Disordered performances: schooling gender & ADHD

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ADHD and gender

It has for some time been accepted within medical discourse that approximately five times as many boys as girls will be diagnosed with behavioural disorders such as ADHD (e.g. Jenkins, 1973). More often than not, this has been accepted unproblematically or simply assumed to be so. Dr Geoff Kewley (1999), for example, introduces his widely read guide to ADHD with a set of nine patient vignettes eight of whom are males. In an equally popular guide by another doctor, Paul Wender (2000), the opening case exhumes ‘fidgety Phil’ the subject of an 1863 poem written by a German physician. Wender credits Phil as the first recognition of ADHD before embarking on an account of the disorder littered almost exclusively with male pronouns. As Singh (2002), notes, ‘if ADHD is presented as a neurochemical problem, neurochemistry must explain the gender skew’ (p. 589), yet even when medical discourse has taken up this line of investigation it has usually been to identify gender or sex differences in the aetiology, presentation and treatment of the disorder (e.g. Biederman et al., 2002, Gaub & Carlson, 1997, Hartung et al., 2002), which has further naturalised rather than problematised the terms of debate.

Outside psycho-medical discourse there are many accounts which seek alternative, ‘inclusive’ or ‘holistic’, understandings of behavioural disorder, (e.g. Gurian & Stevens, 2005, Hartmann, 2003, Kindlon & Thompson, 1999, Pollack, 1998), yet these also tend to reproduce naturalised conceptions of sex and gender roles. The focus, as one critique puts it is ‘on healing the emotional ‘scars’ of boyhood’ (Frank et al., 2003, p. 119). Similar attempts can be read in many accounts which in other places present radical criticism of the ADHD construct (e.g. Armstrong, 1997, Walker, 1998). In The hyperactivity hoax, Walker (1998) states that:
‘Little boys tend to be more active, aggressive, and annoying than little girls, and in the current pro-Ritalin culture, any little boy who squirms in his seat, gets into scuffles on the playground, or clowns around in class is a target for a hyperactivity label and a pill’ (p. 27).

Thus Walker achieves his critique only by re-inscribing existing essentialisms. One significant exception to this pattern is critical child psychiatrist Sami Timimi (2005), who draws attention to the effects of narcissistic Western cultural ideals in distributing limiting models of masculinity and creating social systems of winners and losers, where ‘concern for social harmony contradicts the basic goal of the value system’ (p. 102). Psychiatry thus becomes a ‘cultural defense mechanism’ (p. 107) for the outcasts of this disharmony.

A collection of papers edited by two mental health professionals, Quinn & Nadeau (2002), offers some evidence of a deeper interest in gender issues from within medical discourse. While the primary concern is with the more efficient diagnostic targeting of females, this collection also generates some interesting questions. The observation in one chapter that ‘almost everything that researchers, clinicians, and parents know about AD/HD is based on studies that exclusively studied boys’ (Gershon, 2002, p. 23) presents a very obvious problematisation of the assumed skew in highlighting the fact that such figures are socially constructed. Yet, while it may suggest a different or diminished skew, this observation also provokes further questions; primarily, why? Perhaps there really is some natural phenomena within the minds of males which makes them of primary interest to researchers and clinicians, or, perhaps the identification of research ‘interests’ is the product of further social construction.

In considering the latter, the work of George Still (1902) could be cited. Still is commonly credited with the ‘discovery’ of what is now called ADHD through his 1902 description of a “morbid passionateness” in young boys lacking moral discipline. As Laurence (2008) notes, patients only arrived in Still’s clinic because their disobedience in school had deemed them ‘backward’ and in need of separation (p. 102).

Equally influential for contemporary ADHD practices were Charles Bradley’s (1937) experiments with amphetamines, again conducted upon young boys and with ‘striking’ effects on school performance. Ilina Singh (2002) argues that these experiments were part of a vast movement at this time concerned with what was
then called young boys’ ‘emotional disturbance’, at the centre of this problematic was ‘the relationship between mothers and sons’ (p. 599). Bradley’s experiments aided the construction of an organic aetiology for this ‘emotional disturbance’, which was furthered through the mass experimentation the Electroencephelogram (EEG) received through the Second World War, again, all subjects were male (Laurence & McCallum, 1998).

Each geneses then was based on the availability of a male problem population upon which to drive the ‘natural’ science through the imposition of various ‘microscopics of conduct’ (Foucault, 1977). In the case of the experiments and observations on young children, the primary concern was ‘backward’ and ill-disciplined performance in school.

**Bad, sad, stupid and mad**

Contemporary moral panics concerning the education of young males bear a striking resemblance to the backwardness, disobedience and moral indiscipline of Still’s 1902. The ‘failing boys’ rhetoric claims that boys are being disadvantaged by contemporary schooling as illustrated by their apparent underachievement, mis-behaviour, exclusion and pathologisation. These concerns are also all represented within the ADHD construct, which appears through these panics as the *sum of all fears*.

**Bad**

Boys are understood to be ‘naturally’ more boisterous, disruptive, aggressive and badly behaved than girls, with an ‘instinctive need for activity and risk’ (Palmer, 2007). Boys dominate data on school violence and vandalism, and the question of school discipline is seen almost exclusively as a ‘male issue’ (Slee, 1995, p. 107). Males also make up the large majority excluded from school, from where potential pathways include further violence and criminality.

