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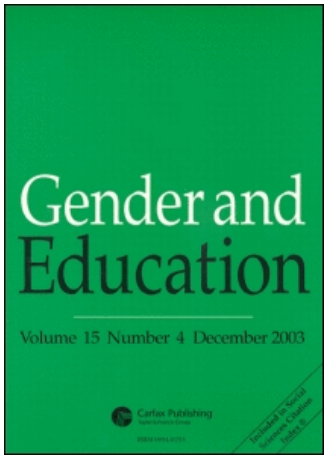

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The emperor has no clothes: examining the impossible relationship between gendered and academic identities in middle school students

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Despite the social equity work that still needs to be done in schools and society, many researchers, politicians, and social commentators claim that gender equity work in schools has been accomplished. These people assume that actions in school lead to gender equity outside it. But, there may be two problems with this assumption: 1) achieving equity in academic work may mask still-inequitable gender work in schools and 2) girls' and boys' equal academic achievement does not promise social equality, inside or outside schools. The following study offers evidence from a recent middle school study that reveals how children's gender identities are naturalized as neutral "student" identities, making the effects of children's gender identity work invisible. This author argues that schooling at best maintains the inequity of the American gender status quo, and perhaps may work to actually lessen chances for women and men's equitable life opportunities.

Introduction

A student is a complex thing to be: many of society's expectations are heaped onto this construction of child, social class, ethnicity and gender. US society seems forever hopeful that the American dream will be realized by neutralizing students as blank slates that can be fixed and filled so that they can go on to their poetic destinies. Several decades of US and European research have exposed the fallacies behind this stubborn mythology (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987; Walkerdine, 1990; Crichlow, 1991; Wexler, 1992), exposing schools as sites of simultaneous and contradictory advancement and reproduction of inequalities.

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The persistent social contradictions of American schools, though less for White middle class children than for their White and non-White working class counterparts (AAUW, 1999), remain particularly confusing for those of us who are concerned about the role schooling plays in the advancement of gender equity. Much gender equity work in schools has been already accomplished (Ravitch, 1996; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000), with prominent social commentators suggesting that the gender disparities in schools, if there ever were any, are gone. But, the following research suggests that student identities and gendered identities may be less compatible than anyone thought: it may be impossible to be a successful student and at the same time a successful girl or boy. The 13-year-old girls' behaviour in this study suggests that they cannot be girls and students simultaneously; their student identities cannot escape the gendered lenses through which adults and children in schools see.

The parity between girls' and boys' academic achievement in K-12[1] schooling is undeniably a significant departure from girls' and boys' unequal academic achievement in the past century (Frazier & Sadker, 1973). Within the last two decades, reports of academic disparities based in gender differences (AAUW, 1992; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994) have not gone unheard: the differences between boys and girls' access to and success in school have changed largely for the better (AAUW, 1999). Boys' and girls' equal academic success can be attributed to a combination of good work ethics, exposure to new possibilities, participation in extra-curricular activities, and above all, good grades (AAUW, 1999, 1992). Now that girls achieve academically at the same rates or better than boys, Sommers (2000) claims that 'we should repudiate the partisanship that currently clouds the issues surrounding sex differences in schools [and] objectively educate all children fairly' (p. 74). By Sommers' interpretation of equal achievement, boys' and girls' equal success as students works in complement with children's gender identities.

Yet I maintain that children's student identities, rather than fitting over other existing social identities as Sommers (2000) suggests, are entangled within them: success in grammar, math and science, for example, is suffused with issues of poverty, language dominance and debates about girls' and boys' genetic predispositions to math (AAUW, 1999, 1992). But schools have existed and thrived historically without significant attention to the identities with which children come to school, and sometimes, when schools have tried to simultaneously fix students' social inequities as well as educate students, unfortunate consequences have resulted. Divisions by race created few schools that were separate and equal; de facto separation of students by economic class and race continues unchallenged in what is supposed to be a equal opportunity public school system, with poorer students receiving significantly fewer resources than their richer counterparts (New York State Department of Education, 2004). Girls and boys, separated less by law but by access to curricula and opportunity, have also been historically denied different futures.

