And I don't think that they cared about those girls at all, it was all 'I'm the boss, I'm the boss, shut up I'm the boss'.

As I have argued, the evaluation of other peer group practices is a key positioning practice which enables pupils to define and validate themselves through what they are not. The treatment of the It girls is used by other groups to validate a position within the year that is not defined through a year-wide reference to 'status' but to alternative value. Lexy, a member of the Crazy Smarts, questions the benefits of being conferred with so much value within the heterosexual field. Instead she emphasises that her transactions with boys results in friendship value which is more genuine:

SWR: And do you think there are downsides to being well known?

Lexy: Well yeah, because obviously they get harassed by boys a lot which is never a good thing, I don't know how they feel about that...The guys we talk to, it's not that kind of relationship, it's like we're all just normal people. It's because they all [the Man-dom and the It girls] fancy each other, because basically they're the sexually charged people of the Year.

### **Lesbians**

Although used less frequently than slag, the 'lesbian' discourse represents the other side of the fine line which girls walk in order to maintain an appropriate sexual identity. The lesbian discourse is attached to those evaluated as insufficiently feminine or as failures in the heterosexual value field (not sufficiently desired by boys). That sufficient heterosexual value is required to 'protect' against becoming a lesbian, is suggested in the opinion that some pupils hold, that attending school without boys (and so without the potential for producing heterosexual value) will automatically result in lesbianism. As Lisa and Linda sit discussing their choices for sixth form, Linda reveals her desired school, "it's a private girls' school". Lisa leaning in whispers, "you'll become a lesbian". However, for Linda the value of this school outweighs this possibility, "I don't care what I become. As long as I can go to that school. It's one of the best schools in the country".

The lesbian label, like the gay label for boys, is often attached to those with low status. Along with slag, these labels do not just represent inappropriate sexual transactions but often stand for a more general transactional failure in school, particularly related to appropriate gendered identities. Jane (one of the Alternative girls) joined Collingson in Year 9, after spending two years in Switzerland with her family. She describes her initial position within school as “bottom rung”:

“Because I was new and everyone else had their friend groups, so I ended up in the group that takes up all the new people because no one else wants them”.

When I asked Jane if she was aware of her, and their, low status at the time, she told the following story in response:

“There was the lesbian thing, the two girls I was best friends with, one of them was rumoured to be a lesbian...When I started hanging around with her people would come up to me and warn me and say ‘do you know she’s a lesbian?’ and I was like ‘I really couldn’t care less’, and they were like ‘are you a lesbian?’ and I was like ‘no’ and then when we used to walk around school people, because they’re really funny, used to shout, get this, ‘lesbian’”.

In the preceding sections, I have discussed the ways pupils police the boundaries of acceptable, gendered sexual identities, and position others as outside the bounds of these acceptable identities through the discourses of gay, slag and lesbian. In the following section, I discuss those girls who manage their transactions successfully, and can enjoy the rewards and pleasures of producing/ being conferred with positive value in the heterosexual field.

### **Sexual power**

Success in the value field of heterosexual desirability offers girls gender appropriate ways to exert power, gain visibility and extend intersubjective influence. It offers the rewards of fitting in, belonging and the validation of an attractive and appropriate feminine identity. Accordingly, it should be remembered that along with its coercive dimensions, an appropriate feminine sexuality also offers rewards, pleasures and validation, which further amplifies the imperative to behave appropriately.

Within the 'sexual hustle and bustle of the classroom, playground and common room' (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 91), there are numerous examples of heterosexual value production. In order to attain success in this field girls need to carefully manage their transactions; chatting, flirting and 'showing interest' in boys – without going 'too far' and acting 'desperate' or 'slaggy'. And they must carefully manage their appearance (clothes, make-up etc), in order to appear attractive and feminine without looking 'sexually available' or 'like a lesbian' (connoting insufficient attention to appearance). At the same time success in this value field is necessarily conferred, boys have to fancy and 'deem' girls attractive in order to legitimise their success.

As I have previously discussed, the It girls are status equivalents to the Man-dom. The Man-dom extend their intersubjective influence by engaging in dominating practices, but the It girls renown is derived from a different source - from their desirability in the closely related fields of appearance and heterosexuality. The girls' success in these fields legitimises their extension of intersubjective influence through different kinds of practices. Natasha and Ruby – two of the most desired girls in Year 11– appear to have enchanted many of the boys in the Year, of all different peer groups. I often see boys practically break into a run in an attempt to cross paths with the girls, just to say hi. And with just a small smile or flutter of their eye lashes, the girls draw boys willing to go out of their way to assist them and gain favour. In science class Ruby sits on a desk surrounded by boys (of different peer groups), they jostle for her attention while she holds court. When it comes time for practical experiments she often sits chatting with friends on nearby tables as the boys gather and set-up the equipment for her.

It is recognised that Ruby and Natasha are exerting their power: The It girls and I watch one day as Natasha chats animatedly to a boy. Grace comments, "She doesn't fancy him, she just likes the attention". The legitimacy of this form of power is contingent on their evaluation as attractive and desired within the heterosexual prestige system which is worked out between pupils. Attempting the same transactions without the necessary status is evaluated as illegitimate - slaggy or desperate.

Georgia, part of a newly formed threesome with Ruby and Natasha, has a more ambivalent status within the Year. Although she manages her transactions successfully (she is never labelled a slag or a lesbian), she is less publicly desired by boys and has not produced positive value like Ruby and Natasha. In geography class, Georgia shares a table with Tom, Leah and Segal, all members of the Misfits. Over a series of lessons, Georgia transforms her transactions with Tom. Previously curt and dismissive, she is now friendly and flirtatious - laughing at his jokes, directing questions at him and engaging in prolonged eye contact. One lunch time, in the Misfits territory, Tom tentatively broaches the subject with Leah, "I know this sounds really strange but do you think that Georgia fancies me?" Leah smiles, "no, but I've noticed as well and I think I know what's going on". Leah and Georgia have a mutually antagonistic relationships and Leah interprets Georgia's behaviour as an attempt to extend intersubjective influence, to divert Tom's attention (to make him fancy her) and to make Leah jealous. "She thinks I fancy you" says Leah to Tom incredulously. In this way, Georgia is also transforming her transactions in similar ways to her new best-friends. However her choice of boy, the low status Tom, is a less risky tactic target than attempting the same transactions with a high status boy, who has more powers to publicly define her behaviour as illegitimate.

However not all girls invest in the heterosexual field in the same way or to the same degrees. Like the outside evaluations of relations between the Man-dom and It girls, discussed earlier, pupils often claim more value from their "genuine" friendships with boys rather than "sexually charged" relations. In this way, girls structure their transactions with boys in different ways, in order to produce friendship value rather than heterosexual value. Furthermore, the different investments in these fields represent another debate over value, through which pupils can position themselves in contrast to others as particular kinds of (sexual) people.

As we sit in the common room, the Alternative girls and I observe an interaction between a boy and girl. The boy has stolen the girl's scarf and is racing around the common room waving it about with the girl chasing after him and squealing. She catches him and starts attempting to wrestle it off him, he falls back onto a soft chair and she jumps on him and grabs her scarf, waving it around triumphantly. "Fight flirting", Jane says under her breath,

and the other girls nod in agreement. Later Jane explains to me why she hates these types of transactions:

“They do that play flirting so they can have some form of physical contact. It’s so annoying. It just annoys me, it’s so childish.....There are people who are genuinely friends with boys and girls and then there are people who are only genuine with girls”.

The Alternative girls often contrast themselves to “girly girls”, defining their relationships with boys as genuine in contrast to these inauthentic relations. Megan says:

“I’m girly, but they’re girly in the sort of way where they don’t want to talk to boys, boys are just boyfriends, not your friends... they don’t know how to deal with boys, they see them in a sexual way”.

Further the girls are critical of the power balance implied in these relations. Megan:

“The boys just see them as possessions, kind of like they can tell them what do and stuff. And always really, really physical with them and pushing them around and not letting them go. It looked like rape, that’s what it looked like”.

The girls saw this route to heterosexual value as diminishing feminine power more generally. Jane:

“I agree with feminism, because there are some women bringing the side down. The girly girls who act different around boys, that annoys me...who act weak and you’re like ‘you know that you could kick him in the bollocks and that would hurt him so why are you acting all weak”.

It would be inaccurate to argue that girls like Megan, Jane and Eleanor do not invest in the heterosexual value field at all. Rather, every field offers a range of means by which pupils can manage their transactions in certain ways. How pupils choose to engage with these and their varying investment in other value fields (such as sociality or formal schooling) will result in a spectrum of different ways of being. The Alternative girls place emphasis on investing in friendships with boys, positioning themselves in contrast to the ‘girly girls’ who structure their relations with boys through the heterosexual systems. At the same time they still talk about boys they fancy, have boyfriends, kiss boys at parties, use the ‘slag’ discourse (although they were also critical of it) and invest in their appearance.

