

## *Role of Boys' Peer Groups In A Secondary School In Malta*

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### **Abstract:**

Adolescence is a period when friendship, social acceptance by peers, and a sense of belonging grow in importance. In addition to this, it is also a time when physical, sexual, cognitive and emotional changes significantly alter the way young adolescents think about themselves and each other. Peer networks form a vital part of children's life at school and the aims of this article, which is based on a Case Study of a Boys' secondary school in Malta, are (i) to demonstrate how messages about what it means to be a boy are both transmitted and enforced by boys in these groups and, consequently, (ii) to illustrate the significant role peer group cultures have in the construction of student masculine identities and their effect on students' behaviour and participation at school.

### **Introduction: Notion of 'masculinities' and Schooling**

Mills (2000) insists that there is a need to take the issue of boys and schooling seriously because the way in which many boys construct their gendered identities impacts significantly on their participation and engagement with school, both in terms of their performance and in the way they behave and relate to others (Beckett 2001). We cannot deny that peer groups are a salient feature of boys' life at school and, as this article will demonstrate, they exert a great influence on the production of a range of student masculinities in schools. Before I set out to explore this issue, however, I believe it is useful to outline the academic perspectives on the understanding of the complexities of masculinities.

Work concerning gender relations has traditionally been characterised by a 'biological/cultural' debate and, probably, the most widespread beliefs about the essence of masculinity are, in fact, those which look to biology as the source (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998) with the result that masculine behaviour is considered to have natural

origins, with men behaving the way they do because of testosterone or big muscles or a male brain.

However, educational literature during the late 1970s and into the 1980s, demonstrated that nearly all of the differences that were assumed to be natural sex differences between women and men were in fact socially constructed gender differences (Messner 1997), in that children learn 'appropriate' ways of relating to the world around them through observation and/or experiencing a system of rewards and sanctions which reinforce such modes of behaviour. Thus, with regard to sex roles, for instance, females learn and internalise such traits as caring, nurturing and selflessness, while males acquire and demonstrate characteristics such as aggression, independence and competitiveness (Oakley 1972; Seidler 1989). However, critics, such as Hall (1988) commented that such theoretical assumptions oversimplify the complex development of sex/gender identities, and hence they fail to recognise that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed, historically specific, and mediated by social class, race, ethnicity and other social categories of inequality.

Steering away from sex-role categorisation, particularly in terms of the construction of masculine identity, critical theorists have now come to acknowledge the existence of a multiplicity of masculinities at both institutional and societal levels. One of the most influential researchers in the field is Connell (1987, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000), whose argument is that masculinity is not a unified discourse. On the contrary, it is diverse, dynamic and changing and, consequently, we need to think of *multiple masculinities* rather than some singular discourse. Thus, different cultures and different periods of history construct gender differently and, equally important, is that diversity is not just a matter of difference between communities for diversity also exists within a given setting. Within any workplace, neighbourhood or peer group, for instance, there are likely to be different understandings of masculinity and different ways of doing masculinity. What is of importance is that there are definite social relations between them (Connell 2000). Some masculinities are more honoured than others, others can be actively dishonoured whilst others may be socially marginalised. In fact, an important point emerging from Connell's work is that there are four ways in which men engage with existing gender relations. He terms these four performances of masculinity as: (i) Subordinate: this relates to those forms of manhood that occupy the bottom rungs of the masculine hierarchy. They are the boys/men who are under constant threat from their peers for not having 'masculine' skills; (ii) Hegemonic: this form of masculinity defines what it means to be a real man or boy, and consequently, other forms of masculinity are seen in relation to this form (Skelton 2001). Hegemonic masculinity can be described as 'a particular variety of masculinity to which others - among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men - are subordinated (Carrigan *et al.* 1985, p.587). The men, both real and fictional, who make up the hegemonic category of masculinity represent an embodiment of exemplary masculinity; (iii) Complicit: this is a form of masculinity, which is typified by the majority of boys or men who, while not meeting the criteria of hegemonic status or demonstrating the worst excesses of hegemonic masculinity, do little to challenge the patriarchal gender order, thereby enjoying its many rewards; (iv) Marginalized: a masculinity that is contingent upon the sanctioning of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group.

A significant point emerging from this literature is that masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction, either as bodily states or as fixed personalities. Rather, masculinities come into existence as people act (Connell 1996, 2000).

What the fresh ways of looking at boys, men and masculinities have allowed educationalists to do, is to open up a new way of theorising gender work with boys that can lead to changed and more effective classroom practices. It is now accepted that young people enter schools as sexual and gendered objects, having already experienced the formal and informal learning networks of the family environment, peer groups, and the media. Children thus come to school knowing that they are girls or boys and with a strong commitment to being members of a gender group and a potential antagonism towards the other group. On the other hand, they have only a very hazy impression of what sort of behaviour that membership demands of them, and are still looking to adults and peers to clarify the question (Jordan 1995). A key message from the literature is that educational environments provide an additional arena within which individuals might contest and negotiate their own sex/gender identity (Parker 1996). At the outset it must be noted, however, that Connell (1987) questions the extent to which schools do transmit a unified gender code. In this respect he argues that it is seriously wrong to assume that the school tends to impose just one sex-role pattern on its boys. Quite the opposite. A range of messages are transmitted and a number of different views of what it means to be a boy are modelled in school. Pupils, then, choose elements from this gender code and mix them with ideas that derive from their own background and community culture.