Teachers and schools have done much to bring equitable treatment to all their children, treating them as 'students' despite differences in social class, ethnicity and gender. It is my contention that this treatment of children as students, while well-meaning, so sublimates the gender work that children are necessarily producing, that

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students and teachers cannot enact meaningful change through any identity. In particular, I will show through examples of school discourse that becoming a successful student reinforces gendered cultural expectations, while recasting gender identities as student identities that mask the gender work beneath them. I will argue that it is impossible for girls, in particular, to position themselves within discourses of academic success and femininity: they cannot be students and girls at the same time.

Background

In their 1983 Grandin School study of students' gender constructions, researchers Eisenhart and Holland noted that: 'In contrast and sometimes in overt opposition to the teachers' emphasis on children as students, the children's peer groups ignored student identities and instead stressed gender and age groups' (p. 322). Eisenhart and Holland (1983) observed that gender identities were the primary focus of the students in their study, who made a concerted effort to conceal their peer–peer interactions from school adults (p. 328). The children in my 1999 study also downplayed their student identities and constructed their school identities primarily through gender, social class and race/ethnicity, just as the children in the Grandin School study had done.

Student identities, like gender, ethnic and social class identities, have evolved as positions which children take up in order to accomplish some of the social work of society. Children, as students, find a place in school that theoretically allows them to develop the requisite skills and maturation necessary to take their place in a complex adult social structure. Student identities, at least in the Western world, are built largely on an assumed frame of middle class Whiteness (Eisenhart & Holland, 1983; Walkerdine, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), allowing them to reify the Western status quo without overt challenge. Student identities masquerade with neutered gender themes as well, as if the acquisition of knowledge, which the student is supposed to be accomplishing, happens outside the realm of gender identity development.

Yet Mac an Ghaill (1994) notes that 'sex/gender regimes are a fundamental organizing principle within the schools which underpins the individual and collective construction of student … subject positions' (p. 168). His 1994 study of the social construction of masculinities in secondary schools revealed that a range of feminine and masculine identities is available for students to inhabit in schools. Connell's (1995) work, too, asserted that 'masculinities come into existence as people act' (p. 208) and that both boys and girls had a range of gender identities available to them in schools. Both researchers corroborated the complex dynamics of student and gender identity work in schools.

Finders, in her 1996 study of the nature and purpose of literacy for adolescent girls, uncovered mechanisms by which schooling acts to construct gender identities even as it works to foreground student identities. She found that while girls' literacy practices in class echoed that of student identities, the girls' literate underlife (Goffman, 1974) 'displayed a tremendous sense of play' (p. 111) which they used to moderate their

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entry into adolescent status. Finders notes, 'The girls' literate underlife was clearly gendered … student-centered pedagogical practices deflected attention away from the rich complexities of students' lived experiences, creating a lens too narrow to view the power of the social dynamic' (p. 121). The data I present from White Oaks Middle School corroborates Finders' conclusions and offers evidence of the conflict created as gender identities and student identities compete in children's interactions, particularly in adolescent children's interactions.

Walkerdine (1990), perhaps more than any gender researcher within the last decade and a half, challenged schools construction of students' gender identities. She asked, 'What constructs the fiction of gender neutrality?' (p. 32). Starting from the premise that there are no 'unitary categories "boys" and "girls"' but only people with multiple positions that are ascribed to masculine and feminine categories (p. 75), she used discourse between students and between students and teachers to illustrate how students and teachers can be positioned in a number of gendered identities and that these positions have 'real and material effects in the life chances of … girls' (p. 74). While her work neglected to point out that boys, even in positions of power, are equally affected by gendered positions, she nonetheless illustrated 'how [student] categories are produced as signs and how they "catch up" the subjects, position them, and in positioning, create a truth' (p. 142). By denying the complex and often masked ways in which gender becomes naturalized, the power assigned to gender becomes hidden.

