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Crossing the Threshold
Masculinities and the transition to school

Jenni Norris

This paper is dedicated to Dr Shane Town

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Starting school is a significant cultural and social milestone in the lives of children (Ramey & Ramey, 1994; Renwick, 1984). However, the experiences of boys making the transition has not been a particular focus for research. My master's thesis, 'Transforming Masculinities: Boys making the transition from early childhood to school' (Norris, 1999) explored the transition of four boys from early childhood education centres to schools, in relation to masculinities.

My interest in researching issues for boys stemmed from my experience as a feminist mother of sons. In educational terms, I was interested to explore whether frequently cited and perplexing problems with boys in education (e.g., Arnot, 1984; Askew & Ross, 1988; Campbell & Brooker, 1991; Kelly, 1986; Mahoney, 1985; Spender, 1980) might be related to anecdotal reports of 'rocky' transitions to compulsory education made by many boys.

Studies pointed to clear patterns of gender disadvantage suffered by girls in relation to boys' behaviour at school (Bird, 1992; Newton, 1992) and perhaps furthered the idea that girls were the 'victims' while boys were the 'perpetrators' in educational research (Arnot, 1991), cited in Mac an Ghaill, 1994, p. 8). However, questions had also been raised about the adequacy of previous work on the subject of boys, and the need to develop more sympathetic understandings of masculinities (McLean, 1997; Yates, 1997). Despite a burgeoning literature, the subject was often cast in relation to the 'big picture' (Segal, 1997). It seemed worthy and important to focus on real life experiences.

I was interested to discover how masculine identities were affected by the transition, as well as how masculine identities operated in the two settings of early childhood education and school. The essence of the research became the notion of boys as 'transformers', undergoing changes as they made this highly significant cultural transition or 'status passage' (Glaser & Strauss, 1971).

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

As I explored the concept of boys as 'transformers', I soon discovered that the topic was fraught with tensions and almost unmanageably broad. It required the consideration of three distinct bodies of literature: gender and masculinities, early education and gender, and the transition to school.

As a response I adopted a post-structural feminist theoretical approach, where the formulation of final answers was not required and where I was able to move beyond structuralist and determinist explanations of gender difference. I came to link the notion of transformation with post-structuralist notions of gender and power, in particular the 'slippery' and fluid essence of masculinity/femininity and gender positioning (Davies, 1993; Foucault, 1980 in Radtke & Stam, 1994; Luke, 1996).

The insights I gained from following the four case study boys from one place to another are of value to educators and suggest that further exploration of the issues is warranted.

The specific research questions posed at the outset of the thesis research were:
- How did the boys' masculinities operate in the two educational settings of early childhood centres and schools?
- How did the boys experience the transition from early childhood education to school?
- What were the attitudes of parents and teachers towards the transition?
- What were the key differences for the boys between early childhood education and schooling experiences (what did differences in school and early childhood philosophies and practices mean for boys?)
- What were the educational implications for the boys of the transition to school?

A qualitative case study approach, based on the transition to school of four randomly chosen boys, was used to collect data in two early childhood centres and four state

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primary schools. Three early childhood observations and three school observations, using ethnographic methods (strongly influenced by the important work of Thorne, 1993), were made of each boy over two months prior to their starting school and in the term after they began. In the case of one boy, Kelly, a change in the research methodology allowed three further observations, over two school terms.

Early childhood teachers and school teachers, as well as all four mothers, were interviewed prior to the boys' starting school and afterwards. Fathers were not interviewed – a limiting factor in the research. This was mainly related to convenience for the parents and, in one case, to the fact that the boy lived with his mother in a sole parent family. Further useful data might also have been obtained if greater emphasis had been given to the responses of the children researched.

The boys and the research settings

The four boys in the study were David, Kelly, Joe and Ryan. David and Kelly attended morning kindergarten while Joe and Ryan attended a crèche attached to a tertiary education institution. The four schools that the boys went to included two Decile 10 schools and two Decile 7 schools.[1]

The boys came from different economic backgrounds. Joe and Ryan had university educated parents, employed in professional occupations. David's and Kelly's parents had not been to university, worked in service-based occupations or were self-employed.

The cultural backgrounds of the boys were also different. Ryan and David both had parents with Maori ancestry, Kelly was of Pacific Island descent, while Joe was pakeha (New Zealander of European ethnicity).

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[1] Decile ratings relate to the socio-economic community in which a school is situated. A low decile rating, would indicate a school which could be expected to have a very high level of need.

THEORY AND RESEARCH

Gender and masculinities

Connell's (1994a) concept of a 'gender regime' (also taken up by Hollway, 1994) was used as a key analytical tool for the consideration of the gender dynamics in the early childhood centres and schools studied. A gender regime comprises the power relations, division of labour, patterns of emotion and symbolisation of an institution.

Another key concept was the role of educational institutions as sites for the reproduction of ranges of masculinities (see also Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Parker, 1996; Skelton, 1997). An associated concept was the notion that masculinity is complex and multi-dimensional, with masculinities structured hierarchically, the most dominant being 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1996).

Connell (1997) also noted the social, cultural and historic construction of masculinity and provided trenchant argument against determinist explanations of gender differences. Connell has explored how men and boys may increasingly be seen to be 'losers' in many respects, as a result of how they 'do' masculinity (see also Segal, 1997), while acknowledging the 'patriarchal dividend' gained by men from their participation in the current order.

It was also useful to consider the links between sexuality, schooling and power made by those writing from the perspectives of queer pedagogy (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Sears, 1991; Town, 1998).

Early education and gender identity

Early childhood educators have long been interested in exploring the nature of gender difference. Socially determined explanations for gender difference have been suggested by a number of early childhood studies, reviewed in some depth by Smith (1992, pp. 120-52). These studies include Smith and Lloyd's (1978) well known study.

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The developmental perspective of much early childhood practice, influenced by Piagetian work and underpinning the notion of 'free play' (Smith & Taylor, 1998), has been critiqued by post-structuralist theorists. From this perspective, the discourse of child-centred learning tends to overlook the socially unjust nature of children's gender-based behaviour, as well as promoting a normative and 'lock step' approach to children's development. Equally, socio-cultural theory, (such as Vygotsky's) fails to address power relations between adults and children (Kenway, 1997).