The most important contributions to understanding masculinity in schools have come from a series of studies into boys' school cultures (Connell *et al.* 1982; Walker 1988; Beynon 1989; Thorne 1993; Mac an Ghaill 1994). These have shown that it is through the school gender regime, (which includes such things as the way the school is organised, how power is used, the kind of school policies in place, the gender balance of executive positions, staff composition and staff dynamics, the teaching methods used, the kinds of subjects offered, the relations between staff and students, the type of discipline in use, and so on) that boys learn how they, as males, should behave in order to have their social needs met. Kessler *et al.* (1985, p.42) remark that these practices construct various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, order them in terms of prestige and power, and construct a sexual division of labour within the institution.

Connell (1996) holds that the school as a major site of masculinity formation can be understood in two ways. It can be conceptualised primarily as an institutional agent of the masculinising process - that is, gender is embedded in the institutional arrangements through which the school functions including the curriculum, organisational management structures, division of labour, authority and discipline patterns, as well as relationships among staff and between staff and students. Alternatively the school can be understood as the setting in which other agencies are in play, especially the agency of the pupils themselves. For Measor & Sikes (1992, p.91), 'pupil-to-pupil relationships and peer networks are a major component of a child's experience of schooling' and Mac an Ghaill & Haywood (1998) argue that such groups are key school-based mechanisms through which different masculinities are developed and lived out.

As I have claimed above, this article will draw on a Case Study I carried out in 2002, actively engaging with pro-feminist perspectives, methodologies and epistemologies, in an all-Boys' Secondary School in Malta<sup>1</sup> which aimed at providing an informed perspective on the social practices of masculinity impacting on boys' lives in school. The study uncovered a number of practices across the school's official and 'hidden' curricula and at its administrative level, which, together with the student peer culture present on site, influence the construction of student masculine identities. In the course of my research, I used the questionnaire and interview as my chief instruments of data collection. I designed three questionnaires: one for male teachers, the other for female teachers and one for students. I opted to focus on three separate age-groups: Form 1 students, Form 3 students and Form 5 boys. I distributed the student questionnaires to 126 students - in two classes in each of the above forms. Part of the questionnaire was concerned with peer culture and my aim was to explore if any messages about what it means to be a boy and how a boy is to behave were both transmitted and enforced by students amongst themselves. I hoped that items on peer groups and peer pressure, misbehaviour, bullying and violence among students would provide valuable insights into this aspect of school life.

I carried out group (three students at a time) intensive semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with 18 students from the classes in which the questionnaires had been distributed - 3 students from each of the 6 classes. During these interviews, certain questions were used to prompt the boys to talk about their friends and friendship groups at school which tended to elicit responses about the dynamics and politics of the interplay of masculinities at the school.

It is important to stress from the outset that my intention in conducting the study was not to generalise my findings to all schools in Malta. Its aim, rather, was to examine gender issues in the education of Maltese boys in one specific setting.

### **Peer culture in the school**

#### *Various cultures on site and different hierarchies of masculinity*

It became apparent, as my research progressed, that (i) a number of pupil cultures were in place at the college, within which specific forms of masculinity could be observed (Mac an Ghail 1994) and that (ii) these peer cultures played a significant part in the construction of students' masculinities.

I identified three main student groups in Form 1: (a) the footballers, (b) the sportsmen, (those who practise athletics and other sports), and (c) the bookworms, (termed 'nerds'<sup>2</sup> by a number of respondents). 58% of Form 1 students who participated in the survey admitted to belonging to one of these groups.

An overwhelming 92% of Form 3 students self-identified as belonging to a student group. What is especially interesting is that there was a much wider variety of student groups among Form 3 students than there was among the younger and the older students, namely: (a) the sportive boys, (b) the music fans (especially of rap), (c) those keen on computers, (d) the 'nerds' and (e) the bullies. None of the students in the

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<sup>1</sup> In order to preserve anonymity, the school has been given the pseudonym 'Turu Scicluna School'. The names of administrators and teachers in the school have also been changed

<sup>2</sup> This is not a translation from the Maltese vernacular but the word as used in English by respondents.

lowest ability class in the form, unlike the students in the higher ability class, mentioned the bullies in their answers. However, what emerged later in the course of my interview with three representatives of the so-called 'weak' class was that it is a tightly-knit group and that they, in fact, were the bullies.

Similarly the lowest ability class in the Fifth form formed one homogenous group of their own, better known within the school as the 'troublemakers'. Overall, however, Fifth Formers belonged to three main groups: (a) the sportsmen, (b) the academic achievers and (c) the 'Saturday night guys', the music fans. 74% of Fifth Formers, the greater percentage (87%) being in the lower ability class, admitted to forming part of a group.

