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Learning Gender in Primary School Playgrounds:
Findings from the Tomboy Identities Project

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Learning gender in primary school playgrounds: findings from the Tomboy Identities study

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The Tomboy Identities Study

The Tomboy Identities Study was an exploratory investigation of tomboy identities intended to address current concerns about decreasing activity in school age girls. It was designed to develop knowledge about how tomboy identities are taken up, enacted and maintained within peer group and family settings. Based on case studies of children in years 5 and 6 in two primary schools, we investigated how tomboys are identified by teachers, children and parents, how tomboy identities are constructed, taken up and maintained by
pre-pubertal girls, and the extent to which tomboyism is a stigmatized or valorized identity.

The research was conducted in two contrasting London primary schools. One, Benjamin Laurenci, is a one-form entry inner city school, in an area of multiple deprivation and with a high proportion of children from refugee families and/or having English as their second language. The other, Holly Bank, is a much larger school in an affluent and leafy outer suburb, where many children go onto private secondary schooling. In each school we have focused on one class, following them from the last term of Year 5 into the first term of Year 6, observing them in lessons, in the playground and before and after school, and conducting group and individual interviews of children, and individual interviews of their teachers, other school staff such as lunchtime supervisors, and parents.

The two schools were deliberately chosen to provide a range of contrasts. First, and most important, is the contrast in location. Benjamin Laurence is situated in a built-up area with few open spaces, a variety of local accommodation, including council-owned and privately rented houses and flats, and the wide variation in affluence, between families living in quite close proximity, that is often found in inner cities. Holly Bank, on the other hand, is in an area of mainly owner-occupation, with a high proportion of professional families and a good deal of open space, including parks and woodland. This locational contrast leads to other differences. There is a
significant gap in parental affluence between the two schools. Families at Benjamin Laurence typically have little money to spare, and a number of parents are unemployed. This means that they are unable to provide many extras for the school, and the children are rarely able to take part in out-of-school activities that have to be paid for. At Holly Bank, on the other hand, the very active Parent-Teacher Association regularly raises significant amounts for school funds, as well as helping the school in other ways, such as by acting as sports coaches, and the school is consequently much better equipped and supported. Holly Bank children are also able to take part in many out-of-school activities, including swimming, ballet, football, instrumental lessons (also studied by many children through the school) and karate, because their parents can afford both the money to pay for these activities and the time to get them there.

There is also a strong contrast between the two schools not only in their ethnic mix but how that mix is handled. At Benjamin Laurence there is a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and a substantial number of Muslim children of mainly Turkish origin. This mix is also openly acknowledged and catered for in the school, with, for example, Halal meat at school mealtimes, an appreciation that the older children might fast during Ramadan, and headscarves and trousers for girls being an accepted part of school uniform. Holly Bank, by contrast, appears at first sight to be a school of almost entirely white Caucasian pupils. On closer inspection this turns out not to be the case,
but ethnicity is very much played down, and the celebration of ethic diversity is not a noticeable feature of school life. Indeed, although the school is non-denominational, there is an emphasis on Christianity, with school assembly regularly taken by local Christian religious leaders, and a Christmas service in the local church.

The schools also have a very different ‘feel’ to them, for a number of reasons. First, they are very different spaces. Benjamin Laurence is a typical Victorian London School Board school, built on several floors with stairwells going straight up from the playground and opening onto each floor. There is comparatively little playground space, and it is all concrete. Holly Bank, on the other hand, is a light, recently built, single-storey structure, with many small courtyards and places to sit outside, as well as large playground areas and access to woodland for the older children. The schools are very different in size: Benjamin Laurence has about 260 pupils on roll, Holly Bank 670.

There is a very different attitude to school uniform in each school, reflecting the affluence of the parents and their consequent ability to conform to strict guidelines. At Benjamin Laurence it is fairly relaxed, with most children wearing trousers, sweatshirts and trainers. At Holly Bank the uniform is more carefully specified and strictly enforced. In particular, girls were only permitted to wear trousers half way through the fieldwork period, and trainers are only allowed at playtimes.
Previous research on tomboys

Before going on to discuss how boys’ and girls’ identities as male and female, and tomboy identities in particular, are constructed in school spaces, we need to consider previous research on and understandings of tomboys. The possibilities for and constraints on the construction of a tomboy identity, and the importance of this in maintaining an active girlhood, were the prime foci of the Tomboy Identities study. This study, as will become clear, differed significantly from previous research into tomboys, as it was ethnographic in nature, with observation of classroom and, especially, playground activity, being central to our approach. We also conducted interviews with the children, and with relevant school staff and some parents. Interviews with children focused on how the children saw themselves and each other, their preferred playtime and out-of-school activities, and their friendship patterns.