In the following exchange, the girls discuss their mixed feelings at attracting attention from unknown men. On the one hand, it is validation of an attractive appearance, central to appropriate feminine identity, and turning advances down is a gender appropriate way to exert power and experience agency. On the other hand, these advances are in 'conditions not of their own making' which the girls sometimes experience as annoying, invasive or threatening:

SWR: What about when you get comments from guys as you walk down the street, how do you feel about that?

Megan: It depends, it's not the sort of thing where you turn around and say 'thanks'.

Jane: It's nice to have the option.

Eleanor: And then sometimes you'll get some huge guy or some disgusting foreign man come up to you and say 'hello darling' and it's just 'urgghh'. And they kept going 'oi, oi' as if we were going to go and say thanks.

Jane: I'd rather they started shouting 'oi babe', then I was a boy and they came over and beat me up. It's nice to have the power to reject them.

Megan: It's nice to know that people don't think you're ugly.

### **Girls and their boyfriends**

Considering the imperative for compulsory heterosexuality within school, I was initially surprised that in Year 11 there are few couples. While there are a few well established long-term couples, most pupils describe themselves as 'single'. As I later came to understand the intense and continuous transactional demands of girls' friendship within school, this state of affairs began to make more sense. A boyfriend demands a similar transactional investment of time, talk, disclosure and embodied affections to friendship; to fulfil the demands of both relationships simultaneously and satisfactorily is a challenge. As Hey writes:

'A great deal of emotional labour was expended in trying to manage their relationships around boys, even if they did not always succeed' (1997, p. 112).

The transactional expectations of a heterosexual relationship also increases as pupils get older. Year 11s speak of a time when there was lots of 'couples', but these were short-term, easily terminated and required little more investment than a verbal agreement that they

were now 'going out'. Pupils now view this type of relationship as 'immature', "We dated each other all the time but we've grown up now" (Shola). As Lisa and Keely discuss in more detail:

Lisa: I think beforehand it was like 'oh I've got a boyfriend', 'oh I've got a girlfriend' and then it lasts a week. People are more interested in long-term commitment...because they're not going to go out with someone just for the sake of having a girlfriend or having a boyfriend, it's just that they actually like them and want to be with them. There was a phase when all the boys had to have a girlfriend. It's like Karl he went out with like...

Keely: Every girl

Lisa: And if he dumped someone or got dumped then...

Keely: Ten minutes later...

Lisa: Yeah, like not even a day later he'd have a new one.

Hey argues that there is pressure on girls to transfer their allegiance from homosociality to heterosexuality, and this pressure intensifies as they progress through school (1997, p. 106). However most girls I speak to do not accept or recognise the inevitability of this process at school. Friendship is viewed as essential (and as I argued earlier is a necessary prerequisite for success in the informal realm) while relationships continue to be positioned as optional: "Some people care about that sort of stuff and some people just don't give a shit" (Lexy). Girls draw on a number of strategies in order to validate their position, and also to enact a heterosexual identity without taking on the transactional demands of a relationship.

The competing demands of friends and boyfriends are illustrated in the frequency of complaints and bitching about friends who spend too much time with their boyfriends and 'desert' their friends. However, these complaints are also transformed into transactions of friendship, by bonding girls together in conditions of closeness through their negative positioning of their 'coupled up' friends. As the Green corridor girls sit chatting on the field one lunch time, their attention turns to Francesca who although sitting in the circle, has her back turned towards the girls as she kisses and whispers with her boyfriend. The other girls nudge each other, miming being sick and commenting, "oh gross, public displays of

affection". Transforming their exclusion into a chance for joking solidarity which temporarily isolates Francesca, the object of their joke.

Girls highlight that boyfriends potentially limit the production of friendship value, restricting friendships with boys, limiting transactional opportunities and exerting intersubjective influence over you:

Rhiannon: I'm quite happy by myself because I can just do what I want really...You know sometimes you've got male friends, and you've got a boyfriend and...

Georgia: They don't like that. Or when you're boyfriend doesn't like your friends and they want you to change your friends.

Girls draw on relationships they have observed, framing them as cautionary tales in order to justify their reserve in embarking on relationships. After Catherine started making up rumours about Marina, "going with lots of boys", Ollie – Marina's best friend Beth's boyfriend - gave Beth an ultimatum, either she stopped hanging around with Marina or he would dump her. The girls decided to pretend to stop being friends, but the pressure of sustaining the flow of transaction necessary for friendship in secret led to real distance between them. Marina became best friends with Rhiannon while Beth spent most of her time with her boyfriend and his friends (and so was unable to produce sufficient friendship value). This episode became a cautionary tale among girls. Similarly one lunch time Georgia tells us a story of a relationship between two friends in another school. She ends the story with a moral, the girl's decision to choose her boyfriend over her friends left her in a vulnerable position:

"He didn't like her friends and rumours started flying and then basically she chose him over her friends. But then it ended up her giving up her friends and then she was really restricted by him and bound to him and now she doesn't really have anyone, and that's bad".

While it is important to produce heterosexual value, girls can do this by expressing heterosexual intent without committing to an actual relationship with its attendant demands. Boys are a common topic of conversation between girls; discussing real or famous boys they think are 'buff', teasing friends about potential love interests or the discussion of

potential relationships. Further, as I discussed in the previous section, success in this field is evidenced by the interests and the attentions of boys; speculation or confirmation of interest is a frequent and favourite topic of informational exchange. Thus in a similar way to 'sex talk' for boys, 'boy talk' can be viewed as the transformation of heterosexual actions and intentions into peer group transactions. This enables girls to validate a heterosexual and desired feminine identity, without sacrificing (and often actually strengthening) homosocial relations. As pupils attempt to produce value in a number of fields, their particular engagement with one will affect their engagement with the others. Girls' investment in friendship affects how they manage their transactions within the heterosexual field - not through boyfriends but through other heterosexual transactions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed how sexual differentiations are produced in the informal realm and come to structure pupils' experience and self/other-definitions. Pupils collaboratively set conventions which define acceptable and appropriate ways of being a sexual boy or girl (defined in opposition to each other). The boundaries of these conventions are made visible by those who transgress and are actively policed by pupils. As we have seen, the discourses of sexual failure often come to stand for more general transgressions of gendered conventions, highlighting the mutually constitutive nature of gender and sexuality. The repetition and power of these discourses attests to the effort that goes into sustaining the dichotomous categories of masculine and feminine sexuality within school and the centrality of sexuality to identity for young people.

Furthermore, these processes offer a vivid exemplar of the dynamics of value-production. As Munn (1986) argues, the governing premises of a society set the parameters of value-production and are embodied in the transformative processes themselves. They thus become a critical component of the positive or negative value that can be generated. In this case the gendered conventions of sexuality (see Hey 1997) define the value that can be generated; when a boy has sex with lots of people these transactions conform to the conventions of masculine sexuality and simultaneously will be evaluated as generating positive value (he will become a "hero"). When a girl does the same thing, her transactions transgress the conventions of feminine sexuality and will be evaluated as generating

negative value (she will become a 'slag'). In this way relations of power are themselves brought into being by pupils' actions and made visible in evaluative practices.

Observing the discourses of sexuality in operation within school was, for me, one of the most striking aspects of my fieldwork. Ten years on from my time in Year 11, I had forgotten the force and pervasiveness of discourses like slag and gay. It was these that made me feel most demoralised about the coercive and rigid definitions of gendered sexuality, the successful enactment of which was a prerequisite for an appropriate gender identity and fitting in:

'If belonging was the name of the game, then being accepted implied the performing of appropriate forms of femininity. Girls' practices...had as their major aim the making of feminine identity or reputation through the axis of conformity to classed sexual codes. Examples like 'being improved' abound, being transformed into a 'slag' or otherwise surveyed – tactics which were made available by girls' unique capacity to 'get beneath each others' skin' by establishing powerful judgements on the surface of each others' bodies (Hey V. , 1997, p. 130).

At the same time however, I was always heartened by pupils' capacity to reflect on the very discourses they operationalised so frequently. In discussions of the slag discourse pupils often commented critically on the "double standards" that structured these discourses: "What really annoys me is that a boy sleeps around and he's like cool and a girl is slag" (Georgia). "I think it's bad really, that girls mainly get labelled as sluts, when it's guys who actually do it most of the time, so it's really hypocritical" (Jerome).

The more playful sexual presentations I observed from sixth-formers like Jerome and the Alternative girls are also heartening, suggesting the increasing flexibility of sexual identity which comes with 'growing-up'. As I have argued in previous chapters, there is a temporal dimension to conventions within school. Conventions are 'brought into being...and made sense anew' (Evans 2006: 158) through pupil (inter)action. Within these processes we can identify several phases; as conventions are being worked out by pupils they are a particularly visible and virulent force within the informal realm. In this phase conformity is very important and policing keen – it is in these ways that the boundaries of propriety are

established. In later years conventions are more established and they are expected to have been incorporated into personal action to a greater degree. Furthermore, some pupils have become adept at playing with the conventional boundaries, without becoming labelled as unacceptable.