When gender identities are sublimated by student identities, they become even more powerful: gender feels natural as it resides in a student identity, thereby masking the ways in which gender and schooling interact. It is the unfortunate consequence of schooling in a society that still believes in the mythological power of meritocracy (Young, 1959) where the simultaneous existence of powerful gender identities and student identities become impossible. The data of White Oaks Middle School offer a glimpse of how gender identities are actively in conflict with and naturalized by student identities.

It is difficult to catch the formation of this naturalization in action. While these discursive data are contextual and fleeting (Geertz, 1973, 1995), catching pieces of them in moments, in their context, is to reveal them in new light. These data are by no means comprehensive, but I believe that they provide us with a rationale for starting a newly radical conversation about girls' and boys' abilities to challenge their gender identities in school.

Poststructural theory and contradictory identities in context

These data were collected as part of a study of student gender identities in a suburban New York State school district. The Sage Creek School District is home to approximately 3300 students, grades Kindergarten through to Grade 12. It is situated in a community of 25,000 predominantly White, middle to upper middle class professionals and their families.[2] The community has a longstanding reputation for educational excellence that its members feel enhances all its residents: they carry the belief

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that they are academically untouchable. Real estate agents use the school district's reputation for academic superiority as a calling card for house sales in the area.

Children in the White Oaks Middle School were expected to carry student identities with pride—to choose success. The Sage Creek Central Schools mission states, 'We expect all students to achieve their full potential for personal development and educational success' (Sage Creek Profile, 1). The middle school principal, Mr Meyer, elaborated on this: 'We need to look at kids as learners, as individuals', he said. 'Every kid needs a couple of pats on the back a day. We need to expect them to perform well academically—to have high standards for them and present them with opportunities' (Principal Interview 1). The principal's assertion that these 12- to 14-year-olds are 'individual learners' places them in the student identity. I suggest that positioning children as 'individual learners' makes the act of teaching less complex and the act of being a student less painful for children, as it mutes the impact of children's social identities on their understanding of how to be successful students.

But the students' discourse suggests otherwise. Despite teachers' and administrators' words that suggest children's student identities could be unchallenged by their social identities, analysis of students' discourse displays just how intertwined gender and academic achievement are. Fairclough (1995) observed that social subjects can occupy institutional subject positions that are ideologically incompatible; this is visible in the discourse of White Oaks Middle School students and teachers.

Poststructural theory and its relationship to students' identities

Poststructuralist theory has its roots in cultural production theory, for it emphasizes the parts of the structure that make up the whole; it challenges the structural view of the whole as representative of its smaller components and allows for relationships to be the substance of analysis. Poststructuralism sees people as the building blocks of social structures, not products of them. Like cultural production theory, poststructuralism allows for the analysis of subject positions (identities) and for those subject positions to take on multiple forms. Poststructuralism, however, uses language as the analytic centerpiece. 'The idea that meanings flow back and forth from what is said to what is done, from ourselves to the world, is integral', writes Cherryholmes (1988, p. 9). Poststructuralism allows for a framework that uses a systematic analysis of language within an understanding of the fluidity of the walls between school and society.

Poststructuralist theory is one that accounts for 'the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power' (Weedon, 1987, p. 12). A feminist approach to poststructuralism extends the theory to understand existing gender power relations and to identify mechanisms of inequality. Feminist poststructuralist theory sees feminism as a politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. Doing so requires feminist critical research which allows us to 'understand social and cultural practices which throw light on how

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gender and power relations are constituted, reproduced and contested' (Weedon, 1987, p. vii).[3]

Placing acts of naturalization in a framework that facilitates the connections between the talk and actions and the larger social structure of the school allows us to understand the connections between context-specific micro actions (here, the students' and teachers' actions) and society. Fairclough (1995) offers a framework for making these connections, stating 'It makes little sense to study verbal interactions *as if* they were unconnected with social structures' (p. 35, emphasis in original). He maintains that social structure and discourse can only be integrated through the use of micro and macro research, and that the institution must be the 'pivot' between society and local action (p. 37).