Most psychological studies regard tomboyism as a frequent aspect of normal childhood, being reported retrospectively in over 50% of adult women in several US studies. Research from a cultural or literary studies background, by contrast, treats tomboyism as a rare occurrence related to extreme forms of female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998; Rottnek, 1999). Most previous studies come from the US, though those carried out elsewhere (Jones, 1999; Safir, Rosenmann, & Kloner, 2003) suggest cultural variations in definition and frequency of occurrence. Most research is also retrospective, studying adult
memories of childhood, with consequent problems of selective recall (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Gottschalk, 2003; Safir et al., 2003). There is also evidence that the word ‘tomboy’ is used more often by adults remembering their childhoods than by children themselves (Reay, 2001; Thorne, 1993). There is little previous research into what it is actually like to be a tomboy, how tomboys relate to their peer group, or how this changes as adolescence approaches.

There is some variation in previous studies about how tomboys are understood. Most psychological and sociological researchers see taking part in stereotypically masculine activities as the defining feature. Morgan (1998), for example, found that three different generational cohorts of adults reporting tomboy behaviour as children saw participation in masculine-labelled sports, rough and tumble play and playing with masculine-labelled toys as the overwhelming definers of tomboy experience. This was borne out by our study, which found that children were more likely to consider others to be tomboys if they took part in these activities, particularly football.

Some studies point to how variations in cultural assumptions about ‘normal’ childhood can affect how tomboy identities are defined. Jones (1999), for example, argues that British girls living in the countryside are consistently (and positively) labelled as tomboys, and that this is related both to their mothers’ childhood tomboyism and to parental desires for their children to live what are perceived as healthy outdoor lives in an idealised rural setting.
Safir, Rosenmann and Kloner (2003), in their sample of adult Israeli women, argue that the lower frequency of claimed tomboy pasts, compared to US studies, reflects the greater prevalence and encouragement of outdoor activities for Israelis of both sexes. There is also some evidence that, even within a particular social setting, there are ethnic differences in the prevalence and extent of tomboyism; African-American girls, for example, seem to have more scope for active play than do their white American peers (McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Thorne, 1993). Possible relationships between social class and tomboy behaviours have also largely been ignored.

Tomboy children have generally found to be accepted as such by both male and female peers. One of the few studies to focus on tomboys as children found that classmates and teachers regard them as popular, cooperative, helpful, supportive of others, and leaders (Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981). Reay (2001) notes that ‘tomboy’ was used as a mark of respect by both boys and girls. McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that pre-adolescent girls who transgressed gender boundaries were not stigmatized by other girls, supporting the suggestion that tomboy behaviour is a frequent and unproblematic aspect of female childhood.

**Embodied identities and the spaces of schooling**

In this research we understand children’s identities as embodied and performed through and within school spaces. We see individual masculinities
and femininities as constructed through local communities of practice in which children and adults collaboratively develop relational understandings of what it is to be male or female in a particular context (Paechter, 2003a, 2003b, 2006). In some settings, such as the school, spatial relations are particularly salient to the forms of masculinity and femininity that are enabled or inhibited. How children’s bodies are used and positioned within school and other spaces, and how they are treated and understood by adults and children, are important factors in the development of their identities. This is partly because identity is performed by and through the body, in relation to the spaces around it and with which it interacts, and partly because children use outward bodily appearance, especially clothing, as a means to understand their own identities and those of others (Paechter & Clark, 2005).

It is clear, both from our own research and from previous studies, that children enact their gendered identities through the use of school space. This is particularly the case with regard to playgrounds, which are spaces of greater freedom for children, subject to less control than those inside the building. Shilling (1991: 24) notes that ‘boys…draw on structural ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ in using space as a way of asserting dominance over girls’ in both academic and playground spaces. Epstein et al (2001: 158) argue that ‘the geography and spatial organization of playgrounds speak gendered power relations’, and that taking part in football (which dominates most primary school playgrounds in the UK) is a major signifier of masculinity for boys.
Thorne notes that, by and large, the elementary school children she studied kept to separate, gender-labeled areas, particularly in playgrounds, which, she suggests, ‘have a more fixed geography of gender’ than classrooms (Thorne, 1993: 44). This finding is not consistently borne out by other studies, however. Karsten (2003) found that, although football games were almost exclusively male, all the Amsterdam community playgrounds she studied had areas in which children played other games in mixed groups.