It was immediately evident that within each class and form, there were different ways of enacting boyhood. Yet the boys' varied perceptions of the constitution of these student groups showed that there were a number of overlapping pupil cultures within the same class to which the boys were affiliated. I found that across the age-groups those boys who were keen on sports or music, those who went out on a Saturday night and the bullies enjoyed a high level of prestige among their peers. On the other hand, the 'nerds', those who did not go out on a Saturday night, and, interestingly in a bilingual context, those who spoke English were targeted by the majority as the 'other'. In fact the dominant groups categorised and defined the other smaller group of boys by their 'differences' and their deficiencies (Swain 2002b). Clearly this confirms the presence of multiple masculinities on site (Connell 1996, 2000) with a definite set of hierarchical relations among them. The wide range of literature which has addressed this issue has alerted me to the existence of a clear divide between the dominant group and the subordinated group, evidenced by the constant jostling of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities in classes. However, my own impression formed from comments made by students is that there was no hierarchy of masculinities among the members of the 'high status' groups. My own understanding is that irrespective of whether a group of boys is keen on football, or music or whether they have an active social life, each group enjoys the same level of status. What counts most of all to them is that they do not form part of the subordinated group.

Data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews implied that there are different ways in which the peer group sustains a particular definition of masculinity and a particular way of pursuing masculine status. I found that status among peers is of significant value to boys who, according to Walker (1996) invest a lot of energy to build what has been called a 'public self' and to display themselves as particular kinds of boys. At the school, teasing and name-calling are the most widespread ways in which this is done.

#### *Part played by teasing and name-calling*

What my research indicated was that the practice of teasing peers becomes more widespread as students progress through secondary school. 33% of 1<sup>st</sup> Formers, 74% of 3<sup>rd</sup> Formers and 83% of 5<sup>th</sup> Formers admitted they teased peers. What emerged from their answers to the questionnaires was that the majority of teachers were aware that students give in to the pressure to tease other students.

My research findings suggest that the students who were teased most by their peers across the age groups were those who studied hard, those who spoke English, those

who had some physical defect or handicap, and, especially in the upper forms, those who did not go out on a Saturday night. Overall, ironically, many students regarded teasing as a joke, as an occasion to have a laugh and not as a serious offence in the victim's regard. This confirms Kehily & Nayak's (1997, 2001) claim that humour is an organising principle in the lives of young men within school arenas, which serves to consolidate hierarchies in male peer groups through regulation of self and others, to enhance/ disparage reputations, and to demarcate those who 'belong' from those who do not (p.83). In the school, name-calling was the main weapon used for this purpose. In fact, 83% of First Formers, 87% of Third Formers and 100% of Fifth Formers admitted this in the questionnaire.

The following extracts from interviews with students of a Form 1 and a Form 3 class, are salient in identifying how teasing takes place among peers.

With Form 1 students:

- JS* When students are teased what words are usually used ?  
*S†1* They call me 'nerd' all the time.  
*S†2* And it's not his fault. They call me nerd too. Do you know why ? Because a friend of mine once said 'Come on, come out with us,' and I'm not really allowed to go and for me not to tell them because they're all allowed to go out and I don't want to be the odd one out, I told them I had to study so they all call me names and ask 'why don't you start coming out?'  
*S†1* Only 3 or 4 boys in my class don't call me names.  
*JS* Why do they call you names ?  
*S†2* Because he studies a lot and in English he came first and they stay<sup>3</sup> teasing him. I told them to stop but...

With Form 3 students as they discuss boys who are 'different':

- JS* What do the other boys tell them ?  
*S†3* They're in a group of their own. Some pick on them.  
*JS* What do they call them ?  
*S†1* 'Gays', 'sissies'.  
*JS* Do some boys try to appear masculine ?  
*S†2* They show off. They interrupt lessons. They tease each other. They come up with nicknames.

From the insults that students, (both in interviews and in the questionnaire) claimed were used most, I was able to distinguish two types: (a) names of animals and objects used to attack physical defects and (b) sexual and homophobic slang. Among the latter the words 'gay', 'pufta' ('poofter' in Maltese) 'bla bajd' (literally 'without balls') '50/50' and 'f-oxx ommok' (mother fucker) featured most prominently.

In the literature, name calling is, in fact identified as a common teasing strategy. In Askew and Ross's (1988) research, for instance, verbal abuse resulted out of students' need to prove that they were not homosexual and that they despised homosexuality. Similarly Epstein (1997) and Kehily & Nayak (1997, 2001) stress the fact that such displays of verbal abuse are ways in which boys can enact a hyper-masculine identity and exhibit their heterosexualities. In contrast, it was evident to me that homophobic terms were not used by students in the school to attack those they believed were homosexual. Rather, such terms were used simply to mock all those that fall into the

<sup>3</sup> 'Stay' in Maltese means 'to do something continually'.

subordinated category, irrespective of their perceived gender orientation. More than anything, these terms connote 'non-masculine' and 'effeminate' rather than 'homosexual'. In view of this I maintain that homophobia is a mechanism or strategy used to police the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, to regulate and normalise masculine identities among boys and their peers and to attack those who do not conform to the group's norms of masculinity. In this regard my findings are consistent with views expressed by Lahelma (2002), Swain (2002a) and Lingard *et al.* (2002) that such homophobic terms are essentially used to control the general behaviour of boys rather than to refer to their sexual preference. Further evidence that the category 'homosexual' serves as a reference point for masculinity relates to the use of the Maltese word '*puf*' which featured quite prominently in students' vocabulary of insults. It must be stressed that although this is the most common term for homosexuals, '*puf*' in the Maltese culture is also used in a variety of contexts where men are seen to transgress the boundaries of acceptable masculine behaviour.

