Pedagogies and critical reflection: key understandings for transformative gender justice

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It is widely acknowledged that quality pedagogy is central to improving the educational outcomes of all students. In improving the social and academic outcomes of boys, and more specifically disengaged boys, the productive pedagogies model has been presented as a way forward. In terms of drawing on this model in socially just ways; to facilitate a broadening, rather than reinscribing of boys’ narrow constructions of gender identity, this paper illustrates the imperative of teachers interacting with key feminist understandings of masculinity. Organized around the four dimensions of productive pedagogy, the paper draws on (predominantly Australian-based) seminal work in the sphere of masculinities and schooling to discuss key strategies and initiatives for improving boys’ educational outcomes. Against this backdrop, the paper demonstrates the importance of two principle understandings. The first relates to teachers understanding masculinity through feminist lenses, as constructed, regulated and maintained through inequitable social processes and the second relates to teachers understanding pedagogy as critical and transformative practice. These understandings are presented as vital to enabling gender justice.

Introduction

For some time now, research in the sphere of boys’ education has highlighted the limitations and counter-productivity of simplistic gender(ed) understandings (Teese et al., 1995; Collins et al., 2000; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino et al., 2004). These understandings have been seen as informing undertheorized approaches to addressing issues of masculinity in schools. ‘Boy-friendly’ strategies along the lines of increasing ‘masculine’ curriculum content, resources and teaching styles; increasing the number of male role models in boys’ lives; and the implementation of single sex classes are often deployed within understandings of gender as difference and opposition (Alloway, 1995; Epstein et al., 1998; Gilbert

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These strategies are most frequently circumscribed by particular beliefs and assumptions about boys’ supposed ‘natural’ (or biologically determined) behaviours and learning orientations and invariably reflect an active/passive gender binary (Martino et al., 2004). In this regard, they are often based on recuperating or reinstating an idealized form of conventional and universal White, middle class and heterosexual masculinity (Connell, 1995; Martino et al., 2004). While potentially effective in addressing issues of masculinity in schools, these strategies can be counter-productive because they invariably normalize, reinforce and leave unquestioned a narrow and often problematic version of masculinity (Connell, 1995, p. 2000; also see Davies, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Keddie, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004). Furthermore, in their prescriptive approach, these strategies fail to account for contextual factors and in this sense the often inequitable social processes and discourses that interplay to construct and maintain particular versions of masculinity are ignored (Martino et al., 2004).

It is clear that undertheorized and simplistic strategies designed to address issues of masculinity in schools are inadequate—there are no simple explanations or ‘quick-fix’ solutions to dealing with the complex and multifarious terrain that characterizes the sphere of boys’ education (Davies, 1997; Alloway et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Against this backdrop, key research (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino et al., 2004) highlights the imperative of teachers engaging with sophisticated research-based knowledges in the area of gender and social construction to enable a critically reflective focus on the nature and potential effects of particular strategies. In moving beyond a reinscription of taken-for-granted social expectations and assumptions about how boys and girls learn and behave, the key here is teachers examining their philosophies and understandings and in particular how these philosophies and understandings are implicated in either confirming and perpetuating or challenging and transforming limited and essentialist versions of masculinity (and femininity).

Of concern, Australian research continues to highlight how teachers’ simplistic and essentialist understandings of gender drive much of the curriculum and pedagogy in our schools, and more specifically many of the programs designed to address the educational needs of boys (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004). While this is perhaps unsurprising, given that schools remain highly gendered in their structures and practices, these understandings can be seen as a key barrier to improving boys’ educational outcomes in effective and sustainable ways (Kenway & Willis, 1998; Connell, 2000; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004).