ADHD is one of the American Psychiatric Association’s ‘disruptive behaviour disorders of childhood’ (APA, 2000). The ‘hyperactive’ and ‘impulsive’ subsections of the symptom profile best represent the ‘bad’ *ADHD child*, who leaves seat, runs, climbs, shouts, interrupts and often acts ‘as if driven by a motor’ (APA, 2000). Of the many co-morbidities that exist for ADHD, the strongest
correlations are with Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder, which are found in over 50% of children with ADHD.

Sad

The image of the ‘hyper’ child is the one which dominates popular perceptions of ADHD, and ‘sad’ doesn’t immediately match this image. The ‘inattentive’ strand is perhaps the place to look for the more withdrawn, disengaged and harder to spot ADHD child, and clinicians bemoan what they see as the under-recognition of this category. In terms of what are described as some of the ‘outcomes’ of ADHD, we are told it is commonly associated with higher than average rates of depression (Able et al., 2007, Torgersen et al., 2006), drug abuse (Greene et al., 1997, Klein & Mannuza, 1991) and suicide (Brook & Boaz, 2005, Singer, 2006). While exclusion may lead down the ‘bad’ route described above, equally it could lead to the disaffection and withdrawal that these outcomes describe.

Stupid

‘Failing boys’ is perhaps the area given the most attention by the moral panickers. Widely publicised is the supposed fall of boys at Key Stages 1-4 when compared to girls. The GCSE results are a particular focus, where even in ‘traditionally male’ subjects such as science and maths boys are now lagging. Boys also make up the majority of school’s remedial and special needs programmes.

ADHD leads many children into special needs education, though in both the UK and Australia it is not necessarily associated with any specific source of funding (Graham, 2007). In the past ADHD was considered to be primarily a learning disorder, and there is a debate for considering it a category of educational disability (Reid et al., 1993, Taylor, 1994). Children with ADHD score poorly on an array of cognitive functions, known collectively by neuropsychologists as ‘executive functions’ (Barkley, 1997). ADHD also correlates highly with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Mad

What supposedly separates ADHD and other pathological forms from ‘normal’ bad, sad and stupid behaviour, is the ‘significant clinical impairment’ (APA, 2000)
that must present in addition to symptoms in order to demarcate mental illness. The view of ADHD as a brain based disease is perceived by some to be robustly backed up by correlations with neurochemical agents and genetic pathways and is used to justify the use of psychoactive medication. ADHD also correlates highly with other ‘mental illnesses’, such as Bipolar and Autism.

**The feminisation of schooling?**

All this may seem to suggest that schools are witnessing some kind of ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Lingard, 2003) at the centre of which sits (or squirms) ‘fidgety Phil’. The spectre of the failing, disruptive, drop-out male has driven theories concerning the ‘feminisation’ of primary school. The substance of these theories lies primarily in the new earlier emphasis on literacy, which is seen as a more feminine domain, and on the fact that the majority of primary school teachers are women. Yet when contextualised within a gender equity discourse, both crisis and reaction can be turned on their heads.

The widely publicised figures concerning failing boys as compared to girls tell an incomplete story. Further stratification by class and ethnicity tells of more complexity, where white middle class girls are narrowly ahead of white middle class boys at the top of the pile across all subjects. Conceiving the debate only in terms of gender eclipses the greater struggles of some ethnic groups (Davis, 2001, Gillborn & Gipps, 1996). A narrow focus primarily on GCSE results also conceals the continued dominance of males in further and higher education (Elwood, 1995) and the substantial inequities of the division of labour, illustrated by ‘female low pay, part-time work and continuing correlations of motherhood with childcare’ (Arnot & Mac an Ghaill, 2006).

While it may be the case that males and females are ‘differently literate’ (Millard, 1997), it is also the case that recent directions in school have favoured males, returning to teaching in ‘more didactic and structured ways (phonics-based approaches to literacy; whole-class inculcation of mathematical rules etc.)’ (Raphael Reed, 1999, p. 100). Further, Millard’s (1997) research on literacy practices at home and in peer group settings suggests that statements about male or female propensities for a given subject are constructed through self/other perceptions and expectations and mediated by helpful or hindering environments. In other words, gender differences in literacy are socially constructed. This point
could be transposed and repeated for any statement predicated upon the ‘natural’ differences between males and females.

Claims about the feminisation of primary teaching based on crude figures concerning the number of male vs. female teachers tell nothing new, as females have always made up the majority of this workforce (Skelton, 2002). Women may outnumber men in the classroom, but men are still proportionately over three times as likely to become a head teacher (Skelton, 2001). Attempts to ‘re-masculinise’ the workforce through the employment of male teachers disregards the fact that it is the behavioural responsibilities of the (female) classroom assistant that sustains ‘normal’ classroom functions (Arnot & Miles, 2005). Nor does the crude statistic say anything about specific forms of femininity or masculinity available to and employed by individual teachers (Raphael Reed, 1999). Skelton (2002) draws attention to the simplicity of the conception with the question: ‘can only females ‘do’ femininity and males ‘display’ masculinity?’ (p. 88). While this is not the case, Millard’s (1997) point above implies that there are heuristic, socially desirable and dominant forms of masculinity and femininity which may affect perceptions, actions and interpretations and aid the construction of ‘gendered matrices’ of schooling (Butler, 1993). What the ‘feminisation’ rhetoric masks is the fact that this matrix is very definitely masculine.