It is also students' use of sexual slang that presents a strong case for this argument. In Mediterranean countries, to rationalize one's actions by reference to the penis or testicles is, above all, to assert one's complete individuality. It is an extreme, yet very common, expression of the obstinate refusal to comply with ordinary behavioural expectations. And just as this particular manifestation of the human will is somehow related to the male genitalia, so too is it perceived as being especially characteristic of men. What is implied is that nonconformity of any kind requires the fearlessness and sense of abandon that only men are thought to possess and that they alone are permitted to express. This is why a man who is considered especially assertive, aggressive, and fearless in Andalusia, as demonstrated by Brandes (1981) is called a '*colonudo*', a 'big-balled man'. His extreme masculine behaviour is projected linguistically onto his genitals, as if normal-sized testicles were not large enough to accommodate the full force of his personal strength and will (Brandes 1981, p.231). Similarly, in Sicily, for instance, masculine honour is bound up with aggression and potency. A real man in Sicily is "a man with big testicles" by means of which his potency is firmly established. Among the Sarakatsani of Greece, too, an adult male must be "well endowed with testicles" quick to arousal, insatiable in the act (Gilmore 1990). '*Bla bajd*' which the students claimed they use to insult each other, is an expression in common use in Malta, used to refer to a male who does not (i) have the courage or strength to do something, (ii) take an important decision, or (iii) act as a male would normally be expected to. Another insult students use among themselves is f-oxx ommok - go fuck your mother - which is a vulgar yet common insult among Maltese men. Kehily & Nayak (1997, 2001) explain that the mother is very often invoked in insults to probe men's associative links with femininity and expose their vulnerabilities. I must add that this insult carries far greater weight in Malta where males, as anywhere in the Mediterranean, are traditionally attached to their mother, probably as a result of the extreme devotion Mediterranean people have for the Virgin Mary. Hence within the school, just as within that studied by Swain (2002b) this particular insult is used, in the same way as homophobic terms, to create a boundary between 'manly' boys and those seen as being susceptible to 'feminine' sensibilities.

A significant finding, as I have mentioned above, is that boys who spoke English were targeted as the 'other' and consequently mocked by their peers. The following extracts from some interviews provide valuable insight into this practice.

With Form 3 students:

- JS* Do you speak English or Maltese among yourselves?  
*All 3* Maltese.  
*St1* Our group Maltese. Then there are a few who are interested in computers, in Pokemon and in that rubbish, who speak English. It's the way you are brought up.  
*JS* Is anything ever said to them because they speak English?  
*St2* Yes. We call them 'tal-pepe'.<sup>4</sup> We say that to joke. Call them girls. Silly. Well, those who are brought up like that are ok but those who speak like that are labelled.  
*JS* In what sense ?  
*St2* You're a nerd, a snob.

With Form 3 students from another class:

- JS* Do you speak English or Maltese among yourselves,?  
*St1* Maltese. Pure Maltese !  
*JS* And why not English ?  
*St2* Because you end up being insulted and we make fools of ourselves... When you're with others, you're not going to speak English because you're teased.  
*JS* Is there certain pressure among students to speak Maltese and not English ?  
*St3* Yes. You're not going up to 4<sup>th</sup> formers and speak to them in English!  
*JS* Do you think that English is spoken mostly by girls?  
*St1* Yes. For example my cousin speaks English all the time.

With Form 5 students:

- JS* Do you speak English or Maltese among yourselves ?  
*All 3* Maltese !  
*JS* And if someone speaks English ?  
*St1* Well we ignore him really. He's a snob.  
*St2* I think he's silly.

Unlike other forms of showing off, which I shall discuss shortly, speaking English at Turu Scicluna School was not seen to confer any status or prestige on the boys who spoke it. In other words, it did not allow boys to acquire any male power among their peers. A comment passed by a student in the first extract cited, neatly sums up the attitude of some students towards our second language. Students who speak English are called 'girls', whilst a Form 1 boy in the questionnaire complained that 'most of my friends call me gay if I speak English'. Data derived from students' responses to the questionnaire when they were asked whether they associated Maltese and English with a particular sex or whether both languages could be associated with both sexes, provides a reasonable explanation for this. I was struck by the discrepancy in results across age groups when students expressed their opinion on speaking English as indicated in Table 1 and on speaking Maltese as evidenced from Table 2.

Table 1: Students' attitude towards speaking English

	FORM 1	FORM 3	FORM 5
Speaking English as 'female'	38%	49%	66%
Speaking English as 'male'	0%	5%	0%
Speaking English appropriate for both sexes	62%	46%	34%

Table 2: Students' attitude towards speaking Maltese

<sup>4</sup> This word is commonly used in Malta to refer to Anglophobic lackeys and is commonly used to mean 'stuck up'.

	FORM 1	FORM 3	FORM 5
Speaking Maltese as 'female'	0%	0%	1%
Speaking Maltese as 'male'	31%	49%	48%
Speaking Maltese appropriate for both sexes	69%	51%	51%

These findings indicate that there was a much greater discrepancy in students' attitudes towards English as they grow older than there is towards Maltese. What is of great importance, however, is that in many boys' eyes, English is associated with females whilst Maltese is a 'male' language. Some comments passed by boys in the interviews support such claims.

Interview with a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> Formers:

*JS* Are Maltese and English appropriate for both sexes?

*A//3* For girls English more.