In this study, post structuralist theory was particularly useful. Through the concepts of gender construction, positioning and discourses, it was possible to challenge the binary opposition of gender. Instead, gender was articulated as a social construction:

> Masculinity and femininity are not inherent properties of individuals; they are inherent or structural properties of our society: that is: they both condition and arise from social processes. Each of us, as a member of society, takes on board as our own the 'knowledge' of sex and gender as they are discursively constituted. (Davies, 1989, p. 238)

Foucault's work, on the nature of power (which he saw as a circulating and ever shifting entity) and discourse (the historical reproduction of knowledge, through which power is assigned and controlled and in terms of which people 'position' themselves), was valuable in relation to the data analysed (Foucault, 1980 in Radtke & Stam, 1994, p. 4).

Some early childhood research taking a post structuralist perspective also provided insight. Alloway's (1995) study of boys' and girls' computer use in an early childhood centre for example, confronted the nature of power and concluded that an equal opportunity model applied to the boys' monopoly of the computer had failed.

Transition to school

Studies have focussed on the crucial significance of the teacher in children's adjustment to school, the behaviour of other children, discontinuity and continuity between early childhood education, or home, and school (Goodnow & Burns, 1985; Jackson, 1979; Ka'ai, 1990) and the type of early childhood centre attended (Elliott, 1998). Transition to school studies frequently discussed readiness (Renwick, 1984; 1987), a particular issue in countries where school starting age was being debated (Graue, 1993a, 1993b; Greenberg, 1990) and in New Zealand/Aotearoa, closely allied with the historical emergence of developmental learning (Middleton & May, 1997; Roxborough, 1970).

Few studies have addressed boys' transitions, although Margetts (1997) has referred to boys experiencing more adjustment problems. Biddulph's (1997) men's movement perspective has also suggested that boys should start school later, for biological reasons, while Jordan (1995) suggested that the inability of the 'Fighting Boys' in primary school classrooms to cope with school becomes a "touchstone for masculinity" (Jordan, 1995, p.77). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that male children were more likely to be affected by environmental change and called for further documentation on the subject. The *Competent Children Project* (Wylie, 1996; Wylie & Thompson, 1998) has pointed to gender differences at school entry, with boys being significantly less enthusiastic about school than girls, and parents less satisfied with boys' progress.

MASCULINITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES

Before discussing the transition stories of the four boys in my study it is important to describe the gender analysis I undertook of the two early childhood centres and four schools.

Within the two early childhood centres, the crèche and the free kindergarten, masculinities and gender identity appeared clear-cut, yet this appearance was

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deceptive. My observations revealed that in the centres children's play was often preoccupied with the binary nature of gender, much like the human need to assign gender (Greer, 1999). It was necessary to look beyond the gendered nature of much of the play within the centres, to become aware of the tensions and fluidity of gender, the times when active construction of gender became visible, or when children 'crossed' gender boundaries (Thorne, 1993).

Three broad processes were identifiable in the early childhood centres and schools, in relation to gender and masculinities. Firstly, teachers' interactions with boys and girls suggested an active and on-going construction of gender. Secondly, in relation to the boys' behaviour, the word 'transformation' described much of their socially organised activity. Thirdly, there were moments of gender transgression when the gender binary seemed less clear. Each of these three processes will be discussed in turn.

Adult gender work

The gendered nature of space was a focus for observations, with some boys frequenting sites along clear gender lines, although most activities involved some boys and some girls at any time, concordant with Thorne (1993). However, the ways teachers used resources or interacted with children appeared to reflect discourses around gender.

Outdoors, teachers usually adopted supervisory roles (as noted by Cullen, 1998b), practised less interactive teaching strategies, and rarely engaged with children's play. Since more boys than girls spent significant amounts of time outdoors, they were receiving these teaching styles more often. My findings suggested that boys talked less with teachers than girls (also found by Halliday & McNaughton, 1982). Additionally I observed that teachers' use of language reinforced the notion of boys as a 'bloc' rather than as individual children.

One day at kindergarten David was playing with a group of his friends outdoors with some oversized foam steps, experimenting with swinging off hoops onto the steps and balancing on them, before tumbling off. Diane, a teacher, made three interventions, on each occasion referring to the group as 'Boys':

> Boys...I've been watching you and I don't think it's a good idea to turn
>
> them over. What you *can* do is use them as stairs. (David, Early
>
> Childhood Observation 1).

Language used in the educational settings by teachers and parents furthered the notion of gender as an immutable force. Teachers also displayed active constructions of gender when they positioned themselves in relation to dominant notions of femininity in front of the children, such as in public discussions about dieting and clothes. A further dimension of the construction of gender by adults related to apparent rules about the expression of emotions. Early childhood teachers were caring within circumscribed limits but there were occasions when denial of emotions was evident, in particular, when limits were put on boys' freedom to express sadness or fear.

The models of gender subscribed to by the teachers and the parents were in some ways contradictory. The teachers' emphasis on children's individual needs, and differences, at times obscured more complex understandings of their social behaviour. Yet teachers also attributed behaviour to innate sex-based differences between boys and girls. They seemed to find the behaviour of boys more 'honest' and 'straight up' and the girls' behaviour was typified as 'catty' and 'nasty' or frustrating.

In the kindergarten, the clearly gendered patterns I observed were not discussed or conceptualised as being related to gender. At crèche, there was a clear recognition by staff that it was a group of boys who were at the centre of undesirable and aggressive TV play that was occurring at the time of the study. Active strategies, including a

written policy, were employed to discourage this play and to break up the group of boys:

> We believe as a team that it doesn't enhance children's play, that it's detrimental to their play. At the same time we encourage them to be involved in their fantasy play but when it involves encroaching on other children's behaviour or actually hurting other children, then we are all quite firm about that. (Jane: Interview).