The particular salience of sexuality within the informal can be understood in this way, as pupils are attempting to become familiar with a central aspect of a 'grown-up' identity – sexuality – that has only been part of their personal experience since puberty (whereas they have been negotiating other aspects of gendered identity for much longer). This idea is similarly articulated by some of the Misfit boys:

SWR: Why do you think people care so much about what other people are doing?

Like with the slag thing?

James: It's just a new thing, so it's got that novelty factor and everyone is kind of obsessed. When everyone gets used to it, it doesn't lose any value but it's...

Richard: Because as soon as something is new people have a really strong opinion on it. But as soon as they get used to it will become less important, it will be a bad thing but not as bad as it was.

James: It's like when a kid's got a new toy and they go over the top with it and end up breaking it, it's sort of like that.

Dominic: It's all to do with normalcy...

Richard: At secondary school if you do something out of the ordinary than you're gay or if you're a woman then you're a slut, it's like you have to be normal, you can't be out of the ordinary, but outside school people kind of accept it more

## Chapter 9: Appearance

SWR: How important is the way you look?

Megan: It's important for me anyway...I want to make the best possible impression when I meet someone. I think when you meet someone new...whenever I meet someone I think 'attractive or not?', I find it easier to talk to people if I know...

Eleanor:...They don't think I'm ugly.

### Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the circulation of idioms of body talk in the informal realm. I argue that attending to the ways in which these discourses are taken up by pupils challenges straightforward causal explanations which position the individual in direct relation to the media (see chapter 2). These body issues are often transformed into positioning practices within the informal realm, embedded in transactions and transformed according to the interrelated conventions of the informal realm. Thus evaluations of physical appearance need to be understood within more encompassing practices of value-evaluation. 'Looking good' in school is about much more than physical appearance, although, for girls' especially, value-evaluations are often projected onto the surface of the body. I end this chapter by discussing the evaluative practices that are a recurrent feature of the informal realm, and what they reveal about divergent forms of value-production among pupils.

### Idioms of body talk

The psychological idioms of disorders such as body dysmorphia, anorexia, bulimia and self-harm are in circulation and used by pupils in their everyday discourse, something they have, "always known somehow" (Elisabeth), rather than something specifically learned in school. Knowledge of these disorders gives shape to pupils' understandings of behaviour, and I often hear them interpret thinness or incongruity of body image and actual size as anorexia or body dysmorphia.

Furthermore, pupils are familiar with the debates surrounding body image and the media. In discussions about the power of the media, pupils often rehearse versions of the dominant argument within this debate - that girls are influenced by, and attempt to emulate, distorted

body ideals created in the media and this is resulting in negative body image, dieting at an increasingly young age and a rise in eating disorders (e.g. (BMA)<sup>130</sup>, (Bray & Colebrook, 1998), (Budgeon, 2003). But although pupils often put forward these understandings, I rarely hear them describe the media as an influence on them personally. Instead they put forward these debates as explanations for the negative body image of others.

When I ask Lexy about negative body image she pinpoints the media as the cause of her peers' unhappiness:

“It's because of the media, because all of the beautiful people are skinny and they think if they're skinny then they're going to be beautiful”.

But she then contrasts this with her own experiences:

“I can see through it. I guess it's down to the person really. I just happen to be one of those people who are really against everything, I'm quite observant as well, so I can often see when people are being influenced by something”.

In this way, media discourses are transformed by pupils into positioning techniques which can enable them to claim a superior position as clear-sighted in contrast to others who are more 'malleable' and easily influenced. The media discourses in wider circulation are actively and selectively drawn on by pupils as part of evaluative practices that organise the informal realm.

Their constellation of differences can be drawn on to displace Western ideals which associate slenderness with positive value (cf. Bordo 1993):

Alicia (Black Caribbean): It's all about the culture you're surrounded by, like for me it's the opposite, if I see someone who's really thin, I'd think they were mean and someone who's bigger I'd think that they're alright. It's good to have a bit of weight on you, it's womanly.

Chantelle (Black Caribbean): Yeah, it's like in Jamaica, people don't judge people on their weight, if you're fat than they call you fattie and if you're thin they call 'marga'

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<sup>130</sup> In 2000 the British Medical Association report *Eating disorders, body image and the media* claimed that young women tried to emulate the distorted body ideal created in the media, and this was resulting in negative body image and dieting at an increasingly young age (BMA 2000).

[skinny] but it's not a big deal, it's just the way people are. And women are proud as well, like big women will wear really tight clothes so you can see their body, they don't hide themselves. In Jamaica it's better to be bigger because it's seen as womanly.

However investment or recognition of these differing ideals does not necessarily mean pupils completely opt-out of dominant ideals. I am asked by a teacher (who knows about my research interests) to come into an A Level psychology class to give a talk on anorexia which they are studying at the time. I open up the topic for discussion and ask the class if these issues are familiar to them, in terms of their everyday experiences. Kessie volunteers that she cannot really identify with these issues, "in Nigeria, where I'm from, being thin isn't seen as that important, so you don't really feel any pressure". However later in the discussion I tell the class about 'fat talk' (Nichter 2000), this time one of Kessie's friends nods in recognition and says addressing Kessie, "you're always talking like that, saying you're going to go on a diet or you've eaten too much and you feel fat".

### **Fat talk**

The above strategies suggest that while dominant body ideals are in circulation within school, the way they are taken up belies any simple relationship between the 'individual' and 'the media'. And although my initial research proposal concerned body image and I was alert to the expression of body discontent among pupils, it was not something I heard often. Nichter (2000) describes how, during her fieldwork, she frequently heard girls engaging in 'fat talk', the almost ritualised form of speech that expresses bodily unhappiness or desire to lose weight or diet (even if it does not necessarily correspond to actual dieting practices)<sup>131</sup>. I too had frequently heard fat talk in many different contexts, and I had expected to hear it a lot in school, but to my surprise I heard it rarely<sup>132</sup>. Why had this mode of transaction, so prevalent in other contexts not taken off in this one?

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<sup>131</sup> Characterised by this basic formulation:

Girl one: 'I'm so fat'

Other listeners: 'Oh no, you're not!'

Girl two: 'I'm so fat'

<sup>132</sup> On one occasion Sam told me that someone had asked her if I was her sister, "you probably find that really insulting especially as I'm so much bigger than you" to which I 'correctly' replied "No you're not".

This form of interaction requires collaboration; while an individual can initiate 'fat talk' it requires another to complete the ritual. On a few occasions I observe Georgia unsuccessfully attempt to instigate 'fat talk', as her peers fail to pick up on her cues<sup>133</sup>. I'm sitting on the field with some of the It girls. Grace has to go and see a teacher, and as she walks away Georgia comments, "she's so thin", intending it to be a compliment. But Samiya misinterprets it as criticism and defensively replies, "yeah but I like that, I think it suits her". Georgia attempts to clarify her meaning, "that's what I mean, she's so lucky she gets to eat whatever she wants and she still looks good". But by this point there is no ritualistic ease in this exchange and the conversation tapers off into awkward silence.

Meanwhile Megan and Jane tell me how they purposefully disrupt 'fat talk', rejecting the expected and appropriate feminine response on the grounds of authenticity. Jane: "What pisses me off is when people who aren't fat say it because I don't tend to go [sympathetic voice], 'oh no you're not babe'. I just go, 'shut up, no you're fucking not' and then they don't tend to mention it again".

While rejecting this convention of feminine transactions, Megan also expresses personal body unhappiness:

"Over the past few years I had a real problem with it [her body] but I'm beginning to feel a bit better about myself... I used to have a problem with everything really".

Body unhappiness is an important aspect of Megan's personal experience, but it does not become salient in her peer transactions. She is afraid that expressing her unhappiness would have led to her being labelled as 'attention-seeking' (inauthentic) and so rejects this as a valid form of transaction:

"I didn't really talk about it with anyone, because I didn't really feel...because you know when people say that kind of stuff and everyone is just like 'shut up', it's such an attention seeking thing to do".

This suggests that while idioms of body unhappiness are in circulation within school, and are often deeply felt personally, they need certain conditions of possibility in order to become

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<sup>133</sup> It's interesting to note that Georgia was 'upper middle class' and had lots of friends who attended private school. In a different context these 'fat talk' cues might well have been conventional transactions and so successfully picked up.

established transactions. Megan's friends do not engage in 'fat talk', and rather than risk her transactions being rejected or evaluated as inauthentic, she chooses not to express these feelings to her friends.

### **Looking bad**

In the above sections, I have argued that body ideals are transformed within the informal realm in ways that challenge or displace dominant body ideals. And while body pressures might be experienced personally and privately, 'fat talk', the 'ritualised' expression of these feelings, has not become an established transaction among girls. On other occasions however, pupils of all ethnicities transform dominant ideals into intersubjective transactions, with the effect of projecting powerful value-judgements of denigration and diminishment onto peers evaluated as 'looking bad'.