*S#1* Yes, English is for girls but Maltese is for boys.

*JS* Why? What's the difference?

*S#2* Girls speak English more. They watch these programmes and imitate the actors/actresses. And even with their friends they speak with an English accent.

A group of 3<sup>rd</sup> Formers:

*JS* Do you feel that Maltese and English are appropriate for a particular sex or for both?

*S#1* Maltese is for boys. Girls speak English more, for example, in Paceville.<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that attitudes to the official languages of the country became gendered as students grow older and that it is such views that lay behind (i) the pressure among boys to speak Maltese and not English, (ii) the teasing that went on of students who spoke English among themselves and (iii) their attitude towards the respective languages. Teachers seemed to be aware of this problem - 89% of female teachers and 53% of male teachers agreed that boys do put pressure on each other not to speak English. One may readily conclude, in effect, that speaking the national tongue and deriding those who speak English appears to be one other signifier of masculinity, part of a larger set of practices which assist in the construction of a daily gender reality among peers in this bilingual school.

### *Bullying*

It cannot be denied that name-calling and teasing are in themselves a form of bullying (Griffiths 1995; Munn 1999; Ma *et al.* 2001). However, there is still some confusion as to the definition of the term 'bullying', with most adults, educators included, regarding such verbal bullying tactics as normal and harmless, and only considering coercive behaviour, such as violence and physical aggression as bullying (Ma *et al.* 2001). Nevertheless, irrespective of the different definitions of the term, there is widespread agreement in the literature that bullying is pervasive in the social life of schools and constitutes a serious widespread social problem (Cullingford & Morrison 1995; Ma *et al.* 2001).

My research at Turu Scicluna School confirmed that apart from verbal bullying, physical bullying both within and outside the classroom among boys, appeared to be

<sup>5</sup> A popular meeting place with youngsters in a Saturday night.

chronic, a view supported by the majority of teachers - an overwhelming 97% - who acknowledged the existence of bullying in the school.

Such an aggressive form of masculinity is conspicuous in the ethnographies of boys' schools. Responses from the students highlighted the fact that physical bullying among peers at the school was rife. I should add that in their answers to the questionnaire students across the three age groups remarked that they believed peers were violent (a) to show off, (b) to appear cool, (c) to keep up their reputation, (d) to look strong, (e) 'to act like a hero' and (f) to be popular. When the boys were asked to write in the questionnaire who was popular in their class or form, apart from the class clowns and the sportive students, it was the bullies, the boys who were/appeared tough and those who caused trouble, who topped the list. It is indeed hard to accept that the bullies should be more popular than the victims after all the trouble and misery they cause. Yet what must be recognised is that the popular boys are those who confirm their masculinity by resorting to practices that are crucial signifiers of masculinity within their culture. Undeniably, bullying/violence is one of many powerful icons with or against which other students position themselves.

There is an indication from students' responses that bullies were most popular in the Third Form and consequently it is not surprising that the incidence of violence should be highest among this age group. In fact 85% of 3<sup>rd</sup> Formers admitted that violence was a prominent feature of school life compared to 63% of 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Formers. This may be related to students at this age being at a transition stage between childhood and adolescence. Interestingly, Walker (1996) draws our attention to the fact that at this age there is a turbulent emotionality which has to be handled and that new rules have to be discovered. It is at this period in their lives that students work hard to build a public self and a private self. Hence the need to establish an identity and reputation is particularly strong. It did indeed become obvious to me from my research that there was a continuous power play, a continual seeking of status and prestige among the boys.

The interviews I held with students shed some interesting light on this problem.

Interview with a group of 1<sup>st</sup> Formers:

*Student one has just been commenting on his small frame:*

*JS* Is it a disadvantage to be small?

*S†1* Yes sometimes.

*JS* Can you give me some examples of when being small is a disadvantage in school?

*S†1* Imagine we just got to the senior school and the other seniors act all big, tough and so they come, shoot your ball, they take it, they run off with it and then you try to stand up to them but you're too small.

*S†2* It's not like that. They shoot our ball and then they stay shooting it and you go and tell them to stop and they don't and if you go and shoot theirs, even by mistake, they come and hit you.

*JS* Is there bullying in the school?

*S†3* Yes. The Form 4s and 5s.

*JS* By what type of students?

*S†1* Big, bulky and ugly.

*S†2* But even in class. There's someone who bullies for a reason. He bullies other people he's trying to prove he's better than you but he isn't.

The following are comments along the same lines passed by older students.

Interview with students from the 'weak' Form 3 class:

*JS* Are students bullied?

*St1* Yes. By us. I admit we're bullies.

*JS* Why?

*St2* Because they're afraid of us. Our group has got the reputation - we're about 7. Everyone is afraid of us, we fight.

*JS* Do you like this reputation?

*St3* Now we're used to it. It doesn't bother us. We don't go up to a student and start hitting him. No, however if someone does something to him for example (points to the one next to him) the former knows that the moment he lays his hands on him, he'll have to face us. Of all the Form 3s we're the first group that went up to Paceville ...

*JS* What types of bullying are there ?

*St1* There's bullying and bullying. There's our type of bullying which is more of a joke and there's a type that isn't. For example, some got hold of a student, threw him to the ground and started kicking him.

*JS* When does this take place?

*St2* During break and after school.

A set of Fifth formers:

*JS* Have you ever seen violence during break?