**The ‘re-masculinising’ of primary school**

Connell (1995) has offered the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to describe this heuristic, desirable and dominant form of masculinity in a given social setting. Hegemonic masculinities operate through the deployment of:

> ‘physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality’ (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p. 121)

Several authors have noted the extent to which these positions are reflected in neo-liberal political discourse, which has distributed the masculinizing forces of ‘commercialization, commodification and rationalization’ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, p. 7) through schools over the last three decades. Examples cited include the gender blind Education Reform Act (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), hierarchical and autocratic

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1 Title taken from Skelton (2002)
management structures (Skelton, 2002), child-centred, psychologised and individualised pedagogies (Walkerdine, 1984), feeding into de-politicised ‘standards’ agendas (Raphael Reed, 1999) and classroom management ‘predicated on control’ (Meyenn & Parker, 2001, p. 174).

Perhaps the largest amount of research exists in relation to masculine violence and the heterosexual identity of schools. ‘Assumptions of maleness, namely that maleness equals aggressiveness, competence with females, misogyny’ (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2006) dominate the cultural descriptions of masculinities made available within schools. Everyday gender oppressions and heterosexualised abuse are normalised within both secondary and primary school between male teachers and female pupils (Skelton, 1997), between male pupils and both female and male teachers (Epstein, 1997, Skelton, 1997) and within male peer groups (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, Nayak & Kehily, 2001, Renold, 2007, Skelton, 1996).

Viewed from a masculinities perspective, connections between the ‘bad, sad, stupid and mad’ begin to emerge. A young male who ascribes to an exaggerated distortion of hegemonic masculinity may well find himself on the ‘bad’ list, however, such a position may well be predicated upon a rejection of the learning values of the school (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, Willis, 1977), in which case he could be branded stupid in addition. Equally, a young male could reject certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity. The policing of masculinity in school suggests that he will have to keep this rejection well hidden and will likely face rejection by his peers (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, Nayak & Kehily, 2001). From here, withdrawal, disaffection, and rejection of the learning culture are all potential pathways.

**Observing gendered performances in a year one and two classroom**

There is a growing research literature on hegemonic masculine, violent and sexualised performances in the primary school (e.g. Epstein, 1997, Renold, 2007, Skelton, 2001). Yet studies of this nature within years one and two are few and far between (though see, Skelton, 1997, 2001). Existing research is also based primarily on interviews and collective biographical work. Here, in addition to excerpts from interviews, observational data is presented to investigate the masculine and heteronormative ‘relations of ruling’ (Smith, 1987) that can be read in the everyday work of the year one and two classroom. A particular focus here will be on disciplinary practices and the implications that forms such as ADHD bring to these practices. This focus will be pursued through three
The setting and recent history of Alderley Infants and Sue’s discourse tell us that anything here said in relation to gender must be considered also in light of both social class, local politics and school-home expectations. These expectations have a tendency to govern interactions with parents as well as perceptions of children’s behaviour as a natural consequence of a ‘difficult’ or ‘disruptive’ home environment. Yet Sue is firm in her rejection of this ‘discourse of derision’

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1 A synonym as are all research names and places
(Kenway, 1990) and keen to re-emphasise the achievement which should lie at
the centre of teaching objectives.

My first two terms at Alderley were spent in the nursery, foundation and year one
and two class, as well as the year one and two nurture group. The third term was
spent mainly in conversation in the staff room or in formal interview with staff.
The observational data comes from a combination of written notes and tape
recordings. Prior permission was sought from all participants and where relevant
parents. Class teachers were given exclusion rights over any data collected in
their classroom, and permission was sought to report staffroom conversations

1. the normalised dominance of boys

The ‘rowdy group’

The Year 1 classroom teacher Tina/Miss Chapel had particular concerns about a
group of boys who not only demanded a lot of attention in class but also
displayed an inter-group violence which she found quite disturbing, particularly in
children this young:

   Tina ‘in year six, I’ve had chairs thrown at me, I’ve been told to “F-off”,
      but I’ve never seen this amount of getting at each other’ (fn
      4/10/06)

This rowdy group was made up of a core set of around six members, however
most of the rest of the males in class were included peripherally and the
dominance of the group and its values within the class did not leave any young
male with a consistently positive ‘learner identity’ (Renold, 2001).

The excerpt below is taken from a morning class where the activity was jewellery
making. In addition to this activity, Tina had a spelling test to administer, for
which she split off small groups at a time while the rest were split into various
stages of the jewellery making process. The following scene is an excerpt from
one of these splitting processes. All the boys mentioned were regular members of
the core group:
The shaker is brought out to try and reduce noise levels a bit. Greg continues to shout out and is reminded of the shaker's purpose. However there is still too much noise especially from the writing table.

Tina: “Umm boys? I was going to choose one of you but now I’m not sure. It won’t be you Jo”

Tina starts to choose people, but has to remind that she won’t choose anyone shouting ‘me me me’, and reprimanding the boys in the writing area for continuing rudeness.

Four children, including Andy and Ed, are chosen. Tina chooses some more but some don’t want to do it. She turns to me to comment on this when Jo pipes up “I do!”. Despite having just told him that he wouldn’t be, Tina capitulates with a weary sounding “Ok, you go paint beads” (fn 19/10/06).

Here the group of boys at the writing table have successfully manipulated the situation to produce a new and favourable group in a different activity. They disrupted sufficiently to make Tina’s task of selecting groups more difficult. At first Tina admonished this disruption but eventually gave in. The group painting beads ended up being made up almost entirely of boys. From here the group were able to dominate the attention of the female classroom assistant (Haley) and disrupt Tina’s attempted spelling tests:

Tina and Haley both have to ask Lewis to forget what the spelling table are doing and return to his own chair. Alex is shouting and Tina reprimands. Then Haley has to ‘shhh’ the whole group of boys on the painting table.

Lewis persists in coming over to the spelling table to see what they’re doing, much to Tina and Haley’s annoyance.