The evaluation of over-weight pupils illustrates this. In their judgements of those who are over-weight, pupils negotiate between 'always already' dimensions of appearing - in which weight is always present in evaluation process - and evaluations stemming from the value-producing processes the individual is engaged in. Conventions in school place additional restrictions on the appropriate appearance of overweight pupils. Acceptability is dependent on maintaining low visibility and not overtly engaging in heterosexual value-production (suggesting the power of negative valuations of 'fatness'). If these conventions are conformed to, the physical appearance of overweight pupils is mentioned but not transformed into powerful insults.

However, when the conventions are transgressed, weight is transformed into powerfully denigrating transactions and can come to stand for a number of transgressions in acceptability. Paige, the central figure in the Blonde Barbies, is often positioned in this way. As I have argued, the Barbies positioning as slags stands for a number of transgressions - in terms of the conventions of femininity as well as sexuality. In the same way, the focus on Paige's weight also comes to stand for transgression of these conventions. Further, the transgressions of 'slaginess' and 'fatness' are mutually fuelling. Paige's 'sexual' appearance is evaluated as even more inappropriate because she is 'fat', and her 'fatness' is evaluated as more transgressive because she dresses 'provocatively' and refuses to conform to

notions of appropriateness that put additional restrictions on the acceptable appearance of overweight pupils.

Paige is unapologetically visible, wearing short skirts, (supposedly) actively pursuing boys, 'thinking herself big' and contravening other conventions of appropriate feminine behaviour in school. This conversation between Marina and Samiya highlights the powerful judgements pupils project onto Paige because of her perceived multiple transgressions:

Marina: They [the Blonde Barbies] have these parties, they all just get really drunk and really high, and they get naked as well. I saw this video and they were all in their underwear. <sup>134</sup>

Samiya: Urggh Paige is fat; she would not look good in her underwear.

Marina: I know, it's like she's got all these rolls of fat, and have you seen the way she walks, she's got to carry all her weight around like this [mimes a laboured waddle].

In this example the negative value that Paige is evaluated as producing is projected by peers onto the surface of her body. In Munn's ethnography (1986) bodily states often convey value transformations, the body acting as a condensed sign of the wider processes of value production of which it is part. I am arguing that a similar condensation is apparent here, and that by positioning pupils' bodily/ appearance evaluations within a broader theory of value, a more dynamic understanding of 'body image' can begin to emerge.

### **Appearing in the right and wrong ways in school**

The frequency of compliments about appearance between girls illustrates the centrality of appearance within girls' transactions. Girls compliment each other often, and I also received lots of compliments, predominantly about my appearance<sup>134</sup>. Compliments represent a key friendly transaction which enacts 'niceness' (important for appropriate femininity), friendliness and inclusion<sup>135</sup>. At the same time, the frequency of these compliments is an indication of appearance as both a product and indicator of positive value.

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<sup>134</sup> For example: "your hair is so nice, is that its natural colour?", "I like your outfit, where did you get your skirt from?", "you look nice today", "you're so slim".

<sup>135</sup> This kind of 'homosocial complimenting' was also an exclusively feminine resource as the same transactions between boys would be labelled gay. Thus there was an asymmetry between girls' and boys' access to enter each other's transactional worlds; while girls could enter boys worlds if they possessed the right information, a

As I have discussed, Munn emphasises that value production is a dialectical process, and Gawans are 'regularly reminded of negativities as part of the activity of striving towards positive value production' (Munn 1986: 273). In this way experience is constituted in terms of choice, actors are regularly confronted with both negative and positive possibilities and can choose between them.

Thus receiving a compliment indicates success, but also serves as a reminder that you are under evaluation. It reminds of the potential for failure and reinforces the imperative to self-surveillance – to avoid becoming the subject of bitching (which occurs behind the back). When I get compliments from girls, I experience the gratification of knowing I am getting it right, in their eyes. At the same time I can be under no illusion that I am not being closely observed, and become (especially) conscious of my appearance, ensuring I make an effort every day at school.

Not all girls invest in regimes of appearance equally, but other girls often include girls in these transactions anyway. Although there is a spectrum of investment in these regimes, all girls are enlisted to some degree. Leah is tomboy-ish and when in school does not invest particularly in her appearance - she does not wear make-up to school like most girls and wears her uniform in the regulation way: formal loose school trousers, Clarks shoes and blazer (in contrast to more invested girls' who wear tight 'skinny' trousers, ballet shoes and make-up). Despite this, I often see other girls attempt to involve her in regimes of appearance, particularly through compliments:

In class Georgia and Leah are in the middle of a conversation, Ling sitting nearby starts calling Leah's name insistently until they stop their conversation and look up. "Your hair looks nice today" says Ling, Leah replies flatly, "it looks the same as always", "you should try a side-parting", Georgia suggests. "What's a side-parting?" Leah asks, "like this", says

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boy entering girls' complimentary worlds would sacrifice his claims to appropriate masculinity (which is defined as mutually exclusive to 'being gay').

Georgia touching her hair, “when you have it on one side, like mine, I always have a side-parting”.

Leah herself recognises the centrality of appearance to girl’s peer relations. She tells me about a school disco she went to last year to which she wore a skirt and make-up. She said that everyone went ‘crazy’ about her appearance and she received lots of attention and compliments. Leah says that she thinks if she had carried on dressing that way she would be, “a lot more central in the Year, a lot more accepted”.

Girls’ compliments indicate success in regimes of appearance but also serve as a constant reminder that they are being evaluated in these terms. Girls I speak to are acutely aware of this constant evaluation from other girls, and the role of these practices in processes of differentiation and hierarchisation. The judgement of other girls, “being looked up and down” (Segal) is a frequent experience:

Shola: “It’s a lot about competition, like I’ve just got a new job in the menswear department, all the guys are really friendly and laidback but the girls are like [imitates a suspicious up and down look], they’re in their clique and they hardly talk to me, it’s really style conscious and they all size up what you’re wearing”.

Girls are not only aware of these practices because they are subjected to them, but also because they themselves take part in them. Year 10 friends Ella, Lily and Elisabeth describe the minutiae by which they assess other girls. Lily starts:

“Like we’ll say ‘oh she has nice eyes’, or talk about their clothing, what looks good on them, what they should wear if they’re not”.

I ask them if they think they are critical of other girls, “yeah” they reply unequivocally.

Elisabeth explains:

“Some things just don’t suit girls and you just think, ‘they shouldn’t wear that’...if we thought that, we wouldn’t say it to everyone, we’d just say it to each other”.

As Elisabeth’s final comments indicate, evaluations on appearance are frequently transformed into peer transactions, usually occurring behind the person’s back. The evaluation of the appearance of other girls becomes a transaction that can produce positive value between friends.

## What it means to look good in school

Jerome: Every kid goes through a stage where everyone thinks they're ugly and I had some girls going 'you're fugly', slang for fucking ugly, and it still affects me now. Like I get, I'm not going to say I get really hot girls but I get pretty decent chicks and I still feel really fugly sometimes. Like I wake up in the morning and it literally feels like I look okay and other days I wake up and I think 'fuck, I look really grim'.

SWR: So do you think that looks are really important?

Jerome: To society? Yeah. To me? I'm at a point in my life where I really couldn't care anymore, as long as I'm pretty happy with myself than I don't care.

As I have argued 'looking good' represents the positive evaluation of others, projected onto the surface of the body. As such it often evidences value produced in different fields. As Jerome's comments illustrate this is particularly in terms of peer evaluations ("I had some girls going 'you're fugly'...and it still affects me now"), heterosexual success ("I get pretty decent chicks") and finally looking good for yourself, which indicates personal value regardless of the evaluation of others.

For girls' in particular 'looking good' is a key route to visibility and status within the informal realm. Those who are most successful are evaluated as successful through both heterosexual evaluative practices and homosocial evaluative practices. For example the girls are visible because they achieve success in both these systems. Girls are aware that these different evaluative practices do not always correspond. As Elisabeth says, "I think girls and boys have a different knowing of hot, like some girls that girls think are hot, boys don't really".

The acknowledgement of the importance of the evaluation of others, both in heterosexual and homosocial terms is joined by an additional rhetoric, the importance of looking good for yourself. Girls especially express the view that growing up means looking good for yourself and being less concerned about the judgements of others:

Tanya: In younger years you always had to look good, otherwise people would be like 'urgghh'. There was a time when everyone wanted to look good, but as we got

older people gave up on that. They found out there was no one to impress at the school.

SWR: So what do you think people care about now?

Samiya: Actually still looks, kind of, in the sense of not looking good, but looking good for yourself. Like you know sometimes you'll come into school and you'll be like 'urgghh I don't feel ok' and you'll feel like everyone is watching you, but no one cares.

