Negotiating Gendered Identities in Primary School

Children's Lives with Their Peers

Jon Swain

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Jon Swain
Institute of Education
University College London
London, UK

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Key to Transcripts

[text]: Background information
[…]: extracts edited out of transcript for sake of clarity
…: pause
/: moment when interruption begins

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About the Author

Jon Swain Jon lives in London and currently works at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL), where he is a senior research officer. His professional career began as a primary school teacher in 1980, and he took a part-time MA in Primary Education at the Institute of Education in the late 1990s, before completing his PhD in 2001 about boys' masculinity. He carries out mainly qualitative research, which has included a series of numeracy and literacy projects in the post-16 sector, and has also written many articles on boys' and young Black men's masculinities. Between 2008 and 2013 he was programme leader for the MPhil/PhD training programme. He has extensive of teaching on doctoral programmes, and he continues to supervise a number of doctoral students. Since 2019, he has also worked on the BA Education Studies degree, where he supervises undergraduate dissertations, and also has a role of personal tutor.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This chapter:

- introduces the reader to what the research is about and argues that the best people to ask about children's lives in school are the children themselves;
- summarises the aims of the book and the academic field in which the research is located;
- provides relevant information about my background and biography;
- outlines the structure of the book, which is organised into 10 chapters.

Sitting at my desk and gazing out the window around 8:45 on a term-time morning, I watch a growing trickle of children walk past the house on their way to the local primary school. A few of them are on their own, some are in pairs or small groups, but most are accompanied by adults, with many of the younger children holding their hands. I am struck by how many children there are and what an organising social event school is, and as the children disappear into these buildings, between around 9:00 and 3:15 the streets empty and traffic flows become considerably lighter. What happens inside these institutions matters and will help form the children's future lives in profound ways, but what really goes on behind closed doors, and what is life like for the children who attend?

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I should have a good idea as I was a primary school teacher for 20 years (1979–1999) and taught over 600 children. However, it was only when I began my doctoral research around 1998 that I had the chance and the time to really observe children and ask them questions such as what they thought about their school; what were their relations and interactions like with their peers; why were friendships so important to them; why did they need to identify with, and belong to, a particular group; and why, and how, did certain pupils in their peer group become especially popular. Teachers often don't have time, space or the inclination in their working day to explore questions like this, but I argue that perhaps they should be more curious. During my research, I remember talking to a young girl (aged 11) about her work and commenting on how neat her handwriting was. The intended compliment was met with an uncertain reaction, and she quickly stated that 'it's neat, but it's not *that* neat'. It gradually began to dawn on me how pupils have to work hard to negotiate their position in the peer group hierarchy and that pupils often have to tread a fine line between showing loyalty to, and either pleasing, their teachers or their peers: if her handwriting was too untidy, she might have been rebuked by the teacher, but if it was too neat she might have been accused of being a 'clever clogs' or a 'boffin' (or even worse), and this could possibly have led her to be teased or even bullied, subordinated and rejected by her peers. Similarly, I began to understand how pupils sometimes must judge when, and whether, to put their hand up to answer a teacher's question: once might be OK, but it may be risky to show too much enthusiasm and therefore be seen as aligning too closely with the formal school regime. Pupils need to negotiate and make choices on the position they are going to take. These types of insights were an eye-opener to me and, as a teacher, I was largely unaware that these kinds of decisions were being considered and made by children as I was teaching them subjects like maths and English.

This book focuses on how young boys and girls experience their life in their peer groups at school. It is about children's identities, relationships and practices: it explores who children think they are; how they make meanings, including what it means to be a boy or girl; and what forms of masculinity and femininity—or versions of being a boy and girl—are the most common and dominant.

Of course, the best people to ask about these kinds of topics are the children themselves, for as Thorne (1993) maintains we need to think of children, not as the next generation of adults, but as social actors who are living here and now. However, up until the late 1970s, very little research

sought to engage directly with young children in any meaningful way (Connolly, 1998). James and Prout (2015) write that the history of the study of childhood in the social sciences had been marked not by an absence of interest in children but by their silence. The new paradigm that started to emerge in the late 1970s began to give a voice to children, who, as Hardman (1973) suggested, gradually began to be regarded as 'people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching' (1973, p. 87). Although the trend in the Sociology of Education started in the 1970s to focus on what was happening, not just in classrooms, but also in the playground and dining halls, the number of studies of middle and secondary schools far outweighed those about primary schooling (Skelton, 2001), and it has only been in the last 45 years or so that academics have realised that, even at a young age, children are eager and enthusiastic to be given opportunities to proffer comment upon the contemporary world around them. They have their own vibrant, malleable culture which is responsive to the nuances and complexities of the adult world. Children can be highly reflective and actually have a very good understanding of how their social world is organised and how it works: they can tell us a great deal if we only ask them.

Academic researchers used to rely on non-participant observation as their main research method to generate data, which was felt to be more objective. In the mid-1970s, a PhD student, Roland King, investigated infant classrooms and called his thesis *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (King, 1978). He didn't attempt to talk to the children and, if they approached him, he used his height and adult presence to 'shoo' them away; he observed them, sometimes by even hiding in the Wendy House. We now know better and since King's study qualitative research about boys and girls in school settings has proliferated over the last 45 years or so (Bragg et al., 2022). While some studies have focused on boys' poor educational attainment in relation to girls, and their disenchantment with schoolwork, since the ethnographic work of EJ Renold (1999) and myself (Swain, 2001), which was based on our respective doctoral studies around the turn of the century, there has been comparatively little in-depth research, certainly in the UK, which has focused specifically on issues of masculinities and femininities and children's informal cultures at the upper end of primary or junior school. Much of the recent research on girls has been on issues around adolescent and teenage girls' sexualised identities, particularly online.

1.1 Aims of the Book

The main aim of this book is to describe and interrogate the life of 10–11-year-old pupils in their last year of junior/primary school. It is about how young boys and girls view and experience school life in their informal peer groups. My intention is to try and understand the social world from the children's perspectives, and the research, therefore, places the children's perceptions and experiences at the heart of its analysis. The findings and conclusions are based on their own interpretations and own points of view and are based on interviews with 94 children in two schools that I carried out between November 2021 and July 2022. Both schools are situated on the outskirts of London: one is a state primary, which I have called Wood Vale, and the other is a fee-paying preparatory school, feeding an independent secondary, or senior, school, which I've named Church Green.[1]

I was not interested so much in what the children thought of their teachers, or which subjects they liked the most and least. Although I did canvas their views on these subjects, it was haphazard, and data were therefore limited. Thus, the book is not really about the teachers, their pedagogy, the curriculum or the school's disciplinary apparatus. Many areas of interest came up in our conversations, which I chose not to pursue in any systematic way. One of the considerations for this was time—the interviews only lasted around an hour—but the main reason was that these areas, or themes, were not my main interest or concern; I felt that the research needed to be focused on the children's informal world with their peers and address the research questions I had set myself.

The main focus of the research is on how boys and girls view and experience school life in their informal peer group. Although studies about gender and young children's identities began to appear in the literature, it was not until the late twentieth century that analyses of gender began to recognise that there are as many, if not more, differences *within*, as *between* categories of boys and girls (Griffen & Lees, 1997). Within the last 30 years or so studies of masculinity and femininity have become a rapidly growing field and the basic proposition of much recent feminist and feminist-inspired work is that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, not biologically given. Boys and girls are not genetically hard-wired, and they learn how to act and behave in certain ways. Moreover, writers now talk about masculinities and femininities to show that there are multiple ways of being a boy and a girl, which produce a series of diverse patterns and outcomes. Gender is also often seen as a verb, it is not

just something we have, it is performed and is something that we 'do' and continually 're-do' through everyday social and cultural practices.

It is naive to ask questions like, what does it mean to be a boy or a girl today? (or, for that matter, a man or a woman?) that we sometimes find in the popular media. It's a bit like asking, what does it mean to be English? We need to beware of simplistic generalisations and appreciate that gender identity, or identities, cannot be reduced to a crude statement. There are many scripts that make up masculinities and femininities, which individuals can follow, and there are many versions of being a boy or a girl; moreover, gender is just one part of identity, and we need to consider other structures, or intersections, such as social class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, socio-economic status and so on (Collins, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2019; Peltola & Phoenix, 2022; Stahl & Keddie, 2020).

Masculinities and femininities need to be studied in contexts in which they are constructed, sustained, challenged and changed. Children negotiate and perform different versions of 'doing' boy and girl in a range of cultural and social situations, such as families, local neighbourhoods, sports, popular media, commodified style cultures and so on, and each of these sites offers opportunities that help form children's views of themselves. However, the focus of this book is on the school setting and how the educational system and individual school processes and practices contribute to the formation of children's masculine and feminine identities (Swain, 2006). They are also places where children also learn what it means to be a school pupil.

The study is positioned in the field of gender, rather than sexuality, although of course these fields overlap. More specifically, the research adds to the fields of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Critical Girlhood Studies (CGS). The book is written mainly for academics and students studying gender (and also sexualities), but many educationalists, such as teachers, and some parents, will also be interested, as life inside the children's informal peer group can sometimes seem a little like an opaque black box.

1.2 My Background

As I have written, I began my professional career as a primary school teacher in 1980. I taught at several primary schools in outer London boroughs and ended up as deputy head at a junior school in Essex. In 1992 I took a master's degree in education at the London Institute of Education

(now part of UCL) and, rather than pursuing a path towards being a head-teacher, I decided, in 1997, to take a break from teaching and begin a PhD at the same institution. At the time, there was an ongoing, almost moral, panic being conducted in the popular press and media about boys' underachievement in relation to girls, and teachers and schools were accused of betraying boys (Delamont, 2000). Instead of acclaiming girls, their teachers and/or their schools, all three were castigated and schools and teachers were accused of betraying boys (Delamont, 2000). The situation was neatly summed up by a letter to *The Guardian* (18.8.00):

> *Isn't it interesting? When boys were outperforming girls in exams it was because boys were cleverer. Now that girls are outperforming boys, it is because boys are underperforming.* (Debbie Burton)

This theme gradually began to morph into a research idea about boys' identities—who they thought they were. I didn't really accept the premise that all boys were struggling academically. I had taught many boys who worked just as hard as girls, and a lot of them also liked reading and writing just as much. I was suspicious of the binaries being created and boys' underachievement has turned out to be as much (if not more) about issues of social class and ethnicity as gender. I knew that my research would have something to do with the children that I had taught. In the end, I chose the theme of boys' identity, or their masculinity, and the title of my thesis was: *An Ethnographic Study into the Construction of Masculinity of 10–11-Year-Old Boys in Three Junior Schools* (Swain, 2001). During my fieldwork, I interviewed boys in small friendship groups but also spoke to all the girls at each school and, over the next years, I became interested as much in femininities and feminine identities as in masculinities. When I carried out this recent study, I thought it would be interesting to see how school cultures and pupil identities have changed since I carried out my PhD around 25 years ago.

1.3 Structure of the Book

The book is organised into 10 chapters. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 set the scene and include details of the theories and methodology; Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 present the main empirical findings, arguments and conclusions.

Chapter 2, 'Literature and Theories', provides information about the concepts and theories of identity, the body and embodiment and agency,

and outlines different concepts and forms of masculinity and femininity. It then analyses how schools work and operate and considers how pupils are regulated, surveilled and controlled in terms of time and space. It then looks at the aims and purposes of the two schools where I carried out the research, their ethos (or culture) that came from being state and private, before considering gender divisions which are built into the structures and architecture of schools in general. The chapter then explains the two interrelating cultures found in schools: the official, or formal, school culture (teaching, administration, management, discipline) and the unofficial, or informal, school culture (the pupils themselves): both have their own rules, codes and regulations. This theoretical section ends by reminding readers about the function and power of the pupils' peer group.

Chapter 3, 'Methodology', provides information about my theoretical and epistemological position, the background about how and why the study began, further basic details of the two schools, the sample of pupils and how it was obtained, the main method used (which was interviews), the main research questions, the process of analysis and ethical issues, and some of the limitations of the research. I also look at some of the challenges of being an adult researcher.

Chapter 4, 'Life at School', presents empirical data and reviews pupils' thoughts on their life at school, from their perspectives and interpretations. What were the best and worst parts of school? What did the pupils think of the teachers and some of the lessons? What did they feel about homework, examinations such as SATs,[2] how much pressure did they feel, and what other stresses did they experience at school? The chapter also explores levels of teasing and bullying in each school.

Chapter 5, 'Making Friends', considers the influence of the peer group on who the pupils think they are now and who they will become. The peer group, at this age, is beginning to assume more importance than parents/family, and there is an urgent need for children to belong to, and identify with, particular groups of pupils. Friends were, and are, a vital ingredient of school life, and all the pupils said that friendship was the best part of school. Questions explored are: what makes a best friend, and what values are particularly prized? How are friendship groups constituted, and how are they characterised; what are the differences between girl and boy friendships groups, and do girls make friends with boys and vice versa?

Chapter 6, 'Popularity and the Ideal Schoolboy and Schoolgirl', has a brief resume of other research about this area, which is connected to status and which is gained by using the resources available in each setting. These

include *physicality and athleticism* (e.g. excelling in a particular sport); *social resources* (e.g. being nice and kind, being sociable, with well-developed linguistic and interpersonal skills); *personal* resources (e.g. being confident and independent and able to make decisions); *and cultural resources* (e.g. knowing the latest memes, or latest verbal expressions and jokes, and being able to engender a laugh). The chapter explores the concept of popularity: Why are some pupils more popular than others? What makes certain pupils popular? What are the qualities/attributes that they have? How do they gain and maintain popularity? Who were the leading boys and girls who could set the agenda in terms of how to behave and who pupils may look up to and try to emulate? The chapter also asks questions about what would an ideal schoolboy or schoolgirl be like. What characteristics would they have, and how would they act?

Chapter 7, 'Messaging Platforms, Video Games and Social Media Outside School, and Thoughts About Their Childhood', addresses questions around the children's use of messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, and the children's use of video games. What did the children think about social media, how did they use it after school, and how many children used it? Were these practices gendered, and how much was their use of messaging platforms, game time and social media controlled by their parents? The next section discusses their thoughts about their childhood and the transition to adolescence. While many were looking forward to becoming a teenager, others were worried of becoming corrupted at secondary school; they also had concerns about increased exposure to social media and some wanted to retain their innocence. The chapter ends with a brief section on the children's greatest influences in their life and their media hero(es).

Chapter 8, 'Cultures of Sexuality', begins with a review of the literature which shows that heterosexual romantic cultures are experienced by the majority of children in schools and that boyfriend-girlfriend relationships can also include pressures of coercion, control and harassment. Questions explored are: how much of the school culture was sexualised within a heterosexual milieu? How many pupils had crushes on the opposite genders? How many boy/girlfriend relationships were there? What did it/does it mean to be 'going out' with someone, and did pupils notice how attractive other pupils were?

Chapter 9, 'Patterns of Masculinity and Femininity', explores what the children's identities and understandings were of being a boy and a girl. The main forms of masculinity that are considered and interrogated are

hegemonic, dominant and subordinated. New forms of masculinity have also recently emerged and are included such as personalised forms. I introduce a new concept of blended masculinity that was found in both schools, which consists of conventional qualities of masculinity (e.g. athleticism, assertiveness, confidence, independence), combined with feminine associated traits (e.g. kindness, caring, sociability, emotional literacy). The research also asks what were the main forms of femininity in each school. The main forms of femininity interrogated are Connell's emphasised femininity and new forms of hybrid femininities, which also consist of traditional feminine and masculine qualities, and which have similar qualities to blended masculinity. Data is also included about girly girls and tomboys.

The book finishes with 'Conclusion and Discussion' (Chap. 10), which summarises the main findings, points and arguments made. It also reviews how the two schools were similar, how were they different, and how things at school have changed, particularly for pupils, over the past 25 years, using my doctoral research as a comparison. After making some suggestions for further research in this area, the chapter ends with some thoughts about what the implications of this study are for teachers, school management, policy makers, parents and children.

Notes

1. All names of places and people in the book have been changed.
2. SATS stands for Standard Assessment Tests. All 10–11-year-old pupils in Year 6 in English state schools take SATS in maths and English. They take place in May, they are externally marked, and results are published, so producing league tables of schools' performance.

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CHAPTER 2

Literature and Theories

This chapter discusses:

- theories of childhood;
- theories of gender, categorisations of boy and girl, masculinities and femininities;
- the body and embodiment;
- status, resources and strategies;
- identities;
- the exercise of agency;
- how schools operate;
- the aims and purposes of the two schools in this study;
- the ethos, or culture, of the two schools, and gender divisions;
- the official/formal and unofficial/informal cultures;
- the influence of the peer group.

2.1 Theories of Childhood

This book is about children and their childhood, particularly the part of it that they spend at school. Although there are many different conceptions about the institution of childhood, as a sociologist I argue it is important to remember that childhood needs to be understood as a social construction and is distinct from psychological understandings as a biological immaturity. As a variable of social analysis, it cannot be detached from

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other variables such as social class, gender or ethnicity. In other words, there are a variety of childhoods. Two key points that we need to bear in mind about childhood are that (i) children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults; and (ii) children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes, but are able to exercise agency, and are active in the construction of their own social lives and the lives of those around them (James & Prout, 2015), albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing (Marx, 1963 [1852]; Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2022).

2.2 Theories of Gender

Many of my fellow academics at UCL who work in the fields of gender and sexuality are post-structuralists, who are particularly interested in language, the concept of truth and how people (in this case, children) are positioned, and position themselves, within and through various discourses. Although I sometimes draw on post-structural theories and theorists, in general I use interpretivist and constructionist theories and, rather than using the concept of discourse, I adopt the idea from Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) of localised practices and 'storylines' and 'repertoires of action' (p. 51), which are made natural or desirable within the local school cultures.

2.2.1 Categories of Boy and Girl

Before I move on to focus on theories of masculinity and gender, I want to address the two categories of boy and girl, which I use throughout this book, but which have, as Francis and Paechter (2015) argue, also 'haunted' the field of gender theory and its empirical applications. For many researchers working in the field of gender it has sometimes been difficult to get away from the dualism at the heart of the concept 'gender', and the conflation of 'sex' and 'gender' underpins much empirical work and, for some, can be problematic (Francis & Paechter, 2015). For Cream (1995), gender *and* sex are historically and geographically variable categories, which in turn means a radical questioning of terms such as 'boy' and 'girl'. However, the categories of 'men/boys' and 'masculinities' and 'women/girls' and femininities are actually inseparable. When these concepts are used by gender scholars, men/boys are used as the plural for 'man/boy' or and 'women/girls' for the plural of 'woman/girl', which usually

signifies a sex category, while 'masculinity' or 'femininity' refers to a gender construction. As Messerschmidt writes, 'both sex and gender grow out of the same embodied social practices in specific social settings and are thus mutually constituted' (Messerschmidt, 2023, pp. 2–3),[1] and I am viewing both sex and gender as socially constructed identities, not just gender. Through government policy in the UK (Equality Act, 2010), the conventional, and social media, awareness and discussion of trans-issues, and non-heteronormative sexualities, has been growing, and this includes in educational settings. Although I am aware that using categorisations of girl/boy, female/male, femininity/masculinity can appear to be like hegemonic binaries, and that there now exists a variety of non-binary gender and sex identities, this was the main way in which pupils were classified in their lived realities at these two schools. Although this suggests that it was difficult for pupils to explore other identities, the headteachers told me that there were no pupils in their school who identified as non-binary, gender fluid, non-conforming or trans.[2] Although Paechter (2021) maintains that a small proportion of children do identify across binary genders, young children have 'strongly held binary ideas about what is appropriate for girls and boys' (p. 618), and most have a resistance to any attempts to confront such stereotypes (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Martin, 2011). She concludes by stating that,

> the increasing prevalence of nonbinary identities among young people and adults is less likely to be reflected among younger children, particularly those in the early years of schooling. (p. 618)

As all the pupils that I spoke to appeared content to use the categories of girl and boy, I am also using gender distinctions based on sexed bodies, designated at birth. Although some researchers wish to deconstruct these binaries, this was not the focus of my research, and I did not ask the right questions to explore this theme further.

2.2.2 Masculinities and Femininities

Masculinities and femininities are, essentially, configurations of social practice that produce particular social relations and social meanings (Connell, 1995). Social constructionist theories view gender as relational, where masculinity defines itself in opposition to femininity. There are sociocultural constructions and associations attached to the two terms. For example:

Masculine	*Feminine*
Rationality	Emotion
Strength	Weakness
Aggression	Care
Competition	Co-operation
Activity	Passivity
Independence	Dependence
Sporting	School work
Mathematics	Reading
Science	Nature/arts

Although these are a set of notional social and cultural constructions, and nobody is going to exhibit all the associative attributes listed above to the preclusion of others, these core values rest behind all constructions of masculinity or femininity and, indeed, it would be impossible to recognise or talk about any discernible masculinity or femininity without them (Francis, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Of course, this is not to say that these traits are not sometimes contradictory or blurred nor that gender identity can be constructed differently by different people in different settings, cultures and social classes. Moreover, boys can display and enact qualities of feminine conduct and be bearers of femininity and vice versa. In other words, masculinity should not be tied to male bodies, and femininity to female bodies, but rather to sets of behaviours or practices. The fundamental point is that there are differences *within* the categories of 'boy' and 'girl', as well as *between* boys and girls.

Masculinity or femininity are not *a priori* ontological facts but a set of social, cultural and material practices: they are something we *do*, rather than *have* or *are* (West & Zimmerman, 1987). *Doing gender* is a recurring accomplishment and, as such, these practices are always open to contestation and/or the possibility of being expressed and performed in different ways. We have come a long way from the socialisation/sex-role frameworks which informed earlier studies of gender in primary and infant schools (e.g. Clarricoates, 1978, 1980, 1987; Delamont, 1990; Evans, 1987; Serbin, 1980). Many writers (e.g. Connell, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 1996; Skelton, 2001) have persuasively argued that theories of socialisation and sex roles are inadequate as they ignore the complex, dynamic and frequently contradictory nature of gender. These theories of socialisation imply that there is a general social consensus about gender roles which can be used as a guide and 'learnt' in a one-way mechanical process; while sex-role theories suggest that there are a set of universal,

unitary male and female characteristics which have somehow been defined as normal, and on which children can model themselves. There is no single consensual model for children to internalise (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998); instead, there are a competing and conflicting variety of styles of masculinity (or versions of being a boy) or femininity (or versions of being a girl), which change according to time and place and with the people who are involved.

Formations of Masculinity

The most notable examples of research about masculinities in the UK with this age group since the millennium (some of which include girls) can be grouped under the following headings: *academic achievement* (Francis, 2010; Skelton & Francis, 2011; Wells, 2016); *constructions of masculinity* (Paechter, 2006, 2007; Renold, 2005, 2007, 2013; Swain, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2023); *gender relations and sexualities* (Atkinson, 2021; Hall, 2020; Renold, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013; Swain, 2004b); *power, friendship, humour and status* (Jago et al., 2009; Schiffrin-Sands, 2021). There has also been important research about masculinities from Australia, Finland, South Africa and the US, some of which I refer to in the book (Bhana, 2008, 2013, 2016; Bartholomaeus, 2012, 2013; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016, 2018; Huuki et al., 2010; Manninen et al., 2011; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2020).

Drawing on the highly influential work of Connell (1995), I am conceptualising masculinity as social construct, occupying a place in gender relations. Generally regarded (at least by sociologists) as being in the plural, masculinities are constructed, negotiated and performed, and, as I have written, are defined in relation to, and against, femininity. They are not only multiple but also fluid and contextual, with meanings of being a boy (and a man) contingent on time and place, and the relations with people involved. Moreover, because they are dynamic and not fixed, and because they are constructed in specific settings and historical circumstances, they are always provisional and therefore open to contestation and change.

2.2.3 Dominant and Hegemonic Masculinity

Theories of masculinity have experienced a number of changes since the early part of the century. A major conceptual breakthrough in the field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) in recent years has

been the move to resolve the difference between dominant and hegemonic masculinities, which some gender scholars have used interchangeably. For example, Martin (1998) raised the issue of slippage and inconsistent applications of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, observing that some scholars equated the concept with a static type of masculinity, or with whatever form that happened to be dominant in a particular place at a particular time.[3] Building on work of Martin (1998), Flood (2002), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Schippers (2007) and Beasley (2008), this has been chiefly led by Messerschmidt (2018, 2019), who writes that, whereas dominant masculinity is the most culturally celebrated version of boyhood on show, and provides a blueprint of how to think and act in a particular setting, hegemonic masculinities 'legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 75). Messerschmidt also notes that dominant masculinities can also, at certain times, be hegemonic.

2.2.4 Subordinate Masculinity

Subordinate masculinities are seen as being inferior, or lesser, to the dominant and/or hegemonic form: in other words, they are the antithesis of these expressions of boyhood (or manhood). As all masculinities are constructed in contrast to being feminine, those located at the base of the hierarchy will be symbolically aligned to femininity and prone to have characteristics of the feminine forms. The various strategies of subordination that boys use against each other are often constructed under the two generic captions of 'difference' and/or 'deficit' (or deficient) (Swain, 2003b).

2.2.5 Personalised Masculinity

There is also a more egalitarian, non-hierarchical, form of masculinity, which is outside Connell's framework and which was first proposed by myself (Swain, 2006): *personalised masculinities.* Messerschmidt (2018) refers to this pattern as part of a group of 'positive' masculinities that have the potential to become counterhegemonic. Just because there is a culturally celebrated and commanding form of masculinity in each setting, it does not necessarily mean that all boys (or men) will try to copy all, or even *some,* of its features. While there will be some boys who do not want to become involved with the leading group of boys because they lack the

resources to do so (e.g. they are not physically strong or quick, or skilful at, say, football), other boys will make the deliberate choice not to engage with them out of preference. They are happy to practise their own personal interests such as music, computer games or specialised hobbies. As they are no threat to the elite groups they are usually ignored, rather than subordinated, and they have no wish, or need, to subordinate others.

2.2.6 *Caring Masculinity*

I have also been attracted by the relatively recent and burgeoning theories of caring masculinities, which originated from the work of Scambor et al. (2014), who were interested in engaging more men in issues of gender equality (e.g. Beglaubter, 2021; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Elliott, 2016, 2020). Elliott describes caring masculinities as being softer, more inclusive, patterns that rebuff patriarchal domination and champion more feminine qualities of interdependence, tolerance, care and positive emotion (Elliott, 2020). Caring masculinities both embrace and critique Connell's theory (Elliott, 2016). For example, Hanlon (2012) argues that dominant and hegemonic masculinities may encourage men to eschew their need for emotional intimacy and cause embarrassment, or even shame, when they feel unable to live up to hegemonic ideals. Moreover, Seidler (2007) writes how Connell's conception of masculinities is 'locked into relations of power' (p. 12), which makes it more difficult to think about the daily lived realities of men's (and young boys') experiences and vulnerabilities and may also constraint research about how masculinities may change in practice.

Hanlon (2012) also maintains that it is crucial to explore values of care and emotion, which are intertwined, rather than appearing averse to masculine power and dominance. However, it is also important to appreciate that not all men who practise aspects of caring masculinities necessarily support gender equality (Morrell & Jewkes, 2011). Moreover, Hunter et al. (2017) suggest that, rather than viewing these newly recognised caring forms as being analytically discrete, it is also possible to view them as being subsets of the dominant or hegemonic forms. This relatively recent conception remains a contested area in the literature and, so far, has mainly been applied to middle-class, white men such as fathers (Beglaubter, 2021) and, as far as I know, has not been used with boys. I mention this concept although, as we will see, rather like Hunter et al. (2017), I argue in Chap. 9 that they form part, and are therefore a subset,

of my own concept of blended masculinity. Of course caring is also huge part, and an integral trait, of femininity and although specific caring aspects can be identified and applied, there may not be a need to view caring femininities as a discrete form in their own right. When I am using the term I am referring to individuals who care and show kindness *about* and *towards* others in everyday relationships (King & Swain, 2024), as many boys in this study did. However, I recognise that these issues are still being debated in the gender fields.

2.2.7 Blended Masculinity

As we will see below, comparatively recent research about femininities from the UK, the US and Europe has suggested that the traditional practices of femininity—submissiveness, docility, vulnerability, quietness and general passivity—are being superseded by contemporary feminine attributes of, for example, authenticity, attractiveness, fitness and athleticism, which are enacted particularly by adolescent girls and young women. Whilst still displaying heterosexual appeal, these individuals also present a series of more masculine markers, such as self-control, independence, determination, competitiveness and individual freedom, which produces a hybrid form of femininity (e.g. Budgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Messerschmidt, 2018; Ringrose, 2007). In this book, I am proposing that many of the boys in the study also performed a similar form of hybrid, or *blended masculinity*, consisting of conventional, or orthodox, masculine qualities such as being athletic, strong-willed, confident, independent (and able to stand up for oneself), which were also combined with more feminine associated attributes of showing emotion, kindness, caring and sociability. As we shall see, many boys in this study also possessed characteristics of being funny, (reasonably) clever, working hard and (reasonably) sporty, which, I argue, are more gender-neutral associations.

While I am not claiming that the term 'blended' masculinity is my own, or is unique, I propose that this form that I shall present in the empirical findings is a new pattern of masculinity found in school settings. The term has occurred in the literature before, although in slightly different ways from my own conception. For instance, Sears (2014) used the expression to conceive how women musicians (band leaders) blended masculine traits into their feminine identities while teaching, while Ganapathy and Balachandran (2019) used the name of gang members in Singapore to describe a mixture of their ethic masculinities ('Malayness' and 'Chineseness').

Of course, the term 'hybrid masculinity' is a familiar one to the field of CSMM, but this formulation is different from the concept advocated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018). While this formulation also involves the incorporation of femininity, it focuses on privileged groups' such as white, heterosexual men, which, while giving masculine hegemony a greater flexibility, actually acts to obscure and secure its hegemonic power, thus providing a new way to legitimate unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018). Some scholars (e.g., Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 2018; Demetriou, 2001; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019) working with the framework of hybrid masculinities also argue that rather than disappearing, hegemonic masculinities have changed forms. Instead of viewing this as implying that homophobia and heterosexism have decreased, they suggest that they still persist but can be seen in more subtle or different ways (e.g. micro-aggressions, through language, jokes etc.). Thus, while building on some of Connell's (1995) main ideas, Bridges and Pascoe's version preserves her emphasis on the hierarchical and unequal relationships between men and women (boys and girls) and among men (boys).

While there is nothing especially new about understanding that boys and men can embody and enact both masculine and feminine traits (e.g. Paechter, 2007) and vice versa (e.g. Halberstam, 1998; Pascoe, 2007), and that masculinity should not be confined to male bodies, but rather to arrays of behaviours or practices, I maintain that this version of blended masculinity I am proposing is a new and specific form of non-hegemonic and positive masculinity, more analogous to an emergent hybrid type of femininity. As we will see, the boys in my study may have been relatively privileged (as the white men were in Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) study), in the sense that they were middle-class and came from economically secure families (particularly at Church Green), but they were from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Instead of being hegemonic, or concealing hegemony, it was the most common form on show.

Formations of Femininity

The most significant empirical research into primary school-aged girls this century in the UK can be grouped under the following headings: *pupil cultures* and *identities* (Allan, 2009; Archer et al., 2012; Bragg et al., 2022; Francis, 2009; Francis et al., 2017; Mannay, 2013; Paechter, 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2007, 2016; Read, 2011; Renold & Allan, 2006; Skelton et al., 2009); *friendship groups* and *popularity* (George & Browne, 2000; Jago et al., 2009; Scholtz & Gilligan, 2017); *cross-gender*

relations (Clark & Paechter, 2007; Schiffrin-Sands, 2021; Swain, 2004c, 2014); *online cultures and media* (D'Lima & Higgins, 2021; Gibson, 2018; Purdy & York, 2016; Willett, 2015); and *sexualised culture and body images* (Atkinson, 2020; Huuki et al., 2022; Renold, 2002, 2003, 2013).

As with masculinities, there has also been a similar interest in femininities. Since entering the new millennium, there has been a considerable amount of debate in Critical Girlhood Studies (CGS) on issues about, for example, the degree to which types of femininities are able to incorporate masculine attributes (e.g. Francis, 2010; Paechter, 2006; Schippers, 2007; Willis, 2009); whether there can be hierarchies within femininities (e.g. Budgeon, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2019; Paechter, 2018; Schippers, 2007); and whether the notion of hegemonic femininity exists, either in wider society or in a particular, localised setting (e.g. Hamilton et al., 2019; Messerschmidt, 2020; Paechter, 2018). Messerschmidt's (2020) paper is a critique of Paecher's (Paechter, 2018) and Hamilton et al.'s (2019) conceptions of hegemonic femininity, and he maintains that the concept cannot exist because, although a particular formation of femininity can be culturally authoritative and dominant, it does not participate in the legitimation of unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities.

As I have written, gender performances are constituted within relations of power. Femininity, like masculinity, is an active construction and is about who we think we are, how we appear, what we do and how we act (Paechter, 2007). Being a girl, and the pathway to adolescence and adulthood, is an ongoing question of becoming (Hall, 1990, 1992), and girls/women, like boys/men, are active participants in repeated negotiations and performances of their gender identities. The position I am taking views gender as being relational, where feminine practices are socially defined in opposition to masculinity and other femininities, it is important to reinforce the point that this is not in a symmetrical relationship and femininity is often defined as a lack, or absence, of masculinity: what masculinity is not. Like masculinities, many feminist scholars (e.g. Allan, 2009; Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1997; Francis, 2010; Hey, 1997, Keddie, 2005; Nayak & Kehily, 2013; Paechter, 2018; Renold, 2005; Ringrose, 2007) argue that there are multiple femininities, which are dynamic, mutable and contextual, contingent on time and place and the relationships involved, and I therefore draw also on some post-structuralist theories, particularly in the fluidity and performance of non-unitary identities.

Again, within each setting, it is generally possible to identify a form of dominant femininity Messerschmidt (2020), which is the most culturally admired, influential and accepted way of being a girl or woman. One of the most durable and widely accepted constructions of femininity that have been applied by feminist researchers to girls and women in many settings, including those with primary-aged and early-year children in schools (e.g. Bhana & Mayeza, 2019; Blaise, 2005; Kostas, 2021, 2022; Paechter, 2006, 2010; Reay, 2001), is Connell's notion of 'emphasised' femininity, which she defined as a type 'oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (Connell, 1987, p. 183)—and boys. Determined through its unequal and subordinate relationship to hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity enables the legitimation of gender hegemony.

Some scholars have also referred to this as a type of 'hyper'-femininity (Allan, 2009), which is also a 'heterosexualised' femininity (Renold, 2005) where individuals express traditional femininity in heightened or accentuated ways, although always within Butler's (1990) 'heterosexual matrix'. A part of these typologies is the construct of the 'girly girl', where individuals both embody and overtly perform qualities that are associated with being '*too* feminine' (Budgeon, 2014, p. 327)—my italics. Francis et al. (2017) argue that 'emphasised' or 'hyper'-femininity and the construct of the girly girl are frequently applied interchangeably, often without any explanation. In this study, the term 'girly girl' was recognised and used by the schoolgirls themselves to describe girls enacting particular (stereotypical) feminine behaviours and investments.

However, as I have written earlier, recent feminist thinking has begun to embrace the relatively new conception of 'hybrid' femininity, which integrates both feminine and masculine associated attributes (e.g. Budgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Messerschmidt, 2018; Ringrose, 2007). My study also suggests that some younger girls have also begun to embody and practise many of these qualities and, thus, increasingly, the dominant gender construction for many young girls today is a 'hybrid' femininity. This is redolent to the concept of 'hybrid-girlhood' delineated by Willis (2009) in her research with pre-adolescent girls in the US, in which she demonstrated these girls merged conventional aspects of femininity and masculinity into their gendered performances. Willis (2009) also highlighted the role of agency, which she maintains, is integral to understandings of girls' identity constructions, and I apply it in this study to mean the capability and degree to which individuals are able to 'exercise control' (Bandura, 2001, p. 11) over events and situations. (I discuss the concept of agency more fully below.) Despite individual lives

being always shaped by the structures and social conditions they find themselves in, I posit that hybrid femininities have a particular agentic quality and offer opportunities to perform different ways of being and *doing* girl.[4]

Some writers, such as Budgeon (2014), McRobbie (2009) and Messerschmidt (2020), argue that, at least so far, this hybrid form has not resulted in a breakdown of unequal gender relations. When it is aligned in a subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity, although it replaces Connell's (1987) conception of emphasised femininity, it actually becomes its own new contemporary version of emphasised femininity. Because it does not require girls to discard *all* feminine qualities, it does not threaten masculine privilege (Budgeon, 2014, p. 327) and is therefore involved in the continuing reproduction of gender hegemony. As McRobbie (2009) writes, hybrid femininities can remain 'reassuringly feminine' (p. 57).

In many ways, the concept of hybrid femininity is not new. Paechter (2006) reminds us that Stoller (1968) considered this over 45 years ago and concluded that the degree of masculinity or femininity that a person 'has' as being variable (p. 259). Paechter (2006), herself, also wrote almost 20 years ago that is important to 'understand that not all masculinities are entirely masculine, or femininities feminine' (p. 262). However, my argument is that theories of hybrid femininity are becoming increasingly debated, sophisticated and more developed.

In relation to hybrid femininity, it is also necessary to mention the work of Halberstam (1998) on female masculinity. Using queer theory, her research study has been influential in showing that gender can be separated from the gender-appropriate body and that femininity and masculinity cannot be reduced to female and male bodies. Halberstam posits that the idea of female masculinity dates back well over 100 years and that women (and girls) can take on the appearance of masculinity in ways that unearth the workings of masculinity itself (Nayak & Kehily, 2013). Halberstam argues that girls should eschew femininity, as it is commonly pathologised, and gives an example of a childhood tomboy as being an archetypal expression of female masculinity, which is 'viewed benignly as a girl's agentic desire to enjoy the freedoms associated with boyhood' (Nayak & Kehily, 2013, p. 198). Halberstam maintains that girls' freedom, and indeed, their world, narrows once they reach puberty. However, her/his work has been critiqued by academics such as Francis (2010), Nayak and Kehily (2013) and Paechter (2006). Nayak and Kehily point out that there is a 'striking lack of engagement with femininities in any

form throughout the text' (p. 202) and that Halberstam's writing is angled too much towards the world of masculinity, which becomes reified and viewed as a signifier of dominance and power. This means that femininity is seen as being inferior to masculinity. Paechter (2006) also questions the placement of the grammar in the term 'female masculinity', arguing that using 'masculinity' as a noun implies there is a thing being named, and suggests that masculinity is something concrete and fixed, rather than being complex and mutable, particularly when disassociated from maleness. Paechter's preferred formulation is 'masculine girl/woman' (or 'feminine man/boy'), which, she argues, 'allows for girls and young women to behave in masculine ways, without having this as their central defining quality' (p. 261). The form of hybrid femininity that I am suggesting differs from Halberstam's conception in that it is not skewed particularly towards masculinity, it contains a mixture of feminine and masculine attributes, and the girls, certainly in this study, did not try, or want to, remove femininity from their identities.

2.3 The Body and Embodiment

As I have written, neither masculinity nor femininity exists as an ontological given but comes into existence as people act (Connell, 2000); that is the social, cultural and material practices through which, and by which, the boys' and girls' identities are defined are generally described in terms of what they do with/to their bodies, and as such I embrace the concept of embodiment (Turner, 1997, 2000). Although there are a number of ways of defining embodiment, it needs to be understood as a social process (Elias, 1978). Although bodies are located in particular social and historical structures and spaces, the children in this study are viewed as embodied social agents, for they do not merely have a passive body which is inscribed and acted upon, but they are actively involved in the development of their bodies throughout their school life (and indeed for their entire lifespan). Thus, as Connell (1995) argues, we should see bodies as both the 'objects and agents of practice, with the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined', and she calls this 'body-reflexive practice' (Connell, 1995, p. 61). The pupils experience themselves simultaneously *in* and *as* their bodies (Lyon & Barbalet, 1994, p. 54) and in this respect *they are bodies* (Turner, 2000). They can be seen being consciously concerned about the maintenance and appearance of their bodies, endeavouring to make it 'the instrument of the will' (Frosh

et al., 2002, p. 68); they can be seen learning to control their bodies, acquiring and mastering a number of techniques such as walking, running, sitting, catching, hitting, kicking and so forth, and using them in the appropriate ways that being a boy or girl demands. Moreover, they are aware of its significance, both as a personal (but unfinished) resource and as a social symbol, which communicates signs/messages about their self-identity. The body is thus an integral part of identity and of our biographies, for the process of making and becoming a body also involves the project of making the self (Shilling, 1993; Synnott, 1993).

There was a struggle over the body between the school system and the boys which was a contestation between control against agency: whilst some of the official practices of the school attempted to regulate and control the bodies to render them docile and receptive for 'better' learning, the children in this study were full of activity and agency and, I suspect, often resisted these attempts.

Connell (1995) suggests that the physicality of the body remains central to the cultural interpretation and experience of gender. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of 'embodied' capital as a subdivision of cultural capital, Shilling (1991, 1993) argues that it is possible to view the body as possessing a 'physical capital', the production of which refers to the ways bodies are recognised as possessing value in various social settings. They may have power, status and/or an array of distinctive symbolic forms which are used as resources of agency and influence. Remarking on the significance of the body to human agency, and the attainment and maintenance of status, he argues that:

> the management of the body through time and space can be seen *as the fundamental constituent* in an individual's ability to intervene in social affairs and to "make a difference" in the flow of daily life. (Shilling, 1991, p. 654, original italics)

The notion of the body as a means of capital to gain status links into the next section, which discusses these themes.

2.4 Status, Resources and Strategies

One of the most powerful and urgent dimensions of school life that children have to deal with is how to gain status, which leads to a particular position in the peer group. The notion of status (Corsaro, 1979) can be

defined as prestige or 'social honour' (Weber, 1946), which comes from having a certain position within the hierarchy which becomes relevant when it is seen in relation to others. Weber (1963) has differentiated between *ascribed status*, which one is born with or given, and *achieved status* which one acquires through one's actions. For the pupils at school, status was not given but had to be earned through negotiation and sustained through performance, sometimes on an almost daily basis. Status can be gained in both the informal peer group and the formal culture of the school, and there is a relationship between these two areas. Sometimes this can cause a tension because, in some schools, if pupils try too hard to please their teachers they can antagonise their classmates (see Chap. 1).

The acquisition of status is interwoven with the development and construction of an individual's particular identity, and for boys and girls it is inextricably linked to the active construction of their masculinity and femininity: thus, the search to achieve status is also the search to achieve an acceptable way of being, which is also part of constructing an acceptable identity. However, although status may be acquired individually, it can also come through, and be confirmed by, the sense of collective belonging to a particular friendship group.