Haley: “James! Put your bottom on a chair and leave Ben alone….Lewis!!”

Haley is now repeatedly ‘shhhing’ what is being called Ben’s table although my impression is that Ben himself is working quite well.
11.59 Greg now decides he’s had enough painting, takes off his apron and leaves the table. Haley admonishes him, telling him he hasn’t finished yet

Greg: “No, I’m done”

Tina: “Greg if you’re finished then go and glue” (fn 19/10/06).

In the above excerpt the dominance of the boys was sufficient to allow Greg to manipulate the ordinary rules of the classroom in his favour. For Tina, this special treatment appeared preferable to continued disruption from the group. However, as this scene drew to a close, Tina was forced to make further dispensations, when the boys made the transition to breaktime problematic:

12.25 Haley is trying to make sure that once the children have left the carpet that they do actually get their coat and make it to the line by the door. Lewis is the first person she picks up not doing this. He says that he cannot find his coat. Tina enjoins those on the carpet to watch and listen and those lining up to be quiet.

Lewis: “Miss Chapel! I can’t find my coat!”

Haley: “You’re not looking!”

Haley finds the coat almost straight away and gives it to Lewis

12.27 Three more children are chosen to line up. Ben is waiting by the door which he now opens and announces that he can see people already outside. He shouts this to Tina before running off

12.28 Tina doesn’t notice this at first but then asks Haley were he is. “He just ran out” comes the answer. Tina raises her eyebrow but does nothing and tells the rest on the carpet to line up (fn 19/10/06).

Once again disruption from one of the boys, Lewis, allowed Ben to disrupt the routine norms of the classroom by running out to break without first lining up. Tina was then faced with the choice of either deserting the rest of the class to chase up Ben, or to sanction his rule breaking. In a no-win situation, she chose
the latter. The other thing worth noting from this scenario is that Haley was on a term’s voluntary work placement at the school. This may mean that she was not ‘authorised’ (Bailey & Thomson, Forthcoming) in disciplinary terms in the same way as permanent staff, allowing the boys extra leeway. However, had she not been there Tina would have had the same demands to negotiate on her own.

2. the allocation of risk and resources

The normalised dominance of the group of boys created spaces into which greater levels of disruption could feed, and this was most clearly seen in two of the core group members, Ben and Kyle. Both boys were regularly disruptive, both boys had an acknowledged ‘difficult’ situation at home. Kyle attended the nurture group four mornings per week and had been seen by both the educational psychologist and paediatrician. It was ‘suspected’ that he had ADHD, but according to Heather, the SENCO, the paediatrician did not wish to diagnose someone so young.

The first excerpt comes from a morning just before assembly, where Tina was having some difficulty controlling disruption:

8.53 Sue came into the room about a minute ago and now sits at the front of the carpet and goes through some counting games with the children

8.55 Sue: “Kyle, look at me, I want to see your eyes!”

8.56 Sue uses some breathing exercises to try to regain some calm after the excitement of the number games

8.58 All are attentive to Sue as she takes them through the need for oxygen to feed their brains and make them work better. Kyle occasionally shouts something out

9.00 Sue moves on to talking about water but is interrupted by Kyle

Sue: “No shouting out Kyle!”

9.01 Sue: “Kyle, put your hand up if you want to say something”
Sue is asking children whether they have a plastic bottle of water in the classroom. Kyle is laughing about something and is given a firm “no thank you!” by Sue

9.02 Sue is now asking questions about the reasons why we need to eat vegetables

9.03 Kyle is shouting out again

Sue: “practice something for me Kyle, put your hand up first”

Kyle does so then says “you get big and strong on veg” and is commended for both his answer and putting his hand up to say it (fn 19/10/06).

During a previous conversation in which Tina and I had been discussing mornings such as these, which were frequently overtaken with disruption, Tina said one of the worst things for her was on the occasions when Sue came in and had the class “eating out of her hand” (fn 4/10/06). Tina obviously felt under pressure when Sue was in the class, and her frustration at Sue’s ability to calm the children implies she would seek some tactics from Sue’s example.

However, in the above excerpt, although there was no serious admonishment, Kyle still managed to dominate Sue’s attention and create his own normative space. Sue chose to try and uphold the classroom norms by not sanctioning his disruption. However, this meant she was required to attend to Kyle on five occasions in only ten minutes in the classroom. Kyle was then given a commendation at the end, despite having been disruptive all the way through.

This is a tactic frequently seen in interactions with ‘difficult’ children, whereby they receive an abnormal amount of praise for completing tasks in a manner ordinarily expected of most. Though the intention is to encourage more of the same appropriate behaviour, there are also ‘incidental effects’ (Graham, 2006). Firstly, it contradicts routine classroom norms which are usually constructed along an ‘everyone is equal’ philosophy. Secondly, for the child to whom it is directed, it implies a sanctioning of the inappropriate behaviour that went before it, conferring or reinforcing a ‘special’ status. This is particularly so in the example
above, where Kyle’s 10 minutes of disruption are implicitly sanctioned when he finishes the session with a commendation.

Though the above example is relatively subtle, instances of Kyle or Ben’s disruption were not always so. Frequently the whole class would be disrupted and several different adults’ attention would be required. The following excerpt concerns an incident involving Ben:

11.02 Ben has had a bit of a tantrum and is now hiding beneath the table, much to the amusement of the others on the table, and distress of Haley. Tina has now gone over and is crouching next to him.

11.08 Sub-table tantrum still going on. “just ignore him” says James. Ben now starts kicking the chairs and tables, Tina gives him a sharp “stop!”, he doesn’t

(...) 