These gendered dominance of the playground by boys and their use of space-consuming active games such as football to construct and confirm their masculinities has concomitant effects on the possible activities of girls (Renold, 2005). First, girls are often systematically excluded by boys from much of the space of the playground, unless a considerable proportion is given over to apparatus or equipment, thus preventing it from being taken over by football (Karsten, 2003). Even if a girl wants to take part in football, she may find it hard to join in, as boys consider most girls to be weaker players and refuse to pass them the ball (Clark & Paechter, 2005; Epstein et al., 2001). In schools in which there is little space available for play apart from football, this can mean that active play becomes associated with masculinity, making it less likely that girls will take part, especially as they get older. We argue that the spatial arrangements and gendered power relations within some playgrounds make it harder for girls to take up and maintain the activities that are related to tomboy identities. The extent to which this is the
case differs between schools, but also within the same school over time. This latter is not only because the children are growing and changing, but also because what appear to be relatively small changes in playground arrangements and organization can have comparatively large effects on the activities open to children.

It is important to realise in the discussion that follows that a full tomboy identity appears to be relatively rare. We only saw one or two girls in either school (and none in our case-study classes) who fitted the tomboy stereotype of rejecting femininity, playing exclusively or almost exclusively with boys, dressing in what are usually considered to be boys’ clothes and having overwhelmingly stereotypically masculine interests. Generally the girls in our study who were named as tomboys by themselves or their peers thought of themselves as ‘a bit tomboy’: they took an enthusiastic part in active play, enjoyed getting dirty, tended to wear trousers and avoided overtly feminine activities and clothing, while at the same time having mainly female friends and attributes they considered important aspects of femininity, such as being helpful and well behaved, or wearing ‘girly’ clothes or make-up for special occasions. It was these girls, however, who were most likely to challenge boys over the use of school space, and who resisted the association of femaleness with spatial marginality.
Constructing gendered identities in the playground

Children use playground spaces in a number of ways in the construction of their own and others’ identities. Identities are not constructed alone by the individual; they are developed in relation to those of others, and to spoken and unspoken group rules and norms about the sort of person one is permitted to be in a specific context. Thus, child communities of masculinity and femininity practice establish way of ‘doing boy’ or ‘doing girl’ which privilege and embargo particular activities and spaces in relation to gender.

These various identities and roles are related to patterns of hierarchy within the intersecting child groups so that some children have more influence than others on what identities are possible in a particular social world. Dominant individuals and groups are able to mobilise space and their own place in it to enable and gatekeep certain identities and roles. This process relates to age as well as to gender: some activities and therefore, up to a point, some identities, are only available to those of particular ages, or who are able to step outside locally accepted age boundaries. The hierarchical world of the playground (Karsten, 2003) not only means that the boundaries of favoured spaces are strictly controlled by dominant groups, but also requires that less important spaces have to be vacated as one gets older; to remain in them is an admission of subordination. This leaves some children, as we shall see, with virtually nowhere to play.
We are now going to look at the construction of gendered identities in play spaces in more detail, by examining it in relation to four key aspects of children’s outdoor play: if they play, what they play, where they play and how they play. We will consider each in turn.

To play or not to play: immobility in the construction of femininity

As girls get older, their femininities are increasingly constructed around not playing at all, or only in the service of others. This was very clear in the study and was manifested in a number of ways. As Lucy, one of the more active girls at Holly Bank, regretfully put it, early on in Year 6:

Lucy: ...apparently you’re not allowed to run in year six or year seven.

Sheryl: You’re not? How come?

Lucy: Or not that much. Or maybe you are but people just don’t want to and you’ll feel silly when you do and everybody else is talking.

For others, as Lucy indicates, ‘just talking’ was more of a source of status and shared identity as the oldest girls in the school; playing was considered childlike; as one girl said of her friends, the dominant group of ‘cool girls’ in the Holly Bank class: ‘We just walk and we talk’. The importance of talking for girl groups, particularly in relation to the making and breaking of friendships, seems to emerge around age ten and persist into secondary
school (George, 2004; Hey, 1997; Renold, 2005). In the schools we studied this intense focus on talking was confined to only some groups of girls, but this did not mean that all the others were involved in active play. A number of other factors came together to prevent or inhibit physical activity.