Informed by the premise that teachers are central to positive outcomes for students, this paper explores two factors identified as the most significant in terms of enhancing the academic and social outcomes of boys: positive teacher–student relationships and quality pedagogy (Lingard et al., 2000, 2002). Using the productive pedagogies framework (See Table 1), this exploration moves beyond a narrow focus on boys’
Table 1. The productive pedagogies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual quality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher order thinking</td>
<td>Are higher order thinking and critical analysis occurring?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of knowledge</td>
<td>Does the lesson cover central concepts and their complex relations in any depth, detail or level of specificity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of students’ understanding</td>
<td>Do the work and response of the students provide evidence of understanding of concepts or ideas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive conversation</td>
<td>Does classroom talk break out of the initiation/response evaluation pattern and lead to sustained dialogue between students, and between teachers and students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge as problematic</td>
<td>Are students critiquing and second-guessing texts, ideas and knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-language</td>
<td>Are aspects of language, grammar, and technical vocabulary being foregrounded?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Connectedness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge integration</td>
<td>Does the lesson range across diverse fields, disciplines and paradigms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link to background knowledge</td>
<td>Is there an attempt to connect with students’ background knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to the world beyond the classroom</td>
<td>Do lessons and the assigned work have any resemblance or connection to real life contexts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-based curriculum</td>
<td>Is there a focus on identifying and solving intellectual and/or real-world problems?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Supportive classroom environment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ direction of activities</td>
<td>Do students have any say in the pace, direction or outcomes of the lesson?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support for student achievement</td>
<td>Is the classroom a socially supportive, positive environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic engagement</td>
<td>Are students engaged and on-task?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit quality performance criteria</td>
<td>Are criteria for student performance made explicit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student self-regulation</td>
<td>Is the direction of student behaviour implicit and self-regulatory or explicit?</td>
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<th>Recognition of difference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural knowledge values cultures</td>
<td>Are diverse cultural knowledges brought into play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public representation of inclusive participation</td>
<td>Are deliberate attempts made to increase the participation of all students of different backgrounds?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Is the teaching principally narrative, or is it expository?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group identities in learning community</td>
<td>Does teaching build a sense of community and identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active citizenship</td>
<td>Are attempts made to foster active citizenship?</td>
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Source: The State of Queensland (2001)
educational strategies (such as those identified above) to a broader focus on pedagogies and critical reflective practice (The State of Queensland, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002). In shifting to a broader focus on pedagogies and critical reflection, this paper adds to key work in this sphere by further illustrating the significance of two key issues. The first refers to teachers drawing on feminist knowledges to understand masculinity within a gender justice framework as constructed and maintained through inequitable social processes and, the second relates to teachers understanding pedagogy as critical and transformative practice (Alloway et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino et al., 2004).

In defining gender justice as a way forward in improving boys’ educational outcomes, the paper draws on key work which argues the importance of teachers problematizing narrow and oppositional constructs of gender to facilitate a broadening of boys’ understandings of masculinity to be more inclusive of difference and diversity (Alloway et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). More specifically, and consistent with Lingard and Douglas (1999), this paper draws on feminist principles in calling for boys to:

... broaden their modes of expression to encompass what has been traditionally seen as feminine, instead of progressively limiting their options as they attempt to continue to define themselves in contrast to girls, women and their identification with the feminine.

(Lingard & Douglas, 1999, p. 152)

‘Constituted through performances of relationality [and more specifically] an investment in relations with others’ (Gonick, 2004, p. 190) and seeming to operate transculturally (at least through Western lenses), the discourses and social ascriptions of hegemonic or traditional femininity are defined here as likely to encourage feelings of emotional responsibility, nurture and community (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). It is acknowledged, of course, that these sorts of enactments are certainly not limited to traditional femininity; however, they are presented in this paper as central to broadening boys’ modes of expression beyond a hegemonic or traditional masculinity that is synonymous with power, domination and ‘non-emotion’ (see Connell, 2000).

In terms of pedagogy as transformative practice, a gender justice perspective that draws on feminist principles to focus on valuing difference and diversity provides a platform for teachers to begin articulating affirmative ‘ways of being’ with boys and, within this framework, to begin questioning and challenging rather than reinscribing the narrow or dominant versions of gender and hierarchical constructions of masculinity that constrain boys’ (and girls’) academic and social outcomes. Within the sphere of education, this gender justice perspective continues to be most critical given the still pervasive ‘what about the boys’ panic and the resultant homogenizing of boys as the ‘new disadvantaged’ (Epstein, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Most importantly, a focus on difference and diversity compels us to take a ‘which boys?’, ‘which girls?’ approach to the issue of educational disadvantage. This is, of course, imperative given that gender analyses are not the most accurate predictors of educational disadvantage (Collins et al., 2000).
Organized around principle elements of the productive pedagogies framework (The State of Queensland, 2001), the following identifies some of the central strategies and initiatives for improving boys’ educational outcomes. These strategies and initiatives refer to: teaching and learning that reflects greater connections to boys’ biographies or lifeworlds; more equitable teacher–student relationships; boys’ engagement with critical literacies; and acknowledging the affirmative possibilities of boys’ group identities. In working towards transformative gender justice, the discussion seeks to illustrate the significance of teachers drawing on key understandings of masculinity in their enactment of these strategies. These understandings are informed by feminist principles and are presented as instrumental in teachers constructing sustainable pedagogies that work to broaden boys’ narrow understandings of identity and articulate socially just alternatives to dominant masculine constructs (Davies, 1993; Alloway, 1995; Lingard & Douglas 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004).