*St1* Fighting. Last week. They were killing each other. A form 5 guy with a form 4 guy. In front of everyone outside. Just to show off.

Two key points stand out from these remarks. Firstly, whilst older boys were bullied by their contemporaries, younger students were usually the victims of older students. The latter case implies that the boys' need to display their maleness was behind the use of their power over those who couldn't fight back. This concurs with Salisbury & Jackson's (1996) claim that bullying in schools is linked with the fierce push and striving of boys wanting to become more masculine. Some boys are even persuaded that appearing more manly can only be achieved through force and intimidation. Many, therefore, pick on younger, weaker students knowing they are bound to succeed and consequently achieve a high position in the male hierarchy.

Secondly, violence and bullying among peers of the same age, serve to normalise particular constructions of masculinity and determine where a boy is positioned within a hierarchical arrangement of masculinities (Mills 2001). The comments passed by the self-confessed bullies indeed confirm that bullying is a deliberate act of undermining another individual for the benefit of those involved. Boys do it for power, status, reputation and group control (Griffiths 1995). The fact that they gloat over everyone's fear of them confirms their need to prove they are really 'male' with its connotations of strength and power. At the same time it illustrates how dependent boys actually are on each other. In my judgement it is no coincidence that these bullies happened to belong to the lowest stream in the form. As I shall discuss shortly, these students can lay no claim to academic achievements. Since boys need to feel valued and recognised (Littlewood 1995), they do their utmost to gain power in other ways. Behaving in this manner may be, in their eyes, their only chance of drawing attention to themselves and acquiring status among their friends.

Doubtlessly great damage can be caused by both verbal and physical bullying. In most cases my findings point to victims being chosen for reasons beyond their control. It appears that victims in the school reacted in one of two ways: (a) they either fought

back or (b) they reacted passively in the face of abuse levelled at them. This is a clear acknowledgement that boys who, in the eyes of their peers, do not have what it takes to be labelled a 'proper boy', or who reject the macho, hegemonic form of masculinity cannot escape it and have a rough time at school in consequence.

Clearly, therefore, a main issue that has emerged from the study is that the wielding of power by boys over their peers, manifesting itself as it does in verbal and physical abuse and violence at times, enables the perpetrators to demonstrate their masculinity and acquire status within their peer culture which, as a result, works to distinguish between dominant and subordinate categories of masculinities.

#### *Other pressures exerted by peer groups*

My research suggests that the term 'masculinity' within the dominant peer group may also be defined through other forms of behaviour. These range from misbehaving in class and showing off with female teachers, to playing the part of the class clown, going out on a Saturday night and indulging in smoking and drinking .

The following extracts from some interviews help to highlight the fact that there is a regime of normalising practices through which boys are incited to adopt certain forms of masculinity and to display themselves as particular kinds of boys.

With students from the low stream Form 3 class:

- JS* Do people try to appear cool ?  
*St1* Some smoke to appear cool.  
*JS* In Form 3, do many smoke ?  
*St2* A lot. Even in our class...  
*JS* Why do they smoke ?  
*St1* I think everybody goes through it. To look cool in front of a girl.  
*St3* Even I went through it. Or else if your friends smoke and not to feel down you smoke as well.  
*JS* Are there other things you do to look cool ?  
*St2* Appearance, clothes. You wear modern clothes. To show off some even swear to appear cool. Some drink. Some behave like bullies as well.

With another group of Form 3 students:

- JS* Are there any students who try to appear cool ?  
*St1* And how ! They interrupt. Once we didn't have a lesson because of a boy.  
*JS* Why ?  
*St2* Mostly when we're with a female teacher and a young female teacher ! To impress.

Form 5 students:

- JS* Do certain boys try to flirt with female teachers ?  
*All3* You bet !  
*St1* A lot of empty chatter and showing off. They try to look cool in front of her.

The wasting of time in class by a number of individuals was rife according to 90% of students across the three age groups who attributed their or their peers' behaving in this manner to the urge to show off, to attract attention to themselves, to impress, to look cool as well as to keep up their reputation. What emerges from such comments made in the questionnaire answers and during interviews, is that boys seem to be constantly attempting to impress each other through various antics (Askew & Ross

1988). The findings of my study attest to the ways in which much of the disruptive, hostile and aggressive behaviour adopted by boys occurs in groups where there is an audience. For Walker (1996) this should be understood as the boys' public self having to do with sociability, and the importance of having a good laugh, if necessary at the expense of school work. For Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) boys' disruptive practices are a complex system of public claims to notoriety, a yearning for recognition, and although they argue that the project of constructing masculinity does not account for all this set of motivations, interpretations and forms of behaviour, they maintain that It is equally true that we cannot understand why boys misbehave in class unless we also realise the significance of such behaviour for their public persona, their social relations and their sense of self. A central part of these elements of identity is the need to establish an acceptable position in the arena of masculine gender relations (p.176).

This may explain Francis' (1999) observation that the role of class clown can play a useful and appropriate role in a boy's construction of himself as masculine, a claim upheld by Jackson (2002). The fact that class clowns feature highly on the list of popular students at the school confirms that social status is derived from amusing the class and supports Jackson's (2002) argument that playing the part of the clown enhances a boy's image with his peers. Masculinity is hence constructed through being silly and the boys' construction of silliness or having a laugh endows them with power in the class, power derived from the prestige which such constructions often earn and from the ability to use these constructions to put down or threaten other students.