Overall, the four mothers interviewed identified clear differences between boys and girls along similar lines to the teachers. Boys were seen as more physical, and girls more 'sulky' and inclined to dwell on emotional hurts. They said that boys tended to 'just get on with it', while girls were more particular. This dualism was attributed to biological differences. However, despite assuming that a gender difference was 'natural', several of the parents were keen to break their family mould, and find new ways of raising boys.

The parents had noticed that their sons were already aware of a gender binary in relation to clothing and possessions (Kelly would no longer wear anything that was pink or purple). Justine, Joe's mother, also reported that for her older sons, girls were being used as 'pollutants' within their peer group, on occasions when boys called other boys 'girls' as a term of abuse.

Transformations

In both early childhood centres, boys' play frequently centred around heroic play, framed within the term 'transformation'. This refers to the ways in which boys acquired and used power in order to explore or assume masculine identities. This play was fast paced, non-rehearsed and noisy, usually involving a group of boys and sometimes one or a few girls. Large amounts of space, usually outdoors, were taken up during heroic play and aspects of the play were sometimes subject to the highest degree of adult censure.

In one observation, a storyline based on power and destruction unfolded when two boys, aged 3 and 4 years, played with dinosaurs and blocks. The baby dinosaur controlled the omnipotent and destructive father dinosaur yet was dependent on him. This aspect of the relationship suggested the contradictory expectations placed on boys: to be at once male, but also dependent and 'good' children (Davies, 1993). Swearing in the early childhood centre also appeared as a key signifier of masculine discourses of anger and aggression by these two 3 and 4-year old boys (swearing and boys were linked by Lloyd & Duveen, 1992).

TV play appeared to permeate most of the boys' transformational play in both early childhood centres, and included references to Superman, Mighty Ducks, Batman, Street Sharks, Gargoyles, Star Wars and Goosebumps. When a boxing match was screened on television, in which one of the boxers bit part of his opponent's ear off, the next day boys at crèche acted it out. This caused their teacher, Jane, to reflect on the impact of such role models for the boys in the centre:

> Boys and girls just seem to develop differently, they just associate themselves with boys and when you see role models, like you think about the role models of men we've got, and you look at TV...a lot of men, it's aggressive, and I think they latch onto that very very quickly. (Jane: Interview)

Transformational play involved the use of weapons. In the absence of toy guns and weapons the boys improvised with other items such as toy irons. At kindergarten, food boxes kept in the collage area were sequestered for use as bombs and guns. The response of one teacher, Diane, to Kelly and his friends when they had turned boxes into guns was to say:

> Boys, I don't like the way you're using them as power swords. You can make something with them, but not anything with power outdoors. OK? If you want to use them as power swords, take them indoors and put them in your bag. (Kelly, Early Childhood Observation 2).

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Guns and aggressive toys were banned in both centres used in the study but Barbie dolls were not. If the girls' extreme versions of the gender binary, represented by the ubiquitous Barbie dolls, were tolerated, whilst the male equivalents were not, the message was given that femininity was acceptable, while masculinity was not.

Sites of tension were suggested by the ways that centres dealt with the issue of aggressive toys. Post structuralist theories suggest that banning toys fails to address the power issues underlying children's desire for these items. On the other hand, Davies (1993) noted that adult reprimands become signals of 'correct placement' in boys' heroic storylines, adding to the danger, excitement and intense pleasure experienced.

Sometimes boys practised what seemed like a systematic avoidance of activities engaged in by teachers and girls and it appeared that gender boundaries were being maintained. A prime example of this were music and dancing sessions. Certain boys would refuse to participate in structured music sessions at crèche. In the kindergarten, the participation of teachers and girls in free-choice music activities was a spectacle to boys, who watched in open amusement or took the opportunity to engage in the forbidden, such as flying paper darts across the room.

In a crèche observation of an action song, where each child took a turn to perform, boys appeared to explore versions of dominant masculinity (as in the hegemonic posturing of rock groups) while the girls wiggled their hips and kissed suggestively.

Transgressions

There were occasions when both boys and girls acted in their own ways that were not in keeping with the gender binary. Ryan, for example, avoided heroic play and always played within close proximity of a teacher. Ryan's periodic attempts to engage with the active storylines of other boys were unsuccessful. Similarly, on occasions, girls appeared to hold significant power and boys sometimes required teachers to intervene on their behalf.

It appeared too that within centres hierarchies of masculinities, along the lines suggested by Connell (1996), were in operation.

The early childhood data suggested a considerable complexity of gender. Adults' gender work had many forms and furthered an immutable view of gender difference. However, the 'slippery' essence of masculinity and femininity shone through in the ease with which children flowed from one to the other in fantasy play, suggesting that power was complex and shifting.

One key issue to emerge from my consideration of the early childhood centres was structure versus free play. Structured sessions were frequent in the creche, and all children were encouraged to join in, even if initially unwilling. This meant that disinteresetd boys participated in activities such as music (often incorporating Maori and Pacific Island language). The structured care routines and mealtimes were combined with music, storytelling and group discussions. At creche there were also explicit links between structure and the transition to school in the form of a special programme (though no boys participated). Structure also appeared to be used in the crèche as a counterbalance to boys' undesirable behaviour.

In the kindergarten free play reigned and undesirable play was attributed to individual differences. Structure, it seemed, provided opportunities for transformation and transgression, such as the occasion described above, when a range of gendered performances emerged from a structured music session.

MASCULINITIES AT SCHOOL

Once at school, the lives of the four case study boys were taken over by the necessity to learn the school rules and cope with the structure of the school day. Gender positioning seemed to be more subtle, although still actively constructed and enmeshed within the official curriculum of the school. The agency of the school and practices of individual teachers became vital determinants of how gender was constructed in each class.

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There were considerable differences between the new entrant classroom in which the boys now found themselves, and the early childhood centre they had attended. For example, the boys now had a single teacher, and, with some exceptions, a single cell class. An early insight during data gathering was that the identities of children at school were constructed by their teachers in relation to their ability to comply with a plethora of classroom rules and regulations. The emphasis was on listening, sitting still and staying on task. The management of time became a crucial arbiter of social interactions, with school life completely dictated by the clock and the bell. The children's ability to complete tasks within allotted periods of time became a means of assessing their progress.