The productive pedagogies framework

The productive pedagogies are an increasingly recognized framework of quality teaching and learning developed in light of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (The State of Queensland, 2001), a three-year examination of the links between classroom practice and improved learning (Lingard et al., 2000). As a response to the findings of this study, principally the generally low levels of authentic or productive pedagogy characterizing teaching and learning environments in Queensland (Australia), the productive pedagogies were presented as a way forward to improving the educational outcomes of all students (The State of Queensland, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002). Addressing the educational needs of boys argues that this framework recognizes and engages with student difference through pedagogies that are intellectually demanding, socially supportive and connected to students’ lives and worlds beyond the classroom. Critically, the report also suggests that a comprehensive approach based on this framework, within the context of whole school support, is particularly important for boys and, more specifically, the diverse range of boys in Australian classrooms who are disengaged from the structures and practices of schooling.

The four dimensions of productive pedagogy: connectedness, supportive classroom environment, intellectual quality and recognition of difference

In terms of relevant and meaningful student learning the productive pedagogies framework highlights the significance of connectedness. Within this dimension, enhanced learning occurs through linking particular understandings and knowledges to students’ experiences—their biographies and the world beyond the classroom. Against this backdrop a supportive classroom environment characterized by mutual respect fosters students’ self-direction and academic engagement with specific activities or tasks (The State of Queensland, 2001). The dimension of intellectual quality involves facilitating students’ deep rather than superficial knowledge and
understanding of particular topics and issues. Critical analysis, reasoning and question- ing are of significant importance here. Central within this paradigm, knowledge is viewed as problematic—as not fixed and unitary but multiple and complex—constructed and maintained by social, political and cultural forces. The valuing and legitimisation of non-dominant cultural knowledges underpins the recognition of difference dimension. In this respect a tenor of inclusion supports students coming to understand the politics of difference in their constructions of affirmative group identities and their enactments of active citizenship (The State of Queensland, 2001).

**Increasing connectedness: connections to boys’ biographies or lifeworlds**

Interpreting ‘biography’ as referring to a person’s lifeworld or sense of self makes transparent a major theme within the boys’ education literature in terms of pedagogy. This theme relates to boys’ sense of self as socially and emotionally invested within bodily or ‘active’ expressions of masculinity and is a key feature within early childhood and primary research (Davies, 1993; Jordan, 1995; Holland, 2003; Keddie, 2003) and research within the sphere of adolescence (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1998; Mills, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002). This research illustrates the importance of teachers connecting with these active investments in multiple ways. Here, for example, boys’ engagement, motivation and confidence are said to be enhanced through increasing opportunities for physical activity within the curriculum, increasing the use of ‘hands-on’ experiences such as those associated with electronic technologies and the integration of multiple media and communication modes (Alloway et al., 2002).

In exploring the selection of content and materials, key masculinities research (Alloway et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2002) also argues the importance of connecting with boys’ interests and preferences beyond the classroom. The issues here relate to increasing the ‘authenticity’ of schoolwork by constructing a classroom environment that reflects more closely the outside world and by increasing motivation through allowing boys to select content or material that is interesting and meaningful to them. Relevant strategies in this regard might be the incorporation of genres from everyday life (such as advertisements, brochures, jokes or cartoons), drawing on boys’ skills (such as drawing, design and construction) and interests (in popular culture or sport, for example) and exploring topics that concern boys (perhaps relating to friendships and peer culture or particular socio-cultural issues) (Alloway et al., 2002). This is said to enhance boys’ feelings of autonomy in terms of positioning their interests, preferences and opinions as valued and worthy (rather than inevitably separate from) parts of ‘official’ school learning (The State of Queensland, 2001; Alloway et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2002).