The focus on the institution as the 'pivot' between levels of society can be illustrated this way:

- Social formation (society).
- Social institution (school).
- Social action (local).

The school, then, functions like a *comedia del arte* mask: half its face has ties downward to social action, to the micro-discourse of the students' and teachers' interactions, and the other half has ties upwards to the societal context in which the school sits. Fairclough argues that the relationship between these levels is not unidirectional, but rather dialectic; changes at any of the levels can influence levels up or down. Because a social institution is 'amongst other things, an apparatus of verbal interaction, or an order of discourse' (p. 38), understanding the discourse associated with a particular organization can lead to understanding the dominant and competing ideologies within that institution.

Fairclough (1995) discusses the dominant ideologies present in social institutions and the discourses used to maintain them as *ideological discourse formations*, or IDFs, created from the combination of Pêcheux's (1982) term 'discursive formation' and Althusser's (1971) 'ideological formation'. As Fairclough further explains:

> I have referred … to the social institution itself as sort of a speech community and … ideological community; and I have claimed that institutions construct subjects ideologically and discoursally. Institutions do indeed give the appearance of having these properties. … I suggest that these properties are properly attributed to the IDF, not the social institution: it is the IDF that positions subjects in relation to its own sets of speech events, participants, settings, topics, goals and simultaneously, ideological representations. (Pêcheux, 1982, p. 41)

The definition of an IDF, then, is a pattern of discursive interactions that systematically keep particular ideologies in place within an institution.

More than one IDF usually exists within an institution and it is the struggle for dominance of a particular IDF where power struggles might be visible. When an IDF is largely unchallenged, it is 'then that the norms of the IDF become the most naturalized … and may come to be seen as the norms of the institution itself' (p. 41).

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This is the case I am making with student identities in White Oaks Middle School. The power of an IDF must be continuously fought for, but that fight might not be obvious; given the possibility of an IDF being so dominant as to be thought of as the institutional norms, the group which has ideological and discoursal power may not even be status-marked.

In order for IDFs to maintain dominance, they must be supported by what Fairclough refers to as 'background knowledge.' Background knowledge is 'taken for granted knowledge … that subsumes 'naturalized' ideological representations which come to be seen as non-ideological "common sense"' (p. 28). The 'student identities' and the discourse that maintains them, create in this context the IDF. In White Oaks Middle School, children's gender identities become naturalized as student identities. Since student identities are supported as the 'appropriate' and common sense identities of schooling, the children's gender identities are sublimated, although not without problem, as I present below.

How gender identities are naturalized as student identities

Students

There are several interactions that I believe reveal how gender identities in this context become naturalized as student identities, forming the IDF. Below, White Oaks Middle School students are in study hall discussing the definition of the 'perfect student'. The students create a distinction between boy and girl students, unmasking the student identity as a gendered identity. I have separated the comments that describe the 'perfect female student' from the comments that challenge this construction: the girls in this conversation display their understanding that the student identity is not unproblematic. It is mostly girls who challenge the construction, but both boys and girls contribute to the construction of the 'perfect student':

Emily:	Repeating my question] What's a perfect student?
Rick:	Uh, like female student?
NN:	Is there a difference?
Rick:	Yeah, there is a difference. The perfect female student, nice clothes, sorta shy—
Jenn:	*Nice? Not nice clothes—*
Dan:	Pretty and tall and like—
Jenn:	*Ah, he thinks we're perfect!*
Dan:	Like skinny and—
Emily:	*Tall, blonde, they want them to be blonde.*
Dan:	No, blondes are—
Jenn:	*You're describing a Barbie doll.*
	[All laugh.]
Dan:	I won't go there.
Jenn:	*And big boobs?*
Dan:	No, they have small boobs.
Rick:	No, but she's like tall and she's thin and she's like I don't really know how big her boobs are but … I don't think it really matters, but, um—
Jenn:	*Yeah right.*
Emily:	*Hey wait, this has like nothing to do with the student.*