11.14 Mary [deputy head] comes in to aid the cause:

Mary: “maybe I’ll come back in a minute and the room will be straight again, what do you think Ben?”

Tina is trying to concentrate on the rest of the class but is obviously distracted by what’s going on

(...) 

11.22 Ben has now half emerged from the table and is sitting with Mary. Now she tries to get him to move the furniture back, he doesn’t want to, so she does it and then returns to him. I can’t hear what is being said, but Ben is now verbally responding

11.28 Ben is now out after almost ½ hour under the table. Ben and Mary leave the room together

(...) 

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11.42 Ben is back in but heads straight for the corner where he stands facing the wall and refuses to move, so Mary takes him out again

(...)

11.51 Ben is now back in the room but has missed the entire lesson.

In contrast to Kyle, I often observed Ben to be relatively shy and quiet, and this matched the perceptions of many staff. This incident was one of several examples where this wasn’t the case. Tina questioned me at the time for any pre-cursor to the ‘tantrum’ but I could offer nothing. There is whole class disruption, an abnormal amount of (female) adult attention given to one (male) child, with the male directing the interactions. However, in addition to these, Ben’s incident brings a slightly different set of concerns with it. For the day or two following such an incident there may be more conversations about Ben amongst staff, and Tina would usually go out of her way to be positive and encouraging with him in class. Once Ben had gone back to his usual quiet, shy and non-participatory role, the concerned conversations and special treatment would stop until the next ‘incident’. Unlike Kyle, Ben did not have a consistent ‘problem’ discourse attached to him, and this appeared to be because on a day-to-day basis he did not threaten the social order to the extent that Kyle did. Both boys were towards the bottom of the class in terms of literacy and numeracy standards, yet, with the exception of what were seen as isolated incidents such as these, Ben slipped beneath the radar which Kyle repeatedly forced himself onto. The result is that while Kyle received all the attention, resources and interventions; IEPs, nurture groups, psychologists and paediatricians, Ben received nothing.

2. pathologisation and the new normalisation of deviance

One can take several critical perspectives towards special needs interventions, which may be exclusive, stigmatising, individualistic, medicalising, deficit ridden, and primarily interested in the ‘needs’ of the social order. Kyle and Ben’s contrasting stories reinforce this last notion, with the ‘benefits’ of attention, resources and professional energies directed towards those who persistently disrupt the docile directive.

The ratio of boys to girls receiving special needs provision is similar to the estimated ADHD gender ratio at about 5:1 (Raphael Reed, 1999). In light of the
benefits of time and money, as well as any positive psychosocial change the
intervention may promote, this ratio represents a significant dividend. The fact
that some males are able to manipulate this extra provision on the basis of a
masculinised dominance in the classroom means that, following Connell (1995),
this can be called a ‘patriarchal dividend’.

Within special needs provision, pathologisation might be seen as a ‘gold standard’
dividend. A diagnosis may signify extra funding, more personal attention, fewer
academic demands and above all, a new normative space. For better or worse, a
diagnosis and label intervenes in self/other perceptions. Alongside negative
implications such as stigma and self-fulfilling prophecies, lies the greater support,
understanding, patience and sympathy that may attend the child who is not
simply bad, sad or stupid, but pathologically so. This has significant implications
for the everyday maintenance of norms in the classroom, where teachers may
now be required to make one rule for some and not for others. In terms of this
analysis a circular motion is produced whereby male dominance produces the
interventions, which produce the diagnoses, creating new normative spaces and
new opportunities for further male dominance.

This argument will be pursued through observations of a year one boy, Chris, and
a year two boy, Ali. Chris had been diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 5. He was
prescribed the psycho-stimulant Ritalin and he attended the nurture group four
mornings per week. At other times he would join the mainstream group, if
possible with an assistant (though no specific funding was available for this). Ali
had a diagnosis of ADHD and Autism, but was not on any medication. His
diagnoses gave the school sufficient funding to supply him with a teaching
assistant in the morning, at other times he joined the rest of the class.

Chris

When I first started observing the Year One classroom I was not aware that Chris
had a diagnosis of ADHD. He had his own rug to sit on when the group were
altogether on the carpet, and he rarely participated any more than minimally in
either whole class or individual activities. His free movement and occupation
within the class was quite normalised, as long as he was not disruptive then he
did not threaten the social order and would often be left to his own devices. His
communication skills were very poor, with speech little more than a quiet mumble. Chris was the second youngest of five children in his family all of whom
were being or had been schooled at Alderley. The derisive discourse that the
family had accumulated drew not only from the school but also from social
services, who had carried out several home inspections unannounced. Chris’
behaviour was seen as an unsurprising, even inevitable consequence of these
circumstances

This view of the ‘inevitable’ tended to govern Chris’ schooling regardless of his
actual behaviour. If he ‘kicked off’ then three or four staff may have been called
on to control him and his medication would be used liberally. If Chris was not
disruptive then he would be untalkative and non-participatory and there would
likely be no great concern about his almost non-existent academic output.