Status is achieved by an individual's ability to draw on and apply a series of resources and strategies which are available in any given milieu (Connell, 1998; Swain, 2004a; Manninen et al., 2011). They exist within determinate historical and spatial conditions, but some of the resources that are open will vary within different settings, and some may be easier to draw on than others at particular times and in particular places. They include the resources of *physicality and athleticism* (see Shilling in the previous section), which is often one of the most highly prized by the informal culture, but other resources include *personal resources* (e.g. being self-confident and assured, independent and able to make decisions) and *social resources* (e.g. being able to get on with people and form networks of friendships). There are also specialist forms of culturally cherished knowledge which act as a form of *cultural resources* (e.g. knowledge about computer games, being able to recite internet memes knowing and using the latest verbal expressions, which shows a person is 'modern' and adds up to a kind of 'savoir faire'). There is also a range of particular skills (e.g. in a sport) or *interpersonal* and *linguistic* skills (e.g. being articulate and able to persuade people), while another cultural strategy is using the strategy of humour to engender a laugh with friends, sometimes at the expense of a teacher. Sometimes the terms 'resource' and 'strategy' can become

conflated, and the distinctions blurred. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1986), I refer to resources as forms of capital or assets that relate to types of resources of power and strategies as the processes that individuals use to apply them. In other words, resources and strategies are the 'what' and 'how', respectively.

2.5 Identities

As we have seen, masculinities and femininities are invariably connected to identities as young boys and girls struggle to work out who they are and who they would like to become. Rather than being viewed as an unalterable, innate and unitary quality that people possess, as some, essentialised, core part of a person's personality that pre-exists them, or as something people somehow acquire at some point at a certain age, identities are, like masculinities and femininities, multiple and socially constructed, negotiated and performed. They are unstable and shifting; they are frequently contradictory; and different identities can be, and often are, adopted at different times in different social contexts. Identities are an unfinished project and always in process and, as Hall (1992) says, identity belongs as much to the future as to the past for it is a matter of 'becoming' as much as 'being', and it is also more about individuals having a series of ongoing 'identifications' by accepting, negotiating with, contesting and reconstructing meanings (Hall, 1992, p. 287), often based on particular 'key' individuals. By the time they reach the later stages of primary school, it is the children's peer group that has the greatest influence on their identity and establishes and organises the ways that enable or constrain particular activities and ways of being (Harris, 1998). Both the spoken, as well as the invisible and unspoken, group rules, codes and norms of their peer group, set the agenda about the kind of person a boy is supposed to be at a particular time and in a particular context (Hey, 1997).

However, I found it interesting that while my theories of identity may argue that it is something ongoing and is a lifelong project which is open to change, some literature suggests that identities are not properly formed until children reach secondary school. As we will see in the chapters where I present the empirical findings (Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9), I found the children who I talked to actually had a very good idea of who they were, what sort of values they had and what kind of person they would like to be in the future.

2.6 Agency

As we have seen, masculinity and femininity are not finished products; rather, individuals 'do' gender in different ways in different, specific and situated, social situations. The children in this study are viewed as social agents who are active meaning-makers in their own lives, rather than simply the passive recipients of adult researchers' directives (Allan, 2009; Best, 2007; Fraser et al., 2004; Kehily, 2007; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2009, 2014). I also draw on the work of Giddens, and I view the boys and girls as 'skilled and knowledgeable agents' (Giddens, 1984), or agentic actors, who were able to exercise agency and were quite capable of consciously appraising and interpreting their own lives and social practices. However, this is not to say they were free human agents, and the boys and girls were not free to create their gendered selves in whatever way they chose, they were and are both constrained (and enabled) by the particular social conditions and structures available (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2022). The children's identities were constructed through the project of the 'reflexive self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 32), that is where they are continuously working and reflecting on their identities, and where agency and structures act through each other.

The concept of agency can be viewed as complex, temporally situated and active. Although personal, or human, agency can be difficult to both define and identify, I am drawing on the definition proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who reconceptualise agency as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement' (p. 963), informed by the past but also orientated towards the present and the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities). Essentially, I am also using the term to mean the capacity and degree to which individuals are able to act in particular ways or 'exercise control' (Bandura, 2001, p. 11) over events and situations. However, although I also recognise that the young boys and girls were 'skilled and knowledgeable agents' (Giddens, 1984), they found themselves living within the wider structural relations we have mentioned above and are only able to act as far as their structural position allows them to, or to paraphrase Marx's aphorism, individuals are able to 'make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing' (Marx, 1963 [1852]). These structures mean that although the participants were able to exercise agency, their scope for their expression of agency was often limited, 'bounded' (Evans, 2002, p. 261) or curtailed. The crucial point is that there are possibilities for individuals to change under the right

circumstances and, as I have already argued, I found that blended masculinities and hybrid femininities have particular agentic qualities that gave the children in this study a number of choices and enabled them to make a number of decisions.

2.7 How Schools Operate

In order to understand the life of a 10–11-year-old boy and girl at school, we need to attempt to understand the purpose of schools and how they operate. Epstein and Johnson (1998) remind us that all schools contain relations of (teacher) control and (pupil) resistance, although the pupils at the two schools in this study seemed to have come to a pragmatic accommodation with the formal school regime and were largely compliant. For Bernstein (1996), schools are, essentially, regulatory institutions which attempt to control pupils, and I argue that they utilise Foucauldian techniques of discipline, surveillance, classification and normalisation (Foucault, 1977). Children are watched, judged, measured, described, compared, trained, corrected, examined and classified almost as soon as they step into the classroom on their first day, as they 'learn' to become pupils. Formalised assessments and ongoing testing in UK state schools now begin at the age of four and continue throughout a child's school life at regular intervals like an educational assembly line.

The discipline/surveillance relation is evident throughout using techniques of spatialisation, control of activity, hierarchies and normalising judgements. Spatialisation limits and shapes what can be done in certain spaces and means that pupils are taught within confined areas where everyone has to be visible, is (usually) assigned a place and keeps to it; hierarchies are created whereby each level watches over the lower ranks; and normalising and comparative judgements are made if an individual deviates from the norm, which is a far more subtle use of power that defines and classifies the individual as not only bad, but also as abnormal: a transgressor from the norm.

2.7.1 Space and Time

Massey (1993) maintains that space is 'one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualise the world' (p. 143). Pupils are positioned in multiple ways in schools, and their relations are not merely abstract relations but are enacted by bodies in space. Spaces limit and shape what is

being done in them, but also are shaped by these same activities. In Foucault's concept of spatialisation (Foucault, 1977), the capability of controlling space is an important constituent of power (Giddens, 1979). Shilling (1991) argues that space in schools is used as a resource to perpetuate adult domination over pupils, and notions of hierarchy are integrated into the division and compartmentalisation of the school space into areas of teaching, administration and recreation. School rules and regulations prescribe what is and what is not allowed in school which includes how bodies are to behave and how they are allowed to move and act in space (Nespor, 1997). For instance, pupils are taught to sit quietly and sit still and to put their hand up when they wish to ask a question; to line up in an orderly manner (usually in a single file, and sometimes in a prescribed order); to control their bowels and bladders; how to walk along the corridor; and how and when to eat in a narrowly prescribed time and space. In the two schools in this study, pupils were seated by gender so that boys and girls were seated alternatively.

Although pupils and teachers spend most of their time sharing the same space, some spaces are more open than others, and different social groups have different access to particular spaces. Opportunities to find private space for pupils are rare, as space in school is generally strictly controlled, regulated and surveyed. Pupils are usually not allowed into the school building at breaktime, and certain rooms are forbidden to them such as staff rooms, adult toilets and gym cupboards. However, breaktimes are times and spaces when pupils can have greater freedom and autonomy, and spaces (which are usually outside the school building) can seem more open and offer more possibilities for expression and movement. During breaktime at these two schools different groups of pupils were engaged in different activities which took place in different spaces: for example, some played football on the main playground, others, at Church Green, were also engaged in a range of other sporting activities (e.g. table tennis, cricket, hockey, netball, tennis), while others at both schools sat/stood and watched or talked in small groups or played made-up informal playground games.

Like space, time in schools is also a variable to be managed, regulated and controlled. Movement is mapped out and controlled at specific times: pupils and teachers have to be at certain points in space at prescribed moments of time. Schools stipulate when the school day starts and ends, when the pupils are supposed to enter and leave the classroom, the times of assembly, breaktimes and lunchtimes, curriculum activities are

prescribed and controlled by being timetabled and so on. Massey (1993) proposes that time and space are not discrete entities but form an amalgamated fourth dimension of space-time. In schools time and space are interconnected in time-space paths, and pupils follow these pathways which become routinised through repetition. However, this is not to say that pupils are not able to exercise agency and, as will see, although the underlying intention of schooling is to produce 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 136), the pupils in this study could sometimes negotiate their own meanings, modify and thus resist some of these attempts.

2.8 The Ethos or Culture of the Two Schools

Pollard (1985) describes the 'rather intangible "feel" of schools as organisations' (p. 115), choosing 'culture' ahead of 'ethos' or 'climate' to describe the formative nature of schools because of its necessary association with power and influence (Prosser, 1999). As we will see below, he differentiates between the formal and informal culture of a school. Donnelly (2000) describes ethos as a formal expression of the aims and objectives of an organisation. In the world of education, a school's ethos exerts a certain amount of power to condition people to think and act in an 'acceptable' manner (Donnelly, 2000).

Schools do not exist in a vacuum but are interconnected to wider, surrounding structures and cultures. An important influence that shapes the practices of the two schools' formal culture came from parental attitudes, their dispositions and the choices available to them. Parents make a difference and so does social class, for class is power and gives rise to better opportunities. The middle classes have recognised the link between examination success and improved career opportunities and generally have high expectations of academic accomplishment.

In many ways, the two schools had more similarities between them than differences (see Chap. 10). Both were concerned with teaching and learning, and all the pupils that attended told me that they were proud of their school and they enjoyed most of their learning in lessons and wanted to do well academically and achieve top grades. It was obvious that the pupils whom I met had formed a pragmatic and compliant accommodation with the formal school regime. Encouraged by supportive parents, they understood that examination success leads to increased career options and material remuneration, and therefore, they used the school as a resource which provides a means to an end.

Church Green could not be described as a community school in the sense that many of the pupils came by car from a few miles/kilometres away; moreover, as one of a number of fee-paying schools in the area, the parents had many choices of where to send their children. Parents had less choice at Wood Vale than the parents at Church Green, but although there were still a limited number of other accessible schools that could be used as an alternative, most children attended the school in their local, mainly middle-class, catchment area, which meant that Wood Vale was more integrated into the local community.

Educating the nation's children used to be seen as a public good, but since the 1980s, state schools have been placed in a competitive, neoliberal, marketised, accountability-driven system, which has been well documented (Ball, 2017; Keddie, 2016, 2017; Simkins et al., 2018), and education is now seen as a service. Schools are infused with discourses of corporate management, accountability, regulation and surveillance (the National Curriculum, Ofsted inspections,[5] league tables and SATs). The Key Stage 2 SATs (taken by children aged 11) have been used since the 1990s, but they have evolved with different governments' priorities and preoccupations, such as the current aim of requiring schools to teach grammar formally. The current assessments in place since 2016 include test papers in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG), Reading, and Mathematics (an arithmetic and reasoning paper and a further reasoning paper). Bradbury et al. (2021) document the pressure this puts on the teaching staff, and there is a yearly pressure to improve on the results which can cause a great deal of anxiety. State schoolteachers are now told *how* to teach as well as *what* to teach, and school budgets are largely based on pupil numbers meaning that local schools need to compete with each other. The academic reputation and performance at Wood Vale was (and is) primarily based on its SAT results.

Although independent, private, schools have less regulation and surveillance, and many have their own, arguably, less exacting inspection regime—the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI)[6]—they have own pressures. Parents pay a substantial amount of money with the primary aim of ensuring their children gain academic advantage, leading to places at prestigious universities and securing highly paid jobs and careers. Thus, these schools live and die by their results. Parents pay for success, but also to buy into contacts and networks concerning future university places and intern and employment opportunities, and basically, by sending their children to fee-paying schools, they are trying to ensure their children gain a

seat at the top table.[7] Walford (1984) also maintains that the particular ethos of the public schools encourages pupils to have good morals, be well behaved and work consistently hard.

Private, independent, schools have huge advantages over state schools and the gap between private and state schools in per-pupil resources has doubled since 2010 (Sibieta, 2021). The IFS (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021) found that the average private school pupil had £6500—or 91.5% more—spent on them during the 2020–2021 academic year than the average peer at a state school. They have far more resources in terms of space (e.g. for music rooms and libraries)' more spacious playing fields, equipment, more peripatetic staff (e.g. teaching music) and specialised teachers (Church Green had dedicated teachers for science, music, art, PE and games), greater curriculum freedoms (they do not have to follow the national curriculum) which enable them to create a broader and more balanced curriculum, less interference with pedagogy and lower teacher-pupil ratios (class sizes at Church Green were, on average, 22 compared to 30 at Wood Vale), and they can also ask pupils who are not performing well academically to leave. The impression conveyed at both schools was that they strove to produce empowered, confident, independent, but also kind and caring pupils, who were successful in a number of areas—be they academic or sporting (Wardman et al., 2010). However, I would argue that Church Green emphasised additional qualities of creativity and high moral values moral and social ease.

2.8.1 Gender Divisions

Gender binaries are built into the structures of the formal school culture (Bragg et al., 2022) and can be seen in school uniforms and sport and in differentiated practices such as having separate lists on the registers for girls and boys, lining up and classroom seating arrangements where girls and boys generally sit together alternatively in rows (as they did at both schools). There are also the architectural features, such as separate toilets for boys and girls, while playground spaces may also help reinforce gender differences, with more of girls' interactions tending to take place around the margins (Dyment et al., 2009; Thorne, 1993). However, the after-school clubs at both schools were, apart from rugby at Church Green, all open to pupils of either sex and, in the informal culture at both schools, boys and girls joined in together in all the playground sporty games such as the large daily games of football.

2.9 The Two School Cultures: Official/Formal and Unofficial/Informal

An important analytical feature is the dual existence of a school's official/formal culture and the pupils' own unofficial/informal culture, which have also been identified (amongst others) by Connell et al. (1982), Pollard (1985) and Gordon et al. (2000) and which inform each other and work in relation to each other. The formal school culture is laid out in documents of the school and includes the management, policy/organisational and administrative structures, the teaching and learning, the pedagogy, the curriculum, the disciplinary apparatus and sport/games. The informal school culture is not intended to be in binary opposition, for it is different from, rather than a reaction to, and is in a continual negotiation with, the formal school culture. Although it also has its own particular hierarchy, rules, codes and criteria of evaluation and judgement, and many of its parameters are set by the formal regime, it has a whole life and meaning all of its own: it includes not only the relations and interactions between the pupils, but also the informal relations between pupils and teachers outside of the instructional relationship.

2.10 The Power of the Peer Group

Interaction with peers has long been acknowledged as playing a vital role in children's social and psychological development (Rogers & Kutnick, 1992). Another main argument in this book is that the construction of masculinity and femininity is a collective enterprise and that the pupils' own peer group is one of the most important features of any school setting. Each peer group has its own identity and series of cultural norms, and these are a key influence on the formation of the pupils' identities, which has been well documented in sociological research (e.g. Adler & Adler, 1998; Connell, 2000; Connolly, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Harris, 1998; Jago et al., 2009; Manninen et al., 2011; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Pollard, 1985; Renold, 2005; Swain, 2004a; Woods, 1990).

Masculinities and femininities are socially organised and are a collective endeavour, and what children value most in school are opportunities for interaction with peers, for as Sutton-Smith (cited in Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 7) maintains, 'peer interaction is not just a preparation for life, it is life itself'. Harris (1998) points out that a child's primary goal is not so much to become a successful adult but rather a successful child and, therefore, the most important people at school are the other children for 'it is their

status among their peers that matters most to them' (Harris, 1998, p. 241). She further argues that the peer group has more influence on children than their parents in the formation of their identity, of who they are now and who they will become, and is the main conduit by which cultures are passed from one generation to another. Each peer group has its own cultural identity which can be said to refer to a 'way of life', or 'shared guidelines' (Dubbs & Whitney, 1980, p. 27), providing boys with a series of collective meanings of what it is to be a boy or girl. In some ways peer groups can be regarded as structures, representing Giddens's organised sets of rules and resources (Giddens, 1984), for they can be both enabling and constraining, and there are constant pressures on individuals to perform and behave to the expected group norms.

Notes

1. There is a succinct summary and discussion of the current debates around the categories of 'gender' and 'sex' written by James Messerschmidt (2023, pp. 2–4), which readers can turn to if they wish to understand more about this debate.
2. However, it needs to be admitted that headteachers are unlikely to know if children were gender fluid, non-binary, non-conforming etc. Only a very small proportion of children identify across binary genders at this age (Paechter, 2021). Most children either don't know or don't use these terms and are reluctant to talk about such matters.
3. I must admit that I had such an understanding of hegemonic masculinity in my own PhD research, which was published in 2001 (Swain, 2001).
4. This agentic quality also applies to the form of blended masculinity, of course.
5. OFSTED stands for the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills and is a non-ministerial department of His Majesty's government, reporting to Parliament. State schools and some independent schools are visited by a team of inspectors. Schools are given a rating or grade. A school can be judged either outstanding, good, requiring improvement or inadequate. When OFSTED has judged a school to be good or outstanding, inspectors will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good or outstanding and that safeguarding is effective. They will visit other schools more frequently.
6. About half of independent schools also have OFSTED inspections (Gov. UK). https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/private-schools.
7. Only around 7% of the population attend independent schools, but they represent 74% of senior judges, 71% of high-ranking officers in the armed forces, 67% of Oscar winners and 50% of cabinet ministers (Verkaik, 2018).

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CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This chapter:

- provides information about my theoretical and epistemological position;
- the background about how, and why, the study originated;
- basic details of the two schools, the sample of pupils, and how it was obtained;
- the methods used and the research questions;
- transcriptions, the process of analysis and ethical issues;
- some limitations of the research;
- some of the challenges of being an adult researcher.

3.1 My Epistemological and Theoretical Position

At the beginning of my PhD study, in 1997, I still thought of myself essentially as a primary school teacher—this was my professional identity—but as my research evolved, and my understandings, through reading and talking to many people, developed, I gradually morphed into being a sociologist, that is someone who is interested in examining the practices and relationships of individuals as members of social groups. I also knew early on that I would become a qualitative researcher—rather than sitting at my desk designing surveys and analysing spreadsheets. I

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enjoyed going out and working with people of all ages—watching them work and talking to them about their lives and views.

My epistemological understanding of the world was, and is, interpretative and constructionist (Crotty, 1998). Individuals interpret the world through the perspectives of their own lives and biographies, languages and cultures, and they negotiate and produce meanings in particular contexts through their social interactions with others. Therefore, meanings are not static but multiplicitous, dependent on context and can change; facts are not independent of our perspectives on the world but are always interpreted through the way we see the world, which is through the lens of who we are. We see the world not as it is but as we are.[1]

As a social researcher, my aim is to try and understand the culture I am investigating from an insider's standpoint, from their view of their own culture (Gibson, 2017), and I have always regarded it a privilege to be allowed into an institution or social space, like a classroom, to observe what is going on and see how people teach and learn. I always think, my word!, the teacher is working so hard, how do they keep this up every day, before reminding myself that I also did something very similar for 20 years!

3.2 The Origins of the Study

The study and subsequent book grew out of an idea I had for a funded project about the production of gender identities in the primary/junior school. These applications take a lot of time and effort. I had originally identified the two schools as potential research settings; the headteachers had been very supportive, and when my submission was rejected at the final stage, I asked them if I could carry out the research anyway, albeit with a more limited scope. We agreed that it could benefit each other: I could use the research as a pilot study if I wanted to apply for a larger funded future project, and/or I could, hopefully, write a paper for an academic journal about pre-adolescent children which would be of interest to the field of gender studies. As it turned out, I generated enough data to write this book! The school would find out how pupil identities were being constructed and performed, what made particular pupils popular, and I could also report back on perhaps more pertinent school issues, including pupils' attitudes to school and their schoolwork, what they thought of the SATs, levels of bullying and so on.

3.3 The Two Schools

The two schools are situated on the outskirts of London: Wood Vale Primary School (built in the 1970s) is a middle-class state school (based on data from the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* and the *Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index*), and the Church Green is an independent, fee-paying, preparatory school feeding its adjacent, much older senior school (founded around 300 years ago). All the pupils at both schools wanted to achieve academically, and no one was teased or bullied for working hard and being seen to be colluding too closely with the official school culture. The prep school, in particular, also worked constantly hard to create storylines and reinforce traits and values of kindness, caring and tolerance of other points of view.

3.3.1 Pupil Sample

Two lessons were absorbed during the recruitment of the pupil sample at Woods Vale. Firstly, obtaining parents' permission was more difficult than I had anticipated. At first, the headteacher had 'advertised' my research project on the school website, which required parents to download the information sheet and consent form and return them to the class teacher. However, this only generated six replies from a potential of 58, so I decided to visit each class to introduce myself and tell the pupils what my research was about and what it would involve. This strategy improved the numbers to 33 pupils in total (9 boys and 24 girls), although a second lesson was learnt when I asked the parents to sign the consent form and found that a third of their names did not match up with the children's. Fortunately, the administrative staff were able to help me out. Things were much more straightforward at Church Green. The headteacher assured me that all the parents would be supportive, which they were, and only two parents out of 64 pupils did not give their permission (one was because they kept forgetting to return the consent form).[2]

3.3.2 Interviews

Thirty-seven small group interviews of between two and four were conducted with 94 pupils between November 2021 and February 2002, and again in July, at Wood Vale, and between March and June 2022 at Church Green. The sample came from two classes at Wood Vale (6MK and 6TD)[3]

and three classes at Church Green (6HH, 6KN and 6SE) and consisted of 43 boys (9 from Wood Vale and 34 boys from Church Green) and 51 girls (24 from Wood Vale and 27 from Church Green). This information is summarised in Table 3.1.

We can see that because of my recruitment problems at Wood Vale I was only able to interview 33 (57%)[4] children out of a total roll of 58, but I interviewed 61 (95%) out of a possible 64 children at Church Green. It is also noteworthy to point out that there was an unusually small proportion of boys at Wood Vale (21 out of 58 pupils), and I was only able to interview less than half of them (about four-tenths). This is discussed under the limitations of the study below.

The intention at Woods Vale was to interview the pupils in small groups of two or, mainly, three, outside of curriculum/teaching time, in a room that, although would have the door open, offered some privacy. However, the school could not find a single private space and the interviews were carried out during the lunch hour in the corridor outside the classroom of 6MK. Although it was sometimes noisy, especially during wet lunchtimes, we all managed to cope, and the digital recorder picked up the speech clearly enough. At the prep school, the headteacher said that he was not concerned with the pupils missing curriculum time; he told me that the school did not take part in SATs, all the pupils at Church Green were bright, and although the school's main function was to make sure the pupils achieved academically, a primary aim was to also make sure they were confident well-rounded, caring and tolerant individuals. He told me that one of the teachers would arrange for the interviews for me and the children appeared, almost like a production line, every hour during the morning, which meant I interviewed around 9–10 pupils each morning

Table 3.1 A summary of the interview sample from both schools

	Number of interviews	*Number of boys interviewed and number on roll*	*Number of girls interviewed and number on roll*	*Total number of pupils interviewed out of number on roll*
Wood Vale	18	9/21	24/37	33/58
Church Green	19	34/35	27/29	61/64
Both schools	37	43/56	51/68	94/124

visit. I was also provided with a dedicated room, which afforded more privacy, although it had windows which meant we were visible to the frequent passers-by. While most of the interview groups were with boys and girls only, some were mixed sex, which seemed to work out just as well in the sense that the conversation was free flowing, and the pupils were uninhibited in front of each other.

Only a very few children ever asked me what I was intending to do with their conversations, but when they did I generally answered by saying that I was hoping to write a book about the life of the children at school, but that I would change their individual names and the name of the school. Although I would agree with Epstein (1998) that the children do not possess the experience, or the framework, for understanding who I was, and what I represented as a researcher, and although the notion of informed consent may be flawed, and the children's capacity to understand the full concept necessarily limited, I nevertheless still tried to ensure that their consent was at least informed, however partial.

Interviews lasted around an hour and were digitally recorded. I used a semi-structured interview format (Newton, 2010; Robson, 2011) where I covered the same topics each time, but questions were not asked in any particular order, and pupils were allowed to talk about new or other areas of interest, which were still part of their world, and which, I judged, were still connected to, and were answering, my research questions.[5] I mainly asked boys and girls the same generic questions although towards the end of the interview more specific questions were directed at particular gender groups. Over the course of the fieldwork, the interview schedules grew from around 20–25 questions to between 41 and 54 (for boys and girls respectively) as my understanding developed and research interests became more focused. The final interview schedules for boys and girls can be seen in Appendices A and B.

I knew I had to maintain my concentration because my interviews were time-limited. Because of the large number of interview questions, I had to prioritise particular themes, which I felt were more important and relevant to my research questions, which meant that some questions I had initially started with had to be dropped. An example of this was 'favourite and least favourite school subjects', which, while interesting, was not deemed as essential.

The main areas that I was interested in, and therefore the main focus of the study, were encapsulated in the following four Research Questions.

3.4 Research Questions

(i) What are the main and most common forms of masculinity and femininity?
(ii) Why are some pupils more or less popular than others—how do pupils gain peer group status, and what resources do they use to achieve this?
(iii) How are friendship groups constituted?
(iv) What are relations like both within and between boys' and girls' groups?

By the end of the fieldwork I found that I had generated a lot of data on a number of themes. As I have alluded to above, some questions were also cut in the latter rounds of the fieldwork as new themes developed (in terms of their interest to my research focus) during the fieldwork and were explored in greater depth in the later interviews. The result of this was that I have more data on themes like pupils' physical appearance and 'crushes' at Church Green than at Wood Vale.

Some of the main areas I explored are listed below: there are 28 of them, which may have been too many, but a lot of these came up in and through our general conversations. Those in *italic type* indicate those that I pursued in the most depth and which generated the richest data. Those in ordinary font are subjects which I regarded as being relatively minor or where I did not gather enough data to justify their inclusion in the book, at least discussed in any depth.

1. School life: best and worst parts, and the reasons why
2. Curriculum: favourite and least favourite subjects and the reasons why
3. School rules: how fair
4. Disciplinary sanctions
5. Gender equality: equal treatment of boys and girls
6. School uniform
7. Seating arrangements in class
8. Homework
9. School tests and *the SATs*
10. *Pressures*
11. Playtimes

12. *Friends and friendship groups*
13. *Relations between boys and girls*
14. *Popular pupils—qualities and attributes*
15. *Leading pupils—qualities and attributes*
16. *Ideal schoolboys and schoolgirls*
17. *Teasing and bullying, including worse names*
18. *Crushes and boy/girlfriends*
19. Physical appearances, including wearing make-up
20. *Girly girls and tomboys*
21. *Girl power*
22. *Social media, and mobile phone/tablet use*
23. *Media heroes*
24. *Greatest influences*
25. Career aspirations
26. Feelings (including main worries) about secondary school
27. *Feelings of innocence and enjoying current stage of development*
28. *Pupils' identities—expressions of masculinity and femininity*

I selected the pupils for interview by asking them to nominate one or two friends anonymously who they would like to be interviewed with. I did this at Wood Vale, using a piece of paper, when I went to introduce myself and the study to the two classes, while this was carried out by the three class teachers at Church Green. Group interviews were chosen for a number of reasons. Connolly (1997) suggests that group interviews may have the tendency to reduce the salience of the researcher's presence, and the interaction between the pupils was at least as important as the interaction between myself (as the interviewer) and the interviewees. Kitzinger (1994) comments on the dynamic, interactive, nature of group interviews and how they 'enable the researcher to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network' (p. 159). Denscombe also points out how group interviews can produce data on 'shared perspectives' (1995, p. 137) and can generate complex understandings and contradictions: there were times when events and/or experiences were introduced by one of the participants which sometimes resulted in the productive re-telling by other children involved and which Kitzinger (1994) has termed 'collective remembering' (p. 105)—see also Middleton and Edwards (1990). Another productive result from the group interviews was that stories told by one of the participants could be scrutinised

and verified by others. As Denscombe writes, they are a place 'where events, legends, actions and attitudes are subjected to peer scrutiny and evaluation' (1995, p. 137). There was also the important practical reason which meant I could interview a greater number of pupils in a fewer number of visits.

Although a further benefit of group interviews is that they may also encourage children to participate who may be more reticent in a one-to-one interview situation, there are also a number of disadvantages that have to be guarded against. I certainly needed to watch out for problems of domination (Denscombe, 1995) in which the forceful and opinionated person can inhibit others into silence, either by simple volubility or by force of argument. It is also possible that some pupils may have been reluctant to talk about more personal issues for fear of embarrassment or ridicule. Two or three people talking over each other sometimes also caused me transcription problems, and decisions had to be made about which voices to prioritise; very occasionally, voices were simply unattributable.

3.4.1 Transcriptions and Analysis

Before I could begin to formally code and analyse my interviews, I had to tackle the issue of transcribing and decide, firstly, whether I was going to transcribe every interview and, secondly, whether I was going to transcribe every interview in its entirety. Walford (2000) refers to 'the fetish of transcription' with the 'over-dependence' many researchers have of transcribing every word of every tape recording. There are no firm rules governing procedure, but the nature of the transcription will depend on the research question being addressed and the focus and purpose of the research. For example, if the research is about discourse and involves conversational analysis, it is reasonable to assume that a full transcript will be needed, but in my case I felt that a detailed transcription of every word was unnecessary: primarily, I was interested in *what* the children said rather than in *how* they said it. As I had conducted 37 interviews, I had to take a pragmatic decision. Interview times varied but usually lasted anything from between around an hour, and as a fairly slow typist my ratio was around five hours for every hour of tape. Although it is said that transcribing makes the researcher engage with the data, the point is that I already had by listening to the digital files, making the notes and analysing the themes. The procedure I followed was as follows: I listened to the whole of each recording

and as I listened I made detailed notes and marked each change of theme (which would often coincide with each new question) against the time on the computer (iPlayer). Then I went through again and transcribed those parts of the interview that were directly relevant to my research questions in the sense that they were significant to my understanding of trying to find out what was going on. For example, I would not generally transcribe many of the passages which were repetitious or where the pupils were relaying routine procedural information (such as how maths groups were organised or what pupils needed to wear for PE), or miscellaneous personal information (such as on favourite TV programmes, football teams, hobbies and so on). Although these may have turned out to be important, I still had my record of them which of course constituted data in its own right. I may lay myself open to the accusation that research questions and the focus could have changed, but both my detailed notes and the original recordings were still there, and I could still have transcribed the appropriate parts had I subsequently judged it to be necessary.

Like Redman (1998), I accept that my interpretation and analysis of the data represents a *reading* of it rather than an empirical truth; the writing up of the data uses principles of selection and organisation (or recontextualistion) which are orientated to the expectations of particular audiences; and the reader of the work will also make an active appropriation of it by their own re-reading and interpretation. Moreover, the social world or 'the field' is not something 'out there' but discursively shaped, or textually constructed, by the researcher (Atkinson, 1990, 1992). Events are enacted and then selected, recorded and narrated by the researcher, and as I have maintained above, interview data will inevitably be mediated and constructed through the views of the subjects and the researcher; there will be manifest relations of power; there will be managed impressions and presentations of self; responses will be shaped by their perception of the person asking the questions; and their responses will be produced from within the context of the interview and are not passive reflections of the world outside the room. However, while I do not stake any claims of writing about reality and truth, I do not consider my account to be fiction, and I would still wish to maintain that the data presented in this study still refers to an actual, existing material social and cultural world and that it provides access to the ways in which embodied pupils experienced their world and the meanings they attached to it: ultimately, it relates to real people living 'real' lives (Probyn, 1993).

The study embraced a form of thematic analysis called a hybrid approach (Swain, 2018, 2019), which combines deductive and inductive approaches. This involved constructing a set of *a priori* (or pre-empirical) codes from the research aims and interview questions, and a series *of a posteriori* (post-empirical) codes generated from the data. While the *a priori* codes included *masculinities, sport* and *popularity,* the unanticipated a posteriori codes that surfaced during the interviews included *pressure*, *humour* and *physical attraction*, amongst others. Once the themes and codes had been assembled, they were further collapsed and grouped into 'family' codes to make the analysis more manageable. These family codes also helped to organise the presentation of the data and can be seen in Table 3.2.

3.5 Ethical Issues and Considerations

The ethics process was complex and was based on the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2018). The university ethics committee required a total of 12 documents, many connected to Covid, before it was finally passed. I obtained my DBS[6] check and at the prep school I was also required to take a four-hour course on child protection in Education, including various safeguarding issues. I prepared short information sheets about the aims of the study for parents and children, I stressed that participation was voluntary and that the pupils could withdraw from the study at any time, and both groups were asked to provide written consent before I could proceed. For the children, this occurred just before the interview was conducted.

3.6 Limitations

All research involves a series of compromises and there were certainly limitations to my research. This was not an ethnographic study where I was absorbed in the school culture over a lengthy period of time. I only interviewed around four-tenths of the boys in the two classes at Wood Vale, and although I believe that I was still able to discover most (or at least a lot) of what I wanted to know—in some areas I was approaching 'data saturation' and beginning to re-hear the same stories—I admit that the amount of data collected was restricted, and my understanding was still partial. Because my research focus developed over the course of my fieldwork and more themes for exploration opened, although I still feel I got plenty of good data from the boys, I probably got richer and more

Table 3.2 Family codes

Formal school culture	Discipline
	Incentives/sanctions
	Mucking about in class
	Clubs
	Pressures
	Best/worst bits and subjects
	School uniform
	Equal treatment, tolerance etc.
	Organisation in class
	Teachers/teaching
Informal school culture	Status
	Admiration
	Popularity
	Leading pupils
	Football
	Humour
	Pressures
	Physical appearance
	Bullying/teasing
	Name-calling
	Homophobia/misogyny
	Crying
	Playground games
Relationships	Between boys and girls
	Between pupils and teachers
	Friendships
	Friendship groups
	Falling out with each other (more fluid for girls)
	Go-to girls
Sexuality	Crushes
	Boyfriends/girlfriends
Social media	WhatsApp group
	Time spent
	Smartphone
	Games
Identities	Remaining a child
	Innocence
	Girly girls
	Tomboys
	Being authentic
	Being independent/standing up for yourself
Masculinities	Caring
	Dominant (no hegemonic)
	Personalised
Femininities	Dominant (no hegemonic)
	Personalised
	Hybrid
	Emphasised/hyper
	Girly girls
	Tomboys
Miscellany	Aspirations
	Secondary school

extensive data from the girls, many of whom were more verbose and seemed to relish the chance to talk to me. Moreover, overall, more data were generated from Church Green, where I spent the majority of my time in the latter part of my data collection. I also recognise that the data I generated was a snapshot of a particular time and place: things can and do change, and when I returned to Wood Vale in July, two weeks before the end of the children's period of time at primary school, I did discover that some aspects of the pupils' lives had, indeed, altered.

Another limitation is that I was only on the school site at Wood Vale during lunchtime (in the corridor) and was shut away in a room away from classes at Church Green. Apart from one 30-minute game of football in the playground at Wood Vale, I did not observe the children, either in class or in the lunch hall or playground in any systematic way, and so only have the children's testament to rely on.[7] I am certainly not claiming that by speaking to the pupils in one year group (almost two-thirds of year 6 at Wood Vale and almost all of them at Church Green) I knew anything approaching what was happening in their lives at school on a regular basis. In order to do this, I would have had to have spent several days with the pupils, observing their behaviour, practices and interactions, and even then, my understanding would only be partial. Even when I was a teacher and taught the same class of pupils every day, there were many things that I did not know about, although I had a different relationship, including a power relationship, than I did during the interviews where, although I was a stranger, during the interview process I became a little more of a confidant over the hour or so we spent in each other's company. In the final analysis, the one-hour interviews were all I had: the data I generated was like trying to stick different pieces together in a gigantic jigsaw to make sense of the overall picture, and although some pieces fitted, there were many gaps.

Although I feel that the flexibility of the semi-structured format worked well, I admit that I used a lot of tightly worded questions. This was mainly because of the time limitation and the desire to cover as much ground as possible, but I concede that I would have probably got more expansive and deeper data if I had used a more unstructured, narrative-type of interview format where the children were encouraged to talk more discursively and at greater length. However, this would have made for a different study. It is also possible to see examples in the later chapters of the book, where I present extracts of empirical data, of where I, as the interviewer, am culpable of either interrupting the children before they can provide an

answer to my question or I do not pursue an answer sufficiently and ask them to clarify what they mean. I also ask some questions that can be considered as being too leading, and I sometimes give too many examples, rather than making the questions more open. Despite the fact that I have been interviewing children and adults since 1998, and have interviewed several hundred (maybe over a thousand) people, I still make these mistakes, although I hope I am still improving my technique.

Moreover, there are also issues around interviews themselves that Douglas (1976) pointed out almost 50 years ago: people do not always tell the truth in interviews, either because they cannot recall information, they mis-remember, they do not want to share particular information or their views on a particular subject (such as girlfriends/boyfriends), or they deliberately tell lies. However, in my defence, the children's stories were remarkably consistent, and I cross-checked some information across interviews, which made me feel more confident that the data were accurate and valid. Moreover, when I fed back my conclusions to the senior management at both schools, although some aspects of the pupils' worlds were a surprise to them, most findings closely resonated with the staff's own understandings of what was going on. However, I also concede that this may have only told me that what children tell adults is consistent. Although interview data may not offer us literal descriptions of the interviewee's reality, this is not to say that they are of no use and, as Massey and Walford (1998) point out, the participants know things about themselves which nobody else knows. I argue that interview data needs to be examined as *accounts,* and we should not worry about whether or not 'the informant is telling the truth' (Dean & Whyte, 1979) if by that we mean trying to uncover distortion, bias and/or deception. Rather than trying to find contrasts and inconsistencies between what people say and do, we need to pay attention to the plausibility of the accounts and their essentially performative nature.

I was also conscious that there were certain areas of the pupils' lives that were more delicate than others. I am aware that many children may not have been comfortable talking about areas such as whether they 'fancied' another child to an adult whom they had only just met and were highly likely never to see again. I had also not had the time to build up sufficiently close relationships with the headteachers or staff. Although I asked questions about 'looks' and whether the boys noticed if a girl was attractive (and vice versa), and we talked about 'crushes', and the meaning of the phrase 'going out' with a girl or boy, this was about as far as I dared

go. I was aware that I had not mentioned to the school that I would be exploring boys' sexualities, and I did not want to be put under suspicion by the school or, perhaps, by some of the parents if they asked the pupils what they had been talking about at school that day and to whom.

3.7 Role of the Adult Researcher

Carrying out research with young children needs careful thinking and there can be several challenges (Swain, 2006). As Alldred (1998) contends, notions such as entering 'the child's world' (Mandell, 1988, 1991) and/or interacting 'with children in their perspective' (Mandell, 1991) imply that adults and children inhabit separate social spaces. This approach is realist and, implicitly, objectivist with the idea that it is possible to enter the cultural setting, observe it and report on it whilst leaving it undisturbed and unaltered. It is also in opposition to Giddens (1976) who argues that all social research produces a 'double hermeneutic' whereby a researcher's own conceptual theories and definitions of 'what is going on' come, unavoidably, to be interpreted and appropriated by the very social actors who are being investigated. Moreover, some researchers such as Corsaro (1981) present their work as a straightforward portrayal of the children's culture with the assumption that the reader will use the researcher's own perspective as the basis for knowledge. However, I argue we need to examine adult conceptions alongside, and in relation to, the observations and conclusions that are made, for the descriptions in this book are, inevitably, rendered through the lens of their own conceptions, experiences and values.

An issue for researchers working in the role of participating in children's cultures is how to approach and manage the conventional adult-child relationship. In her discussion on 'the least-adult' role, Mandell (1988, p. 435) contends that 'the researcher [can] suspend all adult-like characteristics except size', and Goode (1986) and Waksler (1986) also maintain that full adult participation is possible and that all aspects of adult superiority can be ignored except the physical. In earlier times, some researchers, like Davies (1989), appeared to try to actually become a child, but this was not my intention: I never attempted to try and be 'like one of them' for of course I could not: simply being an adult meant an unequal, dichotomous distribution of power, and I knew, and they knew, that I was different and apart. Corsaro (1985) argues that signifiers of adult age and

authority mean that adult participation in children's cultures can only ever be partial.

Although I am sympathetic to Mandell's (1988, 1991) and Epstein's (1998) idea of the 'least-adult role' (see also Garratt, 2021), I was conscious that I was still (very obviously) an adult with my age, height, deeper voice and my clothes and, indeed, Epstein herself points up the impossibility of maintaining such a position beyond a certain point. During the time I spent in the two schools I did not overly concern myself with how the children addressed me (as long as it was polite!). There have been some researchers (such as Epstein, 1998, and Renold, 1999) who have asked the children to call them by their first names, but I generally gave them the choice, and it was usually 'Jon' or, very occasionally, 'Mr Swain'.

Viewing children as highly competent social beings, I also always tried to respect them, and my objective was to learn *from*, as much as *about* the children (Thorne, 1993): however, in many ways I deliberately wanted to maintain some distance between us. My belief (and although rooted in experience, it is still ultimately only a belief) was that my research needed a dialogic regard between both parties, and I felt that if I ever lost the children's respect, the relationship would degenerate and have an adverse effect on the quality of the data. This was particularly apposite in interviews where I set the boundaries for behaviour. In past research I have not let the children lean back on their chairs or put their feet up on the table, and I would also admonish them if they openly used swear words out of the context of their account. However, this did not happen during the interviews in this study. We should not try and fool ourselves, for although I adopted a less adult-centric stance, or less teacher-centric stance, I wanted to maintain the upper hand: the children were allowed to talk freely on a range of subjects of their own choice, but eventually I would bring them back to talk about *my* areas and *my* questions. Sometimes, I found it quite difficult to shake off the role of teacher, for like Epstein (1998, p. 29), I had spent a fair proportion of my adult years in the classroom and had invested considerable amounts of psychic, emotional and social energy in 'becoming' and 'being' a teacher, who, by the nature of the job, has to maintain a certain distance between her/himself and the children/pupils. Unlike Epstein (1998) and many other researchers, I did not offer the children a choice of pseudonyms as I felt that although, in many ways, they *were* my research, it would make little difference what they were called in it, and although I am telling a story of the time I spent with the children, it is still, ultimately, my story and not theirs.

Notes

1. The quote that is normally attributed to the writer Anais Nin https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/crosswords/daily-puzzle-2017-08-05.html
2. I actually interviewed 61 of the 64 pupils on roll as one boy kept being absent when I visited.
3. The names of the classes at both schools were based on the teachers' initials. For example, the teacher of 6MK was Michelle Kinder.
4. All the percentages in the book have been rounded to the nearest whole number.
5. The interviews covered a wide range of topics, rather than concentrating, or having a specific focus, on a particular area (e.g. favourite lessons or popular pupils), so I have not called them focus groups.
6. DBS stands for the Disclosure and Barring Service which helps employers and organisations make safer recruitment decisions. My DBS was carried out by my university, UCL.
7. There were a few morning playtimes at Church Green where I was able to look out of the window into the playground for about 10 minutes a time and see the children playing together. Most were involved in 'free' play or were talking together in pairs or small groups; others were using equipment such as table tennis tables. However, there was nothing systematic about these observations.