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Jenn:	*I know.*
Emily:	*I think Barbie dolls are ugly.*
NN:	What does a perfect girl student act like in class?
Rick:	She's quiet in class—
Emily:	She does all her homework.
Dan:	Doesn't do it all at home, but gets it done.
Emily:	Passes. Always has her binder checked.
Dan:	Passes with flying colours. Never fails. Does everything, hands in her report.
Suzy:	She's always gets things on time or early and she does all the extra credit she can.
Rick:	Alright she's like, she's sorta, she's quiet she's definitely quiet.
Jenn:	*OK what girl—*
Rick:	And—
Jenn:	*—is quiet?*

Emily and Jenn counter the boys' descriptions of the perfect female student, but also contribute to the construction of the identity until Beth exposes the contradiction with 'Hey wait, this has nothing to do with the student'. Jenn concurs and Emily then directly counters their construction of the perfect female student by saying, 'I think Barbie dolls are ugly'. This comment stops the conversation for a long three seconds. But if Barbie dolls are ugly, it means by these students' definitions that 'perfect female students' must also be ugly. Since no one wants to say this, it makes sense, then, that no one responds to Emily. The students' lack of response to Emily also suggests that the girls in this conversation are negotiating contradictory discourses as Finders (1996) and Walkerdine (1990) suggest.

When I ask what this 'perfect female student' acts like in class, the students' comments again jointly construct her as long as they discuss class work. As soon as Rick says that the perfect girl is 'sorta quiet', Jenn counters by loudly asking, 'OK, what girl is quiet?'. They debate this contradictory position.

The physical description of the 'perfect female student' is that she is tall, blonde and model-like in her beauty. No matter that, as Emily notes, beauty has nothing to do with doing schoolwork: for these students, the construction of a female with these characteristics is naturalized as 'good student'. Further, Dan says that the perfect girl 'doesn't do it [her homework] all at home, but gets it done', suggesting that girls willingly participate in hiding their student identities. The perfect female student must: wear nice clothes, be beautiful like a Barbie doll, and do all her schoolwork on time and well, but hide her academic accomplishment. The girls' gender identities are naturalized as student identities, but their student identities are expected to be hidden under gender identities. These constructions create a social Catch 22: a girl is naturalized into a student, but as a student, she is supposed to be a girl in order to be a good student.

The naturalization of these girls' gender identities into student identities is clearly articulated by Emily, though her observation goes unchallenged and barely corroborated. She states that the discussion about girls' breasts 'has nothing to do with the student' but only Jenn responds with an 'I know'. The second half of the conversation reveals contradictions in the students' constructions of male students and elaborates

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on the construction of female students. I have denoted in bold the comments that challenge the construction of either:

NN: So what does a perfect male student look like then?
Rick: Can dress good.
Emily: Pretty much everything that a female is, but—
Rick: Glasses.
Jenn: *Glasses? Why can't the girl have glasses?*
Rick: 'Cause the girl doesn't *wanna* wear glasses.
Jenn: *Girls wear glasses though.*
Rick: OK. I'm not mocking I'm just saying the girl doesn't want to wear glasses and doesn't wear glasses.
Emily: Girls usually wear contacts.
NN: If there's a difference between a perfect male and a perfect female student, what is it?
Rick: He's got glasses, short hair, he's got um—
Suzy: He's gotta be a little bit loud but not that—he can't be shy.
Rick: No, a little bit loud.
Emily: Not shy, a little bit. Funny.
Rick: Sorta procrastinates but doesn't get points off for it because like he'll get it done in study hall.
Jenn: Joke around. But gets good grades, maybe not passes every test but gets average grades, like 70s and 80s.
Emily: [Unclear comment]
NN: What did you just say, Emily?
Emily: *Well, they like described the female as like perfect—*
Jenn: I know.
Emily: *And the male as being like a little loud, not passing every test.*
Jenn: *It's like their dream girl.*
Emily: *The girl has to be perfect.*
Jenn: *A perfect girl student is like a geek, kinda, and kinda not.*
Emily: *Too perfect. Beautiful.*
Emily: *To be perfect, you can't be a geek.*