The following excerpts are taken from an afternoon where Chris was to be
‘included’ in the mainstream classroom:

1.24  Chris is crawling around on the floor and refusing all attention

      Tina [to Haley]: “If he’s crawling around leave him, but I need
      someone to keep an eye of him

1.26  Chris has made it back to the carpet but is shuffling around on a
      chair and still not participating, and now is back to crawling under
      tables

1.30  Chris is still under a table but playing quite contentedly by himself
      (fn 4/10/06).

From this restless and non-participatory but not disruptive role, Tina, Haley and
another assistant, Andrea, attempted to draw Chris into some activities:

1.37  Haley has come over to the carpet with an eye on Chris. He
      emerges from under the table and then fetches his ball and starts
      chasing it round. This is confiscated and Chris sulks off...he is soon
      up looking for something to do and now lurks around the work
      tables. Haley can’t interest him in drawing though. He wants a
      jigsaw now but they are on a shelf he cannot reach. He sits
      beneath the shelf and now seems occupied with something he’s
found on the floor. He seems quite content for now and Haley leaves him to it

1.39 Andrea is now trying to get Chris to come and do some designing in her department but he is being unresponsive

1.40 Tina now tries to engage Chris, but he disappears angrily under a table again and is now throwing his shoes at Tina

1.41 Chris has now been coaxed out from under the table and persuaded to play with some beads (fn 4/10/06).

The pattern that can be observed here involved Chris attracting the attention of the adults in the room through his non-participation. His disruption then appeared to increase relative to the attempts made to bring him back toward something productive. The task then became an attempt to minimise harm, as long as this objective was met, then the nature of activity that Chris pursued seemed relatively unimportant.

This pattern whereby Chris’ levels of disruption seemed to increase with the amount of attention given him was most clearly seen in the nurture group. Nurture groups are an increasingly popular means through which schools attempt to manage certain problem populations. Based on the assumption of emotional deficit within the child; probably the result of a ‘difficult’ or ‘disruptive’ background (Boxall, 2002), they are small groups with increased individual attention and an emphasis on pastoral care. The group aims to provide a positive, relaxed and encouraging environment in which children might learn to express themselves better and gain some emotional literacy.

The Year One and Two nurture group was usually overseen by two female classroom assistants (Andrea and Clare) and regularly attended by 6 children, 5 boys and 1 girl, with other ‘floating’ members joining the group sporadically.

The smaller group had some observable positive effects on Chris, particularly in the improvement in his communication skills. However, the increased confidence he may have felt resulting from this, combined with the nurture group’s relative freedom from the constraints of the classroom and lack of academic agenda produced more disruptive and violent behaviour in Chris:
Everyone is encouraged to set their own targets for the following week...Clare suggests that Chris tries not to hit any staff. Apparently in the last week he has hit both Tina and Andrea (fn 23/11/06)

Later that day, in conversation with Heather and Tina:

Tina is finding Chris’ behaviour particularly upsetting. Yesterday he gave her a whack in the stomach which almost knocked her over (fn 23/11/06)

The following week in the nurture group:

Chris is about as talkative as I think I’ve ever heard. When it’s audible then his speech is basic but otherwise there’s not much wrong with it. He is also pretty active today and the consensus amongst Andrea and Clare is that he hasn’t had his medication

(...)

When the work activity is set, Chris refused to join in and instead went and sat on the cushions with a book....Clare tried to get Chris involved, he refused repeatedly, becoming increasingly angry at Clare’s attempts which culminated in him hitting her and running into the corner...Clare continues to try and bring him back, he hits her again and storms out of the room. (fn 27/11/06)

Afterwards I was discussing this incident with Heather:

Just then someone else came into the staffroom announcing that Chris and Kyle had been in a fight and now Chris was on the rampage, lashing out freely. Heather went off to investigate this, returning back a few minutes later to say that he was up a tree and wouldn’t come down (fn 27/11)

When Chris was eventually coaxed down he was swiftly given more medication and then, while everyone else went to nativity rehearsal he stayed in the year one classroom playing on the computer and colonising the attention of the (female) classroom assistant who was attempting to take several other children through some extra literacy.
In the above excerpts, as Chris’ behaviour became more violent the nurturing assumptions were not disrupted and attempts were made, in this case by Clare, to try to encourage him back. This was met with further violence. After this, and at the same time as he was being discussed in the staffroom, Chris’ violence went up another level. At this point he had colonised the attention of a large proportion of the staff. With the original assumptions still in place (in fact reinforced by the event) the solution is sought in the further administration of medication and exclusion from the afternoon’s activity.

From the ‘disordered background’ assumption of the nurture group came the assumption that when something goes wrong with Chris’ behaviour it is due to disregard at home:

In the staff room this morning there was a great deal of congress going on about Chris. Apparently he had a bad day yesterday and again a lack of medication was blamed. More aspersions were cast as to the parents ability to administer the medication correctly with someone claiming that they had heard that some parents kept back the dose intended for school to help them manage at home (fn 23/11/06)

In Chris’ case the ‘dividend’ which his diagnosis represented was a complex question, mediated by several further externalities. If he chose not to disrupt then he was free to behave in almost any other way he chose, free from the academic agenda of the school and free to choose whether or not to follow the encouragements of the staff around him. Perhaps, Chris experienced the increased attention he was given in the nurture group as compromising this masculine privilege. He reacted in hegemonic manner with violence. This violence attracted more attention and eventually the resource of medication was sought.

So, on the one hand, freedom, attention and resources were all on Chris’ side. However, educationally he was offered no dividend regardless of his behaviour. If he did not disrupt then he was left to his own non-participatory and unproductive devices. If he did disrupt then he was made docile with medication and excluded from ordinary proceedings. The externalities of ADHD and the background which was presumed to have caused it were held as the inevitable and inescapable assumptions upon which his schooling was governed according to a fatalised, \textit{laissez-faire} approach, leaving alternative explanations and solutions unexplored.
Ali

Ali’s case contrasted to Chris’ in several immediately obvious ways: Firstly, his combined diagnoses allowed the school to provide him with a classroom assistant (Anna) every morning, and this allowed him to be kept in the mainstream classroom without recourse to either nurture group or medication. Secondly, Ali’s mother was on good terms with both Anna and the Year Two class teacher (Rachel), and I heard of no associations made between Ali’s home situation and his behaviour.