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CHAPTER 4

Life at School

This chapter presents empirical data on:

- pupils' views about the best and least favourite parts of school (including teachers and particular lessons);
- school pressures (including homework and examinations);
- teasing and bullying.

4.1 Pupils' Views on Their Life at School

4.1.1 Their School

All the children that I spoke to at both schools told me they were proud of their school, and they all generally liked wearing their school uniforms, which they said were comfortable. The great majority really enjoyed attending school, and at Church Green, this positive feeling was unanimous. The Prep school had more resources, and the curriculum was much broader and included more time for subjects like PE and sport, art, music, drama and technology. There was a lot going on with a whole host of lunchtime and after-school clubs; most were connected to sports, but there were also more intellectual associations like the chess club and debating society. There were fewer clubs at the state school, but there were still around a dozen held either during the lunch hour or after school. The most popular were football and netball (open to both sexes), but there was

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also crochet, generic art, SEND art and musical theatre—to name a few. There was an after-school homework club which was primarily for more vulnerable children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The class teacher told me that this was by invite only but was actually well attended.[1]

The pupils at Church Green said that their school was a fun place to be, there was lots of laughter, and this was with some of the teachers during lessons as well as with their peer groups. Attending Wood Vale was also generally enjoyable: as one girl, Trinny (who was typical) told me: '*I really like school…I like achieving new things in school because it makes me feel happy*'. For some, it was also good to be somewhere different from home, as there was usually a lot going on. Another girl, Kennedy, mused that:

> The best thing about school is being somewhere different; it's good to get out of the house; there is quite a lot of drama in the class.

A key dimension of school life for children is their friendships and being with friends (Adler & Adler, 1998; Antonopoulou et al., 2022; Baines & MacIntyre, 2022; Jago et al., 2009; Manninen et al., 2011; Pollard, 1985; Poulin & Chan, 2010; Renold, 2005; Rubin, 1980; Swain, 2000, 2004; Thorne, 1993). As one boy told me at Wood Vale, '*I see my friends and can play with them. Playtime and seeing friends are the best parts of school*'. While, at Church Green, one girl spoke about how much she would miss seeing those friends who were not going with her to the senior school.

Maisie: Now we are at the end of year, now we are coming towards our time at Church Green, and now every day has been a lot more fun; we are close to our teachers and our friendships are really close and we are worried about losing them.

In this conversation below with three girls at Wood Vale, they allude to friendships, teachers and school trips. Marta mentions how much she enjoys the co-educational aspect of being with boys as well as girls, and she appreciates that an individual child can be, and act, how they like without fear of peer derogation; there were no stereotypical ways that people had to conform to and, as we will see in Chaps. 8 and 9, it was accepted that boys could enact feminine qualities and girls can perform masculine qualities. Despite the structural and architectural binaries mentioned earlier, in Chap. 3, both schools worked hard at treating boys and girls equally, and every pupil agreed that they were considered equals. As I have also

written, the only club at Church Green that had separate affiliations for 'boys' and 'girls' was rugby where physical differences (e.g., in physicality, including strength) are perhaps more apparent.

Jon: What is the best thing about coming to Church Green, including lessons, lunchtimes, friends, anything really?
Farah: I have made lot of new friends and I get to see them like every day, some of the lessons are really interesting, and I have lots of fun at breaktime because we get to joke around, and like we all have to be here because it's school, so you have to be here anyway.
Jon: I should have said you can say more than one thing.
Marta: I like the pupils and the teachers…
Uma: And because we go on school trips which are really fun.
Jon: Yes, there are lots of things going on at Church Green.
Uma: Yes, we are doing like conservation things at [Name of nearby conversation centre], and we've planted loads of trees.
Jon: So, it's a fun place, Church Green?
Uma: Yeah, real fun.
Marta: I think for me the main thing is that we are allowed to be with boys and play with boys and not get teased for it. That's the reason … like I got an offer from the Grammar school one month ago, or something, but the main reason I didn't take it is that [Name of the school] is all girls and I would miss not being with the boys because it is actually a lot of fun being with them; some of them are quite nice to be with.
Jon: Yes, you would quite miss them!
Marta: Yeah, it sounds weird but…
Jon: Church Green has a lot of laughter, everyone seems to have a good time and the teachers are funny as well and also make jokes. […]
Farah: Here is quite carefree and you make stronger bonds with people, like at my old school the classes didn't mix very much.
Jon: It seems that the school works hard at emphasising how important it is to be kind, considerate and tolerant of each other's views—is that true?
Farah: Yeah.
Uma: Yeah, they do.
Jon: I get the impression the teachers reinforce these kinds of things.

Farah/Marta: Yeah.
Farah: Another thing is that we have opposite gender sports. In the earlier years the girls didn't go to the boys' clubs but lots of girls now go to the football club and 3–4 boys go to netball club on Tuesday.
Marta: It's really nice that you can do stuff with the opposite gender and mingle together.
Jon: And it just seems natural.
Farah: Yeah.
Uma: It just feels natural [to be with the boys], you're not put under pressure just to play with the girls. Girls can be tough and not get teased and boys can cry, and people will sympathise with them, and you don't have to be put under pressure to be kind and gentle all the time.

We will see some of these themes come up again in the following chapters, but for the moment, it is important to note what Uma says about girls and boys being able to mix freely together without any fear of being derogated, and how girls and boys are able to act whoever they want to be and were not confined to performing predictable, stereotypical identities with conventional feminine or masculine traits.

In this next excerpt, I am, again, testing out my hypothesis with two boys that one of the storylines in the formal culture at Church Green was that it continually reinforced a series of values, such as kindness.

Jon: It seems that the school works hard at having people being kind to each other?
Darshan: Yeah, it is one of our school values, there are seven or eight of them.
Jon: Oh OK, so there is a list of school values? What are they?
Lewis: Integrity, kindness, excellence, initiative, curiosity, critical thinking, collaboration.
Jon: OK, that's seven.
Darshan: There is also balance.
Jon: Balance, what does that mean?
Lewis: A balance between work and play, but I'm not sure it is a value.

While the vast majority of the pupils at Wood Vale also enjoyed coming to school, a proportion of the academic year was spent preparing for the

SATs in May, which meant that the curriculum was much narrower, and, for instance, whereas the pupils had lessons in maths and English every day, they only had an art lesson—a particular favourite—about once a week. When I asked two boys at Wood Vale whether they liked school they replied:

Freddie: It's OK; I like some lessons but not all of them.
Mitch: Yes and no. We get to do fun stuff but sometimes not so much.

The children generally worked hard (some very hard) at both schools and saw a clear, and perhaps simplistic, link between achieving good qualifications and better employment opportunities. As Alan, at Wood Vale, told me:

> I don't see why you would get teased for being smart, I mean if you're good at something … I mean if you are smart you will get a good job.

It was rare for a pupil to be goaded for working hard. Two girls mentioned one instance, but this seemed to be an exception and also appeared quite trivial and a little frivolous.

Jude: We all work hard but sometimes Kai gets called a 'Teachers' Pet' because he can overdo it with the amount of adjectives he uses in stories. He sometimes gets called 'Dictionary Boy', but it's just teasing.

However, a few of the boys at Wood Vale admitted that their commitment to work could be a little patchy and they did not apply themselves fully all the time. We already know from Freddie, above, that he didn't like all the lessons.

Freddie: I generally work hard, but sometimes I have off days.

Pupils at both schools liked their teachers who generally made lessons fun and as interesting as they could. The first quotation is from Church Green, and the second is from Wood Vale.

Alfie: The teachers are great. Our teacher is quite strict, but he's funny. He sometimes does card tricks.

Astrid: The teachers are always there for you to always help you with your learning.

For some pupils, the three ingredients that made school a good place to be were their friends, their teachers and acquiring new knowledge. As Florence at Wood Vale recounted: '*I like seeing my friend, to do the subjects and learn new stuff, and I really like the teachers*'.

Most pupils had very few negative things to say about their school. The most frequent complaint was that school started too early and was sometimes tiring, but this sentiment was only expressed by a minority. The short time they had for morning play was also alluded to. At Wood Vale they were not allowed to play football, and this irritated a few of them. There were also, at Wood Vale, some lessons, as Freddie has said, that some pupils did not enjoy. Whereas no pupil at Church Vale complained about a particular subject and seemed to like almost all the lessons, many at the state school had a particular dislike of English, particularly the boys.[2]

In the conversation below I am asking two boys at Wood Vale about what they like best and least at school.

Jon: What's your favourite subject? Mack, you go first.
Mack: Maths, er, sometimes history, I hate English, I mean I have a deep like hatred of it.
Alan: Does PE count?
Jon: Yes, of course.
Alan: PE is best, there used to be a really good PE teacher but he left so the best two are maths and PE and I hate English so much, it hurts my fingers, I just don't like it.
Jon: The two boys I interviewed yesterday were saying the same thing so why is that?
Mack: You have to write up useless pieces of writing, I get why we have to do it, but it sucks.

Other boys at this school also told me about their dislike for English:

Mitch: I find English, really boring, especially grammar and vocabulary.
Freddie: I don't like English, I don't like punctuation or spellings.

Whilst some girls also mentioned 'grammar' and 'punctuation' exercises, far more boys expressed an aversion to English. Both girls and boys

didn't mind writing stories, which they found could be 'quite creative', and many of them also liked reading. At Church Green, one boy told me he was enjoying reading *Emma* by Jane Austen.

As I have written, one of the limitations of my research was that I was not able to observe any complete classes. However, at Wood Vale, I sat outside one of the classrooms (6MK) in the corridor where the interviews were carried out at lunchtime. I often arrived around 10 minutes early and could see directly into the classroom through a glass wall. The pupils sat in rows and seemed to be well behaved and attentive. I did not have time to investigate the disciplinary apparatus or systems at either school, but from what I could gather, discipline did not seem to be a significant problem and the children told me that they respected their teachers and appreciated their hard work. This is not to say that some pupils, particularly boys, did not sometimes 'show' off in class and were disruptive, but this was generally the exception rather than the rule. I will write more about this in Chap. 6.

4.2 Pressures

Some researchers argue that in current the marketised regime of state surveillance and accountability, there is more pressure on teachers (Jerrim et al., 2022; MacBeath & Galton, 2008), and particularly on headteachers, rather than on children (Bradbury, 2019; Burnitt, 2016; Tucker, 2010). However, life at school could also cause stress and anxiety for pupils. Research from 2017 showed that life for many children in today's primary schools was often difficult and pressurised (House of Commons, 2017). A study of 2000 UK parents and teachers of primary school children revealed that more than 94% of teachers believed that their pupils were contending with a wider range of pressures than five years ago: 27% thought formal examinations (SATs) were a major source of pressure, second only to social media, which 37% regarded as exerting the greatest pressure on pupils. More recently, in April of this year (2024), the *Times* newspaper reported that more six- to ten-year-olds are being seen by the NHS for mental health problems than any adult age group and, on average, every primary school class has a pupil with suspected mental health problem such as an eating disorder, anxiety and/or depression—a 28% rise in less than a year. This had been exacerbated by Covid lockdowns and long waiting lists for treatment.

However, as we have already seen, the children in these two schools were generally content with their life at school, which they viewed as a

happy place and often full of laughter. Homework didn't appear to cause any real stress. Pupils at both schools got around two hours of homework a week, which they accepted and didn't seem to mind. At Wood Vale, they generally had 15 minutes of reading every night and an additional reading comprehension and a maths activity. Homework was found and downloaded from the school website, but hard copies were also available. At Church Green, there were two pieces of homework set for English and two for maths, which, again, pupils thought was 'fair'.

As I wrote earlier in the chapter, research has shown that examinations such as the SATs can cause pupils stress and put their mental health at risk, and this includes pupils at primary school (Keane, 2023).[3] However, this did not appear to be the case at these two schools. Church Green did not take SATs—the headteacher told me that there was no need; they had their own methods of internal assessment and, as I have already written, he told me that '*all the pupils are bright anyway*'. SATs were taken very seriously at Wood Vale, but many of the children that I spoke to in the autumn term said that they were not feeling particularly apprehensive about them. As Rosalind said: '*I feel a bit of pressure about the SATs but not that much*'. Having said this, I broached this subject with the children in November, so they may have had a different view as the exams approached in May.[4] Some, like Grace, told me that expectations—often from parents—could put pressure on them: '*I sometimes feel under pressure when people say you are going to do well in the tests*'.

Jon: Is it a cool thing to work hard?
Grace: …er, yeah, I feel like…I want to do, like, I don't want to do all the work, but I want to, like, do well, because my parents at home get so mad at me when I don't do well. Like there was a time when I got 19 out of 23; my dad got so mad at me.
Jon: Because you only got 19 out of 23!
Grace: I was mad at myself because I knew he would.

Most of the pupils told me that they gained confidence from gaining good marks in the many practice, or mock, tests which they took regularly, and others added that older siblings had also given them added assurance. A few pupils confessed that they felt a little pressure about curriculum areas they did not feel confident with, such as grammar, or the reasoning test, but this was not widespread.

A few boys at the prep school stated feeling the pressure of being in the maths groups, but none of the girls mentioned this.

Jon: Do you ever feel under pressure at school?
Rohan: Yes, when I entered the top maths group, it is very competitive.
Farid: There's a fair bit of pressure to stay in the top maths group.
Hassan: I felt pressure to work hard to move up to another group.

Overall, though, pupils in both schools did not feel that they were under much stress at school from the formal school culture, and they dismissed my query about whether they ever had sleepless nights worrying about things at school. However, pressure is also connected to individual personalities, and of course some pupils felt more pressure, and were more anxious, than others.

Many of the pupils had very busy lives. Although I did not explore the theme of private tutoring in any detail many of them mentioned having a tutor. Moreover, and particularly at Church Green, many pupils attended after-school clubs before they got home and were also ferried around to other activities such as piano classes. For example, Claudia told me that she did about 30 hours of sport (rugby, netball, cricket, football, hockey, swimming) a week, which naturally eroded time for homework.

> I also play the violin; I am also doing singing and am going to take up the guitar soon. I used to do ballet but gave it up. I love them all but can be a bit stressed when I have homework.

There were other pressures for pupils outside of the formal school culture, and two boys at Wood Vale told me that the pressures of performing well in the regular football game could be more stressful than performing well for teachers in class. When children attend school, they need to come to a satisfactory accommodation and balance between the expectations of two sources—the formal and the informal cultures—and these can sometimes exert contradictory pressures (Pollard & Filer, 1996, 1999). As we saw in Chap. 1 with the girl with her neat handwriting, if a pupil tries to please the teachers too much, they can be accused by peers of colluding too closely to the formal culture and suffer subordination, and if they don't work hard enough, or are disruptive in class, this can upset the teachers which will have its own disciplinary consequences. This can

sometimes involve a delicate balance of affiliation which Woods (1990) refers to as 'knife-edging' (p. 131). This was not generally the case in these schools where the great majority of the children were compliant and well-behaved; working hard was commended and being academically clever was cool and admired. However, constructing and performing a pupil identity, and interacting in the peer group on a daily basis, can also be demanding and take a lot of emotional work, and this is before any learning in class is tackled. Most of the data about this theme comes from Church Green, where I explored this theme of 'fitting in with the peer group' in greater depth.

I will look at making friends and friendships in the next chapter (Chap. 5), but falling out with friends can of course lead to a lot of anxiety and there is a pressure to maintain relationships. This data comes from Church Green, which suggests (and was confirmed in conversations with the girls) that there is a tendency for girls to fall out with each other more than boys:

Jon: Do you find there is a pressure of not falling out in friendship groups?
Rohan: That is mainly for the girls.
Farid: We can trust each other.
Jon: So as boys, you don't recognise that, you don't fall out?
Rohan: We don't.

The need and desire to fit in with the peer group can be strong (Adler & Adler, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Poulin & Chan, 2010; Renold, 2005; Swain, 2004, 2023), but this is not the case for all pupils. In the following extract from an interview at Church Green with two boys and three girls, I am asking them if there is a need in the peer group to look and behave in a certain way.

Nikel [a boy]: Not for me… I mean, I guess a little bit, 'cos boys are expected to be more sporty and things, but I find that OK.
Jon: But is there a pressure to look and behave in a certain way?
Mohit: No.
Jon: Is there a pressure for the girls, Emma?
Emma: I think some things you can't talk about with certain girls, not appearances, I think.

Jon: Do the girls talk about appearances themselves?
Emma: No/
Simone: Yes, some girls do, like Claudine.
Jon: Some girls do, but not you Emma!
Emma: No.
Jon: What do you think, Chanda?
Chanda: No.
Jon: Simone?
Simone: No, there's not that much pressure about looks, but if you are thinking about it literally, then probably yes, because you can't come to school in your pyjamas.

So, while some girls talked about their appearance, this was not the case with all of them, or even most of them, and they said that there was no real pressure for a girl to wear their hair in a certain style—'*nothing like this, we all have to have a fringe*'. Another girl, Olivia, slightly disagreed with the group above and thought there was some pressure to conform to a 'certain look', and later in the interview, she said some of this came from social media.

Olivia: I feel, like, I sometimes feel, like, maybe it's a bit too early, but I sometimes and in some ways, I feel bit, like, a bit insecure in some ways.
Jon: We all do/
Olivia: And I feel other people in our year do as well, and I feel there is pressure to look a certain way.

The expression 'maybe it's a bit too early' is telling and there seems to be an anticipation of what is to come at secondary school. Although I took up the theme of needing to 'look a certain way' in subsequent interviews, I couldn't find much evidence for this at this age, and the boys that I asked dismissed this out of hand—they did their own thing and were not bothered about appearances, beyond looking presentable. However, this was towards the end of the interview cycle, which meant that I did not explore this theme in earlier interviews. Later in this same interview with Olivia and her friend Frayer, a self-confessed tomboy (usually understood as a person identified as a girl who engages in masculine practices), the girls went on to suggest that, sometimes, they felt more pressure working on being a girl than on doing their schoolwork, which was, in some ways, easier and could even be a diversion.

Jon:	Is there quite a lot of pressure coming to school, just being a girl? Do you agree?
Frayer:	Yeah.
Olivia:	Yeah.
Jon:	Is it harder than doing your schoolwork?
Olivia:	Sometimes, it can be, but this school takes the pressure away because you have something else to focus on.
Jon:	So, the schoolwork is a diversion!
Olivia:	Yeah.

As we will see in Chap. 8, other girls at this school also spoke about the pressure of having a crush on a boy and the anxiety this can sometimes cause. The literature suggests that many can feel they are involved in something over which they have little control (Blaise, 2005; Cannoni & Bombi, 2016; Huuki et al., 2022; McCullough, 2017; Renold, 2013). Should you tell them, and if so when and how (verbal or written, or through an intermediary), and then you have to wait to see if and how they respond. This could make a person feel vulnerable.

4.3 Teasing and Bullying

Although teasing was an integral and regular feature of the informal peer group, there appeared to be relatively low levels of bullying at Wood Vale and almost none at Church Green—at least that I was able to uncover in this year group, and I did not have the time to carry out any systematic quantitative survey, which would have involved a lot of negotiation with senior staff and seeking further consent from parents. This is not to say that pupils did not fall out with each other (especially the girls) or never said nasty or spiteful things to each other, but these were often one-off instances, and they were not prevalent, persistent or long lasting, which is one of the definitions of being bullied (Olweus, 1993). A lot of the teasing consisted of name-calling. We have already heard that at Wood Vale Kai was sometimes called 'Dictionary Boy' because of his writing prowess and other names mentioned were 'Nerd', which no one seemed to mind too much. Epithets such as 'Shorty' were also cited, but again, these did not seem to be taken too seriously. Of course, there is a fine line between teasing and bullying, but during the interviews I explained that, as far as I was concerned, if a pupil was hurt physically or, more likely, upset emotionally, then they were being bullied. The teasing and bullying that the children

talked about mainly involved the odd, and often one-off, hurtful and spiteful comments, and no one mentioned being bullied persistently, systematically or physically. Occasionally a girl said that she had been called 'fat' (by a boy), which, potentially, was much more hurtful. However, nasty name calling was not confined to between gender groups and one girl at Church Green, Uma, told me, '*Some girls are nastier to the other girls than the boys are*'. I also picked up one instance of a racist name being used in a text: the girl complained to the deputy head, and it was dealt with. I will say more about this later in this chapter.

Most of the data in this section come from girls' interviews at Wood Vale, where a little bullying took place from boys directed to girls. The pupils were adamant at this school that there was no girl-on-girl, or boy-on-boy, bullying. However, the week before I arrived in November the school had held an anti-bullying week, which suggests that there must have been *some* problem with bullying. Pupils at both schools insisted that bullying was much more of a problem in the lower years and most of them had now grown out of it.

It was difficult to arrive at any definitive answer on the level of bullying but, despite Astrid's assertion in the extract below that 'it's mostly all the boys', other girls insisted that it was only a very few, and it mainly happened in one year 6 class. Most bullies need a reaction (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1993; Swain, 1998) and some girls were clearly hurt; what's more, they felt helpless, and some didn't think they could do anything about it.

Annie:	We got bullied today.
Jon:	Oh…
Astrid:	It's mostly all the boys.
Jon:	Do you two agree [asking the other two girls present]?
Aurora:	It's a few.
Jon:	OK, so a few, rather than all of the boys… and do the girls stand up for themselves when this happens?
Astrid:	No.
Annie:	No.
Jon:	They don't! OK, so do they get upset?
Astrid:	Yeah.
Jon:	Do you agree [asking the other two]?
Astrid/Aurora:	Yeah.
Jon:	OK, tell me what happened today with the bullying.

Annie: Erm, this person, in my class, was like saying horrible things about my dog … my dog died a long time ago and I've also had this thing called 'Seizures' and I had one that lasted two hours and he called me 'Seizure Girl'.
Jon: Oh, that sounds horrible, really nasty … so what do you do about that?
Annie: I just normally do nothing because I feel I can't do anything.
Jon: Do you tell Grace or Alexis [two very popular girls who some girls sometimes approached if they wanted advice or comforting]?
Annie: I tell Alexis, but she can't really do anything.
Jon: Do you tell a teacher ever?
Annie: Sometimes.

There was no more time to ask further questions about what would happen if pupils did tell a teacher, but I would imagine (and hope) this might happen if the bullying was particularly nasty or persistent, and I am pretty sure the teachers would take it seriously. However, while some girls told me they got upset, others were able to ignore and laugh off potentially hurtful comments, as we can see in this extract below from an interview with three girls, including Alexis, who is mentioned above. The girls reinforce the themes that bullying was more of a problem in the lower years, and they are older and wiser now, which helps them to see the boys' comments as being largely provocative and dependent on the reaction they received.

Jon: Do people get teased or bullied in your class?
Lillian: Er…
Anna: No.
Jon: No, or a bit?
Alexis: I mean, like, we were when we were younger, yeah, but not any more.
Jon: Some of the girls in the other groups I spoke to said some of the boys called them horrible names. Is that teasing or bullying?
Alexis: I think that's them just being irritating.
Jon: You mean just being boys?
Alexis: Yeah [laughter].
Jon: But does that upset you when that happens?
Lillian: No.
Alexis: Not really … some of the girls are really sensitive but some of them just don't care.

Jon: But what about you, do you care?
Alexis: No.
Jon: OK, so you just brush them off?
Alexis: Yeah.
Jon: What about you Lillian, do you care?
Lillian: No, I mean it depends … I mean if they kept going on or it is really rude then it would be different.
Jon: OK, but usually that doesn't happen?
Lillian: No.
Jon: So, just to get this straight, there was more teasing and bullying when you were in the lower years, but now it has mainly stopped.
Alexis/Lillian: Yeah.
Jon: And why do you think it might have stopped?
Alexis: I think it is because everyone now is just a bit more mature.

Alexis and Lillian are able to exercise agency in their decision to ignore the boys' provocation. Later in this interview, Alexis also confessed that some girls also called boys some *horrible names,* although she insisted that this was only in retaliation. Interestingly, and in contrast to my own PhD research, boys were never referred to as 'girls' as a term of subordination with its associations of femininity.

This next excerpt confirms that not all the girls were able to, in my own words, 'brush off' the boys' comments. It also shows that some of them had misogynist connotations.

Jon: Is it teasing or is it bullying? I mean does it really hurt or do you get upset or do you just say, 'Don't be so pathetic'?
Bailey: I don't.
Jon: OK, so if it upsets you then it is bullying?
Bailey: Yeah.
Armenia: It depends on what they say, I mean some girls do get upset, if they [some of the boys] say, like, 'you're looking really ugly today' some people can tell that it is like a joke, but some people can tell like it's not.
Jon: OK, do some girls do get upset? Or do they say 'shove off'?
Zareen: Well, some girls do get upset; some girls think it's just silly and you should just ignore it.

Although a few boys sporadically made detrimental comments towards the girls at Wood Vale, there seemed to be two main bullies who bullied in a more systematic fashion, one boy in each class, and both had come from other schools within the past year. The boys told me that one of them had called them 'gay', but this had now stopped and was the only instance of homophobia that I was able to uncover at either school.

While teasing was also part of the informal peer group culture at Church Green, I found very few instances where it tipped over into bullying. Although a few girls again reported other girls making spiteful comments to them, these, again, appeared to be one-off instances. Two girls spoke about an instance where another girl had blown up one of their towers in a popular online computer game called *Roblox*, but although this had upset them, it seemed relatively trivial, at least to me, in the sense that the when the girls looked back on this event, they were able to appreciate the humour in it. There was one boy at the prep school, Javier, who also told me he was sometimes bullied by some of the boys, although he did not elaborate on the nature of the bullying. When I broached this with other boys, they told me that Javier could be highly irritating—he sometimes showed off—and they sometimes excluded him from their games. I don't have much data on this, but it was the only specific instance of bullying that I could find at this school. I could find no reported tales of bullying between boys on girls, no homophobia or misogyny that Renold (2005) and I (Swain, 2003) found in our earlier research, or, more recently, Atkinson (2021) and Schiffrin-Sands (2021) found primary schools. Specifically, there were no storylines where words such as 'gay' were used that Hall (2020) found in his research or 'slut' or other synonyms that Ringrose and Renold (2010) reported in primary and secondary school settings. While some of the pupils thought that there were some instances of bullying in the lower years, others could not recall any. As I reported earlier, in one interview, one girl, Uma, insisted that '*boys no longer take advantage of girls; in fact, girls are nastier to the other girls than the boys are*', although this also suggests that this was not always the case in the earlier years. In fact, these findings overlap with the conclusions from recent research into masculinities with older boys across the world (e.g., in the UK—McCormack (2011); the US—Magrath and McCormack (2023); New Zealand—Sexton (2017); and Australia—Kingsman (2023)), which indicate these are not isolated incidents but part of a larger and promising trend, where masculine identities are predicated in direct opposition to homophobia, misogyny and aggressiveness.

There was one instance of online or cyberbullying that I uncovered in one class (6TD) at Wood Vale,[5] which had racist connotations. It seemed to have happened as the result of one girl trying to cause mischief in the class' WhatsApp group, which I write more about in Chap. 10. Florence takes up the story:

> Saanvi called Lila a racist. Jude made her [Lila] spell out a rude word and she didn't know the meaning of it, and she wrote it in a WhatsApp text. Jude then said Lila is a racist, but Lila is not a racist. Saanvi and Lila used to be good friends but are now enemies and Saanvi still thinks Lila is a racist.

This incident happened in the autumn term. It seemed to have caused quite a stir, but it had been reported to teachers and by the time I picked up this story in the spring term it had been largely forgotten about. However, it did result in a few girls leaving the WhatsApp group, perhaps as a result of parental pressure, although I did not investigate this. I also never asked what the 'racist' word was nor did I find out whether Saanvi and Lila had made up as friends.

Notes

1. I did not enquire what the numbers were.
2. Although children in primary schools perform well on reading scores in comparison with other countries, research from the National Literacy Trust (2023) shows that just two in five (43.4%) children and young people aged 8–18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023. This is the lowest level since they first asked the question in 2005. Fewer boys than girls said they enjoyed reading (40.5% vs 45.3%).
3. Academics from my own university (UCL) reviewed 52 studies about students who attended either a primary school, secondary school or sixth-form college around the world between 1991 and 2022. In 48 of the studies, they found a link between academic pressure within the school year and anxiety and depressive symptoms (Keane, 2023).
4. I did ask some of the pupils at Wood Vale how they had felt about taking their SATs when I went back to interview around a dozen pupils in July, and they all said they thought they had gone well, and they had not caused them a great deal of anxiety.
5. Purdy and York (2016) carried out research in Northern Ireland secondary schools with adolescents and found that cyberbullying among these pupils was relatively low and most often consisted of hurtful or nasty comments sent via texts or posted on social networking.

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CHAPTER 5

Making Friends

This chapter presents empirical data on:

1. how friendship groups were constituted and characterised;
2. the differences were between girl and boy friendship groups;
3. what made a best friend, and what values were particularly prized;
4. what relations were like both *within* and *between* boys' and girls' groups.

5.1 Introduction

Along with Paechter and Clark (2007), the study starts from the premise that one of the main influences on children's constructions of their gendered identities within the school setting is their community of peers, which organises the ways that enable or constrain the practices and ways of being or *doing* boy or girl (George, 2007; George & Browne, 2000; Paechter & Clark, 2007). In Connell's words, it is 'peer groups, not individuals, that are the bearers of gender definitions' (Connell, 2000, p. 162). Gay refers to the peer group as a 'halfway house between the family and the adult world' (Gay, 1992, p. 207), and writing about adolescent school pupils, Warrington and Younger (2011) maintain that it is one of the most powerful and compelling forces effecting change in the adolescent and a crucial aspect of school life for many students. I argue that this applies as much to pre-teens on the cusp of adolescence as to teenagers.

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A vital dimension of the peer group is friendships, which were (and are) the beating heart of school and dominate the world of peers. Research shows that throughout life at school, supportive friends and peers are fundamental for social, emotional and cognitive development (Antonopoulou et al., 2022; Krammer et al., 2023). Friendships are about sharing enjoyment and entertainment, but they also provide children opportunities to explore self-understandings; they provide not only companionship but chances for shared intimacy where important interpersonal and social skills of listening and empathy are learned and help children prepare for future adult relationships. The friendship groups played a significant role in the development and consolidation of identity and general well-being; they created a structure where there was a common set of values, shared norms, interests and practices (Magrath & McCormack, 2023; Pahl, 2000; Warrington & Younger, 2011). They also gave pupils a sense of belonging (Poulin & Chan, 2010). While some associations were more active and primarily organised around physical activity, such as football or cricket, other groups were more passive and spent more time talking.

The most important ingredient of any friendship is of course enjoyment, which comes from being in each other's company (Jago et al., 2009). The pupils told me that friends were the most important and best part of their school life, and for many, friendships *were* school life. As Adler and Adler (1998) maintain, '…having someone as a friend is a form of power, which those without close friendships do not have' (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 162).

5.2 Friendship Groups

I began each interview by asking the pupils if they could tell me the names in each friendship group in their class, which I recorded on a piece of paper (see Fig. 5.1). If the group consisted mainly of boys, I would ask them to start with their own groupings and then add in girls' groups, if they thought they knew them, and vice versa with the girls. I then also asked them to include names of friends from other classes, if they joined them on a consistent basis. Although there were minor disagreements about which groups some pupils should be placed, overall, the lists of names were remarkably consistent. I then asked the children to say how they categorised their own group and the other groups in the class with simple, often single, descriptive words and then talked about what they thought made each group distinct from the other. I also asked the

Fig. 5.1 Boys' friendship groups in Class 6HH at Church Green, according to Richard, Pete and Nicky in interview 1: 22 March 2022

interviewees to nominate any groups or individual pupils who were particularly popular within the peer groups and proffer reasons why this might be so. Finally, I asked them to name which pupil they thought was academically the brightest in the class, and there was usually little disagreement about this, although, sometimes, they nominated more than one person. For example, so and so was the best at maths and so and so was the leading pupil in English. See Fig. 5.1 for an example of the boys' friendship groups which I recorded from one class, 6HH, at Church Green. This also includes two boys who regularly joined them from other classes and the girls from their own class.

The purpose of the simple descriptive names was for the pupils to try, describe and capture a characteristic feature of the group such as 'Footballers' or 'Computer-gamers'. They were not typologies as such, which other researchers, working in the field of educational research of

gender, have used. While I found these descriptive names from the children useful, I was also aware of their limitations. Although they gave me a rough idea about what each group's main interests and practices were, I sometimes found it difficult to find any unique distinguishing feature of *sui generis* that made a group stand out on its own, and the one-word descriptors were often unable to capture the full complexities of the pupils' world. Ultimately, however seductively neat, and seemingly clean-cut, these categories were too simplistic. Some of the adjectives the boys came up with at both schools to describe their groups included the 'Footballers', 'Cricketers, 'Jokers', 'Talking' group, but these often seemed too reductionist and unsatisfactory. For example, although football was the binding 'glue' for the two, most easily defined groups at both schools, once I dug beneath the surface I found out that there were subgroups within, which had other interests which bound some of them together. For instance, at Wood Vale, many of the football boys also played computer games, were also academic and told me they liked maths but hated English.

Some of the descriptive names that the girls came up with at both schools were the 'Talking' or 'Gossipy' group, the 'Meme' group, the 'Jokers' group, the 'Sporty' group, the 'Dramatic' group, the 'Hardworking' group, the 'Computer-gamers' group, the 'Shy' group, the 'Dancing' group. Some friendship groupings had several characteristics and therefore more than one name. An example of the difficulties of trying to categorise each group with only one adjective can be seen in the following exchange at Wood Vale. I am asking two girls from 6TD about how they would categorise each friendship group. I have called their own group, Group 3.

Jon: OK, so if we look at Group 2, how are they different from your group?
Emma: They are smart as well [like the main, popular group they have already identified, which I have called Group 1].
Jon: We'll you're smart as well, but do you call them the smart group?
Saanvi: No, but they [Group 2] are kind of loud and/
Emma: Even if they are doing weird things, they, like, don't care about people watching them…they don't really care…they've known each other for about six years.
Jon: OK, what about this group [Group 4]? Are they really close, like inseparable?
Emma: Real best friends.

Jon: Have they got a name—any general characteristics?
Emma: No, I don't think so.
Jon: Saanvi, what do you think?
Saanvi: They haven't got a name, but they are, like, very social people,
Jon: So, they are very friendly…OK, so what about this group, the popular group [Group 1], why are they popular?
Saanvi: I don't know.
Emma: I don't know … mostly because … I don't know actually, like they've just social and they play … like they/
Saanvi: They meet each other outside school.
Emma: Sometimes, I don't really know, but if they get a question wrong or something, like we would be embarrassed, but they are fine about it, they don't mind… […] because they've popular and stuff no one seems to care and because they know that as they are popular no one is going to say anything.

We can see how the two girls struggle to come up with a reason why a particular group of girls is popular. The group they are talking about towards the end of the extract (Group 1) could have several descriptive names beyond the 'Popular' group; it could be called the 'Social' group, the 'Relaxed' group or even, perhaps, the 'Cool' or 'Insouciant' group, although this is more of adult term. I will now look at the boys' groups at each school before turning to the girls' groups.

5.2.1 Boys' Groups at Wood Vale

There were only 21 Year 6 boys on roll out of a total of 58 pupils (36%) in both classes at Wood Vale, which is a relatively low proportion compared to the girls. There was one main group, composed from both classes of around 13 boys—around two-thirds (62%) of the total number, which played football every lunchtime, and the game appeared to carry on into the summer term. Around nine girls (one from 6MK and around seven to eight from 6TD) also joined in every day. Although the boys were passionate about their daily game, there was more to their friendships than football and, as I have written, there were subgroups of friends within the large group. One boy from 6MK told me that although football in his friendship group was their main interest, most of the other three had a historical association going back to the early years at school, they also had other interests, and most saw each other outside school.

Danny: There is a friendship group, me, Mack, Freddie and Mitch.
Jon: And what do you have in common?
Danny: I've known all of them since a long, really long time.
Jon: So, you've known each other for four or five years, maybe even from reception?
Danny: Yeah, exactly.
Jon: What else… do you have similar interests?
Danny: Yes, we all like football!
Jon: So, you're all football mad; what else?
Danny: We like maths; none of us like English.

The main football group at Wood Vale was the active group, who were also confident, but there were also around eight boys from the two classes (five from 6KM and three from 6TD), who formed two other groups, and who were more passive and reticent, and spent most of their time in pairs or small groups talking about more personalised and common interests such as their activities on computers, which was a source of shared identity. Some mixed freely with girls and took part in less intense (active) playground games. All the boys' friendship groups in the two classes appeared to be stable and there was little or no movement between them. See Tables 5.1 and 5.2 for more details.

Table 5.1 Boys' groups in 6MK (total of 10 boys)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Five boys and one girl from this class	Mack Freddie Danny Mitch Dewei Aurora (girl from same class) Eight boys from 6TD and eight girls from 6TD	Active: *Footballing group* but other common interests and historical association Boys and girls from both classes also joined this group Dewei had only recently joined the class. He was very bright but English wasn't his first language and it was still developing this
G2 Five boys	Toby Arlan Aki Hamza Alan	Passive: *Talking group*, playground games One boy has specialised knowledge of IT/ computers; one excelled at art Talkative

Table 5.2 Boys' groups in 6TD (total of 11 boys)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Eight boys and seven girls	Cody Zade Billy Kenji Asnee Abdulla Koa Kai Florence (girl from the same class) Sara (girl from the same class) Umiha (girl from the same class) Lila (girl from the same class) Vera (girl from the same class) Vera (girl from the same class) Trinny (girl from the same class) Plus five boys from 6MK and one girl from 6MK	Active: *Footballing group* but have other common and historical interests Girls from both classes also join this group to play football on most days
G2 Three boys	Angus Antonio Dipan	Passive: *Talking group*, playground games Talkative

5.2.2 Boys' Groups at Church Green

There were 35 boys at the prep school out of a total of 64 pupils from three classes across the year group, which was a much higher ratio of boys to girls than at Wood Vale. There were two to three boys' groups in each of the three Year 6 classes (these included pairs of boys but not the four to five individuals who mixed with the girls on most days). There were also some limited interclass groupings. In 6HH there were two larger main groups, while in the other two classes (6SE and 6KN), there was one main group of eight and six boys, respectively. The friendship groups at Church Green had a variety of characteristics and were often difficult to categorise, both by the pupils and by myself as the researcher, but were again generally based around similar interests/activities and historical friendships. More boys—at least five—in this school played games with, and talked to, the girls—usually every day—and they were not teased about this. Only 2 boys out of the 34 that I interviewed at Church Green told me that they played with younger pupils.

The main official sport at this school was rugby (in the autumn and spring terms) and cricket (in the summer) and, unlike Wood Vale, there was no official or formal school football team. There was an enormous number of lunchtime and after-school clubs at Church Green, many of them based on a sport, and many boys and girls played a variety of other sports/games throughout the year, such as table tennis and hockey. Cricket was also played by a few boys throughout the year but became particularly popular in the summer. Although there was still a fairly large, informal, daily game of football, it was smaller than at Wood Vale, consisting of four boys from one class (6HH), two boys from 6KN and one boy from the other class, 6SE, meaning that this group consisted of about a fifth (20%) of the total number of boys (some other boys also joined in on an occasional basis). Around five girls also joined in most days. Unlike the boys at Wood Vale, football played a minor role in constituting or defining their identity, or as being a signifier of their masculinity, and the boys had a much broader range of interests and pursuits. Other friendships coalesced around a particular sport; some around more personalised interests like computer games or specialised subjects (e.g. aviation) and interests (e.g. playing computer games, such as *Minecraft* or *Roblox*) and musical activities (e.g. playing in a music band). Many of the groupings at Church Green were smaller and more nuanced than at Wood Vale. While the football group was again more active, noisy and confident, other groups were more passive, quiet and shy. While at both schools the girls' groups tended more fluid and dynamic (George & Browne, 2000) (as we will see below), most boys' friendship groupings were far more stable and loyal to each other. Details of the boys' friendship groupings at Church Green can be seen in Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5.

5.2.3 Girls' Groups at Wood Vale

There were more girls' than boys' groups in each of the two classes at Wood Vale, although it is important to remember that there were more girls in the year group as a whole. There were six associations in 6MK and four in 6TD (excluding individuals), although in this class one of the groups consisted of seven to eight girls who were united around football, and they generally joined in the main game with the boys each lunchtime. Only one girl from 6MK, Aurora, played football, and she was regarded as the best girl footballer in the school by both the girls and the boys.

Table 5.3 Boys' groups in 6HH (total of 11 boys)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Four boys from this class and two girls	Pete Richard Nicky Ishir Seb (boy from 6KN) Liam (boy from 6SE) Phoebe (girl from same class) Ayla (girl from the same class)	Active: *Footballing group* Historical friends
G2 Five boys from this class and three girls	Laksh Sammay Vihaan Asnee Noah (joins girls' groups most days). Sonia (girl from the same class) Jaswinder (girl from the same class) Hattie (girl from the same class)	Active/passive: But sometimes play playground games *Jokers* Humour, joking around Talkative They tell each other memes Historical friends Most of them (apart from Noah) are disinterested in girls Some boys in G2 occasionally play football with G1 as well
G3 Two boys from this class	Malakai Caishan	Passive: *Common, personalised, interests group* (aviation) Play video games Historical friends Talkative

Most friendships had a historical association going back to the early years at school, and some saw each other outside school. Some groups were more passive, quiet and shy; others were more active, noisy and confident. Some defined themselves by being particularly confident and outgoing, and by the epithets of humour/jokey or gossiping; some had personalised interests like computer games, or they formed around social media platforms such as WhatsApp, although this tended to be a larger group across the year.

The girls' groups tended to be a little smaller than the boys and, apart from the footballers, the average size of the group was three. One group in 6MK was identified by themselves, and the other girls, as a 'girly' group

Table 5.4 Boys' groups in 6KN (total of 12 boys)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Eight boys	Darshan Viraj Lewis Hugo Haoyuan Sai Dev Krish (he also plays with 2CT)	Active: *Sporty group* and play a variety of sports—e.g., table tennis, hockey, but not football. A physical group They also like playing *Roblox* They share the same interests and values Talkative
G2 Two boys	Seb Ishan	Active: *Footballing group*. Play football every day with 6HH and one boy from 6SE
G3 One boy	Miles Marianne (girl from the same class) Hannah (girl from the same class) Maisie (girl from the same class) Scarlett (girl from the same class)	Active/passive: *Joins girls' groups most days* Talkative
G4 One boy	Javier Samira (girl from the same class) Leila (girl from the same class) Tabatha (girl from the same class)	Active/passive: *Joins girls' groups most days* Talkative

and, although other girls at both schools self-identified as 'girly' girls, this was the only group at either school who categorised themselves with this term. There was more movement between groups, but like the prep school, only a very few pupils mixed with younger children. There was a relatively new girl to the school at Wood Vale, Priya, and at the time of her interview she said that she usually played with her sister and a group of children from Year 4. Details of the girls' friendship groupings at Wood Vale can be seen in Tables 5.6 and 5.7.