Children were now only permitted to play at certain times. The distinction embodied the notion that playtime is not of inherent educational value. It seemed clear from the outset, that for some of the case study boys, the new arrangements at school were going to come as something of a shock.

Adult gender work

At school, gender was frequently invoked by teachers in order to organise groups of children, particularly when moving them from one place to another. Sometimes girls and boys were separated, when teachers employed strategies to make access to certain equipment fair. In general though, children were grouped by ability, personality or randomly (in keeping with Thorne, 1993). When children preferred same sex placements, such as on the mat, teachers were instrumental in either reinforcing or disrupting their choices.

The physical geography of the school also reinforced gender differences. There were now boys' and girls' toilets. There was evidence that sex-segregated toilets became the inner sanctum of gender group identity at school. At Kelly's school, girls led a game of 'kiss catch' (a chasing game where the person caught is kissed) in which 'home' was the girls' toilets. This was consistent with Epstein and Johnston's (1998)

comments on the responsibility taken by girls for sexuality discourses within schooling.

At school, women teachers seemed likely to continue the pastoral care provided by mothers and early childhood teachers. The teachers interviewed had differing views on this theory. Ryan's teacher, Lois, saw her role very much in relation to nurturance and caring ("I just really look after them as if they were my own child, I care for them, and I think one has to care"). Kelly's teacher, Isobel, on the other hand, liked to maintain boundaries with the children and saw a clear distinction between her role as a teacher and that of a parent.

While school life was dominated by classroom rules, other rules concerned the ways in which knowledge itself was to be acquired (Davies, 1993). News sessions at schools were one example of a classroom practice that constructed knowledge with a gender dimension, while conveying the impression that children had autonomy over subject matter. While, in one class in my study, news sessions provided boys with opportunities to dominate girls and become more confident public speakers, in other classes the teacher's 'authoritative scrutiny, interpretation and evaluation' (Davies, 1993) was brought to the fore and boys' interests, in particular, the craze at the time of 'Virtual pets', were extinguished.

Transformations

After the boys went to school, transformational storylines underwent a shift, which seemed determined by the characteristics of each school. In general, transformational storylines went underground within the classroom or were confined to free time during playtime or lunchtime. There was less surveillance of children's play at school and no rules about TV play. Despite this, heroic games appeared less frequent, although several of the case study boys were observed playing them. Popular storylines for boys revolved around sports, physical challenges and being 'cool'. The high energy of TV play was now channelled into simple chasing and

running games, sports activities, climbing on frames and kicking balls, activities encouraged by the greater physical space available.

The activities of older boys were of interest to the new entrants. I saw Kelly transfixed as he watched a large group of older boys slog a soccer ball against a wall. The suggestion that sports within schooling is a hallmark of hegemonic masculinity (Parker, 1996; Skelton, 1997) seemed borne out in my study.

Other changes took place once the boys went school. Kelly began wearing the tongues of his shoes out in imitation of the older boys he'd seen at school. He also started wanting to wear 'cool' clothes to school. His mother, Julie, described Kelly as:

> ...such a cool dude. He always has to have his hair perfect and he's into the Chicago Bulls stuff and he wants to wear his jeans a lot, things like this, and he's only five. (Julie: Interview)

These 'cool' images were associated in the minds of some of the teachers with a negative attitude to learning and to life. Isobel, Kelly's teacher, commented that boys who were 'cool' often had difficulties with learning and their image was something of a refuge for them. Hegemonic masculinity seemed to be regarded as antithetical to school success.

The access to older boys wasn't all positive for the case study boys. Joe was afraid of going to parts of the school where there were older boys and his teacher commented that a rough macho culture existed among these boys.

Gender negotiations

In the classroom it appeared that power shifted fluidly between girls and boys. The gender ratio of the classes also determined the flavour of interactions and a more

direct struggle between girls and boys appeared to be taking place with gender being subject to negotiation.

In David's class, boys seemed powerful in relation to girls and were positioned as 'naughty' by their teacher and frequently disciplined in ways that denied their emotions. A news session observed suggested that children were likely to support news given by same sex children. The boys' news dominated and the boys ridiculed girls' news. Girls appeared to have become a negative reference group for the boys and girls were likely to be used as a 'pollutant' in their gender boundary work within the classroom (Thorne, 1993).

Girls often assumed power in the classroom by mimicking the teacher. This behaviour sometimes had benefits for the entire class when boys and girls obeyed the commands of the girl taking the role and allowed the girl to settle them down. The girls appeared to be experiencing the power of the teacher and it was interesting that boys seldom chose to engage in this behaviour. The authority of the teacher appeared to be a focus for girls' storylines, which were concerned with themes of control, order and everyday normality.

Playing school is not inconsistent with domestic storylines favoured by girls with the power of 'Mum' replaced by the power of the teacher (MacNaughton, 1995) and is less easily co-opted by boys. However, teachers disapproved of this and the forbidden nature of the activity made it a powerful yet dangerous transformation for girls.

At school, the four boys began to explore domestic storylines more than they had done in the early childhood centres. I attributed this to a greater number of girls in several schools, and their co-option of token boys for the usual male roles in their storylines (as Dads or pets). The boys were relegated to lesser roles in the play and their power lay in their ability to disrupt these storylines rather than direct them.

The assumption of the teacher's authoritative power by girls and the continuation of domestic storylines suggested that the new entrant classroom could become the site of considerable power for girls. Some girls, however, such as those in David's class,

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experienced teasing and marginalisation from boys. The data suggested that every classroom dynamic is unique and subject to shifting forms of power.

Transgressions

There were occasions at school when children decided to 'cross' gender boundaries. The game of 'kiss catch' described above, at Kelly's school was one example, as was the occasion when a group of older boys at the school sang the popular 'Barbie' song (by Scandinavian group, Aqua) amongst themselves, at lunchtime. Their performance of this song, itself a parody of the worlds of Barbie and Ken, had the flavour of gender transgression and stood in complete contrast to the recalcitrant attitude of many boys to music and dance in education. It was mocking, defiant and exuberant.