The students begin describing the perfect male student using physical criteria as they did with the construction of the perfect female, but they then dispense with the physical description, turning to males' behaviours and their academic and social performances. It is Emily who again interrupts, imperceptibly at first, eventually giving voice to the disparity between what perfect male and female students are supposed to be: the female has to have perfect grades and be quiet and beautiful according to the spoken description, and the male needs not to pay attention to his looks, should have less than perfect grades and should be loud.

Jenn and Emily refine their understanding of the contradiction inherent in their constructions of the perfect female and male students. Jenn notes that 'the perfect girl has to be "kinda geek and kinda not"' and Emily adds the final coda: 'to be perfect, you can't be a geek'. So, the 'perfect girl student' has to possess all of the characteristics that make up the socially weak 'geek', which in this context is equivalent to a student identity.[4] The girl student has to do all her work and 'pass with flying colours', be quiet and get 'all the extra-credit she can' and at the same time she has to have the beauty

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and social standing of the stereotypically beautiful Barbie doll. The perfect girl student, by the students' own definition, does not and *cannot* exist. The gender standards of the culture hide in the naturalized identity that is the 'perfect female student'. Girls are expected to possess identities that in this context are completely incompatible.

The student identity for a boy also naturalizes his gender identity, though the students in this conversation do not discuss this. The perfect male student is expected to be the rowdy, outspoken boy who does not pay attention to his looks. This male student identity naturalizes the male gender identity construction in this context, and while it may seem less harmful than the female identity, it leaves no room to be any other kind of male other than the one described. Specifically, any boy who does pay attention to his looks or who 'passes everything with flying colours' as the perfect female student must do, is at risk for being a labeled a 'girl'. And, in a double cultural punch, being labeled a girl is an insult in this context, an assertion that one is gay (see Niemi, 2001, for elaboration on this point).

Girls and boys have gender identities that are naturalized as student identities. The student identity reveals, in this context however, the differing expectations for boys and girls; in White Oaks Middle School, it seems as though it is impossible to be both girl and student.

Teachers and administrators

The adults of Sage Creek demonstrate through their discourse that they, too, try to actively prevent the influences of society and social action from entering the institution. If the institutional actors do not acknowledge what they hear or see about gender—or if they actually do not see it—then they can maintain the IDF of the student in the institution. If the efforts of the institutional actors deny the influences of society (both micro and macro), then these efforts stay accepted as a way—perhaps the only way—to make schooling successful for every student, regardless of their other identities.

Earlier I suggested how the principal's discourse naturalized students' gender identities by making them 'individuals'. The teachers naturalize gender as well. By assuming that students' academic identities override their social identities—in this case, gender—the teachers can naturalize gender and make it look as though it does not impact the student identity. In the following interaction, Ms French, an English teacher from my study, wanted to help her students identify with the characters from Shakespeare's play *The tempest*. After finishing an aural reading of the play, she asked them which character they would most like to be:

Ms French:	OK. Now think for a minute. I want you to think about the characters in the play—all the different ones: Prospero, Antonio, Caliban, Miranda, Ariel, and tell me who you would choose to be in real life? [Silence while they write their answers.] Now. Raise your hand. Who would like to be Ariel? Okay, three. Who would be Miranda? Okay, Darcy, Why?
	[Every girl in the class raises her hand.]
Darcy:	She's beautiful.
Phoebe:	She gets married.