Many of the girls did not really get access to the playground every playtime, because of their involvement in carrying out jobs around the school, particularly in Year 6. These tasks were shared equally among both boys and girls, but the girls were more conscientious in carrying them out. Taking such duties seriously was itself important to their understanding of femininity as related to being sensible and responsible, in contrast to the ‘silliness’ and irresponsibility of boys (Francis, 1998; 2000), but it also took girls out of the arena of the junior playground, and either into the school building, or into spaces for younger children. Many of the girls in both schools were involved in leading the play of children further down the school. While seen as an act of community service (and rewarded as such at Benjamin Laurence with an end-of-year outing), treating active play as a responsibility, with taking part being for the benefit of others, could allow girls to play without compromising their stiller, older femininities. Chelsea, Bridget and Holly, three of the otherwise inactive ‘cool girls’ at Holly Bank, listed duck, duck, goose, football, basketball and dancing as games they played with the infant classes.
The Holly Bank ‘cool girls’, in other respects, however, epitomised the image of teenage schoolgirl femininity as centred around hanging around together chatting. It was clear, particularly once they had moved into Year 6, that the power dynamic within this group precluded active play for its own sake. Bridget and Holly were quite clear that they only moved at all to run away from children they disliked; running around for fun was considered babyish. Instead, a passive, ‘girly’ femininity was constructed, focused around the negotiation of friendship and an interest in romance, ‘dating’ and, most of all, preserving the ‘cool girls’’ pre-eminence. This status was also constructed and preserved in relation to the dominant boys in the class, who were considered highly desirable and had considerable influence on what counted as acceptable behaviour. The most dominant of all, Humphrey, was clear about how a girl should behave if she wanted to be liked, stating that ‘to be popular for a girl you have to be like all girly and pretty and stuff’. Such a physically passive femininity would necessarily require that a girl not take up much space in the playground.

This form of femininity was clearly enacted by the most dominant girl in the ‘cool girls’ group, Kelly, who was especially inactive, messing around in physical education lessons as well as opting out of playground games. Her pre-eminence within this group meant that she could require physical inactivity as the price of membership. Consequently, Chelsea and Joanna, both physically active outside school, became inactive at playtime, in the
interest of preserving her coveted friendship. By contrast, during a period in which she had been ousted from the group, Chelsea led other children in a number of active and imaginative games.

A second, much lower status group of girls at Holly Bank, gradually gave up active play as they moved from Year 5 (where some games had involved running) into Year 6. This was largely because one of these girls, Melissa, felt intimidated by the boys on the playground and so preferred not to encounter them by running around. For this group, being ‘nice’ (Kehily, Mac an Ghaill, Epstein, & Redman, 2002) was central to the construction of their femininities. Niceness would preclude leaving Melissa on her own while the others ran around, so they joined her in inactivity. For one member, Lucy, who particularly enjoyed physical activity, this became so problematic that she risked further lowering her status by playing with a group of girls in the year below, so that she could carry on with physically active games.

What to play: the role of playground games in the construction of masculinities and femininities

In both schools, masculinity was overwhelmingly constructed through participation in football. All the dominant boys played, both in and out of school, many every playtime. Football games took up about two-thirds of the play area in each school, which meant that at Benjamin Laurence, where space was limited, there was not much room to play anything else. As a result, the
junior section of the playground was a predominantly masculine arena, with girls, and subordinate and younger boys, pushed largely to the margins. This situation was both complicated and exacerbated by the existence of relatively strong age hierarchies at this school, which will be discussed below. At this point we will concentrate on the ways in which football, and how it was played, were used to construct and consolidate particular masculinities and femininities in the two schools. In both schools, the boys’ perception of football as central to dominant masculinity meant that girls had either to be excluded or their participation marginalised or downgraded. Anything else would have constituted too serious a threat to the construction of masculinity around prowess at the local dominant sport, something that is not a local phenomenon (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001).

At Holly Bank, masculinity and football were inextricably linked. It was the main sport played by boys in the school, and virtually no girls played. This was partly because the football games were not policed at all by staff, but were a free-for-all of masculine domination, in which only a girl who could fully hold her own (both socially and in terms of footballing skill) would be allowed to take part. In this context, playing football more than very occasionally marked a girl out as a tomboy, and a fairly extreme one, though for the most part, tomboy identities at this school were constructed independently of such participation. The close alignment of masculinity and football at Holly Bank thus necessitated, for the boys, the expulsion and
exclusion of any form of femininity in relation to football. In this the dominant boys were supported by the ‘cool girls’, who interpreted other girls’ interest in football as related to a desire to attract the attention of boys, rather than to the game itself. Girls were systematically and consistently excluded from the game, and therefore from much of the playground and field space. The ‘cool girls’ sometimes resisted such male spatial domination by walking onto the pitch and disrupting the game, but they did not challenge the hegemonic understanding of football as a boys’ activity by attempting to take part, thus compromising neither the boys’ masculinity nor their own femininity.