Some boys were able to violate masculine codes of behaviour, by doing ballet for example, without being teased. Kelly's teacher, Isobel, thought these were the truly 'strong' boys who were "strong enough not to worry about that". From this perspective, it appeared that masculinity was a fragile entity for boys to maintain. Based on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital, some boys seemed to have a greater stock of 'gender capital' than others. This allowed them to practise behaviours that for other boys would lead to ridicule. Some boys already displayed signs that they possessed such gender capital, while others, such as Ryan, got teased.

STORIES OF TRANSITION

Narrative stories of the transition to school by each of the four case study boys were developed from the thesis data. One critical concern was the degree to which aspects of boys' masculinities and gender identities were involved in the transition process, both emotionally and in terms of adjustment to school. The key points from the four narrative stories are used in the summaries of these presented in this section.

Kelly

Kelly was ready to start school according to his mother. He was aware of the school through family ties and several visits to the school. Despite sometimes appearing to be 'drifting' at kindergarten, a phenomenon with older children in early childhood centres also noted by Stephenson (1998), Kelly spent a lot of time creating art works and constructions at the collage table and printing his name in a range of increasingly elaborate ways. His continuing explorations with writing led me to believe that his learning dispositions for persistence and playfulness were highly developed (Carr, 1997). The issue of boys being able to write their names emerged several times from the data and was often seen by parents as the minimum benchmark necessary for school entry. Kelly had also set himself the task of learning to swing which furthered my perception that he was persistent.

Kelly's traumatic transition to morning kindergarten had come as a surprise to his mother, Julie, but she wasn't expecting the same problems when Kelly went to school:

> I thought he was just going to settle into kindy and I was in for a big shock because his reaction was the total opposite. After the first few days he didn't want to be there. It took about a full week of hard core, leaving him screaming, and it was hard. He just had to realise that's what I was doing. I dropped him off, leaving him for only ten minutes and then went back, and he realised I was coming back soon, until he got confident with the kindy teachers. I was really shocked because I had expected him to just blend in. (Julie: Interview 1)

Despite his seeming readiness, Kelly was prised, crying, off Julie every day for the first three weeks at school. He found a daily requirement to attend a whole-school assembly, and the following whole-school aerobics session, overwhelming. This reflects Dunlop's (1998) finding, that how children cope in one transition has significance for other transitions.

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Gradually, Kelly settled in at school and when I later visited, after his first term, he was attending the morning assemblies quite happily, although still not participating in the aerobics session. Soon, Kelly was one of those boys who had adopted some 'cool' mannerisms from older boys at the school, and appeared to have settled down into enthusiastic and focussed learning in the classroom.

David

David went to kindergarten too but, unlike Kelly, he usually appeared disinterested in indoor activities. Instead, he spent his time with the large group of boys who swung, spider-like on the trees, the jungle bars, the rubber tyre swings or slid down the slide before sprinting around the perimeter of the grounds, in constant motion. David rarely spoke to the teachers and any interactions he had were disciplinary, involving instructions about his physical safety, or were confined to the brief mat session prior to hometime each day. David's mother, Dale, thought he was bored with kindergarten and ready for school.

David's transition to kindergarten, like Kelly's, had also been traumatic and, like Kelly, David also had links with the school he was to attend. His older sister was already there and he was a frequent visitor with his mother, who was closely involved with school life. However, David was not familiar with the structure of the school day and this obviously came as a great shock to him when he started.

Despite no formal visits, David coped well with his first weeks at school although it was reported that he made frequent comments about the length of the school day, including "it takes so long". When I asked Dale how the first few days had gone, she said:

> Fine, he was great. Really excellent. He just said 'It's so long and I want to go back to kindy' and I asked him why and he said 'Because at kindy you can play all day!' (Dale, Interview 2)

After a month at school, David's best friend joined him in his class and I was able to observe the benefits for both boys. My observations reflected the views of Dunlop (1998) and Margetts (1997) about the value of friends at school. David seemed quiet at school and I wondered if he was one of the children Balaban (1985) suggested are "overlooked because they do not cause trouble" (p. 2.)

Joe

Joe attended crèche full time every day prior to his fifth birthday. He spent special time after lunch in the science corner and was no longer required to have a rest, an aspect of crèche life which he particularly disliked. He was regarded by his teachers and his mother as being ready for school. Joe's (and Ryan's) teacher, Jane, had the following to say about their imminent departures from crèche:

> I would say Joe and Ryan are definitely ready for school, they're ready for a bit more now. I'll be very interested to see how they get on. They've both got that love for learning, they both want to learn more, they want to do more, and they are definitely ready...I think they'll both cope fine with the structure. (Interview: Jane)

A sociable child, Joe spent a lot of time outdoors, playing in the sandpit, in fantasy games, superhero play or water play. During the more structured crèche sessions such as morning and afternoon tea, lunch and music sessions, Joe listened attentively to stories, asked questions and was interested in science topics. He was not observed engaging in literacy activities. I asked Joe about how he felt going to school the week before his birthday:

Jenni: When are you going to school?

Joe: After the holidays.

Jenni: What do you do at school, do you think?

Joe: I know what you do at school.

Jenni: How do you know that?

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Joe: Because I've been there.

Jenni: So what happens?

Joe: First the bell rings and you go inside and sit down. Then you write stories and then you play, and…I'm not sure what else you do.

Jenni: Is it different from crèche?

Joe: I do know…that you don't have rest time at school.