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Ms French: There's no right or wrong here. What about Prospero? [All but five boys raise their hands. Then she asks the students to keep reading the play silently, and turns to talk to me.] You know, this is exactly the same thing that happened in the other class. It's distressing. Every girl in that class picked Miranda too because she was pretty and got the guy. The boys in that class said it was Prospero because of his power. Don't you think—but these are average kids. I can't imagine my high achievers doing that. Amanda, Jill, Sarah D? They would have broken the stereotype.

But, in fact, even in the high-achieving class later that day, every girl picks Miranda. Ms French, as she displays in her aside to me, wants to use high achievement—the student identity—to negate the gender work occurring in her classroom, but the students' discourse will not let her do so, at least with girls. The boys in her classes overwhelmingly picked the powerful character, Prospero, and indicated that they picked him because of his power, but the teacher does not muse about their choices. In fact, she recasts their gendered choice of power as harmless or natural by not calling attention to it. Even if it is questionable that girls pick the stereotypical choice, boys' choices are not even up for discussion, at least not with me.

The institution and its actors, as the discourse of students, teachers and administrators of Sage Creek has already demonstrated, attempt to keep out influences of macro and micro order so that school learning can occur without being challenged by those forces. Both girls and boys act and achieve as 'students', despite the clear existence of their gender identities, in a framework that supports the naturalizing of all gendered identities into student identities.

Teachers' enforcement of 'appropriate behaviour' is one more way in which gender is naturalized in this context. In an interview with my participating teachers, Mr O'Malley and Ms French, we can observe how two teachers cast children's gendered behaviour as inappropriate behaviour for school; their discourse illustrates some of the elements that contribute to making a student identity:

Mr O'Malley: Yeah. I don't think the students know that this is kind of their job and that they should act a certain way in class. And I don't think that they really separate the kid. … It's a level of decorum. They do talk so much that sometimes you just try to keep it very structured, you know, moving forward and … not giving them a whole lot of freedom to express themselves, and it's that way because when they do it [express themselves] they don't do it in an appropriate manner.

NN: What is that?

Mr O'Malley: Ah, well you know it's kind of a—it's kind of like the appropriateness thing, you know like, with the Eighth Graders, just that one of maturity. It's just a huge deal and you know you can talk to them more about that, about sex and stuff, and they'll respect it. It's just the maturity level; they'll accept what you're saying and think about it rather than making fun of it or laughing.

Ms French: There are things students should know about behaving appropriately. They have to learn that I cannot instantly gratify their needs. They cannot get out of their seats and socialize, cannot talk; they have to sit and wait. When they get older, like Twelfth Grade, they can talk about that stuff without being silly.

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The expectations of these teachers seem like classroom management tools and on one level they are. Yet the discursive strategies employed by these teachers naturalize gender, as they try to keep out the social formation and the social action from the social institution. By displaying their professional understanding of what they deem as good classroom behaviour and of students' maturational development, the teachers act as gatekeepers (Erickson & Shultz 1982), forming a barrier between the whole of society—with all its influences—and the institution. Mr O'Malley says that the students should 'separate the kid', suggesting that he understands there are different identities available to students. Moreover, he admits that he tries to stop the students from expressing themselves because they do not do so 'appropriately'.

When I question him about this, Mr O'Malley refers to students' level of maturity, specifically their ability to deal with 'sex and stuff'. Herein lies a revelation of gender and students' gender identities as they are naturalized in student behaviour. Through Mr O'Malley's and Ms French's explanation that 'appropriate behaviour' in part means that they cannot talk about sex, they reveal how classroom management is also about gender. But the ideological discourse formation of 'student', in order to remain dominant, must be continuously constructed through struggle. These struggles are visible in the contradictions found in the discourse events where the students' gender identities and academic identities are juxtaposed. It is in this struggle where gender identity formation loses as the struggles to create different forms of gender identities are challenged. Gender identities are omnipresent and expected but simultaneously downplayed.