Considering the frequency by which girls subject each other to surface evaluations, it perhaps seems puzzling that this rhetoric is so often expressed. For example, Samiya, expressing these sentiments above, as one of the It girls, often sits in judgement upon their elevated bench, assessing those that passed on numerous criteria of appearance success. I would argue however, that what 'looking good for yourself' evidences is the capacity for self-surveillance and the ability to produce and regulate value apart from the evaluation of others. In the previous section I discussed compliments as an example of the dialectical nature of value production (Munn 1986) – girls are reminded of negativities even as they are evaluated positively within peer transactions. Through a focus on 'looking good for yourself' we can begin to consider how this dialectic can be internalised, that part of growing up is learning to be the evaluator and evaluated. The most successful people are the ones that do not need to be told, that effortlessly 'fit in' and produce positive value. Looking good for yourself is one way of organising evaluative practices, and one that for pupils is related to growing up.

In chapter 8 I discussed the temporal dimensions of conventions of sexuality. As conventions are being worked out by pupils they are a particularly visible and virulent force within the informal realm - conformity is very important and policing keen. But as conventions become more established they are expected to have been incorporated into personal action. Conventions of appearance have been established in a similar way.

At first many aspects of appearance are novel for pupils (related to puberty, increased importance of heterosexual prestige systems, increased freedom to choose clothes and wear make-up and becoming more aware of the way you look) and therefore less governed

by conventions. For example in Year 7 the It girls were seen as exceptional because they wore make-up (chapter 5). As these aspects became less novel, pupils develop conventions to govern them, collaboratively setting the boundaries of acceptability. As these conventions are being worked out intersubjectively, between pupils, they are particularly visible in the informal realm.

The rhetoric of 'looking good for yourself', represents a later stage in the development of conventions. Conventions are expected to have been incorporated into personal action to a greater degree; conforming to these conventions should be more 'given' and take less effort. This is linked by pupils to growing up - becoming more autonomous. Conversely 'caring too much' and 'making too much effort' is viewed as evidence of immaturity:

Georgia: Now no one really cares, but then you still see some people who make a real effort.

Grace: Still now though, that's what I'm talking about, the immature people are the people who are still making an effort now.

Georgia: I think most people have realised that you've got to be here five days a week, you can't always make an effort, and when you're with those people it's like 'what's the point?'

'Looking good for yourself' also consolidates evaluative practices that are often in tension with each other - evaluations of surface and evaluations of depth. Looking good for yourself strengthens claims to being genuine – motivated by expressions of the true self rather than superficial surface. To attempt to look good for boys is particularly vulnerable to accusations of 'fakeness', perhaps because of a hierarchical evaluation of values, which positions some as more genuine than others:

SWR: Do you think people care a lot about what people look like?

Lisa: I think they used to a lot more.

Keely: Yeah some girls used to...

Lisa:...They wore a lot of make-up...

Keely:...really bad hair.

Lisa: But now I think, no one really minds, like you want to look nice, but it depends as well whether it's what you want to look like or what you want other people to

look like. Like the girls tried to dress themselves up for the boys, because they were trying to get a boyfriend, weren't they? It used to be like that, so the boys would notice them...But no one really cares anymore, because you know the person not the look. Yeah of course they matter to a certain extent, but not really, do they?  
Keely: As long as you look presentable.

### **Surface and depth**

Tensions between evaluations of surface and evaluations of depth are a recurrent theme within the informal realm, and often expressed in terms of authenticity/ genuineness and fakeness like in the 'looking good for yourself discourse'. These concerns can be related back to notions of personhood in circulation - the autonomous and independent 'individual' is understood as contained within a single, autonomous and individual body. In Western notions of personhood 'there is cultural validation of expression of autonomy through the body and authorisation of a congruity of body with identity (Becker 1995: 34).

Scholars have argued that within this context the body becomes one of the prime means of 'expressing' the self (B. Turner 1984, Bordo 1993, Giddens 1991, Becker 1995, Falk 1994). However what this expressing body actually expresses is unresolved in the literature. As part of his argument that the self has become a reflexive project, Giddens argues that the surface of the body represents a project of the self, evidence that we can construct our identities. Likewise Bryan Turner argues 'it is the surface of the body which is the target of advertising and self-promotion, just as it is the body surfaces which are the site of stigmatisation. The modern consuming self is a representational being' (Turner xiii).

However Turner also writes surface is a 'mirror for the soul' (Turner 1994: xii), and similarly Falk describes the body as a platform to express the 'true inner voice' (Falk, 1994). These metanarratives mirror the tensions in the informal realm between evaluations of surface and evaluations of depth; is surface something that can be manipulated as part of a reflexive project to reflect the you you want to be? Or does it express (or alternatively conceal) the unchanging essential self?

Thus on the one hand, as I have argued, within school there is a focus on surface; pupils are aware that they will be evaluated on the way they 'appear', and that it is not only important to behave in a certain way but to be *seen* to behave in that way. Appearance is seen as centrally important to the (accurate) expression of the self; pupils' want to be seen in the right way.

On the other hand, pupils are also aware that being 'seen' and 'being known' are not necessarily the same thing. There is a recurrent tension in evaluation practices between surface (being judged on the way you appear) and depth (looking beyond this to in order to see the 'real' person).

If there is a 'true inner self', this self may be expressed or concealed by surface. The focus is shifted from surface as identity, to surface as (un)representative of a true self:

Kate: When I was younger I was a chav, but I didn't really feel like it inside. I wasn't a real chav, I had my hair scraped back and stuff, but I didn't really have the attitude".

From this perspective, surface, the importance of appearing in the right way, is devalued. It is shallow to focus on appearance, being a good friend is looking beyond this and getting to know 'the real person'. In this understanding appearance is just surface, and it is necessary to look beyond it in order to see the 'real' person (depth).

Ruby: For example I'm looking at Maria now and she's wearing loads of make-up or whatever, so they think 'she's like this, she's like that' but to judge someone like that is really weird.

These tensions are inherent in ideologies of individualism in circulation, both within school and in the wider context. Their recurrence within school highlights the ways individualism is constituted through sociality. Authenticity and fakeness are evaluated interpersonally, it is through these intersubjective transactions that the myths of individualism are brought into being, given shape and attached to moral valuations (it is important to be genuine and not to be fake). It is through these evaluations that the value of individualism is made visible.

## Evaluations of authenticity

These themes are not only articulated in relation to the body and embodied appearance but more generally in terms of identity. Accusations of 'fakeness' or 'not being genuine' are a frequent strategy among pupils to claim superiority in debates over value. Themes of authenticity are often drawn on by pupils as alternative values to the year-wide prestige-system evidenced by visibility. For example, the Misfits use this strategy to devalue the status hierarchy within the Year. They emphasise the superficiality of the status system, in contrast to the authenticity of their peer group, in order to re-interpret their low-status position as lucky:

James: When you have to be friends with people because no one else wants to be with you that's when you tend to find genuine friends, most of the other groups, they're not genuine friends, everyone is a bitch...it's like a blessing in disguise. I'm by no means Mr Universe, but I've got genuine friends.

Michael: We're a group of individuals. Does that sound ironic? We don't fit in anywhere else so we all hang out together.

So, while the power and status in the informal realm is premised on visibility and appearing in the right way, themes of authenticity enable an alternative reading. 'Being seen' is cast as superficial and those that are visible constricted by the expanded image they must maintain. Being genuine is durable because it stems from the 'inner self', while being visible is fragile because it depends on the maintenance of surface and the evaluations of others:

Michael: Here's the truth though, most guys don't actually care that much how a girl looks, truthfully. It doesn't come down to how they look, it comes down to who they are, and that is the god's honest truth.

Caroline: It might be true for you but not for other boys, say like for Nathan (one of the Man-dom) it's obviously not.

Michael: I think part of that is that if he says that he likes different kinds of people than guys at the school wouldn't accept it, they would lose status and it's all about status. If a guy says he likes a girl who isn't considered to be unbelievably attractive then he will lose status.

SWR: So do you think that the guys who are most concerned about status are the ones who will be most judgemental about how a girl looks?

Michael: They will be judgemental only because they fear losing status.

Caroline: It will affect your reputation.

Leah: They're trying to be [masculine] but they're not. Because they have no self-esteem. Because they're trying to find themselves. Because they're trying to fit into stereotypes. Because when people don't know what they should be they always stereotype themselves and then they become caricature of each other, and they were all caricatures of each other...I don't like people who are fake, and they are fake about it.

In these evaluations we can see competing notions of individuality being drawn on by pupils in order to position themselves and claim value for themselves as particular kinds (genuine as opposed to fake) of people. While appearing in appropriate ways is centrally important in school (assessed by the evaluation of others), being 'true to yourself' regardless of the evaluation of others, is also valued. For example the 'slaggy' behaviour of an individual can be partly exonerated if the person 'owns up' to their actions, Jerome:

"She wasn't respected for what she did, she was respected for what she said when they caught her, because she still carried on with who she was".

This initially may appear to contradict my argument that individuality is constituted interpersonally. However, authenticity (someone being true to their selves regardless of the evaluation of others) is itself subject to evaluation by peers, and so in spite of the rhetoric is itself constituted interpersonally.