Joe obviously had positive expectations of school and had made several visits, even being left by himself for a while because things had gone so well. No-one was prepared for what was to follow. Joe soon decided (after a first day described as 'relatively positive') that he did not want to go to school. His mother, Justine, described Joe's refusal in the following way:

> [He] dug his toes in and said he wasn't going to go and we just had to force him to go. We forced him to go for the whole [first] week in the end…[He] wouldn't get up, didn't want to get dressed, didn't want to have breakfast. Just lots and lots of delaying tactics and then once he finally knew that he had to go he just cried and cried and cried and threw tantrums. Yeah, cried and cried and cried. When he was at school he wouldn't let you go, cried a lot…cried a lot during the day. (Justine, Interview 2)

Other problems emerged, including aggressive behaviour towards other children in the playground. The teachers described Joe as a 'wimp' because he cried every day when his father left, and they also thought he was 'bordering on hyperactive' when they saw the kind of play he engaged in. Within the classroom there was a tendency for Joe to be 'off task' and frequently to act in a 'silly' way. He appeared to have difficulty with the level of complexity required in many tasks and gave up very easily when confronted with things he couldn't do:

A group of four girls are studiously working on alphabet puzzles. Joe watches another boy draw. Joe is lying full length across the table, hanging his head over the edge, loses balance and then falls onto the floor. He acts out songs and dances, crosses the room to join the queue to the teacher's desk, pretending his crayon box is an electric guitar, mimes a Mick Jagger like movement. Returns to the table, romps with the other boy there. (Joe, School Observation 3)

At crèche he had not worked with puzzles or writing at all. Now he was left alone to attempt tasks that seemed beyond him. Instead, during every free moment, whenever the teacher wasn't looking, he continued to rehearse heroic storylines with other boys. His mother was convinced in hindsight that the crèche had not been good for Joe - after all it had obviously not prepared him adequately for school. My perception was that he had enjoyed a vibrant and high quality early childhood experience. Joe, a boy who had been described by his mother as the "Star of Crèche", had in the space of a few short weeks turned into a problem in the classroom.

Ryan

Ryan had attended crèche for six months prior to his fifth birthday, having moved several times with his mother, Oriana, over the past two years. Ryan spent most of his time indoors at crèche, working with art materials, science materials, books or blocks, invariably close to an adult with whom he could converse frequently. Teachers had commented to me that Ryan had cried a lot when he first came to crèche and they had worked hard to help him to verbalise feelings. His advanced general knowledge was a talking point for the crèche teachers and he seemed precocious with adults although rather timid with other children. When I asked his mother what she thought he knew about school he interrupted the interview to share his views about school:

    Oriana: I'm not sure what he knows about school.

    Ryan: I just know, you learn.

    Oriana: You learn now. What's the difference?

Ryan: I learn about rockets and space.

Oriana: The other thing is that he's just so full of questions.

Ryan: I never run out. (Oriana: Interview 1)

Ryan's first few weeks at school were difficult. After one day, at the same school as Joe, he was moved to another school which his mother felt would suit their needs better. He was then swapped from one class to another in his first week. Ryan cried a lot and was upset throughout his first few weeks at school and soon appeared to have behavioural difficulties as well. When I spoke to his teacher, Lois, she described the situation which I recorded in my research journal as follows:

> [Lois] has been having problems in the classroom with Ryan, with crying and hitting other children. She's put him on his own spot at the front of the classroom to focus him, and this has worked. She feels he came to school with limited knowledge and has only just started to write words by himself. He got teased by other children as he was seen as vulnerable, and also as a show-off. (Ryan, School Observation 2)

After some weeks it seemed that Ryan settled down into the school routines. It was disconcerting though, that two boys who had appeared to shine at crèche had significant problems at school. These problems had caused their parents to reconsider their views about the quality of early childhood education their sons had received, despite their high level of satisfaction previously.

Reflections on the boys' transitions

All four boys experienced difficulties to a greater or lesser degree when they went to school. They were all deemed ready by their parents and teachers, but only David made a relatively straightforward initial transition to school. For Kelly, where a longer period of observations was provided, the initial adjustment problems observed in his early weeks had almost disappeared by the second term.

Factors involved in the difficulties experienced by Kelly, Joe and Ryan appeared related to the degree of communication with teachers, the relative strength of links forged prior to starting school, through visits and prior knowledge, and the possibility of sharing the transition process with other familiar children. David's transition was eased by the presence of his sister, and soon after, the arrival of his friend.

Three of the parents said that, in hindsight, they wished there had been more structure in the early childhood centres. There was an irony in the fact that the crèche had offered a transitional programme for children about to start school. This had been developed by the supervisor, Jane, despite some debate within the centre management structure about the appropriateness of such a programme within an early childhood centre:

> I'll be quite honest, the team were not keen at all. They said 'We're not teachers, we are not here to teach reading and writing' and I discussed it with them, and they said 'OK, you can give it a go.' Well, when we went back to our next staff meeting they said 'We can't believe it, we thought you were going to sit them down and say 'You need to write this', but now they are very keen to carry it on because they saw how keen the children were. (Jane: Interview).

Neither Ryan nor Joe chose to participate in the programme.

The success or otherwise of the transition to school also seemed related to the type of early childhood centre attended. The children from highly staffed centres seemed disadvantaged - this raises questions about a need for improved staffing levels in schools.

Different family backgrounds appeared to have a marked effect on the shape of the transition to school. Life for the two families who had used full time child care

became decidedly more complicated after the children went to school - involving juggling work, after school child care and holiday arrangements. As working parents, their ability to attend information sessions and social activities for parents of new entrant children was also restricted, because these were frequently held during the day.

For the mothers not in paid employment, life became more straightforward. The start of school provided an extension of the hours of care offered by kindergarten, and greater freedom. When I asked Julie, Kelly's mother, what Kelly's going to school had meant for her, she said:

> A lot more time out! It's lovely not having a child home for the whole day sometimes...it's nice at school, because it's a whole day and I know he's having fun and learning, I can't wait for Thomas to start school...so I can have them both at school and pick them both up at the same time. (Julie: Interview 2)

The ethnicity and culture of the boys underpinned their lives, but the research methods did not deal sufficiently with home life to be able to grasp their full significance, although several of the parents interviewed expressed views about their culture and ethnicities. Several interviews pointed to racism in centres and schools and one school in particular was decidedly mono-cultural. The experiences of the case study boys as a result of their ethnicity and culture is a complex issue, especially when considered in relation to gender and class issues. Connell's (1997) reminders about the extreme ethnocentrism of present concerns with masculinities was a cause for reflection on my ability to carry out an ethnographic study of boys from different cultures to my own.

The family composition and place in the family of the four boys were also very different and these factors had a bearing on their experiences of starting school.