What does strike me as odd about this type of boy gaining such high status recognition from his peers is that the latter are very well aware that certain behaviour takes place simply to impress others. Evidently, the fact that students were conscious that these boys very often bluffed to keep up appearances and yet looked up to them confirms the strength and influence of the peer group to sustain a particular definition of masculinity and a particular way of pursuing masculine status. This, in turn, doubtlessly influences and provokes many other boys to constantly affirm themselves as members of the male club by acting in the same way. Teachers' views confirm this. 97% of them were very much aware of the pressure that boys put on each other to misbehave in class whilst 95% understood that boys put pressure on their companions not to work.

I found that being disruptive or being the class clown were not the sole variables that affected students' popularity and generated a great deal of peer status. The following extracts from other interviews point to the existence of other forms of masculinity that have a significant role in structuring the way that boys have learned to relate to one another.

A group of Fifth formers:

- JS* In school, are there students who try to prove they are something that they're not ?  
*S#1* There are yes. Just to show how strong they are. For example to show how well they know how to play cds.  
*JS* What is the reason for this ?  
*S#2* Because they're insecure. Just to show they're strong.  
*JS* Is there any boasting amongst yourselves about going out on a Saturday night ?

- St1* Yes. Last year they used to tease me because I didn't go to Paceville. But I didn't want to. I could have gone up to Paceville as much as I wanted to but I didn't. Yet I was actually forced to. They used to say, 'Because his mother didn't let him'.
- JS* Is there pressure then ?
- St1* Nowadays it's what you do with a girl because even a five year-old goes to Paceville. Or else it's all a matter of how long you stay there.
- JS* If you don't take long there or don't do certain things are you made fun of ?
- St1* Yes. But how do you know what to do ? That's what I can't understand. Some boast about what they do with some girl or other.

Another group of Fifth Formers:

- JS* Do you go out on Saturdays ?
- All 3* Why ?
- St1* To relax after a week studying, to meet our girlfriend.
- JS* Where do you go ?
- St2* Paceville.
- St3* I go to the youth centre.
- JS* Is there pressure among students to go out on Saturdays ?
- St2* From their own friends...
- JS* Are there students who don't go out ?
- St2* Of course. Form 5s as well.
- JS* Do you tell them anything ?
- St1* Sure. We tell them, 'Come to Paceville' yet they are not allowed to by their mother. That's what Justin says and that's why I enjoy myself with him because he's on the level with me. Then there are others who say they don't want to but you realise that their mothers don't allow them to.
- JS* Why should they lie then ?
- St2* Not to be regarded as a baby by us.
- JS* If they were to say their mother doesn't let them go out what happens ?
- St1* I personally don't tell them anything. But there are others who mock them.
- JS* When you go to Paceville are there certain things you feel you have to do once you're with friends?
- St2* Once you're there you drink a little bit extra, a little bit of vodka. If not drink, then it's cigarettes.
- JS* And if you go alone ?
- St1* When I go with my girlfriend no - she doesn't drink so I'm not going to drink alone. You drink with friends.
- JS* What's more common, drink or cigarettes ?
- St2* Drink I think. Sometimes the two of them. All my friends smoke.
- JS* At school ?
- St1* They used to. There are some who still do.
- JS* If they are caught, what happens to them ?
- St1* Last year we were caught twice but nothing happened..
- JS* Why do you smoke ?
- St2* To feel cool. We used to go down to the valley. One guy smokes on our bus to look Cool... Kind of 'I smoke, I'm you know, cool!'

It is clear that the specific practices of going out on Saturday nights, smoking and drinking, success with girls and sexual swagger in the form of sexual boasting and bragging also served to ensure credibility and constitute, as it were, almost a quantitative index of manhood. As Salisbury & Jackson (1996) demonstrate, such a wide range of activities are important in enabling boys to identify themselves as part of the club of 'the real lads'. By welcoming such actions they can get a buzz out of displaying just how wild and hard they are, for, through such bravado, they are

attempting to distance themselves from the world of femininity. Basically they are acting that way in order to be more masculine.

As evidenced in the interviews, there was immense social pressure from peers on individuals to demonstrate their independence. Any boy who was allowed less autonomy than his peers was labelled a wimp for failing to establish his position and is thus regarded as belonging to the category of the 'other' within the group.

It is significant to note, that my research demonstrated that the peer group was most influential in the lowest streams of the school. The boys in each of these so-called 'weak' classes were very much a united peer-group and my findings suggest that the similar behaviour (or rather misbehaviour) of the boys in these classes transmits and enforces a number of rules about 'appropriate' behaviour and attitudes.

Connell (1989) explains that the good students, the so-called 'academic successes' have access to social power - in the case of the school I studied, seen in terms of wider choice of subjects- with the result that the reaction of the 'failed' is likely to be a claim to other sources of power, even other definitions of masculinity. At the school these are physical aggression, misbehaviour and resistance to school regulations. Similarly to Mac an Ghail (1994) I noticed that different styles of peer-group masculine identities were developed in response to the school's differentiated forms of authority. In this respect I found the remarks made by students from these classes disquieting.

The 'weak' Form 3 class:

*JS* As a class do you do anything to rebel against the school ?