These appraisals evidence failure in terms of 'fakeness', 'attention-seeking' or 'try-hard' and success in terms of 'being yourself' and can be observed in evaluations of a variety of actions. For example, in the following conversation Lily and Elisabeth assess and compare the validity of two of their peer's 'self-harm' actions. They decide that one is attention-seeking - an invalid attempt to be 'seen', while the other is a genuine expression of inner emotional pain.

Elisabeth: Lara is attention seeking, she's very like 'slitting wrists...'

Lily: She does it on the top, so it's actually to draw attention...she does it on top, and then rolls up her sleeve, and puts them on the desk, so someone will say 'Lara, oh my gosh, that's so terrible', but if you were serious about cutting your wrists you'd clearly try harder and do it somewhere not noticeable.

Elisabeth counter-points this with the 'self-harm' actions of another pupil:

"You know, like Sam, he used to slit his wrists, and he'd do it like here, and then put an arm band thing round it, and then if anyone touched it he'd be like 'get away, get away', so you knew it was genuine".

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I've discussed some of the complex and pervasive evaluation processes of the informal realm. As Munn argues 'intrinsic to value-production is the evaluative rendering of the self by significant others' (1986: 15). In the same way that "becoming known" is the rendering of the action process as a whole in a discourse that positively defines and evaluates the self of the actor' (ibid), 'looking good' in school is evidence of success in evaluative processes between peers. However, in contrast to Munn, who argues that value producing acts stem from a 'generative schema', throughout the chapters we have seen that who or what looks good is a matter of intense debate, and tells of the divergent modes of value production different groups of pupils are engaged in. Further, pupils attempting to 'appear' in the right way must manoeuvre within collaboratively set conventions of acceptability.

These processes can be brought to bear on debates about body image. As I discuss in my methodology, the negative 'body image' of girls' has become a recurrent cause for concern in contemporary culture, and these issues were central to my initial research aims. The dominant understanding is that girls are influenced by, and attempt to emulate, distorted body ideals created in the media and this is resulting in negative body image, dieting at an increasingly young age and a rise in eating disorders. These understandings are premised on a simplistic ingestion (of imagery) model, and the resulting formation of body image and subjectivity is seen as structured through this 'diet' of images (Bray and Colebrook 1998). The over-riding impression is, as Probyn put it, that girls are 'pathologically susceptible to media images' (1987: 203).

I argue that approaches which understand girls in direct relationship with the 'media', without taking account of their everyday contexts will fail to do justice to the complexities of this issue. The dominant concept of body image promotes a one-dimensional approach to these issues but through a focus on the informal realm we can see the multi-dimensional nature of 'appearance'. Evaluation processes between peers operationalise notions of appropriateness, divergent values and strategically – dominant body and beauty ideals. For girls particularly, these evaluations are in turn projected onto their surface – their physical appearance. If, as I would argue, it is through the evaluation of others that girls come to see themselves in positive or negative ways, then these processes call for a much more dynamic, intersubjective and action-based approach to understanding why many girls are unhappy with their bodies.

Furthermore in this chapter I have related issues of appearing, and tensions between evaluations of surface and evaluations of depth, to ideologies of individualism in circulation within school and the wider context. Constructions of the individual self are entailed in these self-other relations. Evaluations of authenticity and fakeness mirror tensions in notions of the individual, and highlight the way ideologies of the individual are constituted within interpersonal relations, and subsequently construct selves in the process.

For example by evaluated their high status peers as fake, the Misfits are 'making sense anew' a particular notion of the individual as involving a true, unchanging, inner self that may or may not be accurately expressed to others. In the process they are constituting themselves as genuine people, and reinforcing the value of their selves. This exemplifies my argument that individuality and individuals are fundamentally produced socially.

## Chapter 10: The last day of school; “celebrating everyone together”

SWR: So when was your best time (at school)?

Nihal: I think it was our last assembly together, it was the best time in my opinion, all of us together and celebrating everyone together.

As I discussed at the beginning of this thesis, until recently anthropology’s engagement with ‘youth’ was primarily in terms of ‘not-yet finished human beings’ being led into full cultural membership by adults. These approaches almost exclusively studied adolescence as a liminal position between childhood and adulthood and were marked in many societies by some form of initiation ceremony (Bucholtz 2002). Despite this reliance on liminality, at the expense of a focus on ‘the more informal ways in which young people socialise themselves and one another’ (Bucholtz 2002: 526), in this section I revisit Turner’s concept of liminality and *communitas* and Kapferer’s subsequent critique, as a way to shed light on processes - normally implicit in school - which become explicit on ‘last day of school’<sup>136</sup>. This day is an important ‘rite of passage’ for pupils which marks among other things the end of compulsory education, school uniform and the year group in its existing form<sup>137</sup>.

I argue that the last day of school manifests the ideal of the growing together discourse. Value-production results in both differentiation and communal value and the experience of *communitas* during this important day represents the temporary victory of unifying processes over differentiating – a Year 11 celebration of their self-produced communal-value.

### **Liminality and the experience of *communitas***

In his analysis of ritual behaviour, Victor Turner (1969) builds on the three-stage framework of the rites of passage, first developed by Van Gennep. According to Van Gennep all rites are accompanied by three stages (although these stages are not equally important in all rituals): Separation from everyday life, entry through a threshold into a ritual liminal realm in which

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<sup>136</sup> This day represented an end to lessons and the compulsion of daily attendance although pupils would still be coming into school for (optional) revision lessons and their GCSE exams.

<sup>137</sup> Many members are leaving for other sixth forms.

everyday notions of time, place and structure are suspended and finally re-entry into society<sup>138</sup>.

For Turner, the most significant of these stages is liminality; a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, in which there is often a simplification or elimination of social structures. Turner argues that liminality is necessarily ambiguous as it evades the network of classifications that usually, 'locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (1969: 95). It is this suspension of everyday modes of classification and action that also weaves into liminality the potential for critique; the withdrawal from the norm enabling scrutinisation of the central values of culture.

According to Turner this 'moment in and out of time' and in and out of the secular structure' also engenders *communitas* (although liminality is not the only generator of *communitas*); the experience of oneness and human unity. Emerging in the interstices of structure, *communitas* 'reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition...of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties' (1969: 96).

### **The last day of school**

As spring blooms and Year 11 lessons are crammed with revision, the last day of school approaches with much excited anticipation from the Year, who are finally briefed on the course of events the day before. This briefing takes place within the normal expectations of school (the teacher speaks at the front of the class, pupils are expected to sit still and be silent and are reprimanded if they do not conform to these expectations).

The following day, the last day of school, as I enter 'my' form room the contrast is striking, it becomes immediately clear to me that this an extraordinary day: Normally form tutors monitor uniform as pupils enter the classroom, requesting those who are diverging from the

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<sup>138</sup> Although I analyse 'the last day at school' within this framework, as Kapferer (1988) highlights in his discussion of Australian Anzac day it is more accurate to consider the whole day as liminal rather than one stage within the day.

code to rectify their appearance (tuck in shirts, take off scarves, remove bright lipstick). They expect pupils to sit down and stop talking quickly so they can take the register and pass on any important information or letters home to parents. In contrast, I arrive upon a vibrant scene; pupils are standing in the classroom chatting loudly with each other and their form tutor. They are wearing a variety of normally banned additions to their uniforms; trainers, baseball caps and scarves. Some girls are wearing sexualised reinterpretation of their normal uniforms; high heels, suspenders, shortened skirts, shirts knotted above belly buttons and exaggerated make-up.

A collection of classrooms have been designated for use by Year 11s and within these rooms and the connecting corridors pupils are free to move. The mood is jubilant as they circulate freely (undefined by peer groups) asking any pupil or teacher they pass to sign their leavers books and shirts. Gradually, all pupils become covered in messages, pictures and signatures written on their shirts with brightly coloured marker pens. While the rest of the school have lessons as usual, for Year 11s the normal institutional expectations of school - including neat uniform, staying in one classroom during lessons, staying seated in class and moving in time to the bell – are suspended. Teachers, normally the enforcers of these expectations, do not take on this role, instead they chat with students and sign their shirts.

All pupils including those who felt marginalised (such as the Misfits), or were disinvested in school as a social space (such as the opt-out rebels) are joining in enthusiastically, chatting and laughing with those who cross their paths. James, a Misfit who often expressed his disdain for the “retarded majority” in the Year, bounds up to me to tell me what a good day he’s having:

“It’s been brilliant, I’ve talked to all these people I don’t normally speak to, and I’ve got loads of mobile numbers. I’m really glad I had this time with all these people I’ve been with, even though I might not have talked to a lot of them”.

After lunch, pupils make their way into the main hall for their final assembly. It lasts for over three hours and is freed from the restrictions of the school bell and the confines of the school day - ending long after the normal school day. Both pupils and teachers contribute to the assembly which is made up of songs, dances, speeches and specially written poems. In a

reversal of the normal order of things, it is the teachers who are required to offer their own work to pupils. All form tutors have produced and perform something for their pupils, one reads a rhyming poem which includes the names of each of her pupils and a little observation or joke about them, another had found school pictures of her class from Year 7 and recounts her memories of her pupils as the pictures appear on the large screen above her head. After this the head teacher, Mr Firth, performs 'I want you back' by the Jackson Five, with the backing vocals of the other teachers, to Mr Forster (who is leaving the school after this term), giving him a big, heartfelt hug as he finishes.