5.2.4 Girls' Groups at Church Green

There were three girls' groups in each of the three Year 6 classes. The average size of a group was three and the largest association was a group of six

Table 5.5 Boys' groups in 6SE (total of 12 boys)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Six boys and one girl	Nikel Hassan Mohit Rohan Rishi George (also roamed across groups) Zoe (a girl from the same class)	Active: *Cricket group* Popular group (Nikel, Hassan, Mohit, Rohan like cricket) Quite sporty George and Rohan sometimes play football; they also like table tennis. George doesn't like cricket and prefers rugby
G2 Two boys	Aditya Matty	Passive: *Talking group* Non-sporty They don't interact with other pupils very much Play playground games Talkative
G3 Two boys	Farid Parin (George)	Passive: (but like table tennis) *Brainy group* These two are best friends, sometimes join G1 George sometimes joins this group
G4 One boy	Liam	Active: *Footballer* and often participates with the main football group *Also joins girls' groups* quite a lot (Frayer and Olivia from the same class)
G5 One boy	Ritvik	Active/passive: *Joins girls' groups most days* Talkative

girls in 6HH (Group 3) who were difficult to categorise with a single descriptive word. Although they joined in with the football group (most of the players were boys), three girls—Julia, Marta and Hattie—were referred to by other girls as being 'girly' girls, although they did not mention this label themselves when we first talked about how their group could be described and named. Some of the boys also told me that they thought these three liked to play football *just to be with the boys* and that they were *not serious players*. This group also spent time together on their

Table 5.6 Girls' groups in 6MK (total of 18 girls)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Three girls	Alexis Lillie Bailey (Sometimes joined by Armina—from G5)	Active/passive: *Popular, funny group* Funny group Talking group
G2 Two girls	Navya Violet (Sometimes joined by Lillie—also in G 1)	Active/passive: *Talking group* Common interests Talkative Like being weird Sometimes play football together but not with the boys
G3 Two girls	Grace Rosalind	Passive: *Cool, talkers* Cool Talkative Quiet in class
G4 Four girls	Kennedy Claire Annie Lillian	Passive: *Joking group* Laughing group Same humour/same interests
G5 Three girls	Nora Deepti Fariha	Passive: *Girly girls group* (self-identified) Gossip Competitive
G6 Three girls	Astrid Anna Indira	Active/passive: *Laughing, dancing group* Gossip Cool TikTok group
G7 One girl	Aurora	Active: *Footballer* Plays with main football game every day (Self-identified) tomboy

own and they were seen as being loud and dramatic and had a variety of other interests apart from football. They were not typical 'girly' girls in the sense they were more active and outgoing than the three who self-identified at Wood Vale, and I will discuss this point later in this chapter, and again in Chap. 9. There was more inter-group mixing in this school,

Table 5.7 Girls' groups in 6TD (total of 19 girls)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Seven girls	Florence Amrita Lila Vera Mia Trinny Sara Jude (from G4, also often joins in the football game)	Active: *Footballers* (Football group with boys), but also meet as their own distinctive group Popular Confident Outgoing Sociable Talkative Friendly Kind Don't care what people think of them
G2 Five girls	Roshni Saira Navja Helen Hailey (also sometimes joins G1 but rarely for football)	Passive: *Talkative* *Common interests* *Dramatic* *Loud* *Hard-working*
G3 Four girls	Emma Saanvi Charlotte Disha	Passive: *Quiet and shy* Close friends
G4 Two girls	Jude Ahana	Active/passive: *Joking group* Humour—joke-making Sociable Talkative Common interests Close friends
G5 One girl	Priya	Active: *Plays with younger pupils.* Sometimes joins in the football game with G1, but usually plays with her sister and the younger pupils in Year 4. (She had only joined the class recently)

although inter-class associations were relatively rare. The friendships were constituted around similar interests/activities and historic friendships and had a variety of characteristics, which, like the group discussed above, were also sometimes difficult to categorise, both for the girls and for myself, the

researcher. Like Wood Vale, most groups had historical connections going back to the early years at school. While some groups were quiet and shy, others were noisy and confident. Some had personalised interests such as playing computer games (Tables 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10).

A summary of the number of friendship groups at each school can been seen in Appendix C.

Table 5.8 Girls' groups in 6HH (total of 11 girls)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Three girls	Jaswinder Sonia Claudia Frayer (a girl from 6KN) Lily (a girl from 6SE) Noah (a boy from the same class) Laksh (a boy from the same class)	Active/passive: *Jokers* Very diverse characteristics Meme group Humorous group Lots of laughs Talkative Sporty (Laughing group or Jokey group/ Joking group, Comedy group) Sonia and Claudia are very sporty
G2 Two girls	Farah Uma Sometimes joined by Jaswinder, Hattie and Julia from the same class	Passive: *Hard-working group* Quiet Kind group Reading group Mainly calm group Work hard/intelligent Don't mix much with the boys
G3 Six girls	Julia Marta Hattie Kiara Ayla Phoebe	Active: *Dramatic and footballing group* Loud, confident group Popular They mix quite a lot with the boys and play football with them Ayla and Phoebe are the most regular footballing girls Julia, Marta and Hattie were called girly girls by some of the other girls[a]

[a]Although these three girls—Julia, Marta and Hattie—were referred to by other girls as being 'girly' girls, they did not mention this label when we first talked about how the group could be named. Some other girls named Harper in Group 1 from 6SE as another possible girly girl

Table 5.9 Girls' groups in 6KN (total of nine girls)

Group number and number of pupils	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Four girls and one boy	Leila Tabatha Samira Maisie Javier (a boy from the same class) Maisie and Samira both fluctuate between this group and Group 3)	Passive: *Computer-gamers* group Leila and Tabatha play computer games almost every day Talkative
G2 Two girls	Noya Laila	Passive: *Talking group*
G3 Three girls and one boy	Hannah Scarlett Marianne Miles (a boy from the same class)	Active: *Sporty group*

Table 5.10 Girls' groups in 6SE (total of nine girls)

Group	*Names*	*Characteristics*
G1 Three girls	Claudine Harper Zoe (Simone)	Passive: *Dramatic* in that there were many arguments and fallouts A fluid group *Creative group* Talkative group Dynamic friendships Simone joins the group occasionally
G2 Three girls and one boy	Chanda Emma Simone Reyaansh (a boy from the same class)	Passive: *Talkative* Musical
G3 Three girls	Frayer Olivia Lily A few other girls sometimes join from 6HH and 6KN	Active: *Sporty group* Sporty and join in the main football group, apart from Lily Dramatic Talkative Frayer self-identified as a tomboy

5.2.5 *Friendships Organised Around Ethnicity*

According to a study with 10–12-year-old girls in Ireland by Scholtz and Gilligan (2017), research on children's friendship in culturally diverse contexts shows that children are more likely to choose friends from their own ethnic or racial groups than others. However, their research was about the experiences of migrant children and a vast majority of boy and girl friendship groups at either school in this study were not organised on racial lines. However, my analysis of the groups is not especially rigorous. While at Wood Vale, one of the teachers, MK, provided a detailed categorisation of the girls' ethnicities in both classes, I only recorded the boys' ethnicity at this school, and I judged all the pupils at Church Green by their appearance, which I admit to being a crude and blunt approach. However, I still believe that the general conclusion to be sound. At Wood Vale, all four boys' groups from the two classes were composed of a variety of ethnicities. Out of the six main girls' groups in 6MK (excluding the individual girl in Group 7), three were organised by ethnicity: one pair were white (Group 3), one group were all Pakistani (Group 5), and one group were all black (Group 6). In 6TD, all four main groups (excluding the individual girl in Group 5) were composed of girls of mixed ethnicity. This means that out of the 14 pupil groups at this school (excluding individual pupils) only 3 were organised along ethnic lines.

At Church Green, in 6HH, one of the three boys' groups (Group 3) was a pair who had the same ethnicity; the two main groups in 6KN were mixed, while one pair of boys (Group 3) were both Asian in 6SE. None of the girl groups in any of the three classes appeared to contain girls of the same ethnicity.[1] This means that out of the 17 pupil groups at this school (excluding individual pupils), only 2 groups (both pairs) were organised around lines of ethnicity.

5.3 Differences Between Boys' and Girls' Groups

In contrast to boys, who are generally described in the literature as preferring membership of relatively large friendship groups, girls are generally seen as tending to form close dyadic friendships with other girls, often linking up with other pairs to form shifting and changing group networks (Adler et al., 1992; Pratt & George, 2004). However, in this study, the average size of boys' and girls' groups (excluding individuals from the class who joined in with other groups, either in the same or a different class) was broadly similar. For boys, the average size was five at Wood Vale

and three at Church Green; for girls, it was three and a half at Wood Vale and three at Church Green. There were more girls' friendship groups in both schools (excluding individuals): 10 to the boys' 4 at Wood Vale, while at Church Green there were 9 girls' groups to the boys' 8. At Wood Vale, 4 of the 14 pupil groups contained a mixture of boys and girls, while at Church Green 5 of the 17 groups were similarly constituted. There was very little involvement with pupils from younger age groups at either school.

George and Browne (2000) point out that, traditionally, girls' friendship groups have been characterised as being 'malicious, bitchy, catty and resentful' (Davies, 1979, p. 65), with boys' friendships being seen as far more straightforward (Nilan, 1991). However, much of this research is relatively old and much of the more recent research is concerned with exploring how friendship groups are characterised and the complex process in which friendships are constructed and sustained (e.g. Buote et al., 2007; Jago et al., 2009; Marcone & Caputo, 2019). As I have written, some pupils in this study told me that they thought that the boys' friendship groups tended to be a little more stable. This extract comes from two boys at Church Green.

Jon: Do you find there is a pressure of not falling out in friendship groups?
Rohan: That is mainly for the girls.
Farid: We can trust each other.
Jon: So as boys, you don't recognise that, you don't fall out…
Rohan: We don't.

Some girls at this school also admitted the girls' groups were more argumentative and more fluid. Another girl told me that '*the girls were more complicated, and the fallings out were deeper and more long lasting*'.

Around 25 years ago, Merten's (1997) research from the US challenged the long-held popular assumption that girls tend to be less competitive than boys, arguing that in the arena of friendship and popularity, the girls in his junior high school study were extremely competitive. In this study I classified each friendship grouping as either active (e.g. they played games such as football or cricket virtually every day) or passive (e.g. they spent their time mainly talking). However, there were other groups who, while spending time in sedentary pursuits, such as talking, also sometimes played sports or running games in the playground, and I categorised these as being active-passive. Using these three classifications, which I admit are not scientifically exact, I judged that, amongst the 12 boys'

groups (excluding individuals who joined various groups), there were 5 active, 5 passive and 2 active-passive groups; amongst the 19 girls' groups (again, excluding individuals), there were 4 active, 10 passive and 5 active-passive. Thus, there was a higher proportion of girls' groups that were less active and more passive, although it is important to remember the caveat of the classification difficulties mentioned above.

During the interviews, I asked whether the pupils categorised themselves by using the terms 'girly' girl or 'tomboy'. They had all heard of these terms, knew what they meant and were content to use them. Many pupils were also happy to self-identify using these terms, and we will pick up this theme of how fluid feminine identities can be in Chap. 9. As we will also see in Chap. 9, a few girls saw this distinction as too artificial and discrete and were adamant that they could be both girly and tomboyish, depending on the time and context. We have also seen that some girls, at Church Green, could be girly and play football. There were only 2, self-identified tomboys amongst the 64 girls on roll at both schools: Aurora at Wood Vale and Frayer at Church Green, and both played football in the large boys' group every day. However, some boys and girls at Church Green also mentioned two other girls who they thought might be considered tomboys.[2] This shows that it was perfectly possible for some girls to disturb expectations of feminine behaviour and that there was also an underlying tolerance of each gendered grouping; it was possible for pupils to employ agency and for a girl to construct their own, hybrid, form of femininity—displaying feminine and masculine qualities—without being too girly (Paechter, 2010; Renold, 2005)—and practising a form of emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987) and, instead, accentuating more masculine qualities (see Chap. 9). Fewer girls self-identified as being outright girly girls, but there seemed to be around three to four at the state school (Nora, Zareen, Deepti) and around four to five (Julia, Hattie, Aisah, Marta and Harper) at the prep school. There were around three girls who stated they could be both, as we shall see in Chap. 9.

5.4 Best Friends

Both boys and girls had special, best, friends (Antonopoulou et al., 2022), who were closer to them than anyone else and particularly treasured (Marcone & Caputo, 2019). The boys tended to have a small number of best friends, ranging from two to five, whereas girls were inclined to have a single person whom they were especially close to, and some girls told me

they called these special relations BFFs (Best Friends Forever). Again, many of these friendships tended to be historic and were based around common and shared interests. I did not explore what the characteristics were that made a 'best' friend, but loyalty was a prized asset and the feeling that the other person would be supportive if someone was nasty to one of them. As Florence, at Wood Vale, told me, '*it's because they are loyal, they will stick up for me and they will be there till the end for me*'. Two boys from the same school told me something similar when I asked them to name the qualities they looked for in a best friend.

Billy: Humour, lots of humour.
Jon: Humour, what else?
Kenji: Loyalty and respect, you must never betray your best friend.

It is important not to forget that being involved in a friendship group can sometimes be a two-edged sword. While friendship groups are usually supportive and involve allegiance, discretion and sympathetic understanding, if a particular member falls out with their friends, the operation of the group can become destructive to an individual's self-esteem, and, in this study, this seemed to happen far more frequently to the girls than the boys.

Although gender relations were generally equitable, this does not mean that there were no power relations where, sometimes, a boy or a group of boys (or perhaps a girl or group of girls) attempted to become too forceful and dominant. As we will see in Chap. 9, one of the most important attributes for a 'successful' girl to exhibit was the ability to show independence and strength. The extract below comes from three girls at Church Green.

Jon: How important is it for girls to stand up for each other when the boys try to dominate them?
Olivia: Very.
Frayer: Very important.
Jon: So, it's an important quality to be independent and show we're not going to take it?
Lily: What I think, personally, what I like to happen in friendships, which I don't think really happens with the boys because they're not into personal in their friendships, for me, if someone insults me it's nice if a friend stands up for me and helps me, and so these are the qualities I look for in a friend, like to help me and stand up for me.

5.4.1 Go-To Girls

There were also some individuals in both schools who were known as 'Go-To' girls, girls who could be approached by a girl if she had a problem, even though they were not necessarily part of their immediate friendship group. There were two in each school that I discovered, although there were probably others. In the conversation below at the state school I am talking about two such individuals with three other girls. Grace and Alexis came from two different friendship groups but within the same class.

Jon:	OK, so what makes people look up to Grace and Alexis?
Astrid:	She will always help you.
Jon:	Who's this?
Astrid:	Grace.
Aurora:	And she's good at football.
Jon:	And she always helps you/
Astrid:	And she's smart.
Jon:	She's smart, that's good.
Astrid:	She makes you happy if you're sad.
Jon:	So, she comforts you if you're down, if you've got a problem you can go to Grace/
Astrid:	Yeah.
Jon:	So what about Alexis?
Annie:	She kind of does the same, actually.
Astrid:	She is always there for people when you need her.
Jon:	OK, can you give me an example?
Astrid:	When you are lonely, you can go up to her.
Jon:	That's good, I mean I am sure you can go up to lots of other people in the class but these two are the main people you would go to/
Astrid/Annie:	Yeah.
Jon:	Can you give me an example of a time when you have been to either Grace or Alexis with something?
Astrid:	If I have an argument with someone, I know I will normally go to Alexis for help.
Jon:	OK, can you give me an example of a time you went to Alexis after an argument?
Astrid:	Er… er… if I argue with Anna I would always go to Alexis, and she would say 'What's wrong', to see what I should do.

Jon: And Alexis will sort it out?
Astrid: Yeah.
Jon: That's great, that's good.
Astrid: Alexis is like the therapist of the group.
Jon: The therapist! That's a really good expression… Aurora, do you want to say anything?
Aurora: I talk to both of them.

Some girls at Church Green also spoke about two similar kinds of individuals, two girls, who were again in the same class, Hattie and Farah, who girls could go to rather than to a teacher if they had a problem.

Jon: Is there a go-to girl that you would go to if you had a problem?
Julia: Hattie.
Jon: Hattie?
Kiara: Yeah, she would help you.
Julia: Farah and Hattie.
[….]
Jon: Can you give me an example of a problem you might have had?
Julia: So, if have a fight.
Jon: Oh blimey!
Kiara: Not a physical fight but if you get into a bit of a pickle/
Julia: A verbal fight/
Kiara: Hattie would help us settle down and be friends again.
Julia: Also, when something happens and if you are, like, feeling a bit sad or nervous, you can go to Farah and hug her.
Jon: Oh, that's really nice.
Kiara: And if you don't want to tell anyone about it, she can keep a secret.

When I pursued this theme with the boys, they said that they did not recognise a 'Go-To' boy and, if they had a problem, they would go to their personal best friend.

5.5 Cross-Gender Relations

As we saw in the previous chapter, relations at both schools between boys and girls were generally good and this was apparent in some of the interviews. Although most pupils were in single-gender groupings, some of them were mixed, which seemed to work out just as well. During the interviews, no pupils appeared to be inhibited or were reticent in giving their views and opinions in front of pupils from a different gender.

Some writers from the end of the last century (e.g. Schofield, 1982; MacCoby & Jacklin, 1987; Tannen, 1990) used to argue that groups of boys and girls inhabit two distinct worlds and that they act from a basis of different values and chase different goals. However, Thorne (1993), in her study about elementary schooling, set in the US, has reminded us that it is all too easy, and even lazy, to fall into the binary language of 'boys versus girls', maintaining that '*within gender variation is greater than differences between boys and girls taken as groups*' (p. 104, original italics). The separate worlds of boys and girls are usually framed as a series of dualisms: boys' groups are larger, girls' groups smaller, boys tend to like rough, physical games like football, girls more sedate activities like talking, and we have seen above that these generalisations don't always stand up. Thorne (1987) points out that there are problems with this model: not only does it over-emphasise the coherence of same-gender interaction and ignore the extensive variation *within* boys' and girls' groups, but gender separation is not nearly as stark and complete as one might imagine.

In some ways, though, the coeducational system makes the differences between genders even more visible than in single-sex schooling, which I discussed in Chap. 2. Although I did not get the chance to observe any lessons at Church Green, boys and girls said that they sat next to each other in class, and this was accepted as being the norm and didn't appear to cause them any friction. I could observe this seating arrangement of alternate boy-girl at Wood Vale through the glass wall as I was waiting to collect the pupils to interview them in the corridor immediately outside. Again, pupils told me that this was the common practice at their school and was therefore regarded as the natural way of being organised.

Thorne (1993) argues that 'boys and girls separate (or are separated) periodically, with their own spaces, rituals and groups, but they also come together to become, in crucial ways, part of the same world', which she calls the 'with-then-apart' (p. 36). It is important to remember, then, that when boys and girls attend school, they are part of the same school domain.

They have a great deal in common as 'children' and 'pupils'; they share many of the same meanings and practices of the formal culture and spend most of their time in close physical proximity. In classrooms, corridors, assembly halls and lunchrooms boys and girls do much, and experience, the very similar things, and it is only in the playground (where children have a greater choice and where adults exercise less control) that there is a greater separation by gender. Although within the two schools in my research there were many contrastive differences between boys' and girls' groups, it was also possible to see many interactions and sources of commonality. Each gender group had different but also similar interests and also pursued different but, at times, similar sets of activities. Cockburn (1987) also emphasises the interrelatedness of the male and female peer groups and also argues against the notion of there being two, almost discrete, worlds. Although, at school, boys and girls may reside and operate in two gendered cultures, these can correspond, be interdependent and complementary. The conclusion from my PhD research, around 2000, was that rather than being two separate worlds, there were two complementary gendered cultures, sharing one overall school world (Swain, 2004).

A number of researchers (Francis, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Thorne & Luria, 1986) have maintained that children of primary school age are inclined to separate more and more by gender with the amount of disconnection climaxing in early adolescence (Wright, 1994; Prenergast & Forrest, 1997; Frosh et al., 2002). In contrast, Adler and Adler (1998) found that cross-gender contacts in the US were beginning to re-emerge by the age of 10–11, for reasons of both friendship and romance. They hypothesise that cross-gender relations are characterised by three distinct stages, during which boys and girls are integrated, separated and reconnected. These roughly correspond (with some overlap) to pre-school to age 5 (Year 1); age 6–7 (Years 2–3); and age 8–11 (Years 4–6).[3]

The boys and girls in this study followed both these patterns. At Wood Vale, pupils told me that in the early part of the junior school (around the ages of seven to eight), boys and girls were closer together, but were now more apart, while at Church Green, the pupils thought it was the opposite, and they were now much nearer to each other and more connected. However, it was a little more nuanced than this at the prep school and cross-relations between the two gender groups differed between the three Year 6 classes. In 6HH, the children told me that most girls and boys were largely disinterested in each other and spent little time interacting together in their free time. The two groups mixed much more in 6SE and were

mostly together in 6KN, where the majority associated together most days during their free time. As one girl disclosed, '*As you grow up you realise the boys aren't too bad*'. However, although the groups were now more integrated, and although many girls and boys spent their free time together—particularly in 6KN—most of the year group overall kept to their own gendered groupings, and although most girls said the boys were 'OK' (and vice versa), the majority of the 61 pupils I interviewed showed disinterest in children with a different gendered construction. A similar reaction of detachment and disinterest was found from the 33 pupils I interviewed at Wood Vale when I broached the subject of mixing between different gender groups.

For boys, playing with girls can be associated with femininity, but this was not the case here. When girls and boys did associate together (playing a game or participating in shared talk), it was regarded in the peer group as being natural and no one was defamed or subordinated at either school, which was different from the findings of Swain (2003) and Renold (2005, 2006). Four boys in the year at Church Green associated with girl groups every day, while others mixed more sporadically. Two told me that they had been teased for playing with the girls in the lower years, but this was '*a thing of the past*'. Most boys who mixed with the girls stressed that the reason they did this was because, firstly, they did not want to play in the large football group and, secondly, they enjoyed the girls' company. As one boy, Miles, said, '*I play with the girls, not because I like them, but because they are just good friends*', and I interpreted his expression of 'not because I like them' as not being attracted to them sexually. Miles was nominated by the boys as being one of the most popular in the peer group, a quality that he gained by being sociable, kind and having a charismatic personality. He was also good a rugby. Another boy, Liam, who associated with the girls every day, was thought to be a little over-dramatic and was said to cry frequently and '*far too easily*'. However, once again, these associations with femininity did not seem to affect his popularity or status (see Paechter, 2019), and the fact that he often joined in with the football group also may have helped.

Some of the girls also told me that they favoured boys' company over girls'. Frayer, the self-confessed tomboy, played with the boys almost every day, because, she said, she shared a common interest in playing football with them. She also spoke about how she preferred mixing with the boys because although she recognised that there were different ways of being a girl, she felt that there could also be pressures to conform to acting in

stereotypical ways. Later in the same interview I tried to find out what the name, 'tomboy', actually meant to them.

Jon: So, what does a tomboy mean?
Olivia: They prefer boys' behaviour.
Frayer: I prefer hanging out with the boys because I find it, not to be rude or anything, … but I find it easier, it doesn't feel, I don't know how to say it/
Olivia: I know what you mean/
Frayer: It doesn't feel like it is wasting my time, like sometimes, when I hang out with the girls, it seems, it's just like talking about clothes and things, 'Oh my goodness this dress is so pretty!'
Jon: So that's like the girly girl talk?
Frayer: Yeah, it doesn't feel… normal.
Jon: So, one girl in 6HH [a parallel class] said she preferred being with the boys sometimes because boys were less complicated, as you said, and the girls were more complicated, and the fallings out were deeper and more long lasting.
Olivia: Yes, definitely.
Jon: And if the boys, if they have an argument, they will just forget about it … and with the girls it's deeper and much more long lasting, is that right?
Frayer: Yes.
Olivia: Definitely.

Frayer states that she prefers the boys' company because she doesn't like 'girls' talk' about clothes and other feminine adornments, which doesn't feel 'normal' to her, and she feels she doesn't fit in, while both girls agree with me that boys' friendships can sometimes be less convoluted, and they don't tend to fall in and out with each other as much. This trend was confirmed in some of the other interviews. This example comes from two girls also from Church Green, where there is a hint of a greater complexity in their relationships.

Jon: Do the girls fall out more with other than the boys?
Julia: Definitely.
Jon: Why is this?
Julia: I don't actually know.
Kiara: Sometimes you do some really tiny thing and I overreact.
Julia: Maybe there is also some jealousy.

Sometimes a whole class could join in a playground game (the favourite game at Church Green was called 'Infection', which was a kind of chasing tag game), but there was also the large daily football game at both schools, involving boys and girls. At Wood Vale, the game was constituted of about 13 boys and about 8 girls from both classes (over a third of the year group), while at Church Green there were about 7 boys and 8 girls from all three classes (just over one-fifth of the year group). Although the girls at Wood Vale joined in the daily game as best they could, some of them told me that they thought they were not treated the same as the boys and, for example, Jude said, rather awkwardly, '*I don't think I've ever been passed to*'. More persistent questioning at Church Green revealed that only three of the girls felt they were treated by the boys as equals in the sense that they were regarded as skilled players and were passed the ball from the boys as much as between the boys. Some boys told me that they thought some girls hung around the football court because they liked being near to the boys and that the game for them was incidental. Despite their presence being tolerated, it was seen as a distraction to the serious business of the game. Although this viewpoint can be interpreted as 'serious boys being watched by silly girls', there may have also been the case of asymmetrical power relations. However, on the whole, cross-gendered relations were far more equal, although, on *some* occasions, *some* boys attempted to try and create unequal power relations.

Notes

1. There was one pair of girls, Group 2 in 6KN, where I was unable to record both their ethnicities because Laila was one of the two girls who I was unable to interview.
2. However, I had already completed the interviews with these two girls, so I did not get the chance to ask either if they agreed with this label.
3. The separation of boys and girls tends to be greater in schools than in local neighbourhoods (see Thorne, 1993); Harris (1998) points out that children can afford to be fussier in schools, whereas at home or in the local neighbourhood, they will generally play with anyone they can find. Moreover, there are also less likely to be so many witnesses to tease boys and girls if they play together (Thorne, 1993).

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CHAPTER 6

Popularity and the Ideal Schoolboy and Schoolgirl

This chapter presents empirical data on:

1. the attributes or qualities that made certain pupils popular within their peer groups;
2. the link between popularity and the resources and strategies that were available to gain peer group status in each school;
3. the leading pupils in the peer groups;
4. the concept of an ideal schoolboy and schoolgirl.

6.1 Introduction

As I mentioned in the last chapter, when I was discussing the names and characteristics of particular children in each friendship group, I took the opportunity to ask participants to nominate those individuals whom they deemed to be the most popular in their class and, if appropriate, across the year group and then suggest what made them especially well liked. Unlike the names they nominated for the 'brightest' pupils in each class, it became clear that popularity was a more contentious and contested issue, and although no-one had any difficulty in coming up with a list there was a little more disagreement.

Many researchers have explored the theme of popularity in their research set in both primary and secondary schools (e.g., Francis et al., 2009; Manninen et al., 2011; Merten, 1997; Phillips, 2005; Pomerantz,

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2008; Read, 2011; Renold, 2007; Swain, 2002), although the concept is not always simple or straightforward (Francis et al., 2009, p. 3). Francis et al., for instance, write:

> *[P]opularity is a complex and slippery concept, both in its actual meaning (those most popular are not necessarily those most liked, as the concept incorporates aspects such as influence and admiration) and in perspective (those most popular with some groups may not be popular with others).*

Indeed, as Merten (1997) found in his US research with young girls, it was possible for girls to be both popular and mean. My own doctoral research also showed that popularity was dependent on context, and it was perfectly possible in certain schools, where hard work and high academic achievement were the expectation and norm, for boys and girls to maintain high peer popularity. Francis et al. (2009) also found that high achievement and popularity were not necessarily incompatible in their research about high-achieving 12–13-year-olds.

The etymological roots of popularity lie in the Latin term *popularis*, '*accepted by the people*', and because, like Francis et al. (2009), I was (and am) aware that the term can be nebulous and is highly subjective, I felt I needed to provide the children with a simple definition. The meaning I conveyed to the pupils was *people who are particularly well liked and admired the most by their peers*, although, as we will see, this did not necessarily mean that children necessarily wanted to copy or emulate them. This was similar to Merten's definition:

> *[W]hen a girl said someone was popular, she meant first, that the student was widely known or recognized by classmates and second, that he or she was sought after as a friend.* (1997, p. 179)

Adler and Adler (1998) have written that popularity can have connotations with hierarchy and may be recognised as being an expression of hierarchical classroom relations involving practices of inclusion and exclusion. Popularity is also associated with, and directly connected to, children's notion of status, which can be defined as prestige or 'social honour' (Weber, 1946), and which comes from having a certain position within the peer group hierarchy, which becomes relevant when it is seen in relation to others. Popularity, then, is a commodity, which can be seen as a continuum as different pupils possess comparatively more or less social

status in relation to others in their peer group. In this study, the most popular boys and girls derived greater levels of prestige and social status amongst the peer group. I accept that the general notion of popularity is generally relational and derives its meaning from this relationship: thus, if an individual is deemed to be popular and has high status, someone else will be unpopular and have less status, which can imply subordination. However, in these two schools, there was no apparent subordination of 'inferior' models or versions of being a boy or girl, and while pupils were aware of who was categorised as being popular, or the most liked, and there were pupils who may have been *less* popular in their peer group, no individuals in either school appeared to be viewed of as being *unpopular* and therefore derogated and/or bullied.

6.2 Popular Boys

When I asked boys in both schools to name the most popular boy in their class, despite the odd disagreement, they generally came up with the same few names. However, almost all of them were adamant that, while certain boys were more popular than others, there was no obvious leader (in the class or in the year group)—that is, someone who was able to dictate, or set the agenda, of how they should think or behave and who other boys might try to emulate.

The six names mentioned most frequently by both genders as being the most popular boys at Wood Vale were Dany, Mack and Freddie (from 6MK) and Cody, Zade and Billy (from 6TD). From this list, Danny was cited as being the *most* popular boy in 6MK, and Zade and Billy in 6TD, and while two of these boys (Danny—occasionally Mack—and Zade) were some of the best-rated footballers and were often the opposing team captains in the playground games, Billy was not particularly sporty and Freddie rarely played football. Danny and Freddie either currently had (Danny) or had had (Freddie) a girlfriend, and this seemed to give them extra status. We can see this in the exchange below between Mack and another boy in the same class, Alan.

Alan: Freddie talks to the girls the most ….
Mack: He doesn't play football so much now.
Jon: He doesn't get teased for talking to the girls then.
Alan: No, Freddie talks/
Mack: He's popular.

Alan: Freddie talks about weird stuff like …/
Mack: He's very grown up.

I wished I had asked Mack what he meant by this last phrase about being 'grown up' and so we can only guess what Mack means. However, we can surmise that it is connected to being, and demonstrating, that he was worldly wise, and possibly had knowledge about things that were sexual.[1]

The popularity of boys at the prep school was a little more contested, and although the names of three boys, Francis and Pete (from 6HH) and Seb (Sebastian) (6KN), were those most cited, many other boys did not mention them as being especially popular when constructing their own lists. These three were some of the best-regarded footballers in the year but other boys nominated as being popular had other interests and did not join in with the daily football game. The boy who was talked about as being the most popular boy in the whole year group, but again not by everybody, was Richard. He was House Captain which appeared to bring an added cache, and when I asked what the additional qualities were that made him so popular, as well as his sporting prowess (he also excelled at cricket as well as football), the children mentioned his kindness, sociability and his singing ability. He was also deemed to be '*super confident*'. Once again, though there were no obvious leading boys—or poster boys—in this school, who other boys looked up to and tried to follow and copy, although, as we will see later in this chapter, George from 6SE was cited as a possible candidate by one group of boys.

People had different talents and were respected for this and, as we shall see, to be popular at both schools, boys and girls had to possess a range, or portfolio, of attributes or talents. These were based on the resources and strategies available at each school and, although these were essentially the same for boys and girls in each setting, and although there were similarities, there were also differences between the two genders and between the schools where particular resources and strategies were available and became more prized than others (Swain, 2004). To remind readers, the concept of resources comes from Bourdieu (1986) and the difference between resources and strategies is that resources can be viewed as assets, or forms of capital, that relate to types of power (the what) and strategies as the processes individuals use to apply them (the how).

Although pupils had capacity to exercise agency in their choice of which resources and strategies they wanted to adopt, some options were more

open or closed than others. For example, the strategy of acting, or being, hard was not open in either school. Whereas a boy—and sometimes a girl—could gain status from acting tough and/or winning fights in some schools, this would have not only been penalised or chastised by the adult authority, but would have brought ridicule and peer distain in the two schools in this study. Similarly, the relatively strictly applied policy of wearing school uniform in both schools meant that wearing expensive clothes and/or trainers was also closed down or attenuated. There were also no economic resources that were used to gain status, and no-one acquired any kudos for having especially rich parents/carers. This was despite the fact that, at Church Green, some pupils came from economically expensive home environments. I found out, in one interview, that Seb was usually driven to school each morning by his father in his expensive sports car, but the boys did not appear to be at all envious of this when it was mentioned.

For boys, the resource of *physicality and athleticism*, which I have written about (see Swain, 2003, 2004), was one of the most essential and the most highly esteemed assets and was expressed through games and sports such as football and cricket. The *social* resource of having well-developed interpersonal or linguistic skills, being able to get on with people and form networks of friendships, was also very important, and there was also a more *personal* resource (e.g., being confident and independent and able to make decisions). A leading *cultural resource* was being witty and using the strategy of humour to engender a laugh amongst the peer group and, also, sometimes, at the expense of a teacher in class. Knowing, and using, the latest verbal expressions, which showed a person was 'modern' and up-to-date, and the possession of specialist forms of culturally cherished knowledge, also acted as another form of *cultural resource* (e.g., knowledge about computer games, a particular theme or topic, or being able to recite Internet memes), could also bring popularity, although these were generally more limited to local friendship groups and had less widespread appeal.

The qualities associated with popularity that were the most frequently cited for the boys were the five resources and strategies mentioned above: displays of physicality and athleticism, social and interpersonal skills, humour, specialised abilities/knowledge, including being, or at least seeming to be, modern and having confidence and showing independence.

6.2.1 Physicality/Athleticism: Football, Other Sports and the Role of the Body

Boys' masculine identities are often defined, and described, in terms of what they do with/to their bodies and, drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1986), Shilling (1991, 1993) argues that it is possible to view the body as having its own distinct form of 'physical capital', the production of which refers to the ways bodies are recognised as possessing value and competence in various social settings.

One of the major factors affecting a boy's position in the peer group hierarchy was his athletic ability and physical prowess, and many aspects were exhibited and performed at school in various spaces at different times. For much of the time the boys defined their masculinity within the peer group through action, and their bodies/identities could become signified either as 'skilful', 'fast', 'forceful' and so on, but also, of course, as 'awkward', 'slow', or 'weak'. Twenty-five years or so ago, during my doctoral research, the body appeared to play a much greater part in the formation of the boys' masculinity, and I argue that today, at least in these two schools, the role of the body was less important and there were more and alternative resources and strategies that boys could use to gain popularity and status. This is not to say that informal games and more formalised sporting activities were not highly significant in the production of masculinities.

The role of sport in the formation of masculinities has been recognised by a number of writers (e.g., Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bromley, 1997; Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Keddie, 2005; Kostas, 2022; Light & Kirk, 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020; Parker, 1996a, 1996b; Renold, 1997; Skelton, 2000; Swain, 2000, 2004). Sport remained a major signifier of masculinity in these two schools and provided a way of measuring a boy's masculine accomplishment against other boys, and against the wider world of men. Many (but not all) of the top sporty boys also tended to have a higher status in the cultural life of the school and amongst the peer group. At Wood Vale, there was an official school team, but although there were around five matches played against other schools each year, these did not take place on a regular basis. Football was the obsession at lunchtime and 13 out of the 21 boys (62%, or just under two-thirds) in the year group played every day on a fenced-in, all-weather, court. As Mack responded when I asked him about the sort of things boys did to make themselves popular: '*We play football, football is probably one of the most important things at school*'.

Despite playing a wide range of sports at Church Green, and rugby being the 'official' sport that was played against other schools during the autumn and winter terms, it was football that was 'probably' the most valorised game amongst the boys' own peer groups, and it was the most accomplished players who seemed to be particularly popular and who held the highest peer group status. However, I write 'probably' because it depended on who you asked. Only 7 of the 35 boys on roll played football every day (20% or a fifth), and many other sporting activities took place during breaktimes. For example, cricket, the official school summer sport, was also enjoyed, even outside the summer term, and was played by four or five boys every day. Moreover, as we will see, the popular footballing boys were also well regarded for having many other qualities and talents, and there was no straightforward correlation between football and popularity. At both schools there were popular boys who rarely played football—for example, Freddie and Billy at Wood Vale (as I have already mentioned), and George at Church Green.

At both schools being sporty and being fast were noticed and every boy knew who was the fastest in their class. Danny was the fastest runner in the year group, and he told me this was important as '*to be a good footballer you need speed and skill*'. However, opinions on which boys were the best, or most skilful, at sports were also more disputed at the prep school. Individuals were more admired for *who they were*, and people were friendly with others who shared similar interests, of which athletic prowess was just one of many assets. The following extract comes from an interview with three boys at Church Green.

Jon: Are boys admired for being fast and strong?
Ishan: Yes/
Dev: Yes/
Haoyuan: Kind of.
Krish: No, I think it's more about who you are … you get on with someone if they like the same stuff, do the same thing … and, yeah.
Dev: I'm not particularly strong.
Jon: Certain boys and girls are good at particular things, Miles knows a lot about technology, Seb is very good at football, but you are all good at lots of various things, but no one is looked up to for this. Am I right?
Krish/Dev: Yeah.

In the conversation above, Dev mentions that he is ‘not particularly strong’ and strength seemed a less influential factor than speed. However, body shape and size were noticed by some boys and girls. A few of the footballing boys at Wood Vale talked about Mack’s size and strength and associated this with him sometimes taking a leading role in making decisions. The association between the body and popularity was also recognised by some girls, and in this interview below with two girls at the same school, we can see that, although individuals need to have a variety of different qualities to become popular, and Grace agrees with me that Mack is a ‘nice guy’ (although Rosalind thinks he is also a bit of a show-off), Grace thinks that the body is an important ingredient in his popularity. She mentions that Mack is a person who is physically big, who thinks he is strong and is the best, or the one who, or she believes, believes he has the most peer group status.

Jon: Why is Mack one of the most popular boys?
Grace: Because Mack is, like, the biggest, he thinks he’s the strongest; he thinks he’s the best.
Rosalind: He also shows off.
Jon: But he’s quite a good guy?
Grace: Yeah, he is a nice guy.
Rosalind: He does show off a lot. I used to sit next to him, and he was constantly telling me stuff I said ‘that’s great’ but can you let me get on with my work.

Later in the interview we return to the topic of popular boys, and I point out that Freddie, who was rather short for his age, was also a popular boy.

Jon: OK, so Mack’s a good guy because he is tall and big but that’s not the case with Freddie is it, but he’s popular!
Grace: He’s a bit rude and he puts people in their place.
Jon: So, he’s a tough character?
Grace: If he thinks someone belongs somewhere he will put them there himself.
Jon: What do you mean?
Grace: If he thinks the girls aren’t as good as the boys, he will put them to the side and take over.
Jon: So, he’s quite a dominant character?
Rosalind: Yes, he likes to think he’s the best and that he’s tough.

For the two girls, it seems that the qualities that make Freddie popular are his general bossiness (which might equate with him having a dominant role in some of the decision-making within the peer group), his rudeness, his arrogance and self-perception that he was above most other people and that he is a 'tough guy', although it is not clear what Rosalind means by this, and I did not have time to ask her to explain.

6.2.2 Being Sociable with Well-Developed Interpersonal Skills

It was noticeable that the popular boys (and girls) at both schools were friendly and affable, and who, at Woods Vale, were willing to give up their lunchtime to talk to me, a stranger, even though this meant, for some, forgoing their favourite pastime of playground football. The popular children were articulate and had good interpersonal and linguistic skills. Adler and Adler (1998) argue that a pupil's 'sophistication in social and interpersonal skills' (p. 42) adds up to a kind of savoir faire, which helps them form networks of friendships and associations.

6.2.3 Humour

As one boy told me at Church Green, '*You can't really like someone if they're not funny*'. Humour consolidated the bonds of friendship (Huuki et al., 2010; Woods, 1976) and, in many ways, was actually 'constitutive' of identities (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 70). While being funny was an integral ingredient of the peer group culture at both schools, it played a more prominent part at the prep school where more of the boys (and girls) defined themselves around humour (e.g., by reciting memes from social media, and/or acting up in class). All the pupils at both schools told me that that the boys mucked around more in class than the girls. As Farah at Church Green told me: '*The boys muck about a bit more than girls in class. The girls giggle a lot, but the boys shout out a bit more. They do it more in certain lessons with certain teachers*'. It is interesting that Farah makes the comment of the boys selecting 'certain lessons with certain teachers': pupils are aware that if a teacher shows any kind of disciplinary weakness they can exploit it.

The boys, in particular, used the strategy of humour, which, I argue, was to enhance their popularity and gain peer group status. This can be seen in these two exchanges from the prep school. In the first one with four boys at Church Green, they take a little time to admit the link between humour and popularity.

Jon: Do boys muck around in class more than the girls?
Krish/Haoyuan: Yes.
Haoyuan: Definitely.
Dev: Way more.
Jon: What do you do when you muck around?
Krish: We tell jokes/
Haoyuan: We crack jokes.
[….]
Jon: So why do boys show off more than girls?
Krish: It's because … I dunno. … it's hard to explain.
Jon: Yes, it's difficult isn't it, but there must be a reason?
Krish: We watch more memes, I guess.
Jon: Is it to look cool?
Haoyuan: Not really/
Krish: No.
Jon: Is being funny an important part of your life? Are you admired if you're funny; do you get to be more popular if you are funny?
Haoyuan: Yes.
Ishan/Krish: Yeah.

The second excerpt is with three girls at the same school who appear to understand the reasons why some boys publicly display disruptive behaviour in class, which one girl, Marianne, associates with a lack of maturity. It is also interesting that the girls have different views about whether the boys' performance is mainly for other boys, or for the girls.

Jon: Do boys show off in front of each other in class sometimes?
Maisie: Yes, they do, 100 per cent!
Noya: They show off in front of girls.
Jon: Girls don't show off in front of other girls? Is this because they don't need to?
Maisie: Yes.
Jon: So why do the boys do it?
Marianne: To make themselves look cool.
Maisie: In front of the other boys.
Jon: Why don't the girls do this? […]
Marianne: Because we are more mature, and therefore we know it is not necessary to show off.