Where Chris was a small, shy and often very quiet child, Ali was bigger and taller than most of the class and was frequently very loud. Though he went about it in different ways Ali also had a tendency to control and manipulate his interactions with the female adults around him and held his own very visible normative space within the classroom:

11.26 Group activities have been back on for about 4-5 minutes now, when Rachel has to stop them for noise levels. She says she knows Ali shouts out during work time, but that doesn’t mean everyone can (fn 02/11/06)

This normative dispensation could often be observed physically:

9.50 Rachel starts to call out addition sums...Ali is wandering around with what looks like a plane made out of plastic cubes. Anna currently seems content to let him as he does a lap of the classroom

9.52 Ali does another lap of the room and gets a cheery hello on the way through the rest of the children who are sitting on the carpet. He then starts to go on what looks like another lap, but Anna stops him to suggest a more constructive activity. Ali is now clambering over one of the desks and Anna prizes him away from this and leads him back to his work table (fn 06/11/06)

As well as his freedom of movement, Ali was relatively free with the amount of noise he could acceptably create. At times he and Anna had a good natured and
productive relationship, however, Anna was often directed by Ali’s whim. He was the dominant force and frequently violent in his interactions:

10.12 Ali wants to use a crayon to write with but Anna would rather he used a pencil, he throws his pencil away and takes a green crayon. Anna takes the box of crayons away to a loud scream of “NO!!” from Ali. She manages to get him holding a pencil again by threatening to put a sad face in his book for his mother to see. Ali obviously doesn’t like this idea but still won’t write down the work given, he keeps swinging little plastic letters around and refusing to write anything. Now he has scribbled all over his paper. “The end” he says, “No” says Anna, “it’s not the end”. “The end! The end! The end!” screams Ali. He stands up, upending his chair and oblivious to Anna’s gentle admonishment goes over to the group on the carpet (fn 06/1106)

As with Chris, it seemed that Anna’s ‘gentle’ approach was based on damage limitation. For Chris, this approach continually sanctioned his lack of academic output, for Ali, it was his rude, violent and anti-social means of asserting himself that was sanctioned.

Nevertheless, there were considerable benefits to Anna’s patient and gentle approach in what with time she could get Ali to do. The following excerpts are taken from a quite lengthy scene between the two of them (the demands of notation did not allow me to also record the time):

Ali is still banging around and shouting “shut up!” at regular intervals....

...Ali continues shouting various things at Anna...

...It sounds like he wants to do some patterns, Anna asks him to do something and gets told to “shut up!” and again when she asks him to pick up his book, now he has left the table....

...Ali has now scribbled on and ripped his book, Anna threatens to tell his mum. This causes even more consternation from Ali, but with no reasoning, he just responded with more “Shut up!”...
...Anna now takes the crayons to put them away which is greeted with another scream and he runs over to stop her...

...Anna introduces the idea of a lunchtime sanction but at the last minute he throws the book down again with a scream that he wants to do numbers not patterns. Finally Anna capitulates and agrees to let him do numbers, but Ali is still not happy...

...it sounds like he doesn’t want to do numbers in the number book so Anna offers him the pattern book, “No patterns!” is the shouted response...

...Ali has thrown all his pencils away so now has nothing to write with, he tries to grab his book back but Anna persists and eventually she has Ali sitting on a seat and looking at the sums, which once he gets into he performs very competently (fn 06/11/06)

Here Ali was being about as persistently difficult as he ever was, and yet Anna kept attempting to bring him back to the task in hand. She allowed him to shout and throw things without sanction, but in so doing managed to eventually re-capture Ali’s attention and get him doing some work. As I observed at the end of this excerpt, he performed this competently. In fact Ali’s literacy and numeracy levels were around average for the class. Ali therefore was not limited in the same way that Chris was by his social externalities. His problems were supported financially and were not seen as the inevitable product of a ‘chaotic’ upbringing.

However, in the afternoons when Anna was no longer in class, Rachel was expected to manage the class often without any help. In the following example one of the part time classroom assistants (Sheila) attempts to reason with Harry:

2.14 Sheila is back in the room and trying to get Ali to read a book. “Just go away” is his response. Now he throws some pictures on the floor, tells Sheila to shut up, walks out of the room and slams the door. Sheila pursues him, though she is now back in the room without him, I think he may be using one of the computers outside (fn 06/11/06)
Here, the pattern followed is much more similar to the approach taken with Chris. Ali no longer had Anna with whom he may be expected to be relatively cooperative. As soon as he started showing any aggression or opposition the primary objective became attaining peace and quiet. This acted both to sanction the aggression through inaction and also to place the social order ahead of trying to provide a constructive activity for Ali.

A distinction thus emerged between Chris and Ali’s schooling and between the time when Ali has the full-time attention of Anna and when he did not. Firstly, and most obviously, Ali was much more academically productive than Chris. The vast majority of this production took place when he was with Anna, and so she represents the clearest indication of the additional dividend that he received compared to Chris. When Anna was taken away, then interactions with Ali tended to take on a similar pattern to Chris with the emphasis on ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977).