Mr Forster then gives a speech to the pupils:

“...We’ve laughed, we’ve cried, there’s been battles over uniforms, make-up, lateness and trainers but there’s always been so much fun and laughs, so many brilliant memories. There is so much talent in this year, this year group is truly special, and you’ve all got such amazing spirits...”

As he finishes - telling them he always regretted not telling his last year group how he felt about them, so just to let them know he thinks they are amazing – his voice breaks, and as he sits down other teachers reach over to comfort him. As I have discussed previously (chapter 3) teachers are normally expected to manage their emotions so they are not visible to pupils. When teachers do show their feelings in class there is a temporary rupture in the dynamics of the teacher/ pupil relationship. In contrast, in this assembly Mr Forster makes no attempt to hide his emotions and a number of other teachers also become tearful as they speak to the Year.

Of the pupils performances it is Candice and Dominic - two marginal members of the Year – who inspire the most emotional responses. Candice is one of the Opt-out rebels who invested little in school as either an academic or social space. Along with her small group of friends she rarely attended lessons, preferring to smoke weed in hidden away spots outside the school grounds. The hall goes quiet as she starts to sing the Whitney Huston ballad *I Will Always Love You* in a beautiful voice, as she becomes more and more choked with tears, she leaves the stage, inducing many more tears among her fellow pupils who cheer encouragingly as she reappears a few moments later to finish her song.

Finally, Dominic, one of the Misfits who frequently expressed feeling marginalised within the Year, and was often the target of the Man-dom's ridicule as he refused to accept the invisibility expected of the low status (chapter 5), comes onto the stage and starts addressing his peers:

"I don't know how many of you remember me in Year 7? Probably only about one person [a few people put their hands up]. But after primary school I had no self-confidence, I couldn't meet anyone's eye, I flinched if anyone came near me. Since then my confidence has grown, now I've got friends and I'm able to stand up in front of you and say this, which I would never have been able to do before, and a lot of you are to thank for that. Some of you are my friends, some of you are people I just nod to when we pass in the corridor and lots of you I probably just pass, but we all get along and while I'm not the most popular person in the Year, as far as I can tell that's Chimmi [one of the Man-dom, the audience laughs] I'm a lot better than I used to be, and that happened here, so I wanted to say thank you".

During this speech my fists are clenched in anticipation of the reaction, after my observations throughout the year, I worry that this brave and honest speech will be met with laughter or jeers. In the split second after he finishes I hold my breath, then the Year explodes into loud and enthusiastic cheers, applause and whoops, some pupils (including most of the Man-dom) give a standing ovation, and I exhale in relief. As the assembly ends *Take That's Never Forget*, a song designated as their 'Year song' and played at a number of assemblies throughout the year plays loudly. Most of the pupils and teachers are crying or have tears in their eyes (as do I) and turn to hug those close to them as they file out into the sunshine.

I argue that this liminal day engendered the experience of *communitas* in pupils and teachers:

'*Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edge of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority...it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. The

processes of “levelling” or “stripping”...often appear to flood their subjects with affect’ (128).

Although the concepts of liminality and *communitas* are well-suited to understanding the last day at school, Kapferer’s consequent discussion of how these concepts apply to Western contexts, sheds further light on this event.

### **The ideal and the real: *communitas* as critique**

In his analysis of Anzac day rituals in Australia, Bruce Kapferer also revisits Turner’s theories, and writes, ‘the concepts of liminality and *communitas* appear almost tailor made for an understanding of Anzac’ (1988: 162). However he continues with caution, ‘the fit is almost too pat’, and we should be wary of extending the concept and in so doing obscuring important differences in applicability and meaning. Especially considering the wide divergence between the non-industrial tribal cultures – from which Turner’s ideas are derived - and industrial non-tribal societies. In fact, Kapferer argues that the concept of *communitas* is probably more applicable to the latter type of culture and furthermore to those founded in ‘ideological variants of egalitarianism’.

Kapferer points out that in tribal societies there is hardly any distinction made between the ideal and the real, sociality and commonality are taken for granted and *communitas* *is* the reality. In contrast, in modern industrial settings such as Australia, *communitas* is an achievement, a rare experience of feeling united in differentiated and diverse societies, despite the ideal of egalitarianism on which it is founded. In this way, Kapferer argues, moments of *communitas* represent an ‘objectified declaration of the ideal’. At the same time, the declaration of this ideal highlights that it is not congruent with everyday experiences, and so represents a critique more significant than in tribal societies.

The ideals of equality and egalitarianism are a central tenet of the British education system and as much research has shown, these are similarly incongruent with the everyday reality of schooling (see for example Tomlinson 2005). Further, we have seen that tensions between equality and hierarchy are writ small within school. Both pupils and teachers often appealed to the ideal of equals growing together into a ‘loving collectively’. At the same time negotiating a reality in which peer groups, academic differentiation, positioning

practices and the performance of ethnicity and gender position pupils in 'an arrangement of positions and statuses'. The last day at school manifests the growing together ideal and in so doing generates the experience of unity to which pupils appeal. The experience of *communitas* also represents a critique of the differentiation co-constructed by pupils, teachers and the institutional structures of schooling.

As Turner argues, together structure and *communitas*, 'comprise a dialectic process that involves the successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality' (1969: 97). It is important to examine both aspects of this dialectic within school, otherwise we risk giving the impression of fixed and unchanging 'social structures' within school, albeit generated by pupils. Writers on peer groups and identity in school (for example Eckert 1989, Bucholtz 1999 and 2001, Perry 2001, Mac an Ghail 1994 and Hey 1997) often focus on one side of this dialectic, at the expense of an examination of the other. Although offering nuanced and insightful accounts of how pupils generate and maintain social categories in the everyday, they tend to focus on processes of differentiation and separation in school and their importance to identity construction. Less attention is given to the processes of unity and closeness that are also an important part of pupils' experiences. A danger is that we might then come to view pupils as trapped in the structures of their own making; engendering a new form of determinism.

Further, the 'manifold categories of distinction' (Evans 2006) are constructed and maintained not just in time but over time. The temporal dimension of these processes are important to pupils own understandings of themselves and their social worlds, often contrasting their past selves and worlds with their present. A focus on these dialectical processes helps keep in mind the momentum forward. Pupils have collaboratively constructed a constellation of differences and position themselves and others within this system. But the system also contains within it recognition of the alternative and transcendent potential. The last day of school represents one instance of this transcendence, and illustrates how the system itself can transform the possibilities within it.

As I have argued, pupils' production of value results in both differentiation and communal value. The production of value is a hierarchising process but is also consolidated with

egalitarian ideals (Munn 1986). Pupils constantly negotiate the tension between differentiation processes that enable them to produce themselves as particular kinds of people and the positive communal value that enables them to define themselves as a viable community. The active management of the growing together discourse exemplifies this, made explicit in the last day of school. On this day, the experience of *communitas* makes explicit and celebrates the successful production of communal value, the temporary triumph of equality over hierarchy, unity over differentiation.

## Conclusion

The last chapter finished with a celebration of the communal value produced throughout Year 11 pupils' time together. The capacity of the year group to create and sustain positive social relations and networks is a source of pride. This is evidenced in the way they see themselves as a group who 'all get on', while the constant flow of transactions between pupils, in class and in the corridor, sustains the network beyond peer groups.

I started this thesis with the observation that school is packed full of meaningful relationships. Sociality is central. It is the substance, agreed by the pupils that defines the value of the group.

My observation is given structure by Munn (1986), my theoretical companion for this thesis. Her model of value-production has provided the architecture for conceptualising the informal realm.

A strength of Munn's model is its dialectical nature. Processes of unification co-exist with those of differentiation - both are important in understanding pupils' school experiences. Munn's value-production model means we do not have to take these processes as either/or. As my thesis shows, actions can result in divergent forms of value. Through positive value-production, pupils come to define themselves as different kinds of people, and separate individuals, but they also create social relations and contribute to communal value. Year 11 creates itself – a process that also delineates the individual.

My research contributes to understanding the way young people constitute difference through their actions. They are not only responding to difference but actively producing it. At the same, simultaneous processes of unification illustrate the way members of this community can construct a collective identity based on sameness rather than closeness. Categories are, essentially, co-created.

Social categories are a form of participation - categories that come to structure experience and identity do not exist apart from the human actions that bring them into existence in the

first place. We see this very clearly in school, as I have argued. Social categories, such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity, are not simply being 'appropriated' from some unspecified source but actively brought into being between peers in a specific time and place. They can also be constraining. Conforming to collaboratively-set conventions is imperative to fitting in, and enjoying the attendant rewards.

This thesis illustrates the usefulness of Munn's theory as a way to capture youth engagement. Value-production always entails subjective transformation so it is an excellent model for describing and analysing how we become who we are. Munn's model is an example of the benefits of practice theory. It enables us to see that what we value as a community emerges through action. Intrinsically dynamic, a model with action as its primary unit will always have change and transformation woven into its fabric.