The need to negotiate an affiliation between the formal and informal school cultures, and trying to please both teachers and peers, needed a careful balancing act (Woods, 1990), but challenging and testing the boundaries of school's (and in particular, the specific teacher's) authority by trying to generate a laugh was a constituent part of the pupils' peer culture and was used as a strategy to foster and confirm camaraderie (Francis, 1998, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kehily & Nayak, 1997). However, humour was also used as a source for developing and reinforcing teacher-pupil relationships and many of the laughs were *with* teachers rather than *against* them. Many of the pupils, especially at the prep school, also told me how funny some of their teachers could be, which they liked and appreciated.

6.2.4 Specialised Abilities and Knowledge and Being Modern

At both schools, certain boys (and girls) were admired or respected for having specialised knowledge (e.g., about computer games), or excelling at a subject like maths or art. Being able to talk knowledgeably about culturally celebrated topics such as football (the teams, the star players, the scores, specific matches, the rules and so on), being familiar with the latest computer and video games and having knowledge of computer programming brought prestige within the peer group hierarchy. However, whilst their knowledge and skills were appreciated, the crucial point to make is that this did not result in the boys being looked up to or revered. The extract below comes from a conversation with two boys at Church Green where, once again, we can observe a number of themes. For *some* children, being and showing that you are able to keep up with the latest 'trendy' expressions and practices can bring popularity, but being nice, outgoing and charismatic are also important factors. Being funny is also important, but, as Ishir points out, this is all highly subjective. Different people have different viewpoints, and it depended on who you asked.

Ishir: There are really popular children in each class ….
Jon: OK, but what makes them popular?
Laksh: They have lots of friends; they sort of keep up with the times; they think they are funny; they are modern; they are entertaining, they are nice to hang around with.
Ishir: Not everyone thinks they are funny, some people do, and some people don't.

Jon: What do you mean by 'keeping up with the times'?
Laksh: [I]t's sort of, like no one really wants … it's quite difficult to explain … it's about keeping up with the modern era, using the latest expressions, telling internet jokes, that's always a really popular thing; repeating memes, knowing the latest memes from the internet (we are the meme group) … if you don't know the latest memes you are missing out.

6.2.5 *Confidence and Independence*

It was noticeable that the popular boys had a certain, in-built, confidence about themselves, which was expressed in the way they spoke and acted. They appeared particularly at ease with themselves. We will see an example of this in the next chapter from a girl at Wood Vale, Astrid, who talks about boys being 'more confident' and not caring if they are told off. Some of the popular boys also practised a form of insouciance. I have no idea if many ever stood up for themselves against a teacher, but they did not seem to know what they wanted and were not going to be pushed around by any of the other boys or girls in the peer group.

6.2.6 *Other, More Minor, Strategies*

Although most pupils spent their free time in single sex friendship groupings, boys and girls at both schools generally got on well with each other and, as we have seen, some friendship groups contained a mixture of genders. Some boys could enhance their popularity and status by having a girlfriend, although, as we will see in Chap. 8, there were very few of these kinds of relationship in either school: I could only uncover 2 sets of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, or 'couples', from the 58 pupils at Wood Vale, and 3 sets across the whole year group of 64 pupils at Church Green.

This next extract below comes from an interview with three of the most popular boys at Wood Vale, and it is possible to detect a slight rivalry between Mack and Danny. The other footballing boys told me that Danny was acknowledged to be the 'best' (most skilful) footballer in the year group but note that Mack, who told me he had *learnt to dribble like Messi*,[2] states that he is 'one of the best'. It is also interesting to see that, although Danny's high peer group status is linked to his speed at running and

football prowess, it is also enhanced by being a 'couple' with Lillie. Finally, it is also intriguing to see Freddie's use of the phrase 'little people', which suggests a hierarchy where there are less popular and, possibly, envious pupils. It also fits in with Grace's and Rosalind's perception of him, that we saw earlier, which was that he thought he was superior to some other children. What is of even greater interest is that other pupils had told me before this conversation in July that Freddie was the other person in the year group to have a girlfriend—Astrid—earlier in the school year, although they had recently split up. This may have also contributed to his overall popularity.

Mack: I don't think if Danny wasn't with Lillie, I don't think he would be, like, as popular (Danny is sitting next to Mack), nothing to do with ….
Freddie: Because little people admire you because you're the only one in our class who is ….
Mack: He's also one of the best footballers, but ….
Jon: So, they are the golden couple … interesting/
Freddie: Yeah.

6.2.7 A Portfolio of Talents and Qualities

One of the most salient findings about popularity is that the pupils who were the most well-liked had a whole range of talents and qualities, drew on different resources and used various strategies. In the interview below, I am asking three girls at Wood Vale who the popular boys were.

Jon: So, Freddie is a real popular boy!
Navya: … Yeah, kind of, maybe half Freddie.
Jon: Half Freddie! [laughs]. … Maybe Mack, I've also heard Mack is popular.
Lillie: Yeah, kind of.
Jon: But why though?
Navya: Because they know a lot of facts.
Violet: They know a lot of history.
Jon: History, and is this what makes them popular? But what else, I mean, are they nice people?
Lillie: Yeah.

Jon: What else?
Violet: I think it's because they are nice and kind of funny and they joke a lot and stuff.
Navya: There is sometimes a silence in the room and Mack will say something funny.

Although the girls do not fully endorse Freddie's and Mack's popularity, they mention at least five qualities that make them well liked: they are smart and knowledgeable, nice, kind, extroverted and they joke a lot, including in class, as well as in more informal spaces. Interestingly, there is no mention of sport (particularly, football) and its connection to popularity from these girls, but this was different when I broached this subject with the boys.

We can also see the range of attributes being identified at Church Green in these two interviews below. The first is with two boys.

Jon: So, what do people get admired for at Church Green?
Jai: Sport.
Jon: Sport, what else?
Jai: Intelligence and behaviour.
Jon: What you mean you have to be quite smart?
Jai: Yeah.
Jon: So, if you are bright boy or girl, you get looked up to?
Jai: Erm, you won't get looked up to if you are only bright, you need at least one of the other two.
Jon: So, I know what it means to be bright or good at sport but what does it mean to be good at behaviour?
Jai: If you don't mess around in class, you'll be fine.
Jon: So, if you muck around in class, you *don't* get looked up to, but some boys do show off in class and deliberately muck around in class to get noticed, but you're saying you don't/
Reyaansh: I muck around in class but not too much.
Jon: OK, so you *do*. That's very good of you to be so honest. Do you do it to look cool?
Reyaansh: I only do it a little bit.
Jon: So, you do want to get noticed?
Reyaansh: Yeah, kind of, I don't do it too much.

The three qualities they mention are sport, intelligence and (good) behaviour in class, which run counter to what many other pupils (boys and girls) told me about some of the popular boys showing off and trying to attract notice from their peers during lessons by making jokes and/or calling out. Whereas Jai seems to be a conformist with the formal school regime, Reyaansh is more conflicted and has obviously been tempted to sometimes transgress and risk teacher admonishment, possibly in order to gain peer group attention in the search for greater peer popularity.

In the second extract with three boys, sport seems to be the most important ingredient of popularity, although popular boys are good at many things, including more than one sport.

Darshan: All the popular kids are in 6HH.[3]
Jon: Why are they popular; is it because they're sporty?
Darshan: I don't know.
Viraj: It's because they are good at lots of things.
Jon: Are lots of them all-rounders?
Viraj: Yeah/
Lewis: Like Nicky, he's good at every sport there is.
Jon: Is he admired for that?
Viraj: No, not really, he's just popular.
Jon: But to be admired you have to be a bit popular, don't you?
Darshan: I don't think people really look up to him, they ….
Jon: So, people don't try and copy him and regard him as a hero?
Darshan: No.

In the conversation above I use the word 'admired' about Nicky, which implies respect, and which, I argue, is different from the phrase 'being looked up to' which implies a greater veneration. After all, I can admire or respect an individual, such as a top musician or sportsperson for their talent and skills, but I do not necessarily have to look up to them. The main conclusions from these three boys are that while some individuals can be popular it does not necessarily follow that people look up to them; these more favoured individuals are good at many things, not just sport (and maybe not even including sport), and they have a range of talents and attributes.

While, at both schools, there were no leading, or celebrity, boys who dominated the peer group, who set the agenda and others looked up to, certain individuals stood out from the rest of the group, and this meant

that this conferred on them higher social prestige. They also tended to have more friends, and some boys and girls liked to be associated with them because this could bring associated peer group status.

While certain boys (and girls) were especially liked amongst the whole class, some were particularly popular within the narrower confines of their own friendship groups. Some pupils, though, were able to transcend gendered groupings and be popular figures with both boys and girls. At Wood Vale there seemed to be four boys and two girls—Danny, Freddie, Zade and Mack, and Florence and Jude—while at Church Green it was three–four boys and two girls—Richard, Nicky, Seb (possibly George) and Olivia and Ayla.

6.3 Popular Girls

Once again, although there was broad agreement amongst the girls about who were the most popular girls, they were resolute in their opinion that there was no recognisable leader (in the class or in the year group) who was able to prescribe the way pupils were to think and behave in terms of values and behaviour.

There were around 9 out of the 37 girls at Wood Vale who were most frequently cited as being the most popular in the class or year group: Astrid, Alexis, Lillie and Bailey in 6MK and Hailey, Olivier, Navya, Jude and Florence in 6TD. Opinions at Church Green were a little more contested: some girls were listed as being little more popular within their class, but this view was not universal and different girls had different views. The 5 girls out of the 29 on roll at Church Green who were most frequently mentioned were Farah, Ayla and Claudia from 6HH, and Olivia and Frayer from 6SE. As I have mentioned, only four girls appeared to carry their popularity across gender groups. Like Richard, Olivia was also a House Captain which gave her additional status, alongside her qualities of being very friendly and sociable and sporty. She was also said to be very talented at playing the piano.

The attributes or qualities that made a girl especially popular were similar at both schools. As with the boys, popularity was based on a range of characteristics, and the most well-liked girls enacted a combination of them drawn from a range of qualities or attributes. The most important resources associated with popularity that were the most cherished amongst the peer group, and mentioned most frequently at both schools, were *social* resources (e.g., being nice and kind; being sociable, e.g., with

well-developed linguistic and interpersonal skills, and able to be flexible and form different networks of friendships; being there for someone) and the *personal* resource of being independent and standing up for oneself. Other features, such as being smart and knowledgeable, and being creative and coming up with ideas, were also alluded to but did not assume such importance. *Cultural* resources (e.g., knowing the latest memes, or latest verbal expressions) were also not such important determinants of popularity for girls in either school, and, compared to the boys' peer group, the ability to engender humour in formal (the classroom) and/or informal settings (the playground, lunch hall) also played a minor role in gaining popularity. The resource of *physicality and athleticism* (e.g., excelling in a particular sport) also assumed a relatively insignificant part. This was slightly surprising, especially at Church Green, where sport took up a comparatively large amount of curriculum time and there was a long list of after-school clubs that almost every girl seemed to be involved in. Although being good at sport was mentioned and sporting proficiency was admired, the girls insisted that it did not make a girl more popular. Other *embodied resources* that girls have utilised in schools, emphasising their femininity, such as using make-up, nail varnish or having hair extensions, were against the school rules and so were not able to be easily activated. Bodily shape or looks were also rarely mentioned, although I did not explore this theme in any depth or with any consistency and I was aware to needing to tread carefully and sensitively when broaching topics like this (see Chap. 8). However, I did introduce the subject with three girls at Wood Vale when I asked them if it was important, or noticed by peers, if a girl had a slim or sporty-looking figure.

Jon: How important is for a girl to be slim and have a good figure?
Lillie: No.
Navya: That's not important.
Violet: Looks don't matter to anyone.
Jon: When people have crushes on boys is it because they are nice looking or nice people?
Navya: Nice looking.
Violet: It's kind of, like, a mixture.
Navya: It's because they're kind and good looking … being a nice person is probably more important.

We can see that, despite initial definite views rejecting my hypothesis, their responses become more equivocal towards the end of the extract and Navya and Violet admit they *are* aware of a boy's 'good looks'. We can also perhaps assume that, as Lillie was 'going out' with Danny, she also was cognisant of physical appearances.

In order to be popular, girls, like the boys, generally had to possess of portfolio of attributes, drawing on various resources and using various strategies. As mentioned above, the four qualities associated with popularity that were the most regularly cited were being nice and kind, being sociable, being there for someone and standing up for oneself and being independent.

6.3.1 Being Nice and Kind

The formal culture of the prep school, in particular, spent a lot of time accentuating values in storylines of kindness, caring and a tolerance of other points of view, and so, perhaps it was not surprising that this characteristic of popularity featured so much at this school. I did not always ask the girls to list the traits in a hierarchical order, but when I did, being nice and kind invariably came out top. In the following exchange at Church Green, I am discussing what makes a girl in the class popular with three girls, and the first name that came up was Farah.

Jon: So, many girls have told me that Farah is the most popular girl? Would you all agree?
Jaswinder/Sonia/Claudia: Yeah?
Claudia: Because she is nice and kind.
Jon: Yes, I was going to ask why? So, she's nice and kind, anything else?
Sonia: She's soft, quiet, she doesn't blow your eardrums out [laughter].
Jon: Is she particularly good at something … [they shake their heads], OK, nothing that springs to mind?
Sonia: She's just a really good friend though.

6.3.2 *Being Sociable with Well-Developed Interpersonal Skills, and Able to Mix with Different Groups*

Being sociable was equally prized and, for example, at Wood Vale, many girls continually cited a girl called Florence as being able to get on with everyone.

Ela: Florence is just really close friends will us all, she is, I don't know, like she is just social with everyone, even with people who are not her friends.

This enabled her to form networks and have a wide circle of friends and a wide range of acquaintances.

6.3.3 *Being There: Go-To Girls*

As we saw in Chap. 5 in the interview about Grace and Alexis from Wood Vale, there were also some individuals who were known as 'Go-To' girls, who girls could approach if they had a problem or felt emotionally low. There were two in each class at Wood Vale and two in one of the classes at Church Green, who were regarded by many of the girls as being particularly wise, kind and understanding.

Not all of these types of girls, who were most frequently cited as being some of the most popular, came across as being particular extrovert and confident. You did not need to be charismatic. As we have seen, Farah was quiet, and so was Alexis at Wood Vale, although she was also known for being confident, poised, funny and having a good sense of humour. Others, such as Florence, also came across as being confident and you could see why their personalities were so appealing and engaging to so many other girls (and some of the boys). Florence and another girl, Jude, at the state school were regarded as being the most favoured girls across the whole year group, but, despite two girls, Olivia and Ayla, being popular with some of the footballing boys at the prep school, their popularity did not appear to extent outside their own classes with other girls.

6.3.4 *Being Brave and Independent*

I had a lot of conversations with the girls about whether they thought it was essential for a girl to stand up for herself and be independent, and every girl I spoke to thought this was a vital quality. Independence was

much more frequently mentioned, and was a more important asset for the girls, than the boys. Unlike with the boys, the attribute of confidence, or being confident and self-assured, was seldom mentioned.

However, while some girls came across as being confident, there were others who some admitted they thought they would like to be a little braver and contrasted their own attitudes and actions with other girls and, in the extract below, against some of the boys.

Jon: Do you think girls are independent?
Astrid: Yeah, a bit.
Jon: A bit, a lot, sometimes.
Astrid: Yeah.
Jon: Are you more independent or less independent than the boys?
Astrid: Less.
Annie: Less.
Jon: You think less, Aurora, what do you think?
Aurora: Less/
Astrid: Boys are more confident.
Jon: Why?
Aurora: Because when we are teaching [in the classroom] they don't care if they're told off, they're more confident.
Jon: Do you think boys sometimes show off?
Astrid: Yes/
Annie: Yeah.
Jon: Why do they show off?
Annie: Because they want to think that they are cool when they are not.
Jon: OK, so do they show off to get attention?
Astrid /Annie/Aurora: Yeah.
Jon: So, what happens, do they get told off?
Astrid: Once, a boy in our class got told off by the PE teacher [a specialist teacher] and he didn't care, he just said, "I've already done it" and he didn't care.
Jon: Oh, I see, that's quite brave.
Astrid: I wouldn't have done that.

Jon:	No, so girls wouldn't do it … when we look at the girls, they have some very lovely characteristics such as they care for each other and help each other, and that's really nice … do you think the girls should have an image to be nice, kind and gentle or should they be tough and rough like the boys?
Annie:	They can be tough.
Astrid:	They can be.
Jon:	But are you as tough as the boys?
Astrid:	No/
Annie/Aurora:	No.
Jon:	No, but would you like to be?
Annie/Astrid:	Yes.
Jon:	So why aren't you then?
Annie:	… It's because we're more sensitive than the boys and the boys can do whatever they want.
Jon:	Do you agree, Aurora?
Aurora:	I'm not sure.
	[…]
Jon:	OK, so you would like to be more confident, how can you become more confident?
Annie:	Er ….
Jon:	OK, you are thinking about it …?
Aurora:	When you had to go up to the front [of the class] to show your work I think we are mostly scared because of the boys because we know they are more brave than us and they can laugh at us at any time.
Jon:	So you get nervous about showing your work … why?
Annie:	Because, like, it feels like the boys are just staring at us non-stop and we can't do nothing about them staring.

6.3.5 More Minor Strategies for Gaining Popularity and Girls' Concerns About Being Popular

Occasionally a girl could become popular in the peer group because she had done something which was regarded as being exceptional or at least 'out of the ordinary'. This was the case with one girl at Wood Vale, Hailey, whose reputation as a 'real' actor brought her status.

Jon: Who is the most popular girl in the class?
Emma: Hailey, probably Olivier, and Florence.
Jon: What makes them popular?
Saanvi: Hailey is an actor.
Emma: She has been a proper actor, and she is on YouTube as well.
Saanvi: And she has done some real acting.

However, although I didn't interview her, some girls told me that Hailey was also very sociable and generally 'quite dramatic' in the playground, which could produce lots of laughter. Referring to Hailey's friendship group, Saanvi elaborated on this.

Saanvi: Some of them are really dramatic … like if they fall, they will pretend that they have twisted their ankle and they start limping but then the next moment they will be running around.
Jon: So, they're just mucking around, so it's just funny really.
Saanvi: Yeah.

In another interview at the prep school, I was discussing the concept of popularity with three girls and asked them why they believed girls had more concerns about wanting to be popular than boys. Later in the conversation, one girl, Farah, introduced the notion of status, which, she said, was connected to how individuals are rated amongst the peer group.

Farah: Boys don't really mind so much about things.
Uma: Boys are less complicated than the girls.
Jon: Boys are less complicated?
Farah/Uma: Yeah.
Farah: Girls try and get attention and stuff.
Jon: What from other girls or from the boys?
Farah: Yeah, to be more popular.
Jon: Girls try to be more popular than the boys!
Marta: Yeah, they want attention from the boys.
Farah: Boys don't really care about popularity; they just want to have fun and play and stuff, but the girls, like, worry about their status.
Jon: That's interesting; the girls are worried about their status?
Marta: Not particularly us three.

Jon: No, you mean the girls in general in your class? … I think I know what you mean by status […] but can you explain what you mean in your own words?

Farah: Like how they are rated in the class … you have the popular girls and then it's like the friends of the popular girls.

Uma: Hattie is quite popular among the boys.

As Farah notes, people can also gain popularity complicity by association with the most popular individuals. They also told me later in the interview that Uma in their class was particularly well regarded because one of the most popular boys in the class, Nicky, had a crush on her, and was possibly going out with her, and, although I did not have time to pursue this, we have already seen that Danny may have accrued extra status for his relationship with Lillie at Wood Vale.

While pupils (girls and boys) at both schools were acutely aware of who was regarded as being socially popular, as with the boys' groups no single name cropped up as being unpopular and therefore subordinated and/or bullied. While the girls fell out with each other and were sometimes accused of spreading rumours and calling each other nasty names, no one was treated as a social outcast or consistently bullied. There was also no relationship between unpopularity and high achievement either (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Quite the reverse: no pupil was derogated for working hard; the girls (and boys) wanted to achieve high educational credentials and were acutely aware that high qualifications led to greater opportunities in employment and further study. There was no 'balancing act' needed between high achievement and popularity that Francis et al. (2009) found with their 12–13-year-old girls, and I did not pick up any storylines of girls boasting about performing effortless achievement—working hard was regarded as the norm.

6.3.6 A Portfolio of Talents and Qualities

As with the boys, in order to be highly popular a girl had to possess and enact a range of qualities. This is illustrated in this extract of data below from Wood Vale, where the girls identify seven qualities popular girls possess and enact: looking smart, having lots of friends, being highly sociable, joining in all the games, being creative, taking a lead by coming up with ideas and consistently being there to help people.

Jon:	What sort of things would a girl need to do to make themselves popular?
Grace:	Dress nicely.
Jon:	Outside or inside school?
Grace:	Both.
Rosalind:	Both.
Grace:	They, like, would have lots of social contacts with people/
Rosalind:	Play the games that all of their friends play/
Grace:	Be the one that always comes up with the ideas/
Rosalind:	Be the one that is always there to help you.
Grace:	The one that is always creative and stands out.

Many girls at the two schools who were consistently mentioned by the girls as being especially well liked also joined in the main football game on a regular basis, although only six were thought to be 'serious' or 'proper' players, drawing on the resource of physicality and athleticism to enhance their status: Florence, Jude and Aurora at Wood Vale, and Ayla, Phoebe, Olivia and Frayer at Church Green.

As we have seen, two of these girls were particularly favoured across the year group: Florence and Jude, and in the extract below we are talking about the latter individual. Although the conversation again involves the same two girls, this took place a few months after the conversation with Grace and Rosalind above.

Jon:	Is there a most popular girl in the whole of Year 6?
Grace:	I think there is one in the whole year group, Jude. She joined in early Year 5.
Rosalind:	Even the boys will, like, play with her.
Jon:	So, what she got that makes her the leading girl? What has she got that others haven't?
Rosalind:	She's got personality that everyone can, like, understand.
Grace:	She's got a personality that can change so she can be friends with other people; she's the most popular with other people … like she can understand people really well.
Jon:	And is she kind?
Grace/Rosalind:	Yes.

We can see how I conflate the terms 'popular' with 'leading' (and I will pick this point up later in the chapter), but the two girls seem to accept or ignore this, and I argue this data is more about Jude being popular than being seen as an influential leader. The attributes that Jude had were slightly different from those listed by these girls above about the fictional girl (coming up with ideas and taking a lead are not mentioned). In this case, Jude was/is protean and able to adapt to be friendly with different groupings; she has very good interpersonal skills; she is wise; she is accessible; she is kind; and she understands people. And, as I've written, Jude was also very keen on football and played in the lunchtime game every day. The situation was very similar to Florence, who also played football every day and who, Emma told me, was

> [r]eally close friends with us all, she is, I don't know, like she is just social with everyone even with people who are not her friends.

One quality of popularity that is common in research about secondary pupil culture (Francis et al., 2009; Lamb et al., 2015) is authenticity, or being authentic, which means being 'real' and 'genuine' in how you behave, dress or act (Skelton et al., 2010). Although I asked a number of girls whether they thought it was important to be 'real' and not fake, only a few were able to articulate what the word really meant. This enquiry didn't produce particularly rich data and it may have been that the concept was too abstract or it was the way I expressed the question.

In this first extract from a conversation with three girls at Church Green, Julia and Kiara reveal how aware they are that identities are fluid and contextualised.

Jon: How important is it to be a real person and not a fake?

Julia: It's really important. … When I hang around the Frayer group [another group of girls on the paper we have in front of each other] I get a bit more, not rude, but a bit more selfish.

Jon: You get more selfish?

Kiara: Sometimes, after she has played with them, it's not a bad thing, and she comes back to our group, she acts a bit different.

Later in the conversation, both girls touch on the theme of the performative nature of a feminine identity.

Jon: Doesn't not being a fake mean something to you? You know, do you need to be a real person?
Julia: Yes, you need to be your real self.
Kiara: A girl shouldn't have to fake herself to impress the boys.
Jon: No.
Julia: I would say you should be yourself, you shouldn't try and hide it, some people will like you and some won't, it doesn't really matter.
Kiara: You don't have to try and make yourself look popular.

I am not sure what Julia means by her expression 'you shouldn't have to be fake in order to impress the boys', but I suggest she may be saying that a girl does not have to become more 'girly' to gain boys' attention. Similarly, does Kiara's last comment refer to making oneself popular for the boys? It is not really clear.

6.3.7 Leading Boys

Sometimes, the terms 'popular' and 'leading' could merge and be difficult to disentangle. Although there was some initial conflation, and even confusion, between the terms 'popular' boy and 'leading' boy', the latter, as I have written, can be defined as having a greater connection to authoritative power: that is, someone who was (or is) able to make important decisions, dictate the agenda of how others should think or behave, talk or even look and who other boys might try to copy. A boy could be a leader in a particular context for a short period of time, such as when he was the captain in the informal playground football games and picked the sides; however, this is different from dominating the peer group with his force of personality.

While some boys were seen at Wood Vale as being more 'bossy' than others, their leadership was contested and no obvious candidate stood out. The conversation below comes from Wood Vale, and we can see that both myself, the researcher, and some of the boys conflate popularity with leadership. We can also see hints again of the rivalry between Danny and Mack.

Jon: Is there a leader in the class, someone who is the most popular boy?
Arlan: Mack.
Danny: Mack.

Jon: Why is Mack the most popular boy?
Danny: He's not the most popular boy, he just thinks he is. … I don't know how to explain … he acts like he's the boss.
Arlan: He acts like the boss.
Jon: He acts like he's the boss but *is* he the boss?
Danny: Kind of/
Arlan: No.
Danny: I do follow him if he suggests to play something, I do follow him.

As Grace said earlier in this chapter, Mack was confident and also physically strong and big (stocky, rather than tall), but we can also see that Mack's status of 'boss' is contested by Arlan. Despite the last comment from Danny that he follows Mack, the other boys that I interviewed at this school did not regard Mack as either *a* leade*r* or *the* leader.

When I asked the same question to the boys at Church Green, I got the same answer.

Jon: Is there a leading boy in the class who people look up to and who makes lots of the decisions?
Laksh: Not really, we are all pretty much together.
Jon: You are pretty much equal?
Noah: Yes.
Laksh: Yes, there's not really anyone but lots of people are friends with Seb in 6KN.

In the last line, Laksh makes the distinction between being a leader and being popular with lots of friends. However, one interview group did raise the possibility of one boy, George from 6SE, as being a leading boy, at least within his own local cohort of friends, if not for the others in the class or year group. Few children from the other groups mentioned this name, although in the conversation below with three girls and one boy, Liam, they have just claimed that George is a 'leading' boy. Once again, and as with Mack from Wood Vale, we can see the possible influence and connection of the body with leadership, although this is dismissed by Liam as not being important. He also claims that some of the boys across the year group are highly influenced by George and taken in by his ability to make friends with many people.

Jon:	Why is George the leading boy in the class?
Lily:	He towers over everyone.
Jon:	Yes, I can see he's tall, so is that actually important?
Liam:	No, no, it's not but he is tall.
Frayer:	It's been this way since year 3 'cos everyone wants to make friends.
Olivia:	So, it's kind of funny because like everyone, most of the boys in the class follow along, it's like he's their leader, everything he wants to do, or does, they follow.
Jon:	Boys and girls.
Liam:	No, not girls. George is good at making friends, but like all the friends seem to be brainwashed by him, literally.
Jon:	So, he has his own group of followers, but are they only from this group in this class [there are about three boys in his group of friends]?
Liam:	Also, from the other classes.
Jon:	OK, so people from the other classes also follow him?
Olivia/Frayer:	Yeah, yeah.

However, other groups of boys dismissed this claim of George being a leading boy and others even contested his popularity. Note, though, the reference again to George's tallness, this time from Hassan.

Farid:	He's [George] really popular.
Jon:	He's a popular boy is he?
Rohan:	I don't think he's that popular.
Hassan:	It's just because he's tall and he's one of the popular boys.
Rohan:	I don't actually think he's that popular.

6.3.8 *Leading Girls*

As in the case with the boys, although the girls felt confident to name the most popular girls in the class, and they generally came up with the same few names, they were equally resolute at both schools that there was no obvious leader—no poster girl or 'alpha' girl (Read, 2011, p. 11) who acted as a role model, either in their class or in the year group, and who other girls might try to emulate. The girls didn't like peers to be too dominant (or domineering), and as I have written above, although Jude was a

highly popular girl, my interpretation is that she was neither *a* leader nor *the* leader, either in her class or across the year group.

In this next extract with three girls at Church Green we can again see my own initial confusion over the terms 'popular' and 'leading', and I am helped out by two of the girls. However, although, these girls do cite three girls from their own class as being 'leading' I don't think they mean that they think they 'set the agenda' in terms of values, behaviour and possible looks; they actually talk of them being 'controlling', as well as being dramatic, extrovert, confident and feisty, and their influence appeared to be limited to their own group of six girls. Rather than looking up to them, most other girls in the class did not interact with them and they were regarded as being rather bossy, which was a pejorative trait.

Jon:	Is there a leading girl in the class?
Sonia:	What do you mean?
Jon:	In the sense that people follow her.
Jaswinder:	Well Phoebe and Ayla can be quite controlling.
Sonia:	I think Farah is the most popular girl.
Jon:	OK, so maybe there's a difference between the leading and most popular girl? Are they two different things?
Claudia/Sonia:	Yeah.
	[…]
Jon:	OK, so who is the leading girl, that some girls follow?
Sonia:	Probably Julia.
Jaswinder:	Also Ayla and Phoebe.
Claudia:	Yeah.
Jon:	OK, so what makes these three leading girls?
Claudia:	They are very controlling.
Sonia:	They like lots of drama.
Jon:	So, controlling and they like drama?
Sonia:	No, I mean they are quite dramatic.
Jon:	OK, so they are quite outgoing?
Sonia:	Yes, they are not afraid to say what they are thinking.
Jon:	OK, but are they still nice and kind?
Sonia/Claudia:	Yeah ….
Jon:	So, kind of nice and kind? Do you have much to do with them?

Claudia: Sometimes, I play football with them but not really.
Jaswinder: I don't with them unless I get invited to.

6.4 Ideal Schoolboys

In each interview I asked boys to name the features, or characteristics, of an 'ideal' schoolboy, someone who was a fictional character, or similar to Weber's (1946) 'ideal typology'. If such a person were to exist, what would they be like? I use the word 'schoolboy', as opposed to ideal 'boy', because masculine identities are highly contextualised and are performed differently in settings outside school such as the family. The reason I asked this question was because of its link to popularity and status, and to the resources and strategies the boys used to achieve these. Analytically, these named features were also linked to different forms of masculinity, and very few boys had a problem listing a series of adjectives. I did not ask what this ideal schoolboy would look like although, in retrospect, I wished I had; however, it was the qualities that I was most interested in. Although there were a variety of viewpoints across the different groups, there was an overall consistency and the same adjectives kept being repeated in different interviews. The main descriptors at Wood Vale of the ideal schoolboy were sporty, clever, hardworking, sociable (with good interpersonal skills), funny and being a 'bit of a character' (charismatic). At Church Green, it was someone who was kind, considerate, friendly/sociable, funny, a little sporty, hardworking, clever, but not super smart. The common signifiers at both schools were being sporty (although this varied between the schools), clever, hardworking and sociable. Being funny, or having a charismatic personality, was not mentioned at Church Green, although these characteristics were frequently talked about during our conversation about the popular boys. The other difference between the two schools were the qualities of being kind and considerate, which, as we have seen, the formal culture at the prep school worked hard to reinforce. Almost every interview group at this school put 'kind' as their top quality, as we can see in this extract below.

Jon: What would be the characteristics of an ideal boy at this school?
Pete: Funny.
Nicky: Kind.

Richard: Sporty ….
Jon: Smart?
Nicky: They don't have to be ….
Pete: Not dumb though.
Jon: OK, so are funny and kind in a hierarchy? Are these the most important?
Nicky: Yes, funny, but they *have to be* kind.

As we can see, these adjectives fit into the idea that there are a range of masculinities and, at first glance, would seem to suggest that an ideal schoolboy practises a combination of both conventional masculine and feminine traits in a type or form of hybrid, combined or blended, masculinity. On closer inspection though, the majority of the traits appear feminine (being sociable, kind, considerate) or more gender neutral (clever, hardworking, funny, charismatic). The only masculine quality is, possibly, being sporty, although I think this is also more gender neutral. There were no definite (or less contentious) masculine traits mentioned such as being physically strong, fast (quick) or assertive, confident or independent, even if these were mentioned in conversations about the popular boys.

6.5 Ideal Schoolgirls

We can also get an insight into what the main features, or characteristics, of the dominant, or most common, forms of femininity were at each school when we look at data generated around the concept of the 'ideal' schoolgirl, which, I argue, is connected to notions of an 'idealised' femininity. Once again, I write about the ideal or perfect 'schoolgirl', as opposed to 'girl', because feminine identities are enacted differently in settings outside school. Although I emphasised that this was a fictional character, if such a girl were to exist how would she act and be like. The girls, like the boys, had little difficulty in coming up with a list of adjectives.

The main descriptors of a perfect schoolgirl at Wood Vale were someone who is friendly and sociable, has good interpersonal skills, is a 'bit of a character', funny, confident and a bit sporty. The girls also thought that she should be able to stand up for herself and mustn't be too soft as people might pick on her. The ideal schoolgirl at Church Green was one who is kind, but not too sensitive, friendly/sociable, confident, independent and able to look after herself, trustworthy, a little sporty (although this was not essential), intelligent/bright but, as with the boys, not super bright or

clever. Being sociable, having a charismatic personality and being independent (and able to look after oneself) were very similar at each school. Although 'being kind' was only mentioned at Church Green, we need to remember that this quality was continually reinforced in the storylines of the formal school culture at this school. While being funny was frequently mentioned as being an important part of friendship groups, as with the boys' list, it did not feature in the qualities constituting a paragon girl. Although only few of the girls mentioned physical attributes such as appearance, a girl's figure, her hair and so on, as with the boys, this was not an area that I had time to pursue, and my primary intention was to focus on qualities and behavioural practices. One of the few times I did specifically mention physical appearance was with two girls, who were close friends, at Wood Vale.

Jon: [I]f there such a person as an ideal or perfect girl, what would they be like and look like, even if they weren't real?
Emma: Eh, I don't know … she would probably have blonde and brownish hair.
Jon: OK, anything else?
Saanvi: Never get anything wrong.
Emma: Yes, smart.
Saanvi: Slim [laughs].
Emma: Flexible.
Jon: What do you mean, like a gymnast, or being athletic? Would she have to be kind?
Emma/Saanvi: Yes.
Emma: And respectful and helpful.
Jon: So those are good qualities of an ideal popular girl?
Emma/Saanvi: Yes.

We can see that the traits of being perfect and respectful, or deferential, are a little different from those I found in the overall general list of adjectives, although being helpful may be quite similar to being kind. The three physical attributes of having a particular hair colour, being slim and being flexible are interesting as these two girls had dark hair (Emma's ethnicity was Turkish and Saanvi's was Pakistani) and neither of them were sporty, but much more passive and spent most playtimes talking together. It is a shame that I interrupt my own question asking Emma what she means by being athletic or a gymnast and do not give her the chance to answer.

The general and overall list of adjectives that I have presented above from both schools fit into the idea that there are a range of femininities, but suggests that the closest conceptual match, and common way of *doing* girl at these two schools, was a hybrid form, which combined, and enacted, traits of femininity and masculinity.[4] I posit that the more constructed associations of femininity are being kind and sociable, and those associated with masculinity are being confident and independent (and able to stand up for oneself), while the characteristics of being funny, working hard, (reasonably) clever and (reasonably) sporty are, arguably, more gender-neutral associations. Of course, most girls *and boys* were able to exert a degree of agency and enacted a mixture of both these features and thus, perhaps, boys also performed a type of hybrid masculinity, which I called *blended* masculinity. We will pick up and elaborate on the themes of hybrid femininity and blended masculinity in Chap. 9.

It was interesting that although 'being sporty' was mentioned by the girls at both schools it seldom appeared at the top, or early on in the conversations, as the list was being constructed. Being sociable was probably the most common adjective, but being confident, standing up for oneself and being charismatic were also seen to be important, as can be seen in these two excerpts from Church Green.

Jon: What would an ideal girl look like,[5] even though she is made up and doesn't exist, what would some of her qualities be? You've already said you like people who stand up for themselves and for you, what else?
Olivia: I feel like sometimes they need to be a bit mean to get their thing across.
Jon: They can't be pushed around, so how shall we describe this? …
Lily: They have to be … 'cos some people are just sort of a blank, they just don't do much.
Olivia: She needs to be able to defend herself, she needs to be generally energetic and have lots of character.
Jon: So, lots of character and do they need to get on with people?
Lily: They need to be sociable, like I had a friend once in my old school who would never talk to me, and I got so bored with her because I am a chatty person.
Jon: I notice you don't mention being sporty or being very bright.
Frayer: No.
Olivia: No.

In the conversation below there is a negotiated balance that a girl should be kind but not *too* kind (which can be a form of weakness), sporty, but not *too* sporty: the perfect girl would have a 'rounded' personality. There is a hint of an emphasised[6] or exaggerated femininity where the girls talk about caring about their appearance, suggesting that, for some, *other*, girls, there is a physical performativity for the boys, although perhaps for this group it is more about self-worth than vanity.

Jon: What sort characteristics would a perfect girl have? […]
Marianne: Kind.
Maisie: Yes, but you don't want to be too kind but sometimes if you are too kind, you can be manipulated.
Jon: OK, so kind, but not too kind …?
Maisie: You don't want to be like other girls who care too much about their appearance, but you still want to make yourself look good.
Jon: Well, I guess you want to take a pride in your appearance?
Maisie: Yes, taking care of your hygiene ….
Jon: OK, give me some other adjectives.
Noya: Smart!
Jon: But not super smart.
Noya: No.
Jon: Sporty?
Noya: They can be a *little* sporty.
Jon: Anything else?
Noya: Friendly, but not too friendly again.
Marianne: They need to show leadership skills.
Maisie: But they mustn't be too bossy.
Jon: OK, so it's all about moderation, really.
Mina: It needs to be equal; you need to have a balance.

Girls seemed to be able to employ at least some degree of agency to construct their own identities and were not derogated in the peer group for being who they were, whether this was enacting a form of emphasised femininity or a more masculine type of femininity such as a tomboy (Paechter & Clark, 2007) or a competitive, sporty, girl. However, this conversation suggests that some girls, at least, were more circumspect, and that they would negotiate a safe position, aiming to be in the middle.

Notes

1. I am aware that there is a lot of conjecture in my interpretation.
2. Lionel Messi is an Argentine professional footballer who at the time of the research was widely regarded as being the best footballer in the world, and who had recently captained his team to win the World Cup in 2022.
3. This is not strictly true as another highly popular boy, Seb, was in 6KN.
4. This is very similar to the concept of the main dominant form of masculinity, which was also a hybrid, or blended, form, and I will expand on this in Chap. 7.
5. It is interesting that the three girls interpret my phrase *look* like as meaning what would a girl *be* like, although I do provide an example of what I meant.
6. The concept of emphasised femininity comes from Connell who defined it as a form 'Oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (1987, p. 183)—and boys. I will write much more about this in Chap. 9.

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CHAPTER 7

Messaging Platforms, Video Games and Social Media Outside School, and Thoughts About Their Childhood

This chapter presents empirical data on:

1. children's use of messaging platforms, video and online games, and social media outside school;
2. children's feelings about their childhood and their transition to become a teenager;
3. children's biggest influences and media heroes.

7.1 Use of Messaging Platforms, Video Games and Social Media

Advances in media and technology have transformed lives of young children in significant ways (John et al., 2023; Rideout & Robb, 2020), and it is hardly surprising that research shows that today's young children are more connected than any generation before them. In 2023, around 55% of children aged between 8 and 11 years in the UK owned a smartphone (Ofcom, 2023), while approximately 30% of children aged between 5 and 7 have access to their own device (Statista, 2022).[1] Mobile phones were also the second most popular devices used to access the web by children aged between 8 and 11 years, as tablet computers (iPads etc.) were still the number one option for users aged between 3 and 11 years (Statista, 2022). These numbers are likely to have risen over the past few years.

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The number of children owning a smart phone at both schools in this study was broadly similar to the figures reported in the survey by Statista above. More of the children possessed a smartphone at Wood Vale than at Church Green. There were differences between the two classes at the state school, but it seemed that about 40 out of the 58 pupils (or two-thirds) had a smartphone, although only about half of them (30) brought it to school. Fewer pupils owned a phone at Church Green, where the percentage seemed to be about a half having phones, and even fewer bothering to bring them to school as they saw little point. In one class (6SE), there were almost no pupils who owned a phone. A few pupils at both schools told me that, although they possessed a phone, they did not use them regularly, and sometimes they were not turned on for a few days at a time.

The pupils at both schools mainly used their phones and tablets (generally iPads) to play games, watch the YouTube app and Netflix, and, particularly at Wood Vale, to send WhatsApp messages. Only a few children used phones to send 'ordinary' texts, often to keep in touch with parents/ carers. iPads and computers were used for homework and to play video games. As we will see, only a few children used social media platforms.

The use of phones at both schools was controlled and regulated. Phones were not allowed to be used during break times, or in lessons, and they had to be handed in as the pupils arrived. At Wood Vale, the place where they were kept was called the Phone box (it was actually situated in the stock cupboard).

7.1.1 Messaging Platforms: WhatsApp

WhatsApp is the most favoured way of messaging among young children and teenagers. Ofcom (2023) show that, 25% of children aged 3–4 used WhatsApp (according to their parents) in 2023, compared to 54% of 8–11-year-olds and 80% of 12–17-year-olds. One of the difficulties with some of the research is that many surveys come from a range of countries, such as the US, and so are not directly comparable, and they do not differentiate between young children and adolescents (the age range covered is often quite broad). Although the findings from Ofcom (2023) show WhatsApp to be the most popular simple messaging platform in the UK, it is difficult to gauge how much time children spend using it. Research from Qustodio (2022) cite children spending, on average, 31 minutes a day on the messaging service, but the age range covers children aged between 10 and 18.

The majority of the children in my research who had a phone did not appear to use it to text very much to friends, and it was mainly used to inform their parents/carers of their whereabouts after the school day had finished. However, there was a large WhatsApp group at Wood Vale, particularly in 6MK which involved about 15 of the 18 girls and a few of the boys. The WhatsApp group in 6TD was smaller and numbers reduced after the 'racist bullying' incident which I have mentioned in Chap. 4. These two groups were both initiated by one or two girls and dominated by girls and, although many boys were initially invited and signed up, many told me that they became bored with all the 'girly' gossip, and the sheer volume of messages they received every day. As Mack bemoaned: '*It's so dull. It's just girls complaining, and there are so many messages*'.