**Key understandings of masculinity for critical reflective and transformative practice within a gender justice framework**

In terms of enhancing educational outcomes, while it is important to engage boys’ interests, preferences, opinions and sense of self, connecting with boys in the ways
just described can, of course, work to validate and legitimize narrow and hierarchical constructions of gender. Aside from the obvious danger in the examples suggested above of stereotyping and homogenizing all boys’ learning styles and interests as similar (Martino et al., 2004), unproblematically tapping into boys’ active expressions of masculinity will quite likely perpetuate and reinscribe investments in physical strength and domination, for example (Alloway et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004) as may drawing on boys’ interests in sport and popular culture. Here gender (as well as other identity relations such as sexuality, race and class) is usually represented and enacted in highly stereotypical ways and in this sense narrow identity constructions are likely to be reinscribed. Moreover, the popular culture designed to attract adolescents is often constructed around anti-establishment and anti-authority messages and discourses which are invariably at odds with official school cultures (Alloway et al., 2002).

Through feminist and gender justice lenses that call for boys to broaden their modes of expression to encompass what has been traditionally seen as feminine (Lingard & Douglas, 1999), we are able to recognize the imperative of connecting with, and channeling boys’ existing patterns of physical desire and pleasure into alternative ways of being (Davies, 1993). Here we can see the imperative of providing boys with opportunities to broaden their understandings of ‘acceptable’ expressions of masculinity and in particular disrupt ‘hypermasculine’ constructions through greater experiences in more traditionally ‘feminine’ pursuits (such as various cultural and aesthetic expressions of drama, dance, visual art, craft and design) (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Alloway et al., 2002). It is contended here that these traditionally feminine pursuits are more likely to lend themselves to encouraging boys’ feelings of emotional responsibility and community through focusing on non-combative and non-competitive relations with others. However, it is also acknowledged that gender injustice can be constructed and reinforced through non-combative and non-competitive relations. Miller’s ‘poisonous pedagogies’ (1987) are one such example of how intellectual (rather than physical) practices of hyperrationality can affirm dominant, controlling and even violent behaviour (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). In this regard, we can see that what matters here are the meanings generated through various forms of physical expression and the importance of encouraging investments in affiliative behaviours rather than those mobilized around physical strength, domination and conflict. Through these lenses we can also see the imperative of facilitating boys’ critical analysis and deconstruction of stereotypical meanings and anti-authority discourses in everyday and popular texts. To these ends, we can draw on feminist knowledges, to avoid a remasculinization of boys’ cultures to facilitate a challenging and transforming of the hegemonic understandings of masculinity that work to narrow choices and opportunities.

**Increasing support: equitable teacher–student relationships**

The importance of relationships and principally, positive student–teacher relationships in the sphere of boys’ education is presently a major focus particularly in
addressing the needs of disengaged boys in the middle years (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Issues of power, control and authoritarianism are key elements of this focus and are presented as significant in understanding how mutually respectful and supportive teacher–student relationships might be facilitated (Davies, 1993; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Teacher–student relationships characterized by traditionally masculine modes of relating, for example, can reinforce traditional versions of gender (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004). In developing positive and mutually supportive relationships the importance of breaking down the power imbalances between teachers and students is seen as central particularly given boys’ resistances to being overpowered and controlled (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Keddie & Churchill, 2004). In this regard, boys’ social and behavioural outcomes are said to be enhanced through democratic disciplinary approaches that focus on teachers sharing power and authority and position students with greater legitimacy and agency in their everyday school lives (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). Key strategies here refer to teachers adopting a more connected and conciliatory approach with students. This might involve placing (greater) value on student opinion and advice (for example, allowing students to have greater input in what, how and when they engage in particular tasks) and demonstrating an active interest in and concern for students (for example, listening and respecting students’ points of view and drawing on strategies that diffuse and deflect rather than confront and challenge) (The State of Queensland, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003).

**Key understandings of masculinity for critical reflective and transformative practice within a gender justice framework**

Drawing on feminist knowledges that theorize narrow and hierarchical masculinities as invested in relations of power, domination and control (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mills, 2001), we can see that democratizing the classroom and school environment to reflect a connected and conciliatory approach might work in generative and socially just ways. Principally, from a gender justice perspective, we might see disrupting and reworking teacher–student power relations to be more equitable as facilitating a broadening of boys’ understandings and enactments of masculinity through legitimizing alternatives to dominance (Alloway et al., 2002).