White Oaks Middle School adults seem to use discourse that supports the student identity in their attempts to block both social formation (macro) and social action (micro) from the academic work of the social institution. In effect, the teachers display that they think they can deny social identities from influencing their academic work with students.

Conclusion

Gender identities are naturalized as student identities in White Oaks Middle School. Both boys and girls are affected by this; girls, in particular, cannot exist as gendered (feminine) and academic simultaneously. Teachers and students pursue academic achievement and deny gender in this pursuit. Were gender identities able to exist side-by-side to student identities, I might be able to argue that they could coexist without harm, allowing gender to be brought in and left out as another topic of discussion and development, much as the teachers indicated they felt they could do.

Yet these four discourse examples give reason to suggest that the student identity is so opaque that it is perceived as an institutional norm, successfully obscuring the effects of any competing identities, in this case gender identities, much less those of ethnicity or social class. The adults of White Oaks Middle School did not deny that their students had gender identities, but they did believe, as their discourse showed, that they could control their students' enactment of gender in school. In the discourse events where students' gender identities were part of the interaction, the school adults

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either ignored the gender implications or, more often, recast the interactions as students' enactment of behaviour that was developmentally appropriate for early adolescents. The students, on the other hand, displayed a more sophisticated understanding of gender identities and their relationships to student identities, even if this understanding was not frequently—or ever—encouraged.

These four discourse examples attest to the power of dominant language practices to affect students' gender identities in spite of the academic equity that is offered in theory to all White Oaks Middle School students. Using Fairclough's (1995) framework of relationships between the levels of society allowed me to expose the naturalization of gender identities and the imposition of student identities in academic discourse. Educational researchers such as Erickson (1986), Mehan (1978) and Weedon (1987) claim that this kind of dual exposure, produced through theories of cultural production and poststructuralism, is possible. Levinson and Holland (1996) claim that by:

> … portray[ing] and interpret[ing] the way people actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling … [theories of cultural production] provide a direction for understanding … the production of cultural forms and [how] subjectivities form and agency develops. (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 14)

By portraying and interpreting the ways in which students and school adults confront and naturalize students' gender identities, I have exposed and illuminated some of the processes by which they codependently exist. Yet this is not enough.

I suggest that educators and educational researchers continue to expose the contradictions in what it means for children to be students. Without this examination, it will be easy to proclaim, as too many have already done, that the 'gender problem' in schools is over; lack of examination will also deny further exploration of the ways in which not only gender, but ethnicity and social class are heterogeneous categories in schools. White girls, for example, will continue to be told that they must be good 'students' but will understand this to mean that they must be 'Barbie dolls'. Do Black girls also hold this understanding? Do girls living in poverty feel this way? Boys, too, may continue to understand that their student performances allow them to 'joke around' while at the same time being considered a 'perfect student.' Is this understanding uncomplicated for boys, regardless of their social class? Does it change depending on the ethnicity of the girls with whom they interact? These are but a few of the questions which need be examined. If we mask the ways in which gender works in school, we lose daily chances to examine it, confront it and envision what could be.

Notes

1. K-12 schooling means Kindergarten through to Grade 12 in the United States' system of schooling; it encompasses children from roughly ages 5 through to 18.
2. Sage Creek School District and all names in this study are pseudonyms in order to protect the participants' privacy.
3. I disagree that poststructural theory must be deemed 'feminist' in order to be used to understand power relations between men and women in society; the definition of poststructuralism

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already takes power into account. While I absolutely agree that feminism is a politics that should and does have a place within poststructural analysis, I do not believe the theory itself is inherently feminist or masculinist. Each time poststructuralism is used within a study, its political representations should be redefined. By combining poststructural theory with an inquiry of gender and schooling, this study sets the stage for understanding the construction of students' gender identities in school and consequently how they might be related to the performance of gender equity outside of school.

4. See Niemi (2001) for extensive description and analysis of the competing student identities in this study.

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