At Benjamin Laurence, on the other hand, more girls participated in football, thereby challenging its strong association with dominant masculinity. This was for two reasons. First, given the relatively small size of the playground area as a whole, there was little else that girls could play if they wanted to be physically active; for example, although the two pitches were also marked out as netball courts, there was no question of one of them being used for netball without the active intervention of an adult and the official designation of a ‘team practice’. Second, there was a policy in the school of active promotion of football for the girls, so that (in year 5, at least, where the class teachers took a strong role in this) they were encouraged to play and included in teams for inter-school matches.
Apart from one extreme tomboy not in our case study class, who was accepted as an honorary boy, the presence of girls on the football pitches represented a challenge to the dominant construction of masculinity in this school. It was thus essential, to preserve the separation of masculinity and femininity, and to maintain male dominance, for the boys symbolically to exclude girls from football, as they could not do so physically. They did this in a number of ways. First, they almost all refused to pass to girls when they were playing, so that the girls never took a full part in the game. Second, when picking teams, girls were usually left until last and their presence complained about. Third, the spatiality of the game itself was used against girls’ participation. They were always placed in defence positions, often in goal, and systematically excluded from the full take-up of even these roles: where a female defender had to do something important, such as take a goal kick, the task was taken over by a boy, while the girl watched. Fourth, girls’ achievements in football were constantly belittled, with the boys repeatedly accusing them of losing them matches and generally undermining their achievements. Thus the gatekeeping role of football with regard to masculinity was preserved despite girls’ access to the game, with the result that, once the main force behind the inclusion of girls football had left the school, girls’ participation dropped off rapidly.

The construction of masculinities and femininities through playground use was further complicated in Benjamin Laurence by the existence of strong
age hierarchies regarding access to certain spaces. When the research commenced, there were two football pitches, Pitch One and Pitch Two. Pitch One was reserved exclusively for Year 6 children, Pitch Two for those in Year 5. Children from other years who wanted to play football had to fit in where they could.

Girls who participated in football in Years 5 and 6 had to develop a certain amount of aggression simply to survive on the pitch; while this was not as essential as at Holly Bank, it was clear that it remained an important factor in participation. This was learned in the other marked area of the playground, the champ game, which was largely played by Year Four girls. Champ (better known as foursquare) is an aggressive, though relatively spatially contained game, played on a grid of four squares with four children competing at any one time and a line of others waiting to replace anyone who is ‘out’. It involves the aggressive bouncing of balls into one’s opponents’ squares, the object being to make it impossible for them to return or to catch the ball; if they fail to do so they are called out. Successful play depends on a forceful slam-throwing style that certainly does not epitomise stereotypical femininity (Evaldson, 2003). Nevertheless, the game was completely dominated by girls, who argued vociferously and aggressively with each other when called out. Boys who joined them did not take part in such disputes, but went out when called, even if they might argue long and hard about a similar decision in football.
It is unclear why this game was so strongly dominated by girls. Maybe the relatively small area of the champ square, or simply the fact that it is not football, associates it with femininity; other studies have also found that it is generally played by girls (Evaldson, 2003; Thorne, 1993). It was interesting to note, however, that the girls who were able to argue so vociferously with each other, sometimes resorting to threats of or actual physical violence, lost much of their strong assertiveness when they (as most did) moved onto the football pitch in Year 5. It appears from this, however, that some masculinities and femininities can be enacted at a very local level, to the extent that girls and boys can inhabit strikingly different femininities and masculinities as they move from one playground area to another.

Where to play: the interaction of gender and age-related hierarchies in playground and neighbourhood spaces

Masculinities and, especially, femininities were not only constructed by children through their use of space, they were also constructed for them as a result of restrictions on their spatial use and range. For many of the girls in the study, differences between their access to playground and neighbourhood spaces and that which was allowed to boys meant that it became increasingly difficult to develop femininities that were not associated with restricted mobility and closeness to the home or the school building. In some cases this was a longstanding difficulty, in others it got worse as the children grew
older, so that some girls found themselves looking forward to their teenage femininities with very mixed feelings.