Most importantly perhaps, drawing on these key gender knowledges, we can see that the context of mutually respectful and conciliatory relations allows a paradigm shift from a prescriptive (and inevitably rational and masculinist) focus on controlling and punishing boys to a situated and contingent focus on knowing and understanding boys—a significant theme in key masculinities and schooling literature (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). In terms of facilitating a transformative gender justice framework, however, that seeks to broaden boys’ modes of expression to encompass what has been traditionally seen as feminine (Lingard & Douglas, 1999), a focus on knowing and understanding boys would also
need to recognize and explore how boys’ behaviours are situated and invested within broader gendered power relations and discourses that work to construct and maintain their ways of being. Of clear importance, these understandings would enable teachers to articulate and promote socially just or ‘affirmative’ ways of being male with boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

In seeking to promote affirmative ways of being within a transformative framework, drawing on these gender knowledges will enable teachers to recognize the imperative of another significant theme within the masculinities literature that might well be seen as integral in supporting and sustaining this paradigm shift. Here, I am referring to the importance of teachers facilitating boys’ capacities for expressing their own feelings and for expressing empathy and emotional connectedness with others (McLean, 1996; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). Kenway and Fitzclarence talk in this regard of developing a ‘pedagogy of emotions’ and highlight the significance of teachers (particularly within the context of what they describe as the ‘emotional neutrality’ and ‘hyperrationality’ of schools), disrupting traditional versions of masculinity as emotionally neutral or distant through boys’ exploration and understanding of the powerful feelings that are implicated in some of their behaviours and interactions (such as suffering, fear, anger, rage, shame and humiliation, jealousy, revenge and remorse, as well as joy and pleasure). The authors describe this exploration and restoring process—‘narrative therapy’ (after White & Epston, 1990)—as working to reconfigure many males’ deep emotional investments in the discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Certainly their work makes a strong case for moving beyond the constraints of rational pedagogic practice to pedagogies that are more sensitive to the reflexive and dynamic nature of humanity and social life (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). As Fitzclarence argues, hyperrationalistic (and masculinist) solutions (such as strict codes of behaviour and regimes of discipline and control) applied to deeply emotive issues (such as aggression and violence) are inadequate because they define students’ identities clinically within conservative, narrow and incomplete paradigms and:

... fail to account for the multiplicity and complexity of human behaviour. As such rational inquiry becomes an ideology that fails to acknowledge that human behaviour does not always follow a rational and predictable path. (Fitzclarence, 2000, p. 151)

Through feminist lenses facilitating a ‘pedagogy of emotions’ that explores and values the world of feelings can be seen as central to disrupting the pedagogies of rationality likely to install and perpetuate masculinist ways of being. This will enable a space for deconstructing and reimagining some of the dominant storylines that narrow boys’ options.

**Intellectual quality: boys’ engagement with critical literacies**

The skills of critical literacy are presented as integral to boys moving beyond investments in narrow and hierarchical versions of masculinity (Davies 1993, 1997; Alloway, 1995; Martino & Mellor, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Alloway et al.,
From MacNaughton’s (2000) embryonic deconstruction in early childhood to Martino and Mellor’s (1995) work designed for the middle years, improved academic and social outcomes occur through boys’ exploration and critical analysis of their personal experiences of what it means to be ‘masculine’ (Davies, 1993; Alloway et al., 2002; Lingard et al., 2002). The aims here are to: enhance boys’ understandings of the multiple ways masculinity is constructed, performed, negotiated and navigated in different contexts; help boys identify and understand how and why they take-up or ‘perform’ their masculinities in relation to various (often inequitable) social processes and discourses; facilitate boys’ recognition that many culturally accepted understandings and enactments of masculinity, and their complicity or endorsement with such understandings and enactments, can work to harm and constrain (as much as advantage) their (and others’) opportunities, life experiences and relationships; and, encourage boys to identify ways that inequitable social processes might be questioned and transformed, rather than taken-for-granted (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Alloway et al., 2002).