But action does not happen in a vacuum as Munn shows. They are occurring with actors acting and acted upon by these actions. The result is an on-going process of change and transformation - all within the context of a pre-existing social order, created by others' actions. More generally, starting with action ensures that agency is a productive place to start. Recognition of the importance of agency is the starting point for analysis – rather than its conclusion.

The intersubjective nature of value-production has highlighted the intrinsically relational nature of growing up. In contrast to the argument that pathways to adulthood have become increasingly individualised (e.g. Beck 1992), I have argued that attention to the informal realm offers a vivid exemplar of the relational nature of growing up - sociality and individuality are mutually constitutive and individuality cannot be understood without reference to sociality.

My research challenges Western ideals of the autonomous individual. We come to know ourselves through others. Intersubjectively is necessary to give shape and evaluate the expression of individuality. It is also in these intersubjective relations that myths of individuality are articulated and evaluated.

Contemporary media discourse tends to represent young people as 'causing trouble', 'in trouble', or passive, inert in front of screens. But these images pay scant attention to the vivid realities of young lives. I wanted to capture in this thesis the achievement of young peoples' collaborative actions. Starting from a place of action allows us to view young people as active - not buffeted between currents beyond their control.

Pupils are far from passive recipients of adult forms. Instead they are affecting change and transformations and creating social arenas of their own. They are creating something of value that deserves our attention.

## Appendix 1

For example pupils use their bodies as a resource to exert power and push against the non-corporal authority of teachers. While teachers constantly attempt to manage pupils' bodies through verbal commands there are strict rules on acceptable physical contact between pupils and teachers, thus within class bodies represent a key resource for pupils as they are able to transform their bodies into vehicles of power which can have an impact that teachers could not equally address. These forms of resistance are illustrated in a year 8 drama class in which a series of disruptions erupted:

After a lacklustre warm up the class get into groups to work on a short scene. Lisa, Blake and Shaun three pupils described as 'problem' by the teacher are in a group together but are sitting down chatting rather than getting on with the task set. Blake looks over at another group who are working well together, practising their scene which involves one of their members lying on the floor, silently Blake gets up and jumps on the boy lying on the floor. His group crowds round him and when the teacher, Ms Gold notices he's crying she sends him to the nurse with another pupil. Blake rejoins the group muttering "he's such a baby, he's not really hurt, I didn't jump on him that hard".

While she's trying to sort the situation out, Ms Gold instructs the rest of the class to sit down and wait in silence. Lisa, who has spent the lesson so far sitting with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face (she refused to get up for the warm-up), except for smiling when Blake jumped on the boy, carries on talking. Returning her attention to the class, Ms Gold asks Lisa to be quiet, Lisa does not acknowledge this command and continues to talk. Ms Gold then tells Lisa to move places, very slowly (as the whole class watches) Lisa gets up and as she walks across the classroom she knocks the chair over. As a result of this Ms Gold tells her to leave the classroom, which Lisa does very slowly. A minute later I notice her looking in, unhappily, through the glass as the class as continue with their task.

A few minutes later Lisa comes back into the classroom, and says sullenly "I'm just getting my bag". Ms Gold says "I told you to stand outside, don't get your bag", Lisa continues to

walk towards her bag repeating “I’m just getting my bag”. Lisa slowly picks up her bag and Ms Gold follows her out of the classroom. While Ms Gold is outside talking to Lisa another drama erupts in the classroom. Amit runs across the classroom carrying a bag and throws it in the bin. Sumesh, the owner of the bag runs over with the intention to fight Amit, closely followed by a surge of other boys intending to stop the fight. Instead a tussle ensues between the boys, they are eventually pulled apart by their friends as Sumesh rages, “I’m gonna fucking beat you down, you just wait after school I’m going to thrash him”.

As the class is leaving the fight erupts again, Ms Gold keeps Amit behind to find out what is going on. Amit tells her that he is upset because Sumesh has been calling him names, he says he’d been teased a lot recently about his size (he is smaller than most people his age), he says that he took Sumesh’s bag because he had called him “premature” (i.e. A premature baby). While some of their friends have stayed with Amit others have gone to find Sumesh (acting in a mediating role), and physically guide him back into the class. Ms Gold asks him to explain himself, at first he insists he had just called Amit “a baby” but then admits he had called him premature “once”. Ms Gold asks Sumesh to apologise to Amit restoring some sort of peace and the boys all leave the classroom together.

In this one hour lesson I observe three different examples of embodied resistance; in the first example Blake is able to disrupt the learning of the group and the whole lesson (which had to be stopped while the incident was sorted out) through his actions. In the second example Lisa resists the commands (and thus the authority) of the teacher through her actions; foot-dragging, ignoring commands and continuing in a course of action when told not to. In the final disruption, Amit expresses his hurt and pain at being insulted by a peer through physical means and Sumesh responded to this in an equally physical way. In older years the dramatic eruptions of unruly bodies (Blake, Sumesh and Amit) are more unusual, especially in the classroom, and pupils define such behaviour as ‘immature’. However the embodied resistance used to challenge the authority of teachers, exemplified by Lisa, remains common in older years and on a number of occasions I observed pupils use these strategies to engage in a battle of wills in which the teacher was, temporarily, at a disadvantage.

After the lesson Ms Gold tells me she does not know what to do about Lisa because “she thinks I hate her”. However a few months later Ms Gold tells me that the relationship between her and Lisa has been ‘transformed’. She credits my observation that Lisa “looked really unhappy and probably felt powerless and trapped by her own behaviour”, and my reference to Abu-Lughod’s definition of resistance as a diagnostic of power (1990), for this change.

“Before we had been locked in a battle of wills but after your observation I tried to see things differently, so I was really inclusive, encouraging and tried to show her that I was really seeing her. Now in class she’s really involved, keeping others on task and contributing to discussions”.

Ms Gold tells me that she used this same technique on a disruptive pupil who had been sent into her class by another drama teacher who “couldn’t deal with him”. She asked him why he was unhappy; he told her that he wasn’t unhappy but angry because he felt he was being treated “unfairly”. Ms Gold suggested they go back into the class together and “all start again”, she said the boy responded well to this idea and did not disrupt the class again.

## Appendix 2

Examples from two very different lessons I observed illustrate the divergence in learning and teaching experiences that occur within the same school:

### **Bottom set year 8 maths:**

The class are told to line up in silence outside before entering the classroom. It takes about five minutes for the class to arrange themselves in some semblance of a line, the boys push and shove each other while the girls are chatting. The class are let into their room and the teacher attempts to introduce the starter exercise however she is distracted by Jo who is playing with a gel-filled ball. The teacher tells him to stop playing with it, and when he does not, gives him a verbal and then a written warning (his name is written on the wall), he continues to play with the ball. Then the ball bursts and Jo goes to put it in the bin, narrating his actions to the class who are all watching him rather than the teacher. Looking down at the ball which has gel leaking out; “uh it looks like, well I’m not going to say, I’ll say in science”. Following this allusion to semen, Jo makes a gesture that the teacher interprets as sexist; “leave the classroom, sexism is automatic removal from class”. Jo protests “I was only scratching my stomach”, the teacher asks the teaching assistant to escort Jo to the timeout room but Jo refuses. Finally a senior teacher comes in, talks quietly to Jo who then follows her out of the room without anymore protest.

This disruption has taken up fifteen minutes of class time, the teacher attempts to refocus the class but this is an uphill struggle. The class are given a simple worksheet about graphs; the class work on the sheet for about ten minutes but many pupils continue chatting with their friends. When the teacher goes through the worksheet the class call out answers to her questions (rather than putting their hand up). The bar graph symbolises the number of cars parked on a street and is labelled with even numbers up to ten, the teacher asks the class how many cars each bar in the graph symbolises, the class calls out a wide variety of answers to each bar. The class are easily distracted and continue chatting and calling answers out until the senior teacher returns. Speaking to the class in a quiet, controlled voice she says: “I don’t understand the culture in this class, I don’t understand why you’re all shouting out when you should put your hands up like Lila (point to a girl with her hand up

at the back of the class)". This seems to work as the noise level reduces but the calm feels tentative and the teacher appears nervous about another interruption.

**Year 10 top set English class:**

The class come in a sit down quickly, chatting quietly, the teacher passes around a sonnet; 'How do I love thee, let me count the ways' by Elisabeth Browning. The teacher instructs the class to annotate the text and the class do start this task quickly, working in silence. The teacher then goes through each lines of the poem, different pupils put their hands up and comment on the line, talking articulately about the pace, rhythm, and meaning of the words and the sentiment, drawing on the Victorian context to locate the meanings. This exercise lasts the whole lesson and the class remains focussed and engaged throughout. The class talk so fluently, and with such little input from the teacher about the Sonnet I assume they have worked on it before but after the lesson the teacher tells me this is the first time they have studied the poem.

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