A further issue to arise from the transition data concerned the marked discontinuity of information between early childhood education and school. The teachers in Joe and Ryan's schools questioned me about their performance in the early childhood centre. Given that both boys had made 'rocky' transitions, cried a great deal and, early on in school life, displayed behavioural problems, it was not surprising that such information was sought. As researcher, I was certainly not in a position to provide the teachers with such information, yet the teachers were not collecting this information from parents.

The crèche supervisor, Jane, thought it would be good if the early childhood teacher could meet with the new entrant teacher. Jane suggested that the profile compiled on each child within the early childhood centre could be shared with the school. However, she also expressed some concerns about the potential pitfalls of such transmission of information from early childhood centres to school:

> We may have formed views about that child that aren't correct and if they go off to school and the new entrant teacher gets that knowledge, she may then carry on with those views. (Jane: Interview)

Improved communication between early childhood and school teachers would assist children in their transition. The gulf between the two sectors is a systemic problem, related to historical and philosophical divisions between compulsory and non-compulsory education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Who then should be responsible for the transition to school? Simpson (1997) asked:

> Why isn't it called transition from early childhood? Does the very title mean that the responsibility for the transition process is just for teachers in early childhood to work through? Or does this need to be a two way process that will have ongoing benefits for children and parents? (Simpson, 1997, p. 1)

MASCULINITIES AND THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Issues emerging during transition to school for the four case study boys strongly suggested a link between gender and masculinity discourses and the boys' adjustment to classroom life. Going to school became the occasion for significant power shifts that illustrated how a range of masculine positionings existed in educational settings.

Free play and structure

Within the early childhood centres used in my study, free play appeared to stand dichotomously in relation to structure. There was also evidence to suggest that a gendered link between free play and boys, and structure and girls, exists within New Zealand early education. Perhaps this is a reason why schooling, in some respects, appears to favour girls.

Structure, in this study, also became synonymous with school and school life, and the often discussed issue of readiness appeared to refer to the concept of readiness for structure. When Jane, Joe and Ryan's teacher, said she thought they were "ready for a bit more", she meant structured, academic activities.

The degree of structure within early childhood centres varied greatly, reflecting pedagogical and philosophical differences. In general, a less structured approach in the kindergarten meant that some children, particularly boys, seldom engaged in literacy or other indoor activities. The more structured approach in the crèche meant that disinterested children were required to engage in some activities, such as music. Care routines invariably included structured activities such as music, storytelling and group discussions, that otherwise, it is likely, some boys would not have engaged in.

Boys in the early childhood centres accessed a myriad opportunities to engage in heroic and transformational play, usually as a result of the large amounts of free time available to them for playing. At school, heroic storylines were limited to playtime or lunchtime, pushed underground or emerged through sites such as news. Masculinity

became connected to hegemonic masculine practices such as sport, which, ironically, were also highly structured with strict rules.

David, who had mostly spent his time at kindergarten outdoors, found the school day very long. Opportunities for physical challenge and transformation were now limited to free time. In the classroom, David was aligned with a group of boys, although he was careful to stay out of trouble. David had resources that he utilised when he went to school. He had his sister, who he played with for his first month, and then his best friend from kindergarten. David made a transformation at school entry, from an outdoor boy to a boy who coped in the classroom, making a "fantastic transition" according to his teacher, although, it seems likely that his first few months at school were more of a trial than she realised.

At school, Joe was only permitted to play heroic storylines at playtime and lunchtime. He continued to act them out anyway, whenever he could. Joe's transformation at school entry was from the "Star of Crèche" to being a child "bordering on hyperactive". Joe transgressed gender boundaries when he cried every morning on being parted from his father. His transition was subject to ambiguity and tension.

Developmental sessions

Both early childhood and school teachers in my study were supportive of practices that facilitated the transition to school, by offering elements of the other setting. In the early childhood centres, structure was offered in various forms, although the kindergarten teachers firmly stated "We don't see it as our job to prepare them for school".

In all four school classes, opportunities to return to the milieu of the early childhood classroom were provided in the form of 'developmental sessions', where a wide range of construction and exploratory materials were made available, although they entailed a limited range of clean, indoor activities. Historically 'developmental'

sessions are linked to the developmental learning movement but they also constitute a bridge between early childhood and school.

In Kelly's school, boys' access to the blocks was restricted during developmental times, in order to give girls a chance. Given the doubts about such strategies raised by some educators (Alloway, 1995), it appears that such policies could be interpreted as making the transition to school even less pleasant for some boys. It is arguable that, for many children, especially boys, greater access to developmental sessions would ease the transition to school.

David's behaviour, throughout a developmental session at school, was in stark contrast to his typical behaviour at kindergarten. At school he and his friend sat silently drawing with crayons. At kindergarten they were in the midst of a mass of boys swinging from bough to bough of the climbing trees and executing a series of fast movements between other equipment. 'Developmental' at school cannot be likened to free play. For the boys in my study it was likely experienced as another type of structured indoor activity.

The changing new entrant classroom

The continual visits of prospective children and their parents, together with the arrival of new children, made the new entrant classrooms the site of continual change and movement. Inevitably much of teachers' time is taken up with teaching new children the rules, with some children appearing to require continual reminders. This aspect of classroom life was similar in all four schools and suggested that one of the key tasks of the new entrant teacher was to socialise children for school rules and regulations.

Cullen and St George (1996) have discussed the continuous enrolment model in New Zealand schools in relation to children's 'learning scripts'. They have suggested that new entrants assume a teacher-directed 'script', as a result of the strong emphasis in new entrant classes on rules and work habits. Children in new entrant classes are

therefore less likely to develop more active scripts of themselves 'as learners'. From this perspective those children who are able to follow the rules and requirements of the new entrant classroom are more likely to succeed at school. In my study, boys appeared to interact less with teachers than girls. They were frequently reprimanded for being off task or not listening, consistent with Fergusson and Horwood's (1997) study that highlighted the increasing number of boys with attentional problems in the classroom.