Martino and Mellor’s work (1995), for example, provides a framework for assisting students to understand how difference and diversity can be produced and maintained, but also challenged and transformed. Through examining the sociocultural production of knowledge, their work focuses on facilitating student awareness of how language operates to produce particular (non-innocent) versions of reality, and more specifically, how texts and contexts work to construct and regulate particular (taken-for-granted) assumptions about gender that position us in inequitable ways. In challenging and transforming these gender(ed) assumptions, their work illustrates the importance of students recognizing how texts and contexts can be read or interpreted in multiple rather than singular ways. This process of critical analysis and deconstruction aims to make transparent the constitutive force of language and discourse—the mechanisms through which we are spoken into existence—and seeks to fracture the taken-for-granted truths that shape our identities (Davies, 1997). Through these lenses, gendered assumptions can lose their apparent inevitability and thus some of their power to hold current relations in place because they become visible as fiction. This opens up possibilities for new ways of thinking, speaking and acting (Davies, 1997).

**Key understandings of masculinity for critical reflective and transformative practice within a gender justice framework**

Research in this sphere (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) illustrates that, within the context of an environment of social support and mutual respect, boys demonstrate sophisticated capacities to engage in critical analysis and reflection on the social processes of masculinity that shape and regulate their own and others’ behaviours. Indeed, this research illustrates how many boys, through their experiences of difference and marginalization, seek to challenge and problematize hierarchical understandings of masculinity and embody a desire for cultures of alienation and exclusion to be challenged and disrupted.
While many boys may resist the narrow masculine constructs that constrain their lifeworlds, enabling transformative practice within a gender justice framework remains a difficult and complex process (Davies, 1997; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). This is particularly so given the probable tensions that will likely persist between schools and classrooms that support greater conciliation and equity between teachers and students and boys’ continued investments in the sociocultural discourses of hegemonic masculinity—discourses that tend to perpetuate rather than counter relations of inequity. Facilitating this critical and transformative process requires students and teachers to engage with gender theory to develop a reflexive awareness of how speaking-as-usual constructs themselves and others (Davies, 1997). Moreover, breaking the ‘enchantment of the compulsory struggle towards dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity’ requires acknowledging the ‘desirability and joyful sense of power that boys gain from being positioned within dominant forms of discourse which hand them ascendancy over others’ (Davies, 1997, p. 15). In assisting boys to explore different and more socially just ways of being Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) make a crucial point:

In criticizing dominant masculinity, we need to be able to replace it with a sense of being male to which boys can aspire. Ridding the dominant image of its worst excesses is important, but it needs to be replaced by some alternative vision and sense of direction. ... The central point is ... that certain values of dominant masculinity, like strength, courage, public leadership and independence can be interpreted and enacted in different ways (both positive and negative). The task is one of identifying the harmful and anti-social elements of any practice and ridding it of them. If the practice remains viable, well and good; if not, the loss is justified. (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, pp. 247–248)

Within the context of exploring a broad range of possible ways of being male, the imperative here relates to teachers recognizing and identifying affirmative or socially just spaces and working with these spaces in connected and meaningful ways (MacNaughton, 2000; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). This means teachers being able to draw on their gender knowledges to identify how students’ actions and silences either support or challenge inequitable gender definitions (MacNaughton, 2000). In relation to broadening boys’ understandings of masculinity, teachers must make visible these challenges and position them as legitimate alternatives to hegemonic constructions (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). This is an ongoing challenge that involves facilitating boys’ awareness and appreciation that alternative ways of being can be rewarding and positive (Davies, 1993, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Alloway et al., 2002) and continually encouraging boys to resist the dominant and perhaps more convincing and familiar social processes and discourses of masculinity that ‘speak them into existence’ (Davies, 1993, 1997).

Recognition of difference: the affirmative possibilities of boys’ group identities

Within a gender justice framework, key masculinities literature suggests ways that schools can generate affirmative group identities and active citizenship. Informed by
anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic principles and organized around group structures (within the context of mentoring, pastoral care, leadership or student representative programs, for instance), many of these suggestions revolve around consciousness raising activities that promote diversity and difference and challenge discrimination and marginalization (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995). Examples here include schools and classrooms: investigating and celebrating such events as International Women’s Day, NAIDOC, World AIDS Day or Lesbian and Gay Pride Week; displaying anti-sexist, anti-homophobic and anti-racist posters; publicly and positively recognizing prominent people who identify as ‘marginalized’ (such as women, homosexuals, aboriginals or the disabled); and inviting guest ‘minority’ speakers (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995).