When I asked the girls what they messaged about, it seemed to mainly consist of issues that had happened in class.

Jon: Is there a WhatsApp group in 6MK?
Navya: Yes, it's basically most of the class, it was set up by one of the girls and they then invited the boys.
Violet: I get about 444 messages a day.
Jon: Wow, that's a lot – you can't possibly read them all!
Violet: No, I usually just go to the end and then say, 'Hi'
Jon: What sort of things do you all talk about?
Violet: Well, it was Arlan's birthday the other day and we wished him Happy Birthday.

Although I was initially (highly) surprised and sceptical by Violet's mention of receiving 444 messages in one day, I kept finding that these kinds of numbers were repeated in subsequent interviews where figures of 300, 400 and 500 were consistently claimed by girls and boys. Although I did not ask how long they spent reading the messages, it would have taken more than the average time of 31 minutes a day cited in the research by Qustodio, which alluded to above. I found it hard to believe that anyone could be bothered to read all their messages and asked the girls if and how they were able to select messages that were the most interesting and/or important. Most told me that they only looked at the messages from their close friends, while Grace said she always looked at those headed WTF first. When I asked her, in my naive state, what WTF meant, she rather sheepishly told me, 'What The Fuck'.

Research from D'Lima and Higgins (2021), involving 100 pupils aged 9–11 years old, found that a key social driver for children's involvement with these types of groups is connected to their desire to belong (Beyens et al., 2016). This sense of belonging can be viewed as being grounded within a group of classroom friends; it is influenced by feedback from the group and is therefore a fluid construct that can shift dynamically in response to changing circumstances and responses (Dunleavy & Burke, 2019).

There was only one small WhatsApp group at Church Green—in 6HH—but the number of messages written and sent were far fewer. There were also a few girls in 6KN who used Skype (a telecommunications application) to communicate with each other every few days, and which, even I, thought was a rather 'old fashioned'.

7.1.2 Video Games

Research shows that two-thirds of 8–11-year-olds reported playing games online (67%). Video games involving playing against multiple people or teams are popular at this age and are played by nearly half (46%) (Ofcom, 2023). Video and online games were particularly favoured at both schools and had an opposite gendered dimension to the WhatsApp activity, in that they were mainly played by boys. Their favourite was Roblox at Wood Vale and Minecraft at Church Green, although both games were played by some pupils at each school.[2] [3]The boys mainly used their Xboxes[4] or their computers, but mobile phones and iPads were also mentioned. I did not conduct a formal survey about computer games, including the length of time pupils played them, but a few boys told me they were active on them for around 2 hours every night and for 4 hours at weekend, while others mentioning playing Minecraft for about 7 hours a week.

Far fewer girls played computer games, but Leila and Tabatha, from 6KN, were some of the most enthusiastic players in the whole interview sample: they played Minecraft against each other every day from around 6.30 to 8.00. However, other children told me that their parents restricted their game time to mainly weekends. The extract below comes from an interview with three girls at Wood Vale.

Navya: We also all play Roblox on our phones or laptops.
Jon: How often do you play?

Navya: I am only allowed to play at weekends. My mum is quite strict and says that education always comes first—'education is going to get you everywhere'.
Violet: I am only allowed at the weekends.
Lillie: Yeah, I am allowed to play at the weekends, and also Thursday and Friday.

7.1.3 Social Media

At the beginning of this year, *The Guardian* newspaper ran a headline based on a study from Cambridge University using data from the Millennium Cohort Study: *Half of British teens 'addicted' to social media* (Guardian, 2024).[5] The research asked the cohort about their social media use when they were aged 16–18. However, there is comparatively little research about the use of social media with primary-aged children, partly because the use of social media with this age group is comparatively much lower[6] than with adolescents. However, a nationwide study by OfCom (2019) found that 21% of 8–11-year-olds in the UK had social networking profiles, despite the majority of social media having age restrictions limiting use to those above 13 years (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat; TikTok) (NSPCC, 2020; Ofcom, 2019). More recent research from Ofcom showed that although Instagram is the most likely app/site for older children to have a profile on (55% of 12–15s and 70% of 16–17s) (Ofcom, 2022), children aged 8–11 are more likely to have profiles on TikTok (32%), followed by Snapchat (24%) (Ofcom, 2023). Short video format content is popular with children between four and 18, who spend an average of 97 minutes *per day engaging with TikTok*, as well as over 50 minutes on YouTube (Statista, 2022).[7]

Although all the children I spoke to told me they watched YouTube regularly, the amount of time spend on social media platforms reported above was not replicated in this study, where children's use of social media was generally tightly regulated and controlled by their parents.

There is general agreement that sexual imagery has become more ubiquitous in society, including in media and social media, and some material is marketed towards, and consumed by, children (Bragg et al., 2011; Buckingham et al., 2008, 2010; Gov.UK, 2009), although, as Renold (2013) points out, the evidence about the impact of this—whether positive or negative—is limited and remains inconclusive. There has been certainly a burgeoning body of empirical research exploring teen sexual

cultures, identities and social and cyber relations living in increasingly sex-saturated societies (Renold, 2013, p. 20): this includes research on 'sexting' (e.g., Ringrose et al., 2012) and sexual bullying (e.g., Rivers & Duncan, 2013). However, the main focus of these studies is on youth and girls coming towards the end of their adolescence. Jackson and Vares (2015) (see below) point to an urgent need for research that not only captures pre-teen's views and experiences, but that does so in ways that can address the complex and contradictory social and cultural messages with which girls and boys are confronted (see also Baker, 2011).

In a recent 3-year Australian study of how younger girls, aged 10–13 (n = 71), are making sense of 'sexualised media', the authors found 'little evidence that girls are eagerly seeking maturity through emulating sexiness' (Jackson & Vares, 2015, p. 198). In contrast to adult concerns of girls becoming 'too sexy too soon', they found most girls were wearing 'concealing not revealing' clothes (see also Kehily, 2012). Nevertheless, their research alerts us to the challenges girls face in 'managing contradictory calls to agency in postfeminist terms as a consumer of "sexy fashion" on the one hand, and the call to the moral preservation of the "good" asexual girl-child on the other' (Jackson & Vares, 2015, p. 208).

I did not explore the subject of pornography and didn't dare ask the children whether they had ever seen any 'rude things on the internet' or whether they had been sent any 'naughty' photos (Also see Ofsted's, 2021 review into sexual abuse.[8]) Nor did I mention the name Andrew Tate,[9] whom I thought was more of a subject for secondary school children. I had not mentioned anything about this theme to the school's senior management or to the parents in their information and consent form, and so didn't want to betray their trust in me. I was also worried that some children might go home and tell their parents what I had been asking about. More fundamentally, this area was not part of my research aims or questions and, in the interviews, I was often pressed for time.

The exact amount of children's involvement was hard to ascertain, and I am aware that some, possibly many, might have been reluctant to tell me. However, the children who I spoke to thought that the numbers were comparatively small. It is also probably true that there tends to be a greater amount of surveillance of their children from middle-class parents than in working-class families (Lee, 2023). At Wood Vale, only two boys and three girls admitted they were on TikTok (although I am sure there were more), and some girls referred to three girls in 6MK as 'The TikTok!' group. Mack told me that he used TikTok, and his mum trusted him to

self-regulate his use, which a literature review of studies on this theme by John et al. (2023) showed is a common practice: Mack said: '*I'll tell her if something is not nice*'.

At Church Green, the use may have been a little more extensive: Rohan told me that:

> Lots of people in class are on TikTok and their parents don't know. You can sign in as a guest, but you can't post. I think the minimum age is 13 but I think it should be 15 or 18.

Five girls spoke about TikTok and how they used it. The first extract comes from an interview with two girls when I am asking if they use any social media.

Ayla: TikTok.
Hattie: Yes, TikTok, a private account.
Jon: Right, set up by your mum and dad?
Hattie: Myself.
Jon: Do they regulate it?
Hattie: So, I have an account where there are only a few friends from school and some from my dad's friends, other kids so I follow them and sometimes we make videos together but only they can see them and no one else.
Jon: How many in the group, roughly?
Hattie: I have about 10 followers.
Jon: And how often do you use it?
Hattie: About a couple of times a week but, like, not during a school week, mainly holidays.
Jon: OK, so it's not a real big deal…What about you? [Looking at Ayla]
Ayla: Yes, I have an account.
Jon: Do your parents know about it?
Ayla: Yes.
Hattie: Yeah.
Jon: OK, and what do you do with TikTok?
Ayla: I look at stuff that people post.
Jon: OK.
Ayla: My parents don't mind me watching it, but they don't want me to use it a lot so I get addicted.

The second excerpt is from an interview with three girls at the same school, although only two are involved in the conversation below.

Jon: Do you use any social media?
Lily: Yes, TikTok.
Jon: And do your parents allow you to see that, and that's OK?
Lily: Yes, my account is on private so no one can see me, no one can see me, like randomly, I let people follow me, they request it and I accept it, and if I know them, I will let them follow me but only if I know them.
Frayer: So they can't see it unless you're both following each other.
Jon: Is this on TikTok?
Frayer: And Instagram
Lily: So it's perfectly safe.
Jon: Oh, Instagram as well.
Frayer: Yes.

Both schools had organised outside speakers to run a session on some of the dangers of using social media, such as communicating with strangers, and the importance of personally 'knowing' who you are online with. Pupils told me that they found these sessions extremely useful, and the data above shows that these girls were both wary and 'savvy'.

Research conducted by England's Children's Commissioner (2018) with 37 primary school children, aged 8–12 years, pointed out some of the benefits of using social media. It found that children enjoyed using social media and stressed its importance for sustaining social relationships (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). It has also been found to enhance communication, social connections and technical skills (Ito et al., 2009), and, like the WhatsApp group, social media can also create a sense of shared belonging (Beyens et al., 2016). However, the research also found that social media can cause anxiety and stress, such as when young people feel the need to conform to particular body-images, and, as we have seen, there can also be online bullying (Ringrose, 2008) (See Chap. 4).

I have already cited the research from the House of Commons (2017) (see Chap. 4) in which parents felt that social media was the greatest source of pressure on their children of primary school age. Some girls in my research at Church Green were beginning to worry about the influence and pressure of social media on their identities and appearance, and being corrupted, especially as they got older. These two excerpts come

from two different interviews. In the first, Claudine insists that she wants to cocoon herself in the protected world of childhood and to remain innocent, which, along with purity, is a key component in the discourses around childhood (James & Prout, 2015).

Claudine: I want to stay innocent for the rest of my life. My mum gave me TikTok on my phone, she allowed me, and then I deleted it …because I said, like on TikTok… "there might be bad stuff on there and I don't want to expose myself to that stuff" and so I deleted my mum's app and my mum was so proud of me.

In the excerpt below, Olivia is wary of the influence of social media and its pernicious effects and therefore wants to keep away from it for as long as she can.

Olivia: I'm not allowed any social media stuff, so I am not as influenced by it like some other people have and/
Jon: So, when you do come across social media, maybe next year or the year after?
Olivia: I won't be using it.
Jon: Will you be worried about being corrupted?
Olivia: I won't be using it!

7.2 Children's Feelings About Their Childhood and Their Transition to Becoming a Teenager

I explored the two themes—of whether some children wanted to remain innocent, while anticipating the inevitable arrival of adolescence—further with the pupils at both schools. Did they categorise themselves as children or as teenagers?

Some children, like Rosalind at Wood Vale, claimed that they had not given the transition from child to teenager much thought and were therefore not particularly worried: '*I have not thought about it – I don't know what will happen, so I don't think about it*'. When I asked her if she felt she would change a lot, she replied: '*I think so, but hope not too much*'.

Other children were also not sure and this excerpt below from Church Green shows that the three boys, who were great friends, each had

different and contrasting views about the present and the future: about whether they had outgrown their current school, and whether they were looking forward to the transition to teenager.

Jon: Do you think you have outgrown the prep school?
Reynaansh: Not really.
Alfie: Sort of.
Jai: A little bit.
Jon: Do you think there is a big scary world of the teenager out there?
Jai: Yeah, definitely.
Alfie: No.
Reynaansh: No … you get used to it.

Some children were uncertain how to classify their own stage of development and were not sure if they should be called a child or a teenager (or adolescent). This data comes from three boys at Wood Vale, and they think they might belong to both camps. They were aware of a growing maturity and a deeper understanding that differentiated them from the year group below and were generally looking forward to their adolescence which, they saw, was going to create more opportunities and open up more choices.

Jon: Do you regard yourself as children or as teenagers?
Danny: It's like half and half, child and teenager.
Mack: The boys in this class, when you compared us to Year 5, we are so different, we are way more mature than they are.
Jon: Yes, but you are a year older.
Mack: Yes, but even when they come into Year 6, they are probably going to be mucking about, they are much more immature than we are, actually we know a lot of stuff… I feel I am about 80% teenager.
Jon: Freddie, what do you think?
Freddie: Some of us are more like teenagers than children but then some are more teenagers, like I have my moments when I muck around but often I have my moments when I take things really seriously.
Jon: So, are you looking forward to becoming a teenager?
Danny: Yes, very much.
Mack: Yes, you are more responsibility, and you get more stuff to do.

In contrast, three girls at the same school wished to remain children. This was a period in their lives that they enjoyed, where adults made choices for them, and they were fearful of the unknown time of adolescence, which they accepted would happen when they began secondary school a few months later.

Jon:	Is it fair to say that at the moment you regard yourself as a child, and then when you go to secondary school you will become a teenager and adolescent?
Violet:	Yes.
Lillie:	I want to stay a child.
Jon:	So, all three of you regard yourself as being a child at the moment.
Violet/Lillie/Navya:	Yeah.
Lillie:	I am at primary school.
Jon:	Do you like being a child?
Lillie:	Yeah, I don't want to grow older.
Jon:	Why?
Violet:	My parents keep saying, "You're a teenager now" and I just don't like it, I just don't like it.
Jon:	Why?
Lillie:	'Cos it feels weird.
Jon:	Because it feels weird, but what else?
Violet:	I want to stay a child and enjoy my childhood.
Navya:	I kind of don't want a lot of independence.

In this interview below, these three boys at Church Green agreed that being a child was a good age because there was more fun with less pressure and stress. I was left wondering if Farid had an older sibling who was about to take their GCSEs,[10] or who else he knew.

Jon:	Some people in the other groups have told me that they quite like to be this age as it is more innocent and less complicated.
Hassan/Rohan:	Definitely, definitely.
Farid:	This is a good age.
Jon:	Tell me why you say this.
Farid:	Because you don't have to worry about things.

Rohan: It's all fun.
Farid: Because if you are 15 and you have your GCSEs coming up/
Hassan: It's all stress.
Farid: Yes, you would be more stressed and you wouldn't have so much time to have fun.

This feeling that life was less complicated, and you might have to work harder on your physical appearance and body, is also reflected in this extract from an interview with two girls at Church Green.

Jon: So, at the moment, you are still young girls, waiting to become teenagers.
Noya: Yes.
Marianne: I don't want to become a teenager… make up for this, make up for that…
Jon: You want to remain as you are.
Noya: Yeah.

Liam, from the same school, was more conflicted and was not sure exactly what was going to happen or what he really wanted.

Liam: I like being young and I don't want to really grow up but I do want to grow up and get a job, but I don't, and I want things but I don't want things …
Jon: Yes, it's complicated, isn't it? Are you happy to be a boy at the moment?
Liam: Yes, but I will also be happy to be an adolescent.

Aries (1962) writes that there is a myth of childhood as a 'golden age' (p. 209). Happiness is now the key term associated with innocence—childhood must be a happy time as well as a time of separation from corrupt adult society. As we saw at the end of the last section, Claudine wanted to remain innocent for as long as possible.

Claudine: I'm obsessed with staying innocent … everyone else in the class judges me by how innocent I am …
Harper: Do they?
Claudine: Apart from you [pointing to Harper], because Harper is innocent herself.

Later in the same interview, Claudine reinforces her protestation of being innocent, and her desire to maintain her distance from the opposite sex, when she talks about her intention to never get married. Her assertion is backed up by her friend, Harper, as well.

Claudine: There are boys in my class, because I say, "I'm never going to get married and never going to have a boyfriend" … it's so disgusting, well not disgusting, that people are 11 years old and they are already calling each other girlfriend and boyfriend, but I always say I am never going to have that and all the boys in the class say "it's not disgusting, you will one day when you are older" and then me and Harper say, "No way".

Harper: I'm never going to have a boyfriend in my life.

Holt also observes that (some) people see childhood as

> a kind of walled garden in which children, being small and weak, are protected from the harshness of the world outside until they become strong and clever enough to cope with it. (Holt, 1975, p. 22)

However, as he goes on to show, for many children, childhood 'as in Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent Childhood, does not exist' (p. 22), and many of the children I spoke to knew this, and were concerned. The extract below comes from one interview with three girls and two boys at Church Green,[11] where some of them say they are worried about the influence of social media and other peers, and there is a greater pressure and perhaps a *need* to fit in.

Jon: Are you looking forward to becoming a teenager, or would you quite like to be a child for a bit longer?

Emma: Yeah.

Chanda: Yes, I would.

Jon: OK, let's go along the row. Simone.

Simone: I prefer this, because some people don't really, like, have interests in the right things, some people, and if you get influenced by them, if they are your friends, you might become like them and that's not really a good thing.

Jon: OK, so it's good to be like you are now…is it scary?

Simone: It's not scary exactly.

Jon: But are you a little apprehensive?
Emma: I don't really want that to happen.
Jon: OK, so you are happy to be where you are now, at this age?
Simone: Yes.
Jon: OK, Emma, what about you?
Emma: Erm … I don't want it to happen because I don't really want that kind of pressure to fit in.
Jon: Yes, is there more pressure to fit in when you are a teenager?
Emma: Yes.
Jon: What about you, Chanda?
Chanda: I don't want to.
Jon: You like it now, you like this kind of innocence this age has and being a child.
Chanda: Yes.
Mohit: [a boy] You don't need to understand lots of things now and then, like in the senior school, you do … you can't be too innocent now, like Claudine [who is mentioned in the interview above].
Jon: So, you're quite happy now but are you looking forward to going to the senior school?
Mohit: Er, not really.
Jon: Not really, OK, what about you, Nikel [another boy]?
Nikel: I prefer it now because, if like, in the senior school I start to get Instagram and stuff, and then I will get pressured and wont' be able to live my life properly.

Other girls at the same school felt that they had already arrived, at least partially, at the stage of becoming a teenager, and they were already using social media platforms like Instagram, although this was with their parents' permission, and, as we have seen in some of the earlier interviews in this chapter, they were not allowed to post. Lily also talks about how fast life seems to go by.

Lily: I kind of think we are entering that stage already; we are getting quite influenced by like older girls, social media and stuff like that. Quite a few of us, including me, are already on social media and are entering that stage already of being a teenager.
Jon: Is it exciting, or does it feel daunting at all?

Lily: It's kind of scary, because it feels like it's gone by too quickly. I remember seeing my brother when he was in Year 6 and I was in Year 3 and watching him do all that leavers stuff and all things before he left but it feels like it is too soon for me to be doing all that stuff and now it's my turn, and it's a bit scary.

Frayer: I feel that when you reach that point that you feel like you are the perfect age it feels like you can stay like that for ever and with me although social media can influence you, I am not allowed that stuff, so I don't think I am influenced as much as other people.

McRobbie's (2005) chapter in her book, *The Uses of Cultural Studies*, is called 'Mad About Boys,' and introduces the category of the 'tween' which describes a girl falling in be*tween* infancy and adolescence and who, by implication, both anticipates adolescence while remaining firmly in childhood. Driscoll (2008) argues that the notion of 'tween' has created a new space for anxiety about the line between little girls and adolescence, while Mitchell and Reid-Walsh's collection, *Seven Going on Seventeen*, sees the tween girl as 'playing with teen culture' (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005, p. 3) while, at the same time, representing a 'heightened awareness of the vulnerability of girls more generally' (p. 3).

When we spoke together about their thoughts about going to secondary school in September, most pupils had a positive view, particularly those who had older siblings in the same school. Although, some had concerns of leaving, and missing, some of their friends (see Weller, 2007), the majority thought they had outgrown their current school and were aware that there was a need to move on. This feeling is summarised by Freddie at Wood Vale, who was already thinking this in November, nine months before he was due to leave.

> I am beginning to outgrow this school. I am looking forward to going to a school with more people; it will be bigger and there will be more things to do.

7.3 The Biggest Influences in Their Lives and Children's Media Heroes

I did not explore these themes of key influential people in their lives and/or media stars systematically or in any great depth. Most of the data comes from the early interviews and these questions tended to get squeezed out in the latter stages of the fieldwork as other themes, which I judged to be of greater importance, emerged and were pursued. I estimate that the

sample of children who I asked these questions to numbered around 30, or around a third of the total sample of children interviewed. Despite the limited amount of data, the findings below are, I believe, still of interest.

7.3.1 The Greatest Influence in Their Lives

When I asked the children who was the greatest influence, or who had the greatest impact, on their lives in terms of who they were and the way they thought and approached things, the great majority of the children immediately said their family: either both parents, or one parent in particular, but older brothers or sisters were also mentioned, who they sometimes turned to for help (sometimes with schoolwork), for advice and emotional support. Quite a few interviewees—and I would estimate about half of the 30[12]—said that they either didn't have one particular person or they didn't know. Only one pupil, Mack at Wood Vale, cited a person whom they knew outside of their family, a teacher: '*The biggest influence on me has been Mr Bolton a PE teacher, who has now left*', but Mack also went on to say that this was inside school and outside of school it was (again) his mum and dad. Although I stressed that influential people or 'influencers' did not have to be people they knew personally, only one pupil, Florence from Wood Vale, talked about a character on social media called Piper Rockelle, who is an American influencer on YouTube.

> *I watch this girl called Piper Rockelle on YouTube all the time; she stands up for things and I admire her, she is a big influence on me.*

7.3.2 Media Heroes

Piper Rockelle also acted as a kind of media hero to her, but I was rather surprised that not many of the children were interested in such people, and this included pop, or media, stars from TV or networked streamed productions. Only two boys—both at Church Green—named sportsmen: Pete, who was a keen cricketer, cited Ben Stokes and Seb, who was mad on football, said Son Heung-min, who starred for his favourite football team, Tottenham Hotspur. The only TV presenters mentioned were David Attenborough (an iconic biologist and natural historian) and Noel Fitzpatrick (a TV vet).

The great majority of pupils said they didn't have any particular heroes. The most frequently cited pop stars were Taylor Swift, Katie Perry and Ariande Grande, but the children said they liked them for their music

rather than what they stood for or symbolised. When I asked the pupils at Wood Vale what they thought of Brittany and Beyoncé, some of them were not sure who they are. They all denied having a crush on a singer or other media star. Most pupils listened to music on Spotify and also liked the bands Oasis, The Killers or Panic! at the Disco, which were formed before they were born and seemed rather 'middle-of-the-road' (at least to me). Only one person mentioned a different kind of music by a man known as 'TheFatRat', who is a German DJ and musician who is into 'glitch-hop'. No rap music was mentioned, which is probably indicative of the children's middle-class roots.

Notes

1. More recently, in April of this year (2024), the BBC website reported Ofcom research which suggests that nearly a quarter of five-to-seven-year-olds in the UK have their own smartphone (BBC, 2024).
2. Roblox is an online platform and one of the most popular computer games. According to Google, *Common Sense Media rates it OK for users age 13+,* but many of the pupils at both schools enjoyed playing it, particularly its collaborative element.
3. Some boys at Church Green told me that they had grown out of playing Roblox and Fortnite.
4. No girl mentioned using an Xbox at either school, although this is not to say that some girls did use them.
5. The research by Dr Amy Orben's team at the University of Cambridge used data from the Millennium Cohort study which is tracking the lives of about 19,000 people born in 2000–2002 across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. When the cohort were aged 16–18, they were asked, for the first time, about their social media use.
6. To register on online platforms such as Facebook (now Meta), Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter (now 'X') individuals need to be aged 13. However, it can be easy for a child to circumvent some of this control, for example, by using a fake date of birth with Snapchat.
7. The wide age range is rather too wide to draw any accurate conclusions about the 10–11-year-old children in my study.
8. Ofsted (2021) spoke to around 900 children. Around 9 in 10 of the girls said that sexist name calling and being sent unwanted explicit pictures or videos happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'. However, only two of the 32 schools visited were primary schools.
9. Andrew Tate is an online influencer who promotes a particular lifestyle and form of *toxic masculinity* (Harrington, 2020), which is generally recognised as being socially destructive, and includes extreme misogyny, homophobia and violent domination.

10. GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. This is an academic qualification in a range of particular subjects, taken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but pupils at 16.
11. This was the only interview where five children were involved. The most common number was three.
12. A reminder that the number of 30 pupils is an approximate number based on my best estimation.

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CHAPTER 8

Cultures of Sexuality

This chapter presents literature and empirical data on:

1. researching children's sexualties;
2. cultures of sexuality;
3. boyfriends and girlfriends;
4. crushes.

8.1 Introduction

One of the main themes I set out to explore was the relations between boys and girls, and as the number of interviews increased and my understanding of the informal school culture developed, I began to ask more questions about girlfriends and boyfriends, and the extent to which the children's world, at this age, was already sexualised within a culture of Butler's 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Butler, 1990, p. 51). Renold et al. (2015) maintain that a consistent theme in research about children and their sexuality is that the empirical studies are generally predicated on adult preoccupations—usually their concerns and anxieties—rather than on the voices of children themselves, and I wanted to give the children a platform to express their views. Although there is no overall agreement about what constitutes a 'culture of sexuality', the definition I used was pupils' awareness of a sexualised body and was based on the number of

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J. Swain, *Negotiating Gendered Identities in Primary School*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69184-3_8

girlfriend/boyfriend relations, the number of expressed crushes, and/or how much they noticed and discussed others' bodies and/or 'looks'.

Renold (2013) writes that, 'sexualisation' is often described as something that happens *to* children, reducing them to passive victims and repudiating their role as active and critical meaning-makers (Bragg et al., 2011; Duschinksy, 2013). Moreover, when a child expresses *any* knowledge or expression of 'sexuality', it is often regarded with suspicion and evidence of 'sexualisation' (Egan & Hawkes, 2008, 2012; Egan, 2013). Researching children's sexualities can be fraught with difficulties. Huuki et al. (2022) have written about how research about young children's ways of relating to themselves and others as gendered and sexual beings can be challenging to study, since they are often delicate matters for adults to ask questions about and/or observe, and for children to articulate. Often the silences, or what is not said, are as important as the spoken utterances. I also approached this subject in the interviews a little tentatively and tried to be sensitive. Remember that my research is positioned in the field of gender, rather than sexuality, and, although the two fields of course overlap, as I have written in the methodology chapter, I had not specifically told the headteachers that I intended to investigate the pupils' sexualities. I did not want to put myself, or my university, under suspicion, or in any trouble, and so I was careful not to ask the children whether, for example, they had viewed 'rude' images on social media or whether they had 'physical' feelings for each other. In order to do this, I argue I would have needed a longer time with the children, to form deeper relationships and build up greater trust. I would have used a different interviewing style, which was more discursive and less structured, although time was a consideration. More fundamentally, this would have made it a different project and the intention was to keep the main focus on pupil identities and explore the construction of their masculinities and femininities.

As I have written in Chap. 7, much of the recent research about the theme of sexuality has concentrated on the sexualisation of teenage girls and their bodies, particularly online, and findings suggest that many girls practise a form of Connell's (1987) emphasised (heterosexualised) femininity that is intended to appeal to boys and values sexiness and a sexy appearance (Archer et al., 2007) (see Chap. 9). There has also been a mounting interest around trans and more fluid gender identities, sexualities and social media. Once again, this has been with, and about, older, teenage girls (Gilbert et al., 2018), although Roche (2020) recently used interviews to carry out research about gendered identities with young trans children, from 7 years old.

8.2 Researching Children's Sexualities

Paechter (2021) maintains that it is commonly assumed that 'sexual knowledge begins with the development of secondary sexual characteristics, and that until this happens children have an innocence that should be protected' (pp. 615–616) (Bhana, 2007; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; King, 2009; Paechter, 2017; Prout, 2005; Renold, 2006; Ryan, 2000). Paechter (2021) reminds us that when researchers set out to explore the romantic and sexual affiliations of primary-age children, their work is often affected by societal and cultural assumptions:

> *We frequently find ourselves struggling to combat a semi-articulated assumption that prepubertal children live, or should live, in a prelapsarian paradise in which sexual knowledge and, indeed, knowledge about the body, is absent (*Foucault, 1978*) and in which they should be protected from that knowledge, whether it comes from the media (*Robinson, 2008*), older children and adults, or an enlightened sex and relationships curriculum.* (p. 616)

However, it is well known that many children are deeply invested in heterosexually inflected gendered identities, including in the early years (e.g., Blaise, 2005; Connolly, 1998; Gansen, 2017; Martin, 2011; Morison et al., 2022), and, as Paechter (2021) writes, researchers working in gender and education are aware that some children have sexual feelings long before reaching puberty, and that 'some develop both sexualised and romantic relationships by the end of primary school' (p. 616). Many scholars (e.g., Epstein, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2008) have also argued that primary schools are key social and cultural arenas for *doing* sexuality, and despite the ubiquity of childhood discourses and storylines (which Paechter alludes to in the above quotation) that constitute children as being innocent, asexual and too young to understand what sexuality is, or involves, heterosexual desire (of varying degrees) is an intrinsic part of the children's everyday school world.

Epstein (1997a, 1997b, 1998) maintains that it is impossible to develop a full understanding of gender relations in schools without examining them in the context of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1983) or 'heteronormative' relations, which refers to the privileging of heterosexual relationships—and associated distinct gender roles—as the 'normal', 'natural' expression of sexuality (Bragg et al., 2022).[1] Butler (1990) was one of the first academic scholars to posit that gender is constructed through a 'heterosexual matrix', in which gender and sexuality are inextricably

linked, while Wittig (1989/1992) maintains that heterosexuality is such an integral part of society that it is part of a social contract, which is, in effect, a heterosexual contract. Paechter (2017) argues that 'the heterosexual matrix is a key underpinning feature of adult society' (p. 288); children observe sexual relationships and practices all around them—in everyday family life, the media (including social media) and literature—and they consider these heterosexual practices as being signifiers and markers of adulthood; in other words, they not only use their knowledge of the heterosexual matrix to preserve particular ways of being girls and boys, but also as, and of, future adults.

In her research over 25 years ago, in a London junior school, Epstein (1997b) argued that sexuality was 'pervasive' (p. 38) and the 'part of the stuff of everyday life of school children' (p. 51), and this finding has been confirmed with primary school-aged children more recently by scholars such as Renold (2005) and Paechter (2017) in the UK and Bhana (2016) in South Africa. However, it is important to point out that these studies were conducted in schools which had very different pupil intakes, and so are not straightforwardly comparable to the middle-class cultures found in the two schools in this study, where pupils enjoyed a culture of safety and security and did not face the challenges of poverty and marginalisation that are found in other school settings.

Several studies have investigated the heterosexual positions of boyfriend and girlfriend, particularly at the upper end of the primary school (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Epstein, 1997b; Renold, 2005; Swain, 2014; Thorne, 1993). Some researchers, like Renold, found that, for 10–11-year-olds, 'having a girlfriend or boyfriend'—often referred to as 'going-out'—was a common occurrence amongst the peer group culture and created an 'acceptable and assumptive' status (Renold, 2005, p. 319). However, Renold (2005) and myself (Swain, 2004, 2014) have also highlighted the fact that most people would not generally regard these attachments as genuine, bona fide, heterosexual affiliations; couples rarely actually meet or 'go' anywhere outside school, although, as we have seen in Chap. 6, these associations may lead to higher status within the peer group.

Recent research by Huuki et al. (2022) indicates that most children approaching their teenage years are more likely to have 'crushes' on others than to 'go out' with anyone. The research team postulates that crushes, or, using their definition, 'being romantically fancied and fancying others' (p. 577), are often a fundamental part of pre-teen children's relationships

to one another. Crushes form part of young children's early sexual awareness and understandings, teaching them social and interpersonal skills involving, and helping them, for example, to develop skills of communication and compromise, which they will cultivate further in adolescence and young adulthood. They are also about children beginning to recognise and understand bodies as being gendered and sexualised through affective relationships (Coleman, 2009). However, although pupils can have fun and gain pleasure with their 'crushes' on children from a differently categorised gender, these affiliations can also be precarious and bring pressure and pain. Research on sexual relations between children shows how intensely young boys and girls can sense and they can sometimes feel they have become ensnared in romantic relationships with each other in ways that resemble sexual harassment. Some can feel they have become entangled in something over which they have little say or influence (Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2013; Cannoni & Bombi, 2016; McCullough, 2017), and this can make them feel vulnerable. Several studies have highlighted the role of power and shown how different forms of coercion, control, domination and harassment construct and mediate boyfriend–girlfriend cultures for children and youth (e.g., Coleman, 2009; Gillander Gådin, 2012; Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Renold, 2013).

8.3 Cultures of Sexuality

As we saw in Chap. 5, the boys and girls generally got on well with each other (particularly in the prep school), and relations within the formal school culture appeared to be relaxed and easy. I could find no obvious gender hegemony (Messerschmidt, 2018), or, if it existed, it was not prevalent and it had little power. Having familiarised myself with the literature, I was expecting to find that a culture of sexuality was widespread in the two schools. After all, I noted that, in her doctoral research, around 25 years ago, into gendered and sexual identities in two junior schools, Renold (2005) found evidence that sexuality was an everyday part of school life. However, I concede that the two schools in her research had different catchment areas and pupil intakes from the two in this research; one school was particularly working-class,[2] and there is some evidence that middle-class parents/carers police and repress their children's sexualities to a far greater extent than those from working-class backgrounds (Ungar, 2009). As her observations and interviews with girls showed, they had two basic choices: to align themselves with or against the dominant

'emphasised' femininity of the 'girly', heterosexual girl (see Chap. 9). Renold found that over two-thirds of girls identified with the heterosexualised 'girly' femininity, regardless of their body shape, social class or academic disposition. The prevalence of this emphasised form has been confirmed in studies in primary school settings with pre-adolescent girls by other feminist scholars (e.g., Allan, 2009; Francis et al., 2017; Kostas, 2021; Reay, 2001), and also with adolescent, secondary aged girls, chiefly in online and social media environments (e.g., Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

However, unlike these and other researchers (e.g., Bragg et al., 2022; Epstein, 1997a, 1997b, 1998), I did not find, or at least I was unable to discover, the informal school culture in either of the two schools in this study to be immersed or suffused with sexuality, although I concede this is contingent on how it is defined. Traces of sexuality were certainly evident; cross-gender relations certainly took part through Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix, and, for *some* children, heterosexual desires were an everyday ingredient of school life.

I began to become aware that there was some kind of culture of sexuality in one of the early interviews with three girls at Church Green. I was asking them if they wanted to get married, when Hattie, almost plaintively, admitted that she wanted to have a boyfriend.

Ayla:	A lot in my family say, "Marry someone rich and get a good job" so, yeah, I will get a good job, but I don't really need a husband to succeed in life, and also…
Jon:	Yes, more and more people are deciding they want to stay single.
Ayla:	I won't be single, I just want to marry someone I actually love.
Jon:	That's important.
Ayla:	Yeah … I want to marry for love, not for money.
Jon:	What about you, Hattie?
Hattie:	Sometimes I think I wish I had a boyfriend right now!

There were a significant minority of girls who were referred to by other girls as 'sassy' and 'flirty', and who practised an emphasised form of femininity. There was one particular girl called Madison who featured in some of our conversations at the prep school and who appeared to be an extreme version of this. The girls told me that she was '*obsessed with boys*', was '*a big flirt*' and that '*she liked every boy—for about three minutes*'. Apparently, Madison kept a pink book which contained a long list of her, and other

girls', crushes. The book also contained comments about some of the teachers—'*horrible things*'—and unfortunately it was discovered (I don't know by whom—pupil or teacher) and reported. I didn't pursue this matter further as this had happened in the previous year, so I don't know any further details except that it was regarded by the schools as such a serious disciplinary matter that Madison was asked to leave. I expect there was much more to it. Although Madison seems to have been an aberration, there were a few other girls in the year group practising an emphasised form of femininity. Hattie told me that, '*I feel that they* [some girls] *go to school, not for the education, but to be with the boys*', which is an interesting comment in the light of her desire, expressed above, to have her own boyfriend at the moment. However, overall, these kinds of feelings were expressed by a minority of girls at both schools in this particular age group. Moreover, and as we shall we, the majority of the boys were also impartial and rather dispassionate when it came to talking about girls.

8.4 Girlfriends and Boyfriends

Although many pupils appeared rather disinterested in the number of individuals 'going out' with someone in their class, most were happy to talk about such relationships and, when pressed, were usually willing to estimate the numbers. I could only uncover three sets of girlfriend-boyfriend relationships at Wood Vale (although two of these had broken up during the year) amongst the 58 pupils in Year 6 and three such associations, or 'couples', across the whole year group of 64 pupils at Church Green.[3] This relatively low number of six—amongst 124 children—is again different from findings in previous studies (e.g., Morison et al., 2022; Renold, 2005).

The most common reaction to the question of whether people had partners at either school is summed up by these three girls when I asked this question at Wood Vale.

Jon: Are there any boyfriends and girlfriends in the class?
Florence: No.
Roshni/Trinny: No.

It was difficult to pin down what the expression 'boyfriend' or girlfriend' meant (I was given various definitions), but these relationships seemed to have had a certain prestige, be a little more serious, and generally be more enduring than a crush (see below). As I wrote earlier, these

pairs didn't appear to see each other outside school, or even spend that much time together inside school. As one girl told me at Church Green, '*Some people in our year, as I said, call themselves girlfriend and boyfriend but you don't really go on dates*'. The crucial point is that the relationship was mutual and reciprocal. Sometimes the two characters texted each other a lot, but they did not appear to have many (if any) public displays of affection such as holding hands in the playground. Although, as we have seen, these relationships could bring added kudos to the two protagonists, they were not without risk, and one group of girls at the prep school related the story of how one couple were regularly teased, and perhaps even parodied, when a group of girls composed and sang an amusing rhyme about them.

Mention was also made of one girl who was particularly serious about her boyfriend:

Farah: One girl said she would rather be with her boyfriend than her parents.
Jon: Was that a big deal?
Farah: Yes, that *is* a pretty big deal!

The interchange below comes from Wood Vale where I am asking two boys if they know if any boys in the class had a girlfriend. I am also trying to get a sense of what this relationship means in the peer group.

Mack: Freddie and Astrid.
Jon: So, are they going out at the moment?
Alan: No, they've broken up now.
Jon: When they were going out, what does it mean to be going out with someone? Do they hang around together?
Alan: No… I used to like Astrid a bit, but I don't like her now, because all Astrid does, like, if you are a boyfriend with her, she doesn't let you play with your friends, she tries to break you up from your friends.
Jon: Oh, she sounds like she is a bit controlling.
Alan: Yes, *really* controlling!
Mack: Freddie has had many girls in the past… everyone knows who likes who.
Alan: So, Danny and Lillie, they have been together/
Mack: They have not! [Looks surprised]

Alan: Yes, they have! Danny likes Lillie and Lillie likes Danny.
Jon: So … you mean they're not like boyfriend and girlfriend, they just like each other as friends?
Alan: No, they're just there.… It's just a statement, they don't go to each other's houses, they don't see each other outside school, it's just at school.
Jon: Do they spend a lot of time together at school?
Mack: No, they just gossip.
Alan: They're just in a calm place.
Jon: What do you mean, a calm place?
Alan: They're like, just settled, together, they just let each other [indistinct].
Mack: It's kind of nice.

As we saw in Chap. 6, boys' (and girls') peer group status could increase by having a partner. When I returned to Wood Vale in July, a week or so before the pupils were due to leave the school for good and begin their life in secondary school, I asked Lillie and her friend about Lillie's relationship with Danny:

Lillie: We started to like each other in Year 3 but we didn't really know this at the time.
Jon: What happens when you go out with each other, I mean you don't go out for pizzas with Danny or see him after school? What's it mean? … I presume you text each other?
Violet: Danny sent Lillie a text with a heart on it. [Lots of laughter]
Lillie: We text a lot.
Jon: So, you talk most days?
Lillie: Yes.

In the extract below, from an interview with four boys in 6KN at Church Green, although the data are a little ambiguous about whether boys have girlfriends, it seems to hinge on the particular definition. In an earlier conversation, Noah from 6HH—who joined in with the girls' groups on most days—had told me that when boys talk about playing with girls' groups, they mean being with 'just friends', with an absence of any (or little) sexual attraction, which Krish reinforces below. Although I concede that some pupils would be reluctant to tell me, many pupils (both

girls and boys) were positive that they did not, and had not, experienced this form of connection.

Jon:	It seems that boys and girls seem to get on very well in your class, and you mix with them.
Krish/Dev:	Yes.
Jon:	Do boys have girlfriends?
Haoyuan:	No.
Krish:	Some.
Dev:	No.
Krish:	When mean girlfriends, we mean just friends.

Some pupils felt that they were not sufficiently mature or knowledgeable to become involved in a 'real' or 'proper' relationship, and that this was something for the future.

Frayer:	Some people call themselves girlfriend and boyfriend, but I personally feel I'm not ready.
Jon:	You're not ready yet?
Frayer:	No labels.

This is interesting because, as readers may remember, Frayer referred to herself as a tomboy and shows that just because a girl engages in particular masculine practices and usually has short hair and wears more 'boyish' clothes (outside school), it does not mean that they do not have stirring of sexual feelings for boys. Some girls told me that Frayer liked some boys—Liam's name was mentioned—and so, in some settings, it is perfectly possible to be a tomboy and have a boyfriend. I also wonder if Frayer's last phrase, 'no labels', means that she does not want to be pinned down or categorised into a box.

8.5 Crushes

Most of the data in this next section comes from the prep school because this theme of subject was something that I began to explore in greater depth in the second phase of my fieldwork, in the summer of 2022, and this school is where the majority of the interviews took place. However,

the first extract comes from Wood Vale and is with the same three girls who were so definite about the absence of boyfriends–girlfriends in the class.

Jon: But do girls have crushes on boys?
Florence: Yeah. [Quietly.]
Roshni: No.
Trinny: I don't have crushes…
Jon: Why not?
Trinny: Because all the boys in the class are rude, I'm not saying they're all rude, but don't want to be with them and I'm too young.

Trinny's last statement echoes Frayer's from earlier and is also interesting that Florence's comment ('yeah') is mumbled quietly as it later turns out during other interviews that, despite her denial of there being no 'couples' in the class, she may have had a 'close' relationship with Billy earlier in the year.

Despite Roshni's and Trinny's disavowal of having a crush, many more pupils at both schools—boys and girls—were prepared to admit that they had had crush on someone, either in their younger years or in the current school year. The main difference between a crush and having a girlfriend or boyfriend was that crushes were more frivolous in nature and ephemeral, with many only lasting days or weeks. Liam, from Church Green, suggested that:

> A crush is like you like them, but they are more like friends whereas when they like you back it means something more to you, it sort of feels something more to you, it's a better relationship, it's like having a best friend.