Cullen (1998a) highlighted the significance of knowledge and control in the acquisition of metacognitive (learning) skills. If metacognitive abilities are related to power and control, then there are grounds to examine more closely the operation of power in the classroom. It seemed from my data, that boys' methods of dealing with power and control were different, in ways that seemed likely to impact negatively on their ability to adjust to school expectations. Girls were far more ready, for example, to rehearse the power arrangements of the classroom in their frequent imitations of the teacher. It was not surprising then that some boys were led to disrupt the 'storyline' of the classroom, with its single female authority figure. The classroom itself could be seen as a domestic storyline, the type of scenario that many boys appeared ready to sabotage in their play. These considerations, though tentative, may illuminate the apparent misbehaviour of boys, pointing perhaps to their more limited capacity to develop metacognitive skills in the classroom, a limitation related to the construction of masculinity.

Ryan experienced difficulties when he went to school. His high level of general knowledge had been a source of pride at crèche and the site of public performance, but at school his teacher commented he had come to school with "limited knowledge". Ryan transformed at school entry from someone with knowledge to someone without it. Ryan may also have lacked the gender capital to carry off his knowledge at school. He was seen as a skite by other boys.

School practices

Davies (1993) has suggested that the gender binary is encouraged and reproduced by the school in the production of knowledge. The news sessions observed provided some examples of this, where girls were rewarded for their feminine positioning, as caring and nurturing, and boys were ignored or disciplined for being interested in the latest electronic gadgets. Masculine positioned toys at school appeared antithetical to what was acceptable, in ways that feminine positioned toys were not. This was also the case in early childhood centres.

Boys appeared to be in a no-win situation with regard to both masculine and feminine positioning. The boys who transgressed the gender order and cried, for example, were labelled wimps. Parents and, especially, teachers wished boys to follow hegemonic masculine codes when they went to school. Yet boys were also expected not to be aggressive or play with weapons. The position for boys in education then appeared "deeply problematized" (Alton-Lee, 1997).

Kelly transformed into a "cool dude" when he went to school, fast adopting the mannerisms of older boys, to his mother's astonishment. At Kelly's small school, the blurring of gender boundaries appeared to be furthered by cross-age socialising, although it also resulted in the early adoption of the older boys' styles.

Transformations and Power

When transformation was applied as a concept to the four boys' transition to school, it appeared that some had made successful transformations, in terms of the requirements of school, and some had not. Were the boys aware of these changes or were they done *to* the boys? The emphasis in my study was on the children's gender identity, but it was also necessary to acknowledge the power of the school and its complex and shifting power arrangements.

Transition as a focal point

The transition to school as a focal point for masculinities and gender issues, throws the following key themes into relief:

- *How did the boys' masculinities operate in the two educational settings, early childhood centres and schools?*

The boys' experiences illustrated a diversity of masculine positionings, both powerful and less powerful. Masculinities emerged as a series of complex and actively constructed positions. Boys were clearly not a 'bloc', despite their frequent heroic play in groups. Neither were they the perpetrators. The thesis data suggests a need for a thorough examination of the power relations underpinning children's interactions.

- *How did the boys experience the transition from early childhood education to school?*

The boys underwent transformations when they went to school, if transformation can be seen as the desire to explore masculine subjectivities. Three of the case study boys made traumatic transitions to school and it is likely that David had difficulties also. The transition to school was a catalyst for shifts and transformations of gender dynamics.

- *What were the attitudes of parents and teachers towards the transition?*

Parents and teachers seemed preoccupied with notions of readiness. In several cases their convictions about boys' readiness bore no relation to how the transition actually went. Parents and teachers had active constructions of gender, which they constructed on a daily basis with the children in their care. Parents were understandably very concerned that their son's transition was smooth and many worked extremely hard to ensure that the children were well informed, although they

perhaps did not take sufficient cognisance of previous difficult transitions or the value of school visits for their sons.

- *What were the key differences for the boys between early childhood education and schooling experiences?*

A key factor was the schools' regulation of time, which underscored the philosophical boundaries between structure (formal teaching/learning) and free time/play. This also related to the increasing lack of access to the outdoors. For many boys this appeared to be a difficult aspect of the transition. The presence of a single teacher, after attending early childhood centres with at least three teachers (and up to six) was another factor that seemed to define the school experience. The presence of a population of older children also influenced the gender behaviour and culture of younger children at school.

- *What were the educational implications for the boys of the transition to school?*

There was evidence that aspects of classroom and school life militated against boys' success. But it is important to note that this was only the case for some boys and there were also girls who made difficult transitions during the research. There is a danger in labelling boys' problems as gender based, yet the research evidence clearly suggests their educational disadvantage (Fergusson and Horwood, 1997). Hegemonic masculine behaviours may also obscure the difficulties experienced by some children, who as Kelly's teacher commented, may hide behind a façade of ultra-cool behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Taking a post structuralist stance to the study of boys making the transition to school allowed me to move beyond the developmental perspective on this activity usually employed in New Zealand early education. What was revealed was sometimes

challenging to the philosophies and practices of early educators. In maintaining a stance that does not address gender issues directly, or follows equal opportunity models of intervention, educators may believe that they are offering children equality. However, this would seem to result in pedagogical practices in which power is overlooked.

Bringing gender issues to the foreground is a strategy likely to assist boys and girls in their transitions to school. Strategies, such as banning boys from the blocks, only seem to cause resentment and frequently, as Alloway (1995) said, leave "the power base intact" (p. 37).

The cessation of free play at school appeared crucially linked to boys' masculine identities, suggesting that educators may benefit from becoming fully aware of the powerlessness experienced when boys (and girls) start school. Equally, if developmental approaches are valuable in easing the transition to school for boys like Joe, who found it difficult to persist with many classroom tasks, then there is an argument for the extension of such programmes. Also, it follows that if boys' storylines and cultures are in some ways inimical to the way that learning is constructed at school, then evaluation of these ways of learning is needed.

The transitions of the four boys in my study were also subject to many social factors, including their dispositions, family circumstances and the early childhood centres they attended. The transition to school was also a site for the transformation of masculinities. How this occurred was unique for each individual boy. For some boys the transition was easier than for others. It would be interesting to know if these experiences will have a bearing on their later academic and social progress.

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