However, for over half the time Ali was in school, he had resources and attention directed at him not only to try and normalise his behaviour and protect the social order but also to regulate his attention towards the needs of his schooling, from which he will likely reap future dividend. This distinction illustrates Foucault’s (1981) distinction between power that seeks to discipline through ‘an anatomo-politics of the human body’ (p. 139; original emphasis); which is the docile bodies approach taken with Chris; and, a power that seeks regulatory control through ‘a bio-politics of the population…a power whose highest function was…to invest life through and through’ (p. 139; original emphasis). One is a power that seeks to control by domination, the other seeks to regulate through optimization.

**Missing children**

In thinking about gendered effects, perhaps the first thing I could say in appraisal of my observational notes, is that they are dominated by boys. This represents a problematic of its own. It implies, firstly, that it is the boys who are dominating the social arena, this has been discussed already. It also implies that my position as a male and my preconceptions of my subject matter being a predominantly male issue have had productive effects on the resulting data. This presents a set of concerns which extend beyond the limitations of my data. If particular problems become associated with particular groups circular motions come into
operation whereby preconceptions guide perceptions, perceptions reinforce expectations and actions reinforce the initial assumption. The result is that the words and actions of females in classroom scenes, staffroom conversations, special needs interventions and professional discourses are notable only for their absence.

Part of not wanting teachers to guide me too much according to their own preconceptions meant that I had not mentioned a particular interest in pathologised children and therefore one Year 2 boy, Ross, had not been pointed out to me. Ross had a diagnosis of ADHD, he was relatively small for the class and had a knack of slipping away from notice. His name was very rarely heard for any reason and during structured activities he sat on a desk on the other side of the room, out of my field of vision. It was not until one of my conversations with Heather, towards the end of my time in the Year 2 classroom, that I was made aware of the concerns over Ross’ schooling.

What I had not observed in Ross was illustrative of his non-participative role at school. He had produced very little work and had very basic levels of literacy and numeracy. He did not seem to enjoy whole group activities or the collective nature of schooling in general. He had very few friends and his ability to wind other children up was one of the reasons offered by both Rachel and Heather for two other children with ADHD being removed from the class. A little like Ali and Anna, if Rachel were not in the room then Ross would become very upset and badly behaved; I observed this for myself one day when a supply teacher was covering the Year 2 class, and Ross was very ill-tempered, defiant, loud and disruptive; the total opposite of the child who had not appeared on my radar at all up to this point.

While my lack of notes on Ross has not allowed me to talk about him as much as I would have liked, I have tried to use his invisibility as a counter image to the notion of problem-child-as-disrupter. In terms of the whole class experience, management of the disruptive child seems essential to management of the valorised social order, however on an individual level, the ‘invisible’ child may present a different but equal challenge to the notion of inclusion.

**Conclusion: Dominance and dividend?**
The perceived need to alleviate the struggles of boys in schools is inscribed through moral panics of the bad, sad, stupid and mad. Yet these discourses mask the continued dominance of boys in school, which has been demonstrated here both through some of the existing research on school and gender and through the first section of my ethnographic data.

This initial dominance opens up normative and resource driven spaces within schools. From the increased attention of teachers in class, to special needs interventions such as nurture groups and in some cases the resources of the psychiatric profession. The medical label distributes a new set of normative positions which encourage adults to further sanction hegemonic masculine behaviours. This feeds a circular motion whereby male dominance opens up new space into which psychopathology can intervene to open up new space to allow for further dominance. The contrasted cases of Kyle and Ben within this first set of data implies that the mechanism by which the circular motion initially takes hold is the needs of the social order. Thus overtly hegemonic behaviour is required to attract resources and interventions.

Within an overall situation of dominance, some finer distinctions can be drawn out as to the extent to which psychopathology may represent a dividend. In Ali’s case the dividend appeared relatively clear cut. He had his own normative and physical space in the classroom; his violent and dominating behaviour was sanctioned through this space and through the assignment of a teaching assistant to him; because of the sensitive and productive nature of this relationship Ali was often successfully integrated into the academic needs of schooling.

In contrast to this was Chris, whose label conspired with some naturalised assumptions regarding his family background to produce a bind which in some ways limited his available subject positions. Chris had been offered both the resources of the nurture group and Ritalin. However, he often seemed to enact a dichotomised ontology within school whereby he would either take up a non-disruptive and non-participative role and be left to his own unproductive devices, or he would take up an active, over-exuberant role in which case he would likely be dosed. Once again it could be argued that the presentation of violent masculine behaviours attracted resources and attention for Chris. But this was only in the questionable dividend represented by medicalisation and Ritalin.
The case of the children largely missing from my data is illustrative of more generalised problematics. Through his absence, Ross represents an extension of the problematic whereby masculine dominance will only be sanctioned and resourced if it threatens the social order. Like Chris, Ross’ diagnosis has not forced a confrontation with his academic difficulties. Equally, if Ross did not disrupt then he remained invisible. For Chris and Ross the diagnosis has had something of the reverse dividend effect where the naturalised assumptions it produced guided a *laissez-faire* fatalism in their schooling.

The complexities of individual statements about the precise nature of dividend do not detract from being able to speak of a generalized dominance of males in the classrooms presented here, and this is testified to by the distinct lack of female children in the analysis. The valorization of the social order seems to hold primary dominance however and this implies that individual males will be differently served or limited through their actions.

There seems little sense in which, on its own, psychiatric diagnoses generates significant dividend unless it is backed up by practical resources at the classroom level. Additionally, though I have posited the new normative space which it opens up for some children, and the overall sense in which this serves male domination, at the individual level this is to some extent an exclusionary space, predicated on the assumption of an internal and naturalised deficit in the child.

References


*This document was added to the Education-line database on 10 September 2008*