A girl from the same school proffered a similar definition.

Jon: What's it mean to have a crush?
Simone: To…actually, it's to say they get on well with someone.
Jon: It is like to have a good friend?
Simone: Yes, like a really, really good friend, I mean I can be a good friend with someone but not have a crush on them, but like if you are really, really, really… then maybe.

This next excerpt illustrating my exploration into what crushes are, and what they mean, comes from a mixed-gendered interview with four pupils, three boys and one girl, Samira, again at Church Green.

Jon:	So, a few girls have crushes on boys but how long do they usually last? Do they last a few weeks, or months or a whole year?
Samira (a girl):	Some of them lasted quite long but others last for, like, maybe, a week or just a few days.
Jon:	And do you tell each other in your groups?
Samira:	Well, sometimes they lie about it, and they won't have it, but sometimes they do.
Jon:	What about the boys about the girls?
Asnee:	Well, sometimes people come to me and ask me, 'What is your crush?' and I say I have none because I don't really care about that sort of thing, I just care more about games, kind of, and things
Jon:	Yes, they are more important to you … and Seb, do you have any crushes?
Seb:	Yeah, I do, kind of.
Jon:	Yeah, I know this can be embarrassing, but do they last a long time?
Seb:	Yes, some of them do.
Jon:	So some boys have some crushes? … Miles.
Miles:	Yeah, some of them do.
Jon:	And do some of them last a long time?
Miles:	Yeah, some of them.
	[…]
Jon:	But you're in the girls' group, Miles, that's a different relationship, right?
Miles:	Yeah.

In retrospect, it was interesting to see Seb's admission that he 'kind of' has crushes and some of them can last a long time in the light of what I subsequently found out from Phoebe (see below) that Seb had been a boyfriend to Madison in Year 5.

Some pupils found it difficult to guess how many others in their class had a crush during the current year, but the general feeling was that crushes were more frequent in the lower years; they felt they had begun to wane as they got older, although I have no idea why this should be the case. After my analysis of all 19 interviews at Church Green, I judged that around a quarter of the pupils in Year 6 currently had a crush (although many more, especially the girls, had one when they were younger).[4] However, we can see how difficult some children found it to estimate. In this interview, four of the boys from 6KN, three of whom we have met above, are trying to guess how many of the 12 boys in their class have a crush, and we can see that the estimates vary.

Jon: Do some boys and girls have crushes on each other?[5]
Krish: Yes, definitely.
Ishan: There are quite a few people.
Jon: How many boys have crushes on girls in your class? Roughly.
Haoyuan: I only know one that actually has one.
Krish: Do you mean currently?
Jon: Yes.
Krish: I know two people.
Ishan: I know four or five.
Jon: You're don't seem sure, Haoyuan … and do crushes last days, weeks, months, hours?
Haoyuan: I had one for a month.
Krish: I had one that lasted for… a little in Year 4.
Ishan: Yes, mine went away pretty quickly.
Jon: But do you notice how attractive the girls are, how pretty they are?
Haoyuan: No.
Ishan: Kind of.
Krish: No, not really.
Jon: So, they're just nice and you get on well with them and they are just friends.
Krish: Yeah.
Ishan: Yup.

We can also see in the later part of this excerpt that there seems to be at least some element of sexual attraction, when one of the group, Ishan, admits that he does take (a 'kind of') notice of girls' physical appearance,

even though he agrees with his friend, Krish, that they are essentially platonic friends.

The situation was very different when I asked some girls from another class.

Jon: Do lots of girls have lots of crushes on other boys?
Ayla: I swear it's crush season or something. It used to be worse, Year 5 was crazy!

The pupils didn't appear to have multiple crushes but usually seemed to focus on one individual. According to the children, more girls appeared to have crushes on boys than vice versa. Another girl told me: '*Everyone in the Prep school have had at least one crush over the four years*' [that they had spent at the school], which fits in with Renold's (2005) research, where she found the younger pupils had multiple partners and games like 'kiss-chase' were commonplace.

Trying to estimate the number of crushes, to gain a sense of their extent, was also difficult because some pupils were not honest about whether they had a crush or not, even with, and perhaps, particularly with, their peers. As Samira had told me: '*Sometimes they lie about it, and they won't have it, but sometimes they do*'. This maybe also partly explained by the performative nature of the crush, which can be seen in this excerpt below, from Simone, who is talking about one of the other girls in the class:

> I kind of think that they're, like, a bit young for that, and I think, erm, that that they might say they have a crush on someone and but don't actually think they are in love or anything, I think they're just attention seeking or something.

As the boys in 6KN and also Samira from the same class said above, most crushes were short lived, and some pupils were not sure what they wanted or how they would end. As Olivia confided:

> Sometimes, when I like a person and they like me back, I then, after the day, I don't really like them very much… and then I'll like them again.

Another girl told me, '*Some crushes can last a long time; I've had one crush for 3 years, one for 4 months*'.

Unlike having a 'proper' partner, having a crush did not seem to lead to added status, and the fact that so many pupils found it difficult to estimate numbers suggests that knowledge of crushes was generally kept to the confines of intimate friendship groups. Having a crush could be fun but could also cause confusion and uncertainty, and therefore anxiety. Here is Olivia again, suggesting that she is too young and naïve and wouldn't quite know where to go, or what to do, if a boy began to show some physical affection.

> I think a crush is like…I don't know how to describe it…it's like when you have a crush, what you want is for the other person to have a crush on you but, like I said, when you get to that point you don't really know where to go at our age …

Having a crush, then, also came with certain pressures and expose vulnerabilities (Huuki et al., 2022). It could be risky, and you could lose face in the peer group if a show of affection was not reciprocated. When and how to approach a person needed fine judgement, or maybe the best strategy was for a pupil to keep their feelings to themselves. Unfortunately, we have no way of telling how many pupils took this option.

Mohit: If you want to let someone know you have a crush on them, that can be a risk because you can get dumped or you can get teased, or they can accept you?
Jon: Yes, it can be risky.
Mohit: In Senior school it matters more.

Mohit's statement in the last line hints at future uncertainties and further anxieties around reputational harm.

The main finding in this research is that most pupils, at least at Church Green, did not have a current crush, and those who did stressed it was because they liked the boy or girl for their personality, found similar things funny, and perhaps shared a common interest, rather than because there was any sexual desirability, at least in any meaningful sense. This suggests that the word 'crush' does not, at this age, have to necessarily connote sexuality, and in some cases it can be asexual. The first extract below is from a conversation with three prep school girls, where I am testing this hypothesis out.

Jon: Are the crushes because the boys is good looking?
Grace: Or because he shares the same interests.
Jon: So, it's not so much because the boy is good looking.
Grace: Not really, not really.
Jon: It's more like he shares the same interests, like computer games or he like the same books/
Tabatha: Or he's funny.
Jon: So, he may share the same sense of humour.
Tabatha: Yes.

We can see that I did, gently, probe whether the children found each other attractive. I didn't find many who confessed to doing so but some clearly did, as is suggested in this interview with three prep boys.

Jon: Do you look at how attractive a girl is in the class, or are you not interested in that sort of thing?
Hassan: No.
Farid: Not really interested.
Hassan: Some boys do.
Farid: Lots of boys do.
Jon: What in your class?
Rohan: One boy, George, definitely does.
Farid: He's really popular.

George (who we first met in Chap. 6) from 6SE was one of the three boys in the year group who had an 'official' girlfriend; he didn't play football—he preferred rugby—and Farid's last comment suggests that it was having a partner from a different gender that brought him additional status and popularity. Farid also alludes to how some boys are of girls' physical appearance and children's bodies are, of course, integral to their gender performances. How girls dress, their hairstyles, use of make-up and nail varnish are the main ways they notify and perform their gender identity (Paechter, 2021), although make-up was not available as a resource to emphasise femininity in these two schools. Performances of gender through dress, for both cis and trans children, is generally more straightforward before puberty, as the only discernible differences between bodies at this age in school are genital, which, Paechter (2021) reminds us, are usually covered up.

Boys' bodies also played a role in girls' feelings connected to sexuality. Some girls talked about others 'fancying' a boy because they found him good looking. A few girls in 6HH at Church Green talked about others in the class having a crush on Nicky, whom they regarded as the best-looking boy in their class. Mya thought Nicky had a '*chiselled chin*' and some girls thought Mya tried to mark Nicky in the daily football game because she 'fancies him'. However, another girl in 6HH, Sonia, thought '*Nicky looks like a robot*' and told me: '*I used to have a crush, but I have grown out of it*'. I did not ask if her crush was on Nicky, or on someone else.

In this last extract from an interview with two girls, again at Church Green, we were talking about another boyfriend/girlfriend relationship (which had subsequently broken up), and they were clearly aware of Seb's physical appearance.

Phoebe: Madison was with Seb [in Year 5], but she was only using him for, like, his money.
Jon: Is Seb rich?
Ayla: Yes, really rich, his dad owns about a million cars, he has a Lamborghini and two Teslas [electric cars].
Jon: So, he's good looking and he's rich, he's got everything!
Ayla: He's not *that* good looking… to be honest he's quite short.
Phoebe: He's short, he's tiny.
Ayla: He's short but he's OK.

Seb was frequently cited by pupils as being one of the most popular boys in the whole year group, but perhaps boys needed to be rich *and tall* to be regarded as sexually appealing! It seems clear to me that these two girls, at least, did not fancy him.

Notes

1. More recently, the term 'cisnormative' has been used to describe when sex end gender match and to question this as the only possible route for gender expression.
2. Both schools in Renold's PhD research were situated in a semi-rural village in East England. Although almost all of the pupils were predominantly white, the schools performed very differently in the SATs, and while one catchment area was middle-class, made up of mainly professional families,

the other school had a working-class intake, with the parents employed in mainly retail and factory work.

3. At Wood Vale, the main boyfriend-girlfriend relationship in Year 6 was in 6MK—Danny and Lillie, Freddie and Astrid and Billy and Florence, in 6TD, had been 'couples' at some stage during the year but 'broken' up. At Church Green, the children were either more reluctant to divulge this information, or, as I believe was more likely, they didn't know. However, it appears that there were three such associations, or 'couples', across the whole year group of 64 pupils: Nicky and, possibly, Ayla in 6HH, and Seb from 6KN and George from 6SE with two girls whose names I did not pursue and therefore did not uncover.
4. I estimated that about 10% of the pupils had crushes on the opposite sex at Wood Vale, but I did not explore this in so much depth at this school. Most of the children said they liked each other because they were nice and friendly, rather than because they found them physically attractive.
5. I did not ask about same gender crushes.

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CHAPTER 9

Patterns of Masculinity and Femininity

This chapter presents empirical data on:

1. the construction and performance of masculinities in both schools;
2. hegemonic, dominant, subordinated masculinities;
3. personalised masculinities;
4. a new form of non-hegemonic and positive masculinity, called 'blended' masculinity, which was the most common form in the two schools;
5. the construction and performance of femininities at both schools;
6. girls' views on girl power;
7. heterosexualised, emphasised forms of femininity and girly girls;
8. the most common form of femininity, which was a hybrid (also a blended) formation.

9.1 Introduction

At the heart of this book are the construction, negotiation and performance of boys' and girls' gendered identities. As we have seen, these constructions of masculinity and femininity are also related to concepts of popularity and the ideal pupil (ideal schoolboy and ideal schoolgirl), which I discussed and presented data about in Chap. 6. In this chapter, I interrogate different forms of masculinity and femininity; I introduce a new pattern of masculinity, blended masculinity, and also interrogate forms of

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a hybrid femininity, which may also be called 'blended femininity'. These two types were the most common patterns of gender in both schools.

Although I am aware that identities are made up of other intersections, or axes, such as ethnicity and social class (Collins, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2019; Peltola & Phoenix, 2022; Stahl & Keddie, 2020), the central focus of my analysis is gender. Although the intakes of the schools were multicultural, I have not had space to integrate ethnicity into my analysis, and this variable was not the main consideration. Nor was social class, although I recognise its importance: the pupils came from middle-class families, or even upper-middle-class backgrounds at Church Green. Research (e.g., Power et al., 2003) consistently confirms that parental attitudes affect children's aspirations, their values, work ethic and behaviour. It also shows that, with every increase in their family's wealth, children, on average, are more likely to do better at school and gain higher academic outcomes than children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The pupils also came to these two schools every day knowing that they were valued and supported, and to a place where behaviour was controlled and where they felt safe and secure.

9.2 Masculinities

The findings presented in this chapter show and confirm the multiplicity, complexity, fluidity and situated nature of masculinity, but one of the main contributions of this study is the introduction of a new, non-hegemonic and non-hierarchical form masculinity, which I am calling 'blended' masculinity, and which was the most common form in both schools. I will write more about this pattern below.

9.2.1 Hegemonic Masculinities and Subordinated Masculinities

One of the main findings is that I could not discover, or identify, a form of hegemonic masculinity in either school, which is rare in empirical research conducted with boys in school settings (e.g., Bhana, 2008; Govender & Bhana, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016, 2018; Huuki et al., 2010; Manninen et al., 2011; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2020; Renold, 2005, 2007; Schiffrin-Sands, 2021; Swain, 2000, 2002, 2004).

As I have written in Chap. 4, the formal school cultures at both schools worked hard at espousing storylines and values such as kindness and

tolerance, particularly at Church Green, and the pupils seemed to be sympathetic and empathetic to others' views and actions. There were very low levels of bullying—the pupils only identified one bully in each class at Wood Vale and none at Church Green—and I could not find virtually any traces of homophobia or misogyny that Renold (2002) and myself (Swain, 2003) highlighted around 25 years ago. There was no use of subordinating other pupils by using terms such as 'gay' that Hall (2020) recently uncovered, or 'slut', or other synonyms, that Ringrose (2008) found with adolescent schoolgirls. Other forms of masculinity (or femininities) were not derogated and so there was no form of masculinity that led to the legitimation of unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018). Boys who were not interested in sport were not picked on. No one got teased or bullied if they didn't want to play football, or if they were not very good at football or other sports/games. Nor were any boys denigrated if they openly cried, and this was a generally accepted practice by both genders.

The following three excerpts come from interviews at Wood Vale where I am asking whether it is OK for a boy to cry.

Mitch: I used to cry when I fell over but now, I have developed hard knees. Billy in the other class always cries but most boys don't cry.

Mack: I cried once this year when I got injured playing football. No one gets teased. We don't cry much. We used to cry a lot but now we don't.

Danny: If they [a boy] get injured, if there is a foul, there may be an argument and people gather around, but no one worries if a boy cries.

When these three boys talk about crying, they refer to physical injuries sustained in games such as football; crying is also associated with age, and although 'no one worries if a boy cries' now, Mitch and Mack emphasise that this was a practice that was much more common when they were younger and, by implication, less mature. There was one boy at the prep school, Liam, who many boys (and girls) thought could be a little 'over dramatic' and 'emotional' and was prone to cry at the 'slightest opportunity'. Unlike the three boys above from Wood Vale, Liam's tears were not always the result of physical damage—although he did often join in the daily football game—and the cause appeared (at least sometimes) to be more emotional: as Hattie said, '*He overreacts a lot*'. Liam also joined in

with the girls' groups every day, but he was consistently cited by both boys and girls as being one of the most popular pupils in the class, and this did not appear to affect his status (see Paechter, 2019). He appeared to me as being confident, secure and comfortable with his own image; he did admit that, occasionally, he had been called a 'Cry Baby' by some boys at the school, but this had happened when he was younger and, anyway, he claimed he didn't mind—it was just a mild form of teasing.

The girls also didn't think it was a sign of weakness if a boy cried. Grace, from Wood Vale, told me that, '*I don't like crying and try to avoid it; a boy will not be thought of as weak if they cry*', while Marianne, at Church Green, said, '*Yes, it's OK for a boy to cry, no one gets teased and we would try and help a boy if they were crying*'.

There were few examples of unequal relations between boys and girls that I was able to discover although, as we saw in Chap. 6 in the conversation with Astrid, Annie and Aurora, a few girls could sometime feel intimidated by *some* of the boys. Most girls prided themselves by being independent and sticking up for themselves. The following excerpt comes from a conversation I had with Olivia at the prep school.

Olivia: Some of the boys in our class, you know, sometimes it feels like, because they're boys, they feel like they have the advantage over us because we're girls and so they take advantage.
Jon: Can you give me an example of that?
Olivia: So, say we wanted to hang out with them, they say, 'You can hang out with us', and they, like, give us an ultimatum, and say, 'You can hang out with us if you do something else'.
Jon: So, what do you say to this?
Olivia: Well, I say 'no' just because it's not right.

One example of unequal relations between boys and girls that came to my attention was in the daily football game at each school, which was an especially dominant event during the lunchtime at Wood Vale, at least during the autumn and winter/spring terms. To remind readers (see Chap. 4), around 13 of the 21 boys (62%) from the 2 classes played football every lunchtime and around 8 out of the 37 girls (22%) also participated. The numbers of daily footballers at Church Green were around 7 of the 35 boys (20%) from the 3 classes, and 5 out of the 29 (17%) girls.[1] Although the boys claimed that girls were regarded as equals and were treated the same, further questioning disclosed that the boys seldom

The game was played in an enclosed fenced-in area, a hard court; it was quite chaotic; there were about 20; some children never touched the ball, especially most of the girls; some boys and girls were hopeless, and some didn't seem to really be trying; only a few boys and Aurora *[from 6MK] were quite skilful – she was easily the best girl, tough and a strong tackler. Most children were running around and at least trying to join in, but some were also chatting to each other. I watched for 15 mins and saw 3 goals scored; some children stood in front of the goal area and blocked shots; it was quite difficult to score; about 4-5 boys seemed to be a cut above the rest; they could control the ball, pass, shoot, move into spaces to receive the ball; when one boy, Danny, scored he ran back to the centre circle, high-fiving his team-mates (all boys). There was a lot of passion!*

Fig. 9.1 Observation of a lunchtime football game at Wood Vale (4 April 2022)

passed the ball to girls, who were, therefore, not regarded as being equal players. The boys' defence for this was that the girls' commitment to the game was less serious and that they would 'muck things up'. Although some researchers may contend that this still makes the relations unequal, some of the girls admitted that they liked 'hanging around' the boys as much as joining in the game. I did actually observe one game of playground football for 15 minutes at Wood Vale and this was the only time I was able to observe children's interactions outside during my fieldwork, at least in any systematic way. The extract below is from my field notes, and the writing is typically unedited (Fig. 9.1).

9.2.2 Personalised Masculinities

There was also non-hierarchical form of masculinity external to Connell's framework, and which was first promoted by myself (Swain, 2006): *personalised masculinities* (see Chap. 2). Messerschmidt (2018) calls this pattern part of a group of 'positive' and more egalitarian masculinities that have the potential to become counterhegemonic. There were examples of personalised masculinities at both schools and, during the interviews, many of the boys also talked enthusiastically about their hobbies and mutual interests. Not surprisingly, the children liked, and made friends with, their peers (including girls) who had similar interests and shared

similar values, which is the case across all ages (e.g., Buote et al., 2007). As Krish at Church Green told me, what people did, or how they behaved, was not necessarily as important as what their values and tastes were. To remind readers of what he said in Chap. 6: '*I think it's more about who you are…you get on with someone if they like the same stuff, do the same thing…*' At the state school, the chief interests of two boys in one class were centred around their artistic abilities in drawing and painting (Arlan) and in computer science and technology (Toby). These two boys seemed self-contained; they did not want, or try, to copy or join in with the group of sporty footballers, nor did they wish to derogate any other groups or forms of masculinity. There were many more boys at the Church Green practising this form, who constructed their interests around particular sports such as cricket, rugby and table tennis, and a wide variety of pursuits such as reciting internet memes, or around more specialised interests, like using particular computer games (e.g., *Minecraft* or *Roblox*), playing in a musical group or band, or in aviation.

Argun: Yes, I am mad on aviation, particularly commercial airliners, and I want to be a pilot….
Jon: Do people look up to respect you for this knowledge?
Argun: Well, I can impress people with my knowledge of planes, but no-one looks up to me.

9.2.3 Blended Masculinity

The most common cultural script of masculinity, or version of boyhood, at both schools was a blended form of masculinity which combined masculine and feminine qualities. This was an expansive definition of masculinity and of doing boy. The boys practised masculine attributes of athleticism, confidence, assertiveness and independence, and although they were generally more extrovert than the girls, they also enacted feminine qualities of kindness and sociability, tolerance and emotional intelligence. However, its characteristics were a little different at each school. Although the boys' lives were shaped by structures and conditions that they found themselves in, I argue that blended masculinities have a particular agentic quality and offer opportunities to perform different ways of being and *doing* boy.

At Wood Vale, the blended expression drew more on the resource of physicality and athleticism; it was embodied and represented by the large group of footballing (rather than sporty) boys that I have mentioned above, but the most popular boys in the whole year group—cited by boys and girls—were the ones who also had the additional characteristics of being smart, sociable, funny and a 'bit of a character'—in other words, they were charming and charismatic. According to some of the girls, the 'coolest' boys—a synonym for popularity—were also kind, sensible and more mature.

Jon: Who is the coolest boy in the class?
Annie: I have three.
Jon: You have three, go on then, who are they?
Astrid: I think Freddie, Danny and Mack.
Aurora: I think kind of the same.
Jon: Why is that then?
Annie: Because they help us.
Aurora: Sometimes they are kind.
Astrid: I agree, and they are kind.
Annie: They have got more sense.
Astrid: They take things more seriously; they are more grown up.

While the demonstration of sporting prowess was also important at Church Green, and sport was central to many pupils' identity, the most common formation of masculinity was far more diverse and was built around other interests and abilities such as music. While football was the main playground game, it did not govern the peer group culture like football at the state school, and an assortment of other sports was played at breaktimes and in afterschool clubs. There was no formal school football team—rugby and cricket were the official sports—which may also be significant to the fewer number of boys creating and playing informal games of football in their free time. Cricket was also a popular pastime. In the conversation below, I am talking with three boys, including Hassan and Yuvaj who played informal games of playground cricket everyday—at least in the summer term—and also represented the school cricket team. It is interesting that, although there is some disagreement about whether the top cricketers were lionised or not, they were certainly respected.

Jon:	Do boys who are the best at things get looked up to or are they admired?
Rohan:	Not really in playing a musical instrument but more in sports.
Hassan:	Yes.
Jon:	Do you agree, Farid?
Farid:	Yes, and they challenge you because you try to get better.
Jon:	So, it's quite competitive?
Hassan/Rohan:	Yes
Jon:	Are they heroes, these boys?
Hassan:	Yes/
Rohan:	No, not really but if there is a fixture and they save the team then you respect them and praise them…
Hassan:	I mean, like yesterday I had to hit a boundary to save the team.
Jon:	Oh, you did? You must have felt good about that.
Rohan:	Yes.

The attributes expressed in the concept of the ideal schoolboy at the prep school meant that kindness and sociability were the most prized qualities in the peer group, again by both boys and girls. Thus, we can notice that there are links between the characteristics of this blended form of masculinity with the features of the ideal schoolboy, as well as with the attributes and qualities associated with, and enacted, by the most popular boys.

As I have written in Chap. 2, one of the reasons I am not calling this blended form a 'hybrid' masculinity is because a similar, but different, concept already exists in the literature, proposed by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), and I want to avoid any confusion. The boys at these two schools did not use blended masculinity to help them secure gender hegemony and provide a new way to legitimate unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018)—far from it. However, it was also neither a type of 'geek' (Ging, 2019, p. 651) masculinity enacted by 'Beta' (p. 651) boys, and most of them were the 'Alphas' (or A-listers) who were the most popular and well-liked individuals in the peer group. This blended form did not dominate, in the sense that it was non-hierarchical; it did not connote superiority or inferiority, or attempt to supress other forms.

This form of masculinity had a particularly egalitarian quality. Like the boys practising personalised masculinities—which may be a subset of this blended form—they were comfortable in their own skin and had no wish to copy others or derogate any other group or individual; they regarded not only themselves but other boys across the year group as being equal. I argue that the sharp hierarchy used to categorise and distinguish various masculinities, as proposed by Connell (1995), and which have been appropriated and used by many scholars in both primary school settings (e.g., Bhana, 2008; Renold, 2005; Swain, 2004) and secondary schools (e.g., Frosh et al., 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Peltola & Phoenix, 2022) is now looking a little less steep, and flatter, or more even. While this does not mean that homophobia, misogyny and misandry have vanished, my analysis suggests that they have been greatly diminished and that the movement of feminism and the way it has been realised—at least in these two school settings—may be resulting in a more tolerant gender order.

Because this masculinity was the most predominant expression of boyhood in these two schools, there was consequently more diversity and more room for other expressions of masculine formations, such as personalised masculinities, to prosper, and this includes incorporating expressions of masculinity within its aegis that have their own and discrete conceptual definitions. These also include theorisations of caring masculinity, which is a developing presence in the masculinity literature (e.g., Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Elliott, 2016, 2020; Hanlon, 2012), although, so far, it has been mainly applied in empirical studies to practices by (mainly) white, middle-class men, such as fathers. These are softer, more inclusive forms that eschew domination and associated patriarchal traits and involve more feminine values of interdependence, tolerance, care and positive emotion (Elliott, 2020).

One argument that I will return to in the conclusion is whether these forms of caring masculinity, or for that matter personalised masculinities, should be incorporated under the umbrella of blended masculinity. After all, both contain feminine features and attributes. In this study, while I have decided to regard personalised masculinities as a discrete form and integrate caring masculinities under the cover of the blended formation, I recognise that, to some extent, this is an arbitrary decision and is one that is open for a continuing debate within the field.

The data from the two schools demonstrates that boys can, and do, perform different versions of masculinity at different times and places and with different individuals. Sometimes boys could enact blended

masculinities and also perform personalised masculinities (which had a particular egalitarian quality) and vice versa. The important point is that this shows the fluidity of masculinity. Each form is not discrete or singular, and they can often overlap and merge. Sometimes boys could emphasise and perform different features of masculinity in the same space almost concurrently, which shows up the limitations of using mono typologies such as ‘sporty boy’ or ‘caring’ boy, however enticing these can appear. (People often like neat and clean-cut boxes.)

We also need to view blended masculinities as being part of a spectrum or continuum, with masculine and feminine forms at either end. We can then see that these patterns will have different features in each local setting. While some boys will practise more masculine qualities, such as being extrovert, self-assured, independent and competitive, others will accentuate other, more feminine, types of doing boy such as being quiet, sociable, caring and kind. For much of their time they can, and will, perform both versions, showing how nuanced and fluid masculinity is and how conditional it is on time, space and the relationships involved.

Readers may also have noticed that I have also written that this blended pattern was the most *common* form of masculinity on show in both schools, rather than also being the most *dominant* form. If we accept Messerschmidt’s (2018) definition of dominant masculinity as being the most culturally prized version of boyhood in a particular setting, it probably was; however, the word ‘dominant’ has connections to a hierarchy and is associated with pre-eminence, or superiority, and therefore inferiority, and the blended form in these schools did not attempt to disparage other forms. This may also be a cause for further discussion.

9.3 Femininities

9.3.1 Introduction

As I have written in Chap. 2, although there is a long history of ethnographic feminist research exploring girls’ gendered experiences in school settings, studies about girls’ schooling and femininities in primary/junior schools (with pupils aged 7–11 years) in the UK have become relatively marginalised in the field of CGS in preference of issues around adolescent/teenage girls’ sexualised identities, particularly online. This study has given pre-adolescent girls a platform to talk about life at school with their peers, demonstrating how they make meanings, especially around gender,

and how they negotiate and perform different versions of femininity. Very similar to the concept of blended masculinity, I interrogate constructions of a relatively new, and hybrid, pattern of femininity (Messerschmidt, 2018), which remains relatively under-theorised with young girls in an empirical setting. The research also confirms the multiplicity, complexity, fluidity and situated nature of femininity, which is similar to the constructions of masculinity discussed above. Before I present findings about emphasised and hybrid forms of femininity, the next section reports the girls' views on the expression 'girl power'.

9.3.2 Girl Power

One of the themes that I explored with some of the girls was 'girl power'. Most data about this comes from Wood Vale, as there were so many other themes that emerged during the fieldwork that I wanted to prioritise, questions about girl power often tended to get squeezed out. I wanted to know whether the girls had heard of the term and, if so, if they knew where it came from, and, most importantly, what they thought it meant. The term 'girl power' was initiated by the popular British pop group *Spice Girls*, who were very popular around the millennium, and Press (cited in Currie et al., 2009) has maintained that the Spice Girls gave many prepubescent girls their first taste of feminism. The Spice Girls' official book, *Girl Power*!, is full of slogans like 'Girl power is when… you believe in yourself and control your own life', and it celebrates sisterhood ('You stick with your mates and they stick with you'). At this time, Press concluded that, although girl power '*may turn out to be fleeting… chances are that… it will expand society's ideas about what is acceptable and what possible for young women*'. Around this time, Girl power became a household word. The 2001 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2001) included a 'girl power' entry, defining it as '*a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness and individualism*'. However, Bae (2011) argues that girl power also helped to redirect the representation of girlhood from a strong, proactive, smart heroine to a worshiper of feminine beauty and heterosexuality. In other words, this was a form of hybrid femininity that, while incorporating attributes of masculinity, remained, as McRobbie (2009, p. 57) notes, 'reassuringly feminine'.

When I asked girls, although none of them knew where the term had originated from, almost all of them had heard of the expression and associated it with greater empowerment, girls having greater rights, girls needing

to stand up for themselves, and girls having more power and greater equality, as this data in different interviews from Wood Vale suggests:

Jon: What do you think girl power means?
Florence: No matter what like happens 'cos obviously, I mean in the olden days, girls weren't allowed to have rights but now, like, they are allowed to stand up for themselves and, like, use the power against people who don't think we should have rights.

Other themes that the girls related to the term were around caring for each other, being brave and doing things on their own, for themselves.

Other typical comments at Wood Vale were:

Astrid: Girls can all care for each other, and they can work as a team.
Grace: It means girls should stick up for themselves. It is important to be able to do things for yourself.
Bailey: It means we are energetic, stand up for ourselves, we are brave for ourselves.
Jude: Girls have power, and they can do things without boys or men. It is important for girls to be nice and kind, but they also need to stick up for themselves.

Data from Church Green suggests that while girls thought that things were getting better (in the sense of being more equal), others felt that the expression that had become a little anachronistic, as extracts from these two interviews suggest:

Jon: What does the term girl power mean?
Ayla: Girls will run the world/,
Hattie: But it's not true!
Phoebe: It means nothing to me because we are all equal.
Hattie: That's all in the past.
Ayla: Girl power is overrated; it's more about independence; it is important for girls to stand up for themselves.
Marta: Girl power is an inspiration but now everyone is equal and we all mix.
Uma: Boys no longer take advantage of girls.

During our conversations, there was no mention of girl power being associated with, let alone being used, to emphasise feminine beauty and heterosexuality, as suggested by Bae (2011). This was not part of its image for these young, prepubescent girls.

9.3.3 Heterosexualised, Emphasised Femininities and Girly Girls

In her research about gendered and sexual identities in the last years of the twentieth century, Renold concluded that the girls in her two junior schools only had a binary choice: to position themselves either with or against the dominant heterosexualised femininity of the girly girl. Renold remarked that the girls' 'preoccupation with all things romantic and (hetero)sexual' (2005, p. 95) was striking, and her findings concluded that over two-thirds of all the girls bought into the heterosexualised 'girly' femininity, regardless of their social class, body shape, or academic ability. However, as I have written in Chap. 8, this finding was not repeated in this study, and I was unable to find a prevalent culture of sexuality that either suffused or shaped the children's informal culture that Renold portrayed (albeit in schools with different catchment areas and pupil intakes). I am aware that my research only involved two schools—which were very different contexts to those in Renold's research—and that most girls, whom I had only just met, were unlikely to be frank with me about their sexual desires, particularly in front of their peers. It was, though, conspicuous how little evidence of this type of femininity I was able to uncover. Out of the 68 girls on roll at both schools, only around 5 in each school were named by the girls (and who also self-identified) as being girly girls (about 7% of the total roll) and, after all, Blaise points out that emphasised femininity is (like hegemonic masculinity) generally a very public construction (2005, p. 86). It is also noteworthy that data about the idealised schoolgirl (see Chap. 6) contained no adjectives that denoted traits of an embellished femininity or sexiness.

This is not to say that I did not uncover many examples of girly girls, with contained traits of an emphasised femininity; it was just that this form seemed to be very much in the minority. Most of the data about emphasised femininity comes from Church Green because, although there were also a few girly girls at Wood Vale practising this form, this was a theme that I investigated in more depth at the prep school and so the data here is both richer and more extensive.

In one interview, the girls talked about particular girls being 'sassy' and 'flirty', and as Hattie declared in Chap. 6: '*I feel that they* [some girls] *go to school, not for the education, but to be with the boys*'. However, in general, there was little profit in accentuating physical appearance and/or exaggerated sexualised behaviours amongst the peer culture in either school. As we have seen in Chap. 8, there were few girlfriend-boyfriend relationships in either school that were open or acknowledged by both parties. From the two classes at Wood Vale, I found only three of these relationships (and two of these split up during the year), and there were, or the pupils believed there to be, only three such associations in the three classes at Church Green. Although there were undoubtedly many more 'crushes' at both schools, which Huuki et al. (2022) define as 'being romantically fancied and fancying others' (p. 577), unlike these three researchers, I did not find them to be an 'integral part of pre-teen children's relationships to one another' (p. 577), particularly amongst the boys. Most pupils did not experience a pressure to partake in them or feel this was part of school life where they had little agency or control (e.g., Cannoni & Bombi, 2016). To remind readers, at Wood Vale I estimated (and it is only an educated guess) that about 10% of the girls presently had a crush (or had experience of having a crush at some point over the past year), while they were more numerous at Church Green, where I estimated that around 25% of pupils had a crush. These emotive feelings were generally also transient and could sometimes last a few days.

A greater proportion of girls had crushes on boys than vice versa. However, most girls stated that they liked a certain boy because they found them 'funny', a person who made people laugh, or who was 'kind' or 'nice' or they had a 'nice' (charismatic) personality. They seldom mentioned any physical desirability, and most girls expressed having a disinterest in boys when I raised the subject with them. Few girls sporadically attempted to see if they could get away sporting nail varnish, but this was pretty much all.

Jon: Are you allowed to wear nail varnish?
Lelia: Kind of.
Rosalind: We sometimes wear it.
Jon: Do you get told off?
Rosalind: Sometimes, not always… we used to paint our nails quite often…
Grace: We are also allowed to wear earrings but nothing too big.

Very few girls risked, or tried, to wear facial make-up (which was forbidden in both schools); I did not observe any long eyelashes (so trendy with young girls and women at the time of my fieldwork), and there were not any long or coloured nails or hair extensions, which were used to embellish the hyper-feminine shape of the body found in secondary schools (Ringrose, 2008).

Although the girls took a pleasure and a pride in their appearance, this was mostly for themselves, rather than for boys. Two girls at Wood Vale commented on how girly girls would often wear different, possibly more sexy, clothes (generally outside school) and pay more attention to their hair styles, in contrast to themselves.

Rosalind:	Like, I feel like they like to search hair styles, they like certain clothes.
Grace:	They're a bit like…. I feel that less is more, I like to go quite basic and stuff… but the girly girls, they're mainly like, they [pointing to a group of girls that were written on a page] are like more is more.

In this short extract at Church Green, Marta also hints that some (other) girls did accentuate their appearance to get noted by the boys:

> We wouldn't like to be like the other girls, so into our appearance, but you still try and want yourself to look good.

In the following interview, three other girls at this school also dissociated themselves from the concept of the girly girls, who they thought amplified their physical appearance, and whom they considered being more histrionic (perhaps flirtatious) and 'gossipy', not as intelligent as them, more emotionally capricious and closer to being teenagers. This was a period of their life that they wanted to postpone for a little longer.

Jon:	Are there any girly girls in the class?
Harper:	No.
Maisie/Noya:	No.
Harper:	None of us!
Jon:	In [name of another class], some of the girls said that they work on their appearance.
Harper:	Oh no, not in our class.

Jon: OK, so not for you.
Masie: We are not about the drama and the gossip, like in the other two classes.
Jon: So, the other two classes are more dramatic and gossipy?
Harper: We are smarter than them.
Masie: Yes, we are.
Jon: Smarter, so more mature?
Harper: We are more emotionally stable…they are more like teenagers.
Jon: So, at the moment, you are still young girls, waiting to become teenagers.
Noya: Yes.
Harper: I don't want to become a teenager…make up for this, make up for that…
Jon: You want to remain as you are.
Maisie: Yeah.

In another interview, I am again enquiring if there are any girly girls in the class. Claudine seemed to be delighted to be given the chance to talk about how girly she is and has always been. It is notable that when I ask the question, towards the end of this passage, about who the make-up is for, she is swift to underline her reasons, and to highlight her young age. Although, I argue that her application of make-up is a signifier for adulthood, it also implies a kind of innocence. It establishes that some can be girly girls—liking related feminine artefacts, performing feminine traits, and wearing feminine adornments—without enacting a form of 'emphasised' femininity for boys, and this includes having a crush on them.

Jon: Are there any girly girls in the class?
Claudine /Harper: [Laughter]
Claudine: I am a girly girl, I like make-up and stuff like that.
Jon: Are you happy to be called a girly girl?
Claudine: Yes… because, the thing is, erm, at school no one calls me a girly girl, but I know I am inside even though… I only play with the boys sometimes but… I truly am a bit of a girly girl.
Jon: What's it mean to you to be a girly girl, I know you said about the make-up, but what else?

Claudine: Ever since I was young … I've always been that sort of person, my mum always calls me a girly girl and I'm proud of it, I've always been that sort of person who wants to dress up for fun, put on make-up for fun, does girly stuff for fun, just sing my heart out for fun, putting pink flowers in my bedroom and stuff like that and that has also contrasted at home because my mum is a true girly girl, but my sister, who is also at this school, and my dad are both, like, *really* strong tomboys, so my sister is no girl, literally no girl, she's always go with the boys and play football, do whatever… I always felt like accepted by my family, and at school I have always been accepted for being a girly girl because these guys [the other two girls in the interview, Harper and Zoe] they don't, like, point out, Claudine you're a such a strong girly girl, I am just accepted for what I am.

Jon: So, when you put on the make-up …/

Claudine: I don't wear it at school.

Jon: No, but at home, do you wear it to make yourself attractive for the boys?

Claudine: No!, we're eleven!, no, the thing is… this leads to something … well, I have always been the one who hasn't had crushes; me and Harper are the 'no crush' squad, we've had no crushes whatsoever … I just want to make myself happy, I just do it [putting on make-up] for fun.

Later in the same interview, Harper also admits that girly girls set out to exaggerate their appearance, although in her case (and in Claudine's) this only happens outside school.

Jon: So why are you a girly girl?

Harper: The same thing as Claudine, I like putting on make-up and I always over exaggerate, I think girly girls always over exaggerate.

Jon: Do they?

Harper: Yes, we dramatise … the thing is that we always like to put on make-up on the same occasions.

Both girls also confirm, in no uncertain terms, that they only wear make-up for themselves, and definitely not for boys.

Jon: And do you agree with Claudine that you don't do it for the boys?
Harper: No, we definitely do not do it for the boys.
Jon: You *do not*, that's quite strong.
Harper: Yes, *we do not.*
Ariana: No way!
Harper: No way!

Thus, there appears to be two distinctive types of girly girl: those that emphasise their (hetero) sexuality and play up (or perform) to the boys, and others, like Claudine, for whom the phrase means that they emphasise their qualities of femininity and enjoy wearing feminine things to please themselves (as do some woman, of course).

9.3.4 Hybrid Femininities

Although there were a variety of femininities at both schools, which were performed at various times and in different contexts, the most *common*, popular and influential way of doing girl was a hybrid form of femininity. This was similar to the notion of blended masculinity and was characterised by traditional masculine and feminine traits, and which were again connected to the descriptors listed in the concepts of popularity and the ideal schoolgirl. Unlike Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) term 'hybrid' masculinity, the use of 'hybrid' femininity in the literature (see, in particular, Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 86) perfectly describes the formation of femininity that I found in these two schools and so there was no need to rename it and call it 'blended' femininity.

Similar to the girls in Maxwell and Aggleton's (2013) elite private school, the pupils[2] at Church Green appeared to have a 'high degree of surety in the self' (p. 75)—an inner confidence—which is created through family and school practices, and which, I argue, not only provided them with a culture of economic, social and educational security, but also ensured(s) the reproduction of particular forms of privilege. Although the great majority of girls at both schools felt it was important for a girl to be soft and kind, they also wanted to be strong, resilient and independent. Many girls who were popular, and therefore held high status in the peer group, were admired for being confident, self-assured, sometimes outspoken, and able to look after themselves. I would certainly not have called most of the girls—particularly at Church Green—'shrinking violets', or

'subservient handmaidens' (Messerschmidt, 2020, p. 4). They were the successful, 'can do' girls, and they weren't going to be pushed or messed around by boys or anyone else, as this excerpt from an interview with three girls at Church Green shows.

Ayla: If somebody's being rude to you, be independent, like,…
Jon: So is it important for a girl to stand up for herself.
Phoebe/Hattie: Yeah.

Within the peer group, most girls also liked to have power to exercise agency. Maxwell and Aggleton (2009) found that the adolescent girls in their research aligned the concept of power with either *not* having 'choice' or alternatively with *being* in 'control', and the majority of pupils at both schools—but particularly at Church Green—prided themselves with being independent, having a choice and being in control.

As we saw in the conversation with four girls (Marianne, Maisie, Noya and Mina) at Church Green in Chap. 6, many felt that an ideal girl should have a 'rounded' personality, negotiate a middle position, and this view was expressed by other girls in different interviews. It was best for a girl not to show vulnerability.

Jon: How important is it for a girl to be gentle and kind and should girls be independent and stand up for themselves?
Kiara: I think middle because if they they're too kind they can get probably get bullied easily.

In some of the interviews, particularly at Wood Vale, I was inspired by the work of Kostas (2021) and asked girls what they thought about traditional fairy tales where the princess is portrayed as always being beautiful but is locked in the tower and is rescued by the prince. The response below is typical of the reaction I received: they objected to girls who are depicted as weak, submissive and helpless and insisted that girls need to exercise agency, be independent and self-reliant.

Grace: I don't like it.
Rosalind: I don't like it at all!
Grace: It makes it look like that girls just need to be rescued, that they can't help themselves.

Jon: So, girls need to be able to help themselves?
Grace: Yes.
Rosalind: Yeah.
Grace: It's kind of showing you that, oh don't worry, the boys will just come and save you, don't have to do ever anything for yourself but that's not what you can teach little kids. You have to teach them that if you want to get out of something you have to do it yourself.