The age hierarchies at Benjamin Laurence had a significant effect on where the children played. In particular, Pitch One and Pitch Two were significant high-status spaces, only open to some children. Who they were open to changed during the fieldwork period, significantly limiting the play possibilities for girls and lower-status boys in the fieldwork classes.

When the children were in Year 5, Pitch One was reserved for the Year 6 children, several girls in the study joining the boys in their class on Pitch Two on a regular basis. Some of these girls were very enthusiastic about football, which was an important aspect of their self-constructions as ‘a bit tomboy’, and they looked forward with eager anticipation to graduating to Pitch One the following year. The school employed a coach, Darren Thomas, to supervise both pitches several days a week. When the case study classes moved to Year 6, he decided to change this age-related hierarchy, instead designating the best players as ‘Squad One’ which contained no girls, giving them Pitch One as their playing area, and telling all the other children (including those from Years Three and Four) to play on Pitch Two. For the Year 6 footballing girls, this represented a significant demotion, particularly in relation to the boys in their class, most of whom were allowed onto Pitch One. The change in policy effectively removed many of these girls from active play and from the main spaces of the playground. Being female, for these
older girls, thus became associated with an inactive spatial marginality, in which they were lumped together with the younger children as lacking in skills and therefore not deserving of a presence on a pitch that they had expected to have been theirs by right. This situation, particularly as it had been set up by a member of the school staff, was extremely hard to challenge.

In this situation, a femininity associated with inactivity and spatial marginality was almost being constructed for and foisted on the girls by the change in school policy. While this was resisted, such resistance seemed to take place through the adoption of a helpful, supportive femininity which resulted in being allowed to play on Pitch One as a favour, rather than as a right. Gazza, a keen female footballer who was also an extremely conscientious and helpful pupil, eventually gained access to Pitch One for herself and a couple of other girls by chatting to the coach on a regular basis and running errands for him, until, after nearly a term, he allowed them to join the game.

By contrast, the ‘cool girls’ at Holly Bank made an active choice to limit the area of the playground in which they spent their time. They took over a small ramp at the side of the school building, from where they surveyed the playground and intervened in the relationships between the other girls in their class, through selective offers of friendship and participation in their high status grouping. This space, though tiny (about eight by three feet), was ideal for their purposes. It commanded a good view of the play areas, and
was surrounded, except at one end, by either the school wall or a railing, so that there was only a small entrance space. This allowed the girls physically, as well as symbolically, to restrict admittance both to the group and to ‘their’ space. Other girls might be called over and invited to join, or messages to others might be dispatched from these headquarters. These girls were thus able to use the spatial arrangement of the playground in the maintenance of their position as the high-status girls in the class, controlling and commenting on the femininities of others, while putting on a permanent and very visible display of girly femininity for their high status male peers.

Girls’ limited access to space within school is reflected in their restricted ability to function independently in the local community, echoing similar findings by Nespor (1997) in a Virginia elementary school. Karsten (2003) notes that, while children of both sexes were free to come and go in the Amsterdam community playgrounds she studied, the girls were always gone by dusk, while boys’ presence continued until after dark. We found that, with few exceptions, girls in both schools were limited in their access to local outdoor spaces, and that this had a particularly problematic effect on those girls who were constructing their identities as partially tomboy.

Lucy, one of the tomboy girls at Holly Bank, had increasing problems in maintaining friendships with other girls, both because of their decreasing mobility and because of her unusual degree of freedom to go out into the local area. For example, she had wanted to go cycling regularly with her best
friend, but had found that this was impossible, because ‘we weren’t going with adults’. She had to settle for inviting Chelsea (one of the girls most commonly identified as a tomboy by other children), the only other girl she knew who would be allowed out on her bicycle without adult supervision. Lucy’s mother, who commented that Lucy’s friends were not allowed to go swimming alone, as Lucy was, felt that the restrictions placed on other girls made it hard for Lucy to maintain friendships, as the things she wanted to do were not possible for her friends. Lucy, who was constantly struggling to maintain her identity as both an active and energetic girl and as someone who was ‘nice’, was constantly caught in the middle, having to renounce her enjoyment of her spatial and bodily freedom for the sake of her preferred companions and their stiller femininities.