*St1* Yes, we try. For example last time Mr Psaila<sup>6</sup> told me, 'I know you're right and the teacher isn't but the teacher is having his way'. There is discrimination. There is reason to rebel. Last time I sealed the door. I did it to dare them.

*JS* Are there any other things you do ?

*St2* Yes. They organised mass during break for us and we all started eating...

The 'weak' 5<sup>th</sup> form class:

*JS* Do you rebel ? What do you do ?

*St2* We can't do anything because we know they're against us. Sometimes we feel like killing our teacher. We don't give a hoot ! Because we're so used to their not taking any notice of us. But what can you do ? We make it a point to have fun during the lessons...

*JS* Are you doing this to prove anything ?

*St2* Yes. That's what we're doing. We're paying them back. We bother the teachers. For example Mr Mifsud hasn't been giving a lesson for ages ! He tells us, 'You're difficult kids' and we prefer it that way - we're happy when we hear that (uttered in anger). It's his problem. We're fed up here.

What these boys were expressing is a form of protest masculinity (Connell 1996) against the values of the educational system and against the school that they felt had treated them as nobodies *for so long*. In their struggle to create or maintain a personal identity they were most likely doing their best to establish a hegemonic form of masculinity through which they could demonstrate their opposition to the values embodied in the aims of formal education. I believe very strongly that their closeness was a defence mechanism against what they saw as a hostile school environment surrounding them which had 'sentenced' them to approximately five years of 'solitary

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<sup>6</sup> Assistant Head in charge of discipline

confinement'. The following comments in their regard passed by a group of students in another Form 5 class provide further evidence of this.

These students are talking about the different student groups:

- S†2* Then there's the trouble group, class B.  
*JS* How do they behave ?  
*All/3* [A snigger]  
*S†1* Last time they organised a band in class. They got a piece of tin and started hitting it.  
*JS* Why do you think they behave this way ?  
*S†1* Because the teachers placed them in this class on purpose. I think they want to rebel. Students in other classes think too highly of themselves. They have no respect for Students from class B regard them as fools, nobodies. All in all, after spending 2 years and sometimes 5 years in that class you feel ostracised and cut off so what they've built up inside them, throughout these years they release in their last year...

I find Jackson's (2002) ideas on self-worth protection theories useful in helping to deepen my understanding of such misbehaviour on the part of lower stream students. It is argued that academic ability is a highly valued commodity in some schools and such ability is intertwined with feelings of self-worth. Many students' fear of failure is the motivating force behind their efforts to protect their sense of self-worth at all costs. Clearly in a competitive system such as the one prevailing at Turu Scicluna School, a good number of students who knew or who were told that they would never succeed academically, felt their sense of self-worth threatened and consequently did their utmost to preserve their social esteem. Displaying 'laddish' behaviour is one strategy they adopted to deflect attention away from their poor academic performance. Furthermore, they tried to convince others, including their peers, that their poor performance was a direct result of their not paying attention in class rather than of a lack of ability. At the same time, such behaviour operating as a self-worth protection strategy acts to reinforce hegemonic masculinities (Jackson 2002, p.42) and to enhance a boy's status within his peer group. Thus, the streaming practices at the school encourage behaviours associated with particular types of masculinity. Undoubtedly they play a major part in the formation of an abrasive masculinity within the lower stream in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Form classes as well as in the development of a top-stream masculinity geared to academic achievement.

## Conclusion

Undeniably, my findings clearly highlight the direct role of the school as 'setting' in the making of masculinities. A major issue that emerged from the research I conducted on the peer culture at the school is that the 'dominant' peer group has its own ideas of what constitutes acceptable high-status masculinity at the institution and it utilises various strategies to ensure that others conform to this category of masculinity. However, those who do not comply and who are then relegated to a low-status subordinate masculinity category, are victimised in ways which I have already demonstrated. What also emerges from my findings is that the main features of hegemonic masculinity at the college are bound up with a highly visible kind of presentation. There is a need to be *seen* doing certain things and it is a kind of perpetual performance. Boys clearly depend on other boys for their identities as 'males', a fact which is entirely consistent with the existing literature that illustrates the highly significant part played by peer group relations in the construction of masculinities among the boys. Importantly too, it has demonstrated that in a bilingual

environment where the national and official second language are viewed in different ways, students who opt to make use of the 'lower status' language within the school, are regarded as appertaining to a 'subordinate' category of masculinity and targeted as a result. A central argument is, therefore, that use of language in a context such as the Maltese one, becomes a strong and effective masculinising practice.

Beyond any doubt, my research emphasizes the complexities surrounding the construction of gender identities among students. I hope that this article has been instrumental in bringing to the fore the need for all those involved in educational management as well as for *all* educators to acknowledge that (i) young people are active markers of sex/gender identities, (ii) by sustaining a particular definition of masculinity and a particular way of pursuing masculine status (Connell 2000) student peer groups, are key signifiers that mark out gender and sexual status, (iii) the construction of masculinity is a powerful component of harassment and bullying in schools and (iv) conformity to peer pressure can work against some boys' academic success and lead to much physical and psychological abuse which is damaging to the lives of marginalised boys. It is only through recognition and understanding of the ways in which gender identities may be constructed and negotiated in the school that intervention practices on the part of teachers and administrators may be effective and ultimately make a realistic difference.

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