There were many examples from both schools of girls enacting different forms of more masculine-femininity, or, using Paechter's (2021) term, 'masculine girls'. Some of the boys also observed how assertive some girls could be. Talking about one girl, Frayer (a noted tomboy), at the prep school, they were struck how spirited she was and able to threaten them physically: '*when she gives her opinion, she always sticks with it; she does kick-boxing, she's a real tomboy and looks like a boy*'. In another interview at this school, during a conversation about girl power, Uma had also made the comment (reported in Chap. 4) that '*girls are nastier to the other girls than the boys are*', which suggests that some girls can be aggressive and the opposite of 'shrinking violets'.

A few girls at both schools were also very competitive: it was important to them to declare they were the fastest runner in the class and/or the best at a certain sport. However, they could also personify caring and softer types, which were associated with popularity, and conceptions of what constitutes an ideal girl, as was seen in Chap. 6.

This following extract comes from an interview with three girls at the prep school and unveils that, although being a fast runner may have been important to some girls, Phoebe's claim is challenged. Further questioning about the connection between speed and popularity, did not appear to reveal an association for girls. While almost every girl in the class knew who the fastest runner was, and could respect a girl for this, it did seem to lead to any peer group admiration.

Phoebe: I am the fastest girl in the class.
Jon: Are you?
Ayla: No, Marta is.
Phoebe: No, she's not, she's not!
Ayla: She is faster than you!
Phoebe: No, she's not, I am the fastest.
Jon: Is it important to be the fastest?

Phoebe: Yeah, to me it is, it is because I take my sports seriously.

Later in the same interview, it transpired just how important it was for Phoebe's personal esteem and identity to be the best.

Phoebe: I want to be taken seriously in sports and stuff, I feel, like I am good at sports, but no-one takes me seriously, especially, like the boys, they don't take me seriously in football.
Jon: Yes, but they would do in other things that you could beat them at.
Phoebe: I could easily smash them all in hockey.
Ayla/Hattie: Hmm.
Ayla: Not Sammay [a boy in the same class].
Phoebe: OK, not Sammay, but, like, Ishir [a boy in the same class, 6HH], but I know I could definitely beat Ishir.

9.3.5 The Fluidity of Femininities

One of the main conclusions from recent gender research is that femininities (and masculinities) should not be regarded as fixed formations but are extremely fluid (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2022). Individuals move between, and practise, different types and my findings confirmed that all the girls engaged in vibrant and protean constructions, which were highly nuanced, depending on time and context, and on the relations they were involved in and experienced with different people. That is, when the girls enacted hybrid patterns of femininity, they could be sociable and kind and also assertive, resilient and very competitive, whether this was in the classroom or on the games/sports field. Of course, many girls who performed the hybrid type could also participate with more emphasised versions as well. For example, although there were few out and out tomboys at either school,[3] one of the most popular girls at Wood Vale, Florence, declared she could be both a tomboy and a girly girl—'*I can be a girly girl, but I can be a tomboy… I like wearing skirts*'—and she did not seem to see any inconsistency in performing these two versions of girlhood. We have also seen how Frayer, despite celebrating her role as a tomboy, may have had some kind of sexualised feelings (however, embryonic and unformed) for Liam.

Girls could also exercise agency and try-out, and change, their identities, which were an ongoing venture (Hall, 1990, 1992) of construction,

negotiation and performance. In one interview at the state school, two girls told me how one of the girls, Ellie, had swapped from being a girly girl to a tomboy and back again, and that, like Florence, they were relaxed and secure in performing both identities.

Grace:	Ellie used to be a girly girl, and then a tomboy, but now I feel like she's changed toward becoming a girly girl because now she wears mascara to school which she would never do that before. Literally, she sold all her stuff, or she gave it all away, and now has bought a new cupboard of clothes… and I told her, 'What happens if you change again?' and she said, 'I'm not going to change again'.
Jon:	Can you be both? A tomboy and a girly girl?
Rosalind:	Yes, I think that's us.
Grace:	Yes, that's me, like sometimes I wear really old clothes, like ones that used to be my brothers' because they are comfy
Jon:	And when do you become a girly girl?
Grace:	If I go out, I will wear a skirt, or if it's like a special occasion, I will dress up for it and wear make-up.

In this study, a tomboy could be tough, strong, competitive, independent, even aggressive, but also be kind and caring and soft, and so, in McRobbie's (2009, p. 57) words, the hybrid form continued to be 'reassuringly feminine'. Although, in theory, girls appeared to be able to apply agency to reject *all* feminine qualities if they wanted, I could not find any girl who did this in practice, and every girl appeared to want to reserve at least some residues of femininity. None were looking to reject their feminine qualities, and this distinguishes this pattern of hybrid femininity from Halberstam's (1998) female masculinity.

Although we have seen a very few hints of some girls being dominated by the boys at Wood Vale, only one girl during my fieldwork, Julia at Church Green, spoke of being, or feeling, weak and powerless. The exchange below comes from the same interview with Kiara, where I was asking her about girls being independent, and I am also probing Julia about whether she thinks girls should stand up for themselves. Julia decides that she does not want to reveal her reasons why she feels she is weak, although the last line suggests that perhaps this feeling was the result of another girl, Hattie, having been cruel to her and she has not stood up for herself. In the middle of this excerpt, her friend, Kiara, comes to her rescue to fill the silence.

Julia: I'm… a … weak person.
Jon: Oh, you mean you don't stand up for yourself enough!
Julia: No.
Jon: No… why not?
Julia: Cos, I just think… [long pause]
Kiara: I think … I'm not sure if this has happened, but if Julia had a problem and no one else would do anything I think I would help her.
Julia: Yeah.
Jon: So, you would help your friend?
Kiara: Yeah.
Julia: Hattie was nasty to me in the past.

This conversation was very much the exception and is also interesting for three reasons. Firstly, one group of the boys from a different class (6HH) cited Julia as being one of the most popular girls in the year group because '*she is bossy and makes decisions*',[4] and her group of friends categorised her, and themselves, as being loud and dramatic. Secondly, Sonia had actually talked of Julia as being a possible 'leading' girl (see Chap. 6) but, although Julia was one of the girls who joined in with the football group each day, she was also thought of as being rather 'girly' by some of the others, again showing the fluidity of femininities. Thirdly, it is also of interest to remind readers that in Chap. 6 Julia talked about Hattie (mentioned in the last line above) as being one for the go-to girls she would seek out if she had a problem, which suggests that Hattie being 'nasty' to her may have had an added piquancy. Julia may have even felt guilty or embarrassed of not standing up to her.

Notes

1. While the numbers in the football games at each school are broadly accurate and consistent, they could still vary each day.
2. This applied to the boys as well.
3. There were only two self-identified tomboys amongst the 64 girls on roll at both schools: Aurora at Wood Vale and Frayer at Church Green, and both played football in the boys' group every day. However, some boys and girls at Church Green also mentioned two other girls whom they thought might be considered tomboys. There were also a few girls, like Florence, who claimed they could be tomboys *sometimes.*
4. This statement again shows a confusion (mainly my own) between the terms 'popular' and 'leading', particularly in the early part of the fieldwork.

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CHAPTER 10

Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter

1. summarises the main findings, points and arguments made;
2. outlines the study's main contributions, particularly to the fields of masculinity and femininity;
3. considers how the two schools were similar and how they were different;
4. looks at how things at school have changed, particularly for pupils, over the past 25 years, using my doctoral research as a comparison;
5. makes suggestions for further research;
6. offers some thoughts about what the implications of this study are for teachers, school management, policy makers, parents and children.

10.1 A Summary of the Chapters and Main Findings

Chapter 1 sets out the aims of the book, which is to report and interrogate findings about the experiences of young, 10–11-year-old boys and girls in their peer groups at two schools. Fundamentally, the book is about children's identities, their relationships and their practices. It concerns who the children think they are; how they make meanings, including what they think it means to be a boy or girl; and what forms of masculinity and femininity are the most common and accepted in the children's peer group

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culture. The children's views and interpretations are placed at the centre of the analysis. The research is positioned field of gender, rather than sexuality; more specifically, the research aims to add to the fields of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Critical Girlhood Studies (CGS). Although the main audience of the book is academics and students studying gender (and also sexualities), I believe that the book will be of interest to teachers and parents. The chapter also provides information about my background and biography, beginning with my life as a primary school teacher before I gained my PhD in 2001 and switched to becoming a researcher in higher education.

Chapter 2 affords information about the concepts and theories I have drawn on for my research, which include theories of childhood; the body and embodiment; identity; agency; the concept of status, resources and strategies; the formal (or official) and informal (or unofficial) school cultures and the peer group. It also analyses how schools work and operate and considers the aims, purposes and ethos of the two schools where I carried out the research. The main essence of the book concerns gender, and the chapter discusses in detail recent sociological theories of masculinity and femininity, focusing particularly on blended formations of masculinity, and emphasised and hybrid patterns of femininity.

Chapter 3 outlines the *Methodology* and discusses my theoretical and epistemological position, which is broadly situated within a social constructionist and interpretivist framework. The chapter provides more information about how the study originated—from an idea for sponsored project which failed to secure funding at the final stage—and further details about the two schools: Wood Vale, a middle-class state school, and Church Green, a fee-paying, middle-upper-middle-class preparatory school. The total sample in the study was 94 pupils (43 boys and 51 girls), and the main method used to generate data was small group interviews, using a semi-structured format. The main research questions explored were (1) what most common patterns of masculinity and femininity were at both schools; (2) how, and why, particular pupils gained a special popularity and high peer group status; (3) how the pupil friendship groups were formed and organised and (4) what the relationships were like within and between boys' and girls' groups. The process of using a hybrid form of thematic analysis is outlined, and some of the main ethical issues that arose are discussed, such issues around consent. The main limitations of the research are highlighted, which includes the fact that I did not spend a sustained period of time in either school, and the data relies on

testimonies from interview, and I was therefore unable to confirm what the pupils said by observing what they do (or did). The chapter concludes by considering the difficulties of interviewing children as an adult (who was also a relative stranger to them) and the power relations that were involved.

Chapter 4 is the first of chapters that presents the empirical findings. The research found that the pupils were proud of their schools and the vast majority looked forward to attending each day. Both schools were happy places, and there was lots of laughter. All the pupils worked hard and recognised the connection between academic success and future opportunities and outcomes. They liked their teachers and found most of the lessons stimulating. However, although the pupils at the state school enjoyed reading and writing, a few boys disliked the new government emphasis that was placed on grammar. The curriculum was far more restricted at Wood Vale; the pupils at this school only had about an hour or so for art and music a week, whereas at Church Green, which had far greater financial resources, there was a much broader curriculum, and some subject areas were taught by specialist teachers. There were a number of school clubs at both schools (again, particularly at Church Green), which were well attended.

The best part of coming to school for the children was the chance to see, and be with, their friends. Playtimes were a particularly treasured time. A large game of football dominated the lunchtime at Wood Vale for this year group (and played by about two-thirds of the boys), but although football was also a popular pastime at Church Green, there were a much greater number and variety of games and activities played at this school. Pupils at both schools were highly organised and regimented in terms of time and space but, despite the school day appearing to be demanding and sometimes having a relentless pace, very few pupils appeared to feel under any real pressure. The children knew nothing else to compare their time at school against and accepted that this was how it was. They accepted that the amount of homework they were given—about two hours a week in each school—was manageable and fair. There were far fewer in-class tests at Church Green but very few pupils at Wood Vale were worried about taking the SATs in May: this was often because they either had elder, reassuring siblings, or they were getting good marks in the numerous practice tests which they took on a regular basis. Many pupils at Church Green seemed to have a lot of after-school activities organised for them by their parents, which they seemed to enjoy. Most of the pressures for the children came

from within their peer group, including worries of falling out with friends and being ostracised. The role of the body seemed a relatively minor consideration: no pupil felt the need to follow fashions and look a certain way. Although, for most pupils, physical appearance had yet to assume a high importance, a minority of pupils noticed how others looked. Both schools worked had at espousing and creating storylines and values, such as kindness and tolerance, although this was particularly marked at Church Green. There were relatively low levels of teasing and bullying, especially at the prep school. This is not to suggest that pupils were never nasty to each other, said spiteful things, or that there were rivalries. However, I uncovered very little systematic and persistent bullying. There were two bullies—one in each class at Wood Vale—and none at Church Green. There was only one case of cyber bullying that I discovered at the state school, but this appeared to be a one-off incident. There was little homophobia—the pejorative use of the word 'gay' was almost unheard of—and little misogyny, and this theme is expanded on further below in the later chapters.

Chapter 5 explores friendships, including how many friendship groups there were in each class and how they were characterised. I found the use of typologies such as the 'footballing' group rather restrictive and unable to express the nuances of collective masculine and feminine identities. At Wood Vale, there was one main friendship group of boys from both classes, who played football every lunchtime. The friendship groupings for boys at Church Green were a little smaller and more nuanced. While at both schools, the girls' groups tended to be more fluid and dynamic; most boys' friendship associations were more stable and loyal to each other. Some girls also admitted the girls' groups were more argumentative and more fluid. Inter-class associations were relatively rare, especially outside the footballing group. Most friendship groups at either school were ethically mixed and only a very few friendship groups were organised around ethnic backgrounds. Only a very few pupils at both schools played with younger pupils.

The average size of boys' and girls' groups was broadly similar. For boys, the average size was five at Wood Vale and three at Church Green; for girls, it was three and a half at Wood Vale and three at Church Green. There were more girls' friendship groups in both schools (excluding individuals): ten to the boys' four at Wood Vale (although it is important to remember that there were many more girls at this school), while at Church Green there were nine girls' groups to the boys' eight.

Many boys and girls had a special, best, friend who were closer to them than anyone else and were particularly precious. The boys tended to have a small number of best friends, ranging from 2–5, whereas girls were inclined to have a single person to whom they were especially close. There were also some individuals in both schools who were known as 'Go-To' girls who could be approached by a girl if she had a problem, but there were not similar people in the boys' groups. Having shared values, a sense of humour and similar interests were obviously important for making friends, and the most prized qualities of friendship for pupils were loyalty and being supportive if someone was nasty to them.

The boys and girls generally got on well with each and seating arrangements were organised in classes by boy-girl. There were few examples of gender hegemony where boys dominated girls and unequal gender relations were legitimated. Rather than there being two separate worlds of boys and girls, there were generally two complementary gendered cultures, sharing the one overall school world. However, at Wood Vale pupils told me that in the early part of the junior school (around the ages of 7–8) boys and girls were closer together, but were now more apart, while at Church Green, the pupils thought it was the opposite, and they were now much nearer and more connected. However, it was a little more nuanced than this at the prep school and cross-relations between the two gender groups differed between the three Year 6 classes. At Wood Vale, a quarter of the 14 pupil groups contained a mixture of boys and girls, while at Church Green just under a third of the 17 groups were similarly constituted. However, the two genders were perhaps more superficially closer than appeared and most of the pupils showed a disinterest in children with a different gendered construction. A number of boys and girls joined in with different gendered friendship grouping each day, and this was mainly because they liked them as platonic friends and had shared values and interests. It was seen as being 'normal' and no one was derogated for this. In other research, boys playing with girls can be associated with femininity, but this was not the case here. There were also very few tomboys in either school, one or two in each school.

Chapter 6 explores issues around popularity: who were the most esteemed pupils within their peer groups and what were the reasons for their popularity. I acknowledge that the concept of popularity is often 'complex' and 'slippery', but although it is often also relational and connected to configurations of hierarchy, there did not appear to be any pupils who were especially unpopular, or pupils who were subordinated. Pupils

had different talents and were respected for this, but to be particularly popular, and gain greater levels of social prestige, boys and girls at both schools needed to acquire and use an array, or portfolio, of attributes or talents, which were based on the resources and strategies available in each setting. Although these were essentially the same for boys and girls in each school, and there were many similarities, there were also differences between the two genders and between the schools where particular resources and strategies became more valued than others. Although pupils had capacity to exercise agency in their choice of which resources and strategies they wanted to implement, some options were more open or closed than others in each setting. The main resources in both schools were *physicality and athleticism* (e.g., shining in a particular game or sport); *social* resources (e.g., being kind and sociable, having good interpersonal skills, and often being articulate); *personal* resources (being confident and independent); and *cultural* resources (e.g., knowing the latest verbal saying and in-jokes, and being able to create a laugh in the playground and/or class).

The five qualities associated with popularity that were the most consistently cited for the boys were the resources and strategies of physicality and athleticism, social and interpersonal skills, personal qualities of confidence and independence, humour, and specialised abilities/knowledge and being modern. The four qualities associated with popularity that were the most frequently cited for girls were being nice and kind, being sociable, standing up for oneself and being independent, and being there for someone.

While the pupils had little difficulty in naming the most popular children in their class, there were very few, if any, leading boys or girls. Although there was some initial confusion between the terms ‘popular’ and ‘leading’, pupil, the latter can be defined as having a greater association to authoritative power: that is, someone who was (or is) able to make important decisions, set the agenda of how others should think or behave, talk, or even look, and who other pupils might try to copy.

The final theme in this chapter involves the pupils’ ideas on what the characteristics would be of a fictionalised ‘ideal’ schoolboy or schoolgirl. These were closely connected to notions of popularity and the features contained in the most common forms of masculinity and femininity. The main descriptors at Wood Vale of the ideal schoolboy were sporty, clever, hardworking, sociable, funny and being charismatic; at Church Green, it was an individual who was kind, considerate, friendly/sociable, funny, a

little sporty, hardworking, clever, but not exceptionally smart. The main descriptors of a perfect schoolgirl at Wood Vale were someone who is friendly and sociable, has good interpersonal skills, was a 'bit of a character', funny, confident, a bit sporty, and be able to stand up for herself; at Church Green it was someone who is kind, but not too sensitive, friendly/sociable, confident, trustworthy, a little sporty, intelligent/bright but, as with the boys, not super bright, independent, and able to look after herself. The general and overall list of adjectives from both schools indicate that there were a range of masculinities and femininities, but suggest that the closest conceptual match, and most common way of *doing* boy or girl at these two schools, was a blended or hybrid form, which combined, and enacted, traits of femininity and masculinity.

Chapter 7 moves outside the school setting and reports findings about how the children used messaging platforms like WhatsApp, video games and social media outside school, although of course these practices seep in the informal culture inside. The chapter also asks the children to think about their childhood and to reflect on this stage of childhood before their forthcoming, and fast approaching, transition to adolescence, including how they were anticipating their move to secondary school. The chapter ends with a short section on the greatest influences in their life, so far, and asks whether the children have any media hero(es).

The use of mobile phones at both schools was controlled and regulated. About two-thirds of the children possessed a phone at Wood Vale, although only about half of them brought it to school. Fewer pupils owned a phone at Church Green, where the fraction seemed to be about a half, and even fewer bothered to bring them to school as they saw little point. Pupils mainly used their smart phones and tablets (generally iPads) to play games, to watch the YouTube app and Netflix, and, particularly at Wood Vale, to send WhatsApp messages.

There was a large WhatsApp group at Wood Vale, consisting mainly of girls, and some claimed to sometimes receive up to 500 messages a day. Video and online games were also favoured at both schools and had an opposite gendered dimension to the WhatsApp movement and were mainly played by boys. Although all the children watched YouTube regularly, the amount of time spent on social media platforms reported was comparatively low as the children's use was generally tightly controlled by their parents. I did not explore the subject of pornography and/or whether they had seen explicit images.

Some children were unclear how to classify their own stage of development and were uncertain if they should be referred to as a child or a teenager. Many wished to remain, and were happy to be called, children as this was a stage in their lives that they enjoyed: there was more fun, less stress, and most did not mind adults making choices for them. Some were also apprehensive about approaching adolescence, but despite worrying about losing friends and the need to form new alliances, most were looking forward to secondary school as they felt they had outgrown their current school. Most children cited their parents as being the main influence in their life, at least so far, and very few had a media hero. Some listened to pop music but said they liked the popstars for their music rather than what they stood for or symbolised.

Chapter 8 investigates children's sexualities and the extent to which there was a culture, or storylines, of sexuality within the informal culture, and, indeed, one of the book's aims has been to address the literary lacuna regarding the theme of sexuality with preadolescents, including those who were privately educated. Although a 'culture of sexuality' can be difficult and contentious to define, the measure that I used was pupils' awareness of a sexualised body and was based on the number of girlfriend/boyfriend associations, the number of stated crushes, and/or how much they observed and remarked on others' bodies and/or 'looks'. Traces of sexuality were certainly evident, cross-gender relations took part through Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix, and, for *some* children, heterosexual desires were an everyday component of school life. However, in contrast to other studies with this age group, or in recent research set in secondary schools, I was unable to discover a prevalent or 'saturated' culture of sexuality. There were very few girlfriend-boyfriend relationships: less than 6 out of the 94 pupils I interviewed or out of over 120 on the total roll. However, many children declared to have 'crushes'. However, although the numbers—around a quarter at Church Green and a tenth at Wood Vale—were relatively low, there seemed to be more pupils who had crushes when they were younger. Numbers, though, were difficult to gauge. I also admit that there was also probably a great deal of unconscious and unspoken sexuality present, but I did not use the appropriate theories or ask the right questions to investigate this. The children, overall, appeared to be rather naïve and innocent, and some felt that they were not mature enough for a more sexualised relationship. They wouldn't know what to do. There may have been (some) talk, but there was very little action, and this may be a reflection of the middle-class (and upper-middle-class) backgrounds

of the children, and their parents, who possibly have a greater tendency to insulate children from the various forms of difficulty, including matters of sexuality. A significant number of children joined in with the activities of different gendered friendship groups at breaktimes, but most pupils were disinterested in pupils categorised from different genders. Although some noticed if pupils were physically attractive, most liked pupils from a different gender because they were 'kind', were 'fun' and/or had a 'good' personality. The word 'crush' did not always signify sexual attraction and was usually platonic or asexual.

Chapter 9 reviews findings about the construction, negotiation and performance of masculinity and femininity at both schools. The study introduces a new form of masculinity which I am calling blended masculinity, and which is similar to hybrid patterns of femininity in that it contains elements and qualities of masculinity and femininity. There were connections between the blended and hybrid forms with popularity, and the notion of the ideal schoolboy and schoolgirl, and many features, and enacted attributes, overlapped. Although the boys' lives were shaped by structures and conditions that they found themselves in, I argue that blended masculinities, like hybrid femininities, have a particular agentic quality and offer opportunities to perform different ways of being and *doing* boy. While these blended and hybrid forms did not give boys or girls an open or, voluntary, choice of who to be and act, it gave them *opportunities* to exercise agency and experiment with, and enact, different versions of boyhood and girlhood.

There was no palpable pattern of hegemonic masculinity at either school that legitimated unequal relationships between boys and girls, or between masculinities and femininities, or among masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018), and this illustrates that not every setting will inevitably have a visible and perceptible hegemonic, or even dominant, form of masculinity. Masculinity and femininity did not appear to have an asymmetrical ordering, there was no evident masculine privilege/advantage, and there did not seem to be any hierarchies of masculinity, or examples of marginalised or subordinated identities that I could find. The hierarchies appear to be looking less steep and are getting flatter. Although sporting and athletic prowess remained important signifiers of successful masculinity for many boys, particularly at Wood Vale, because so many pupils at the prep school played a range of sports and games, football did not assume such a central part of the informal school culture and it did not dominate. It was also not the official school sport. Around a fifth of the boys played

football at breaktimes at Church Green, but the other boys did not look up to the footballers and instead pursued their own interests.

The most common form of masculinity at both schools was a nonhegemonic and positive blended form—composed of masculine and feminine qualities—although it was constituted of slightly different features in each school and the footballing (as opposed to sporty) boy was more prevalent at Wood Vale. Although we can see that the blended form contains elements that are similar to the more feminine values contained in caring masculinity, I argue that these features are part of blended masculinity, rather than representing a discrete form.

The findings also reveal that boys can, and do, perform different versions of masculinity at different times and places and with different individuals. Sometimes boys could enact blended masculinities and also perform personalised masculinities (which had a particular egalitarian quality) and vice versa. Each form is not discrete or singular and they can often overlap and merge. Sometimes boys could emphasise and perform different features of masculinity in the same space almost concurrently, which shows up the limitations of using mono typologies such as 'sporty boy' or 'caring' boy.

The study also offers new insights into, and understandings of, constructions of the conceptionally developing theory of hybrid femininity, which can be seen as a reflection of the changing cultural landscape, where more traditional forms of femininity no longer fully capture the complexity and diversity of girls' (or women's) experiences. This has not been theoretically or empirically applied to this age group in school settings. The book also shows that the emphasised femininity of the heterosexualised girly girl is much less widespread than in previous research. As with masculinities, the research produces further confirmatory evidence that femininity is not fixed and stable, but dynamic and highly fluid, time and context, and relationship dependent.

Hybrid femininity was the most common, favoured, and cherished version at both schools. Constituted by a wide range of conventional feminine and masculine qualities, this form provided an overarching structure under which a variety of ways of doing girl (including caring girl, sporty girl, independent girl, competitive girl) were embedded.

Although Messerschmidt (2018) argues that emphasised femininity operates in ways that legitimates gender hegemony, this was a relative minor pattern, and did not appear to be the case in these schools. The hybrid femininity was neither complementary and compliant nor

accommodating to any type of masculinity. Moreover, there were no femininities that I could discover in either setting that were regarded as 'lesser than' or 'aberrant' and therefore subordinated. Although emphasised femininities and other types of more masculine femininity (such as tomboys, or highly competitive versions of girlhood) were in the minority, they were nevertheless accepted. Although it was still noticeable that some girls tried to steer a middle course onto safer ground, this generally meant that practising the hybrid form did not require very much negotiation between identities.

10.2 The Study's Main Contributions to the Fields of Masculinity and Femininity

The book contributes to the field of gender and to a lesser extent the field of sexuality—specifically CSMM and CGS—by giving young, pre-adolescent, 10–11-year-old boys and girls a platform to talk about their life at school with their peers, an age group which has been relatively neglected by empirical research over the past 15–20 years, particularly in the UK. The findings show how they make meanings, especially around gender, and how they negotiate and perform different expressions of masculinity and femininity, or different versions of being a boy and a girl.

These children have been given a voice to talk about their lives at school amongst the informal culture of their peers, and their views and interpretations are placed at the heart of the findings. Although Sexton (2017) writes that boys (and girls) are beginning to develop an understanding of the purpose and nature of societal conventions, as well as their own identities in early adolescence (defined as 12–14), I maintain these come earlier. Although my theories of identity argue that it is an ongoing process, the majority of the young boys (and girls) in my study were already very reflective, they had a very good idea of how society works and is organised, and they had a very good idea who they already were, what values and beliefs they held, and who they wanted to become.

The study covers their views about the best and worst parts of school life; the curriculum; homework; SATs; playtimes; friendships and friendship groups; relations between boys and girls; pressures; teasing and bullying; the qualities of popular pupils and leading pupils; the characteristics of fictionalised ideal schoolboys and school girls; cultures of sexuality, including boyfriend-girlfriend associations; crushes; girly girls; tomboys; the use of mobile phones, tablets and social media; media heroes; thoughts

about secondary school; and feelings of innocence and enjoyment of their current stage of development.

Essentially, the book is about the children's gendered identities. The study introduces a new form of nonhegemonic, egalitarian and positive masculinity, which I have called 'blended' masculinity, which was the most common form on show in these two schools. The research also uncovered patterns of personalised masculinity, but, rather unusually, there was no obvious hegemonic form or a subordinate type of masculinity. The study offers new insights into, and understandings of, constructions of the conceptionally developing theory of hybrid femininity, which attempts to capture the intricacy and sheer variety of girls' (or women's) experiences, and which has not been theoretically or empirically applied to this age group in school settings. The study also shows that the emphasised femininity of the heterosexualised girly girl was much less widespread than in previous research with this age group. The findings confirm the multiplicity, complexity, fluidity and situated nature of masculinity and femininity, which is contingent on time and place and on the relations involved.

The research also gives an insight into the children's feelings towards, and their relationships with, children from different gendered groups, and the extent to which their world is already sexualised within a culture of heterosexuality. Although many boys and (particularly) girls had crushes on each other, it appears that these feelings were declining (at least for the moment) as the children got older. Even so, crushes were plentiful and could be a source of anxiety as much as fun. Many were often ephemeral. There were very few boyfriend-girlfriend relationships in both schools—around 6—but two couples had split up over the year or perhaps in the year before.

In contrast to earlier research about boys, there was very little homophobia or misogyny. There were also much less bullying, more caring, and greater levels of tolerance, kindness, and equality, and this positive movement has been replicated in other research. All in all, this makes the research and this book a good news story.

10.3 Similarities and Differences Between the Two Schools

Independent and state schools have many different demands and challenges. However, there are also many similarities, both in the formal school cultures (of the teaching, management and organisation) and within the informal cultures of the pupils themselves between the two school in this research. These similarities and differences are summarised in the Table 10.1. The top section considers the informal culture, and the

Table 10.1 Similarities and differences between the two schools

Similarities	*Differences*
Informal school culture	
Both sets of pupils enjoyed school, liked learning, and wanted to achieve academically. They understood the connection between qualifications and greater life opportunities. They liked and respected the teachers. Most pupils enjoyed most of their lessons. There was lots of laughter and school was a fun place to be. Humour was an important source of gaining popularity and status. There was very little bullying and only a small amount of name-calling. There was virtually no homophobia and/or misogyny and no subordination of different forms of masculinity or femininity. The best thing about school for the children was their friends. They didn't feel under much pressure. There are more pressures from the informal culture than from the official culture.	A few more pupils were identified and cited at Wood Vale. Football was a more important signifier of successful masculinity at Wood Vale. There was a greater use of mobile phones at Wood Vale, including a large WhatsApp group. Also, more pupils at Wood Vale played video games. More pupils seemed to be using social media at Church Green, even though the numbers were comparatively small.
There were very few boy/girlfriends in either school. There was a relatively limited sexualised culture although many more boys and, particularly, girls had crushes.	There was a greater sexualised culture at the prep school. I estimated that 25% of pupils had a crush at Church Green and about 10% at Wood Vale. There were more crushes in the lower years.
The resources that the pupils used to gain popularity and peer group status were broadly similar at both schools.	Girls and boys kept more apart at Wood Vale, where it was a little more like two separate worlds (apart from a few girls who joined in with the main football game). There was much more boy-girl mixing at Church Green, although the amount varied between the three classes. At Church Green the pattern was more apart in Year 3 and more together in Year 6. At Wood Vale it was more together in Year 3 and more apart in Year 6.

(*continued*)

Table 10.1 (continued)

Similarities	*Differences*
Most children at both schools wished to retain their innocence and remain at this stage of development.	
Many were wary of social media.	
Formal school culture	
	The prep school had far greater financial resources and (therefore) facilities and resources than the state school. Pupil-teacher ratios were much lower.
Both schools were judged by their academic results.	Wood Vale was judged by the SATs results and a lot of the time was spent preparing the pupils for these exams.
Both schools set the pupils homework over the week.	
Both schools appeared to have few disciplinary problems.	
Parents were broadly supportive of the school.	
	The curriculum at Wood Vale was much narrower and restrictive than at Church Green. Teachers at Wood Vale had fewer opportunities to be creative.
Pupil behaviour at both schools seemed good. Working hard and being clever was applauded.	Church Green spent more time emphasising qualities such as kindness and tolerance.

bottom section looks at the formal culture, although the two overlap and are formed in relation to each other.

10.4 What Has Changed for Pupils in Schools Since the Millennium

One of the most important findings from this study is that things have got better for children—at least in *these two* schools—in the last 25 years or so. Compared to the findings from Renold and myself from around 2000—which involved research in five schools between us—there is far less

homophobia and misogyny or misandry today. The use of the word 'gay' as a pejorative term was almost unheard of in this study. There was less teasing and bullying and nasty name-calling, and school was a kinder place. At these two schools (and I am aware of the caveat that this is only two, middle-class, schools where the children felt safe and secure), there was a wider range of resources, and less emphasis on the resource of physicality, to gain popularity and status. The most common versions of masculinity and femininity, or doing boy or girl, involved a combination of masculine and feminine traits. There was no hegemonic form of masculinity or type of femininity that dominated the informal culture in the sense that there was a hierarchy where other forms were judged to be inferior, and unequal gender relations were legitimised. Other forms of masculinity and femininity were not subordinated as they were before. There was less of a sexualised culture and many of the pupils embraced this current stage of their development, including its innocence. Although many pupils had crushes, there were few boyfriend-girlfriend associations, and pupils were not 'dumped' when they broke up. Boys and girls generally got on well with each other, and more boys felt they were able to join in with girls' friendship groups at playtimes without any fear of derogation. It was OK for boys (and girls) to cry without being femininised. There were fewer tomboys and perhaps fewer girly girls performing an emphasised femininity.

On the last day of my fieldwork in one of my schools from my PhD research in 1999, I remember one girl running across the playground to proudly show off her new artefact: a mobile phone. I was intrigued and went home wondering how this new form of technology might affect social practices and relations in the future. Little did I know! Today the wider culture has been colonised and saturated by social media and identities are formed by and through it. This of course seeps into schools and so pupils' use of social media, video games and mobile phones is very different in this study than before.

Although the formal school culture did not form part of my exploration, I only stopped teaching in 1998 and so am still able to remember what state education was like around 25 years ago. Today, the curriculum in state schools has narrowed further, and there is less time for art and music, drama and PE/games, although the curriculum in private schools remains broad. There is more homework now for pupils of this age. There is even less time for play—again, particularly in the state sector, as from around the mid-1990s afternoon playtime in many schools was removed. A lot of this was caused by the introduction of the SATs and the league

tables. The fact that a marketplace was created, and pupils funding was tied to pupil numbers, meant that schools were supposed to try to make sure that their pupils performed well in the SATs, and that the school found itself towards the top of the published league table. (Of course, not all schools can be top and there were consequences of this in terms of maintaining resources, including staff.) This meant that in the two state schools in my PhD research, SATs practice began in the early autumn term, which meant that 'softer' parts of the curriculum became marginalised, and this was still happening at Wood Vale, although possibly to a lesser extent.

10.5 Suggestions for Further Research

The schools in my research were middle class (and possibly upper-middle class), and these data only show what it was, and is, like this in these two settings. The prep school, in particular, worked very hard to reinforce values of kindness, caring and a tolerance of other points of view. Both these environments also created storylines and a culture of both aspiration and security where children were not facing the challenges of poverty and marginalisation experienced by pupils in some other mainstream schools. This influenced the options and opportunities available, and the possible ways masculinities and femininities could be constructed and performed. This therefore suggests that there is a vital need to carry further research in primary/junior school with more extensive and varied samples in terms of geographical locations, social class, ethnicity, age and perhaps including pupils with nonbinary gender and sex identities. Also, more research about gendered identities in secondary schools.

10.6 Implications of the Research for Teachers, School Management, Policy Makers, Parents and Children

Although it is not the intention or purpose of this book to provide detailed guidance about the implications of the research, it is undeniable that schools can do a lot to influence change. Dominant or hegemonic gender systems are neither natural nor inevitable and, although schools can of course help create gender hegemony (see Smith, 2007), they can also do much to combat it and create a kinder and more equal community.

Although particularly evident at Church Green, the formal school cultures at both schools worked hard to promote and champion values like kindness, tolerance and respect. There were no, relationally, 'lesser' forms of masculinity and femininity that were subordinated by girls or boys, and many children were able to find space to utilise agency to 'do their own thing' and create their own identities. There was no hegemonic masculinity that legitimated unequal relations between boys and girls, or between masculinities and femininities, or among masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018); although sporting prowess was important, the dominant masculinities and femininities were constructed around the attributes of kindness, care and sociability. I suggest that other schools can create something similar. All playground games and every school club apart from rugby (where issues of physicality were more pronounced) involved boys and girls. Achievements in all areas of school life, including within a range of sports, need to be validated and celebrated. However, there needs to be a whole school approach and all staff need to buy in to the philosophy and approach (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Partnerships also need to be developed between teachers, parents and children to optimise and promote the range a masculinities and femininities available. Formal discussions that critique social policies which support gender inequality and violence need to be introduced into curriculum time. Both schools had used external speakers to talk about the advantages and disadvantages (including the danger) of using social media, and the children I talked to found these sessions informative and useful. Something similar could be done on talking about the different versions available of being a boy or a girl and there are many programmes available about issues of gender equity. One of the most frequently mentioned programmes in the *State of UK Boys* report by Bragg et al. (2022) was Renold's (2019) AGENDA resources, which contains extensive research-based ideas for working with children aged 7 to 18. This research has confirmed that children are aware of, and actively engaged, in their 'gender projects' from an early age (Bragg et al., 2022) and so it is important to start early on work challenging gender norms. These sessions should include matters of different sexuality. Although I found that many of the girls came across as being innocent and even naïve, particularly pertaining to matters of sexuality, Bennett et al. (2017) argue that the corollary of this is that 'children are potentially rendered more vulnerable if they are kept in ignorance' (2017, p. 1376). Assumptions about childhood innocence need to be challenged and the schools, but also parents, need to realise that knowledge about matters connected to sex can actually play a protective role for their children.

It is also essential to view children as active co-producers and participants in their education around gender equity and social justice and so, if the aim is to create gender transformations, children need to be involved in decision making (Renold et al., 2021). As gender is socially and historically conducted it means that it is open to change. The pupils need to appreciate that there is not just one form of masculinity or femininity, which may be narrow and rigid. In terms of masculinity, it needs to be defined in such a way that any forms of violence and aggression are regarded as being weak and cowardly. As one of my heroes, Barrie Thorne (1993), avowed over 30 years ago: it's all about having imagination and embracing the sense of the possible.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Final Interview Schedule for the Boys (Around June 2022)

1. Do you like coming to school? What is the best thing about school?
2. And the worst thing about school?
3. Do you ever feel under pressure?
4. How many friendship groups are there in your class?
5. Who are the most popular boys in the class?
6. Can you say why they are popular?
7. What kinds of things do they do to make themselves popular?
8. Who is the coolest boy in the class?
9. Who is the brightest?
10. Who is the most hard working?
11. Who works harder in class, boys or girls?
12. Is there one leader in the class, or lots of leaders?
13. What should an ideal, or the perfect, boy look like?
14. Do boys have best friends?
15. Is there a go-to boy people go to for advice?
16. Do people notice the trainers people wear? Anything else?
17. Do people get teased or bullied?
18. What happens if they do?
19. What is the worst name someone can call you in school?

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20. Is there an anti-bullying policy in school? What does it say? Is it ever implemented?
21. Do people get teased if they are seen to be working too hard?
22. If so, what do they do about it?
23. How do you get on with the girls?
24. Do you mix the girls?
25. Do boys have girlfriends?
26. Is it risky to mix too much with the girls?
27. Is there a 'leading' girl?
28. Are there any tomboys? What does this mean?
29. Are there any girly girls?
30. Do any girls wear earrings or paint their nails? Do you notice?
31. Do you notice how attractive a girl is?
32. Do you think it is OK for a boy to cry?—If so, why/why not? What about a girl to cry?
33. How important is it for a girl to be nice, gentle, and kind? To be a lady? Independent.
34. Should girls stand up for themselves? Do they? And boys?
35. How important is it for a person to be real and not fake?
36. Are boys and girls treated equally? Are they equal or are girls better than boys? Inferior to boys?
37. What social media do you use? How often? What sort of things do you use it for? When do you use it? Texting, WhatsApp group, YouTube interviews?
38. Who would you say is the biggest influence in your life?
39. Is it important how people (other children) look—dress sense, hair styles?
40. Do you feel you have to behave in a particular way? What are the main differences in how boys and girls behave?
41. Would you like to look older? Do you ever try to look older?

Appendix B: Final Interview Schedule for the Girls (Around June 2022)

1. Do you like coming to school? What is the best thing about school?
2. And the worst thing about school?
3. Do you ever feel under pressure?

4. How many friendship groups are there in your class?
5. Are they organised around racial/ethnic lines?
6. How fixed are they? How much movement is there between the groups?
7. Do you have to be loyal to your group? (e.g., if someone upsets one person, do you stick up for each other?)
8. Is there a go-to girl that people go to if they have a problem? Why this person?
9. Who are the most popular girls in the class?
10. Can you say why they are popular?
11. What kinds of things do they do to make themselves popular?
12. Who is the coolest girl in the class?—Why?
13. What should an ideal, or the perfect, girl look like? Or be like?
14. Do girls have best friends?
15. Are there any girly girls?
16. Do girls have handbags outside school?
17. Are there any sporty girls? Or Tomboys?
18. Are there any hard-working girls or are all girls hardworking?
19. Do the boys work hard? Any exceptions?
20. Do any girls muck around in class?
21. Is there one leader in the class, or lots of leaders?
22. Do people get teased or bullied? Are there any bullies in the class?
23. Is there any bullying online?
24. What happens if they do?
25. What is the worst name someone can call you in school?
26. Do people get teased if they are seen to be working too hard? Is it cool to work hard?
27. If so, what do they do about it?
28. How do you get on with the boys?
29. Do you mix the boys?
30. Do girls have boyfriends?
31. Is it risky to mix too much with the boys?
32. Is there a 'leading' boy?
33. Do you notice how handsome a boy is?
34. Do girls have crushes on boys?
35. Are boys and girls equal? Are they treated equally in school or differently? Examples!
36. Do you think it is OK for a girl or a boy to cry?—If so, why/why not?
37. Do people notice the trainers people wear? Anything else?

38. Do girls wear earrings or paint their nails? Are they allowed to? Why do you think they do this? (if they do)
39. Are there any Tomboys in the class? What does this mean?
40. What social media do you use? How often? What sort of things do you use it for? When do you use it? Do you play games; look at YouTube? What else?
41. Tell me about your WhatsApp group? Who set it up?
42. Have you heard of the expression 'Girl Power'? If so, what does it mean for you?
43. How important is it for a girl to be nice, gentle, and kind? To be a lady? Independent. Is it important for a girl to be pretty?
44. Do you ever make yourself look attractive to the boys or girls?
45. Is it important to look nice/attractive?
46. How important is it for a person to be real and not fake?
47. Should girls stand up for themselves? Do they?
48. Are boys and girls treated equally? Are they equal or are girls better than boys? Inferior to boys?
49. Have you got a media hero like Ariana Grande or Beyoncé? Who else?
50. Is it important how people (other children) look—dress sense, hair styles?
51. Do you feel you have to behave in a particular way? What are the main differences in how girls and boys behave?
52. Would you like to look older? Do you ever try to look older?
53. Do you ever get called 'fat'—or have other remarks made about your body?
54. Who would you say is the biggest influence in your life?

Appendix C: Summary of Number of Friendship Groups at Wood Vale and Church Green

Friendship groups at Wood Vale

Class	*Total number of friendship groups*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Number of pupils in class*
6MK	8	2 main groups	6 main groups	18 girls 10 boys
6TD	6	2 main groups	4 main groups	19 girls 11 boys

Friendship groups at Church Green

Class	*Total number of friendship groups*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Number of pupils in class*
6HH	6	3 main groups	3 main groups	11 girls 11 boys
6KN	5	2 main groups	3 main groups	9 girls 12 boys
6SE	6	3 main groups	3 main groups	9 girls 12 boys

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