Lindsey and Nilay, two girls from Benjamin Laurence from strict Muslim backgrounds, discovered for themselves the difference between their own spatial freedom and that of their male classmates. The two were best friends, and both, particularly Lindsey, who was a keen footballer, were active and adventurous. In this extract from their joint interview in Year 5, they tell Sheryl about an incident where they left Lindsey’s house unobserved and ventured out into the local area. This was clearly a significant and memorable occasion. The transcript is only a poor echo of the excitement in their voices; their words spill out and over each other in as they describe what happened:
Lindsey: Yeah once she came to my my house and we did this really secret stuff and and my mum [went out] and it was really far and only me and Nilay stayed and my big sister she was just watching TV. We were just playing around. Then she took her purse and we went to the shops. ‘Cause my mum’s really scared. She doesn’t let us into the shops ‘cause there’s lots of roads and there’s lots of traffic and that kind of stuff, yeah, the road. She’s scared we might get runned over.

Sheryl: Yeah, yeah.

Lindsey: We go the nearest shop and we buy some [?] and we’re like “If we show it to our moms we’re going to get in trouble.” Like boys’ stuff. Like boys get to hang out, but girls, we just stay home and have to help their mums and stuff like that.

Sheryl: But boys get to hang out in shops and things?

Lindsey: Yeah, so we tried to do that once as well

Sheryl: Did you?

Lindsey: Yeah.

Nilay: I think we told you this. We sneakily, that same day we sneakily went into a park, nobody knew, and we stayed there and then we came back. And nobody knew. We stayed there and then we came back.

Lindsey: Yeah. That’s where the boys are, there were lots of boys there
Sheryl: Were there?

Lindsey: That’s what the boys do. Roberto was there, and [?] as well.

For Lindsey and Nilay, an adult Muslim femininity was something to look forward to only with reservations. They saw their lives as becoming increasingly spatially and physically limited, in comparison to those of their brothers, and anticipated having to give up active play at secondary school. The access that the boys had to the park, and thus their greater ‘ownership’ of local community space, reflected their dominance in the playground and the association of masculinity with spatial control and confidence. In contrast, Lindsey and Nilay were increasingly expected to construct their femininities as sensible, still and studious, taking on increasing responsibilities in school and at home, while their brothers and male classmates roamed freely.

**How you play: masculinity and taking sports seriously**

Although not all sports played in school playgrounds are associated with masculinity, taking sports seriously is. Dominant boys thus constructed their masculinities around their commitment to sports, particularly football. Associated with this, tomboy identities were constructed, both by tomboys themselves and by other children, in relation to caring about sports, and in particular about winning. At Benjamin Laurence this was particularly related to bringing the world of the playground into that of the classroom, by continuing one’s upset about losing the weekly ‘big match’ into the time of
afternoon school. Two children were especially singled out in this regard: Donaldinho (a boy) and Deniz (a girl). For Donaldinho, who was repeatedly mentioned by other children as ‘moaning’ when his team lost, or shouting at other children when their play did not come up to his standards, such an attitude was an essential part of how his masculinity was constructed: he was considered to be the best footballer in his year group, and a dominant member of the ‘cool boys’ group in this school. The other children were generally accepting of his attitude, which, after all, was only a more extreme example of what the girls repeatedly referred to as boys ‘taking it too seriously’, and had been mentioned the previous year in relation to that group’s ‘best footballer’ and dominant male.

For Deniz, on the other hand, ‘taking it seriously’ was very clearly associated with being a tomboy. Fred and Wayne, for example, mentioned Deniz immediately when asked about possible tomboys, on the grounds that her activities and attitude were ‘more like a boy’:

Wayne: Deniz’s always doing runnings on Thursdays and football on the other days.

Fred: And her attitude is more like a boy.

Sheryl: How is her attitude more like a boy?

Fred: It’s like when her team loses.

Wayne: She always chases people. When her team loses she’s just like stunned. She starts moaning, innit.
Similarly, both masculinity and tomboydom were constructed by the children, particularly at this school, around physical aggression. Both Donaldinho and Deniz had got into fights after losing the weekly ‘big match’. While this was also true of a number of other boys, Deniz was the only girl in the class for whom it was the case.

Taking sports seriously and being prepared to play aggressively (and to fight) can be seen as related to claims to playground and other sports space. We have written elsewhere (Clark & Paechter, forthcoming) about many girls’ reluctance to take possession of the ball or move to forward positions in both mixed and single-sex football games, suggesting that this is due to a lack of a sense of ‘ownership’ of the ball. Conversely, where a girl does take sports seriously this indicates a symbolic claim to (shared) ownership of the pitch, the court or the running track. By working hard at sports, and by insisting on their right to take part at the highest level, girls are claiming physical as well as metaphorical space. Girls such as Gazza and Deniz at Benjamin Laurence, who finally got to play on Pitch One, and Spirit at Holly Bank, who had challenged a teacher when she was excluded from the top cross-country running group despite coming eighth in the trials, construct their identities partly through such participation, and, while they may not claim a tomboy identity (Spirit did, but Deniz did not) certainly stand out from many of their peers in their belief in their right to access to playground and sporting spaces.
Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that children’s masculinities and femininities are constructed partially in relation to playground and neighbourhood spaces and how they are used. We also suggest that such constructions can be manipulated, often unwittingly, by apparently minor alterations in the rules governing the use of these communal spaces, as happened when the girls were excluded from Pitch One at Benjamin Laurence and thus had to construct themselves either as belonging on Pitch Two with the younger children, or as relatively inactive, a much more stereotypically feminine positioning than many were used to. It is thus important, when making such changes, for schools and other bodies providing playground space to consider that the effects may be far-reaching, taking into account the importance of both age and gender hierarchies for junior age children.

At the same time we need to be aware that girls’ resistance to predominant spatial arrangements, while often aimed at challenging dominant masculinities, could also serve to consolidate particular forms of femininity, especially in the eyes of others. In the Tomboys study, this was particularly the case in relation to football. At Holly Bank, where the ‘cool girls’ resented the amount of space given over to the game despite their own relative immobility, this group occasionally deliberately disrupted games by walking, arm in arm, into the middle of the pitch and just standing there, or
by stealing the ball. Similarly, at Benjamin Laurence, from time to time the footballing girls would get so annoyed by the failure of the boys to pass the ball to them that they simply stopped playing and stood in the middle of the pitch chatting. Both these strategies reinforced the boys’ and male teachers’ views of the girls as not taking sports seriously and not ‘really’ wanting to play, thus making it less likely that they would be supported when they did.

If we want girls to be able to construct their femininities around active and assertive play, we need to take the spatial arrangements of play spaces seriously. Karsten argues that if girls are to have a chance of being full participants in playground life,

the terrain for play equipment (slides, bars, swings, climbing structures, sand boxes, water places) should take up as much territory as the area for ball games...Both girls and boys appreciate speeding along on cycles and skates, playing with sand and water and climbing on high objects. (Karsten, 2003: 471)

This was not the case in either of our case study schools. Although both had taken pains to provide play equipment and space for activities other than football, these activities remained at the margins, with by far the greatest area taken up by this stereotypically masculine pursuit. This marginality was literally the case at Holly Bank, where all chasing games in the summer had to take place around the perimeter of the field, as the football pitches took up the
whole of the central area. It would be an enormously symbolic gesture for primary schools to limit football to one, relatively small, section of the playground, maybe restricting access to one year group at a time with some girls-only sessions, thus allowing other activities (appropriately supported with equipment and supervision) to spread out beyond the margins. While it is unlikely to be possible to challenge the significance of football in relation to the construction of dominant masculinities, this would offer children a wider variety of alternatives. It was notable that at Holly Bank, where the vastly greater amount of playground and field space meant that other space-hungry activities were possible, and where a wide variety of equipment was provided, some children did continue to play games other than football in mixed groups, even in Year 6. It was also in this school that several girls were able to construct tomboy femininities that were unrelated to participation in football; they had other ways and opportunities to express themselves through physically active play.

Playgrounds are, as Karsten (2003, 471) notes, ‘the first arenas in which girls and boys learn to negotiate their behaviour in public’. It is there that they start to construct and establish their identities, including their gender identities, in relation to their peers and to the spaces they inhabit. If we want children, both boys and girls, to have a wide range of possibilities concerning how they think about themselves and who they can be, we need to provide playgrounds that enable a wide variety of play activities, and which do not
allow particular forms of masculinity to dominate the available space. This requires that we think much more carefully about how playground spaces are laid out, equipped, and staffed, than is the case at present, and that we consider how children use those spaces, and what the implications of this use are for their self-constructions as masculine and feminine.

References


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These are the last two years in English primary schools. Children in Year 5 are aged between nine and ten, and in Year 6 between ten and eleven.

The names of the schools and the children have been changed to protect the identity of the research participants. The children’s pseudonyms have been self-chosen so do not necessarily reflect their ethnicities or their genders. Where this is the case we indicate ethnicity, religious background or gender where it is relevant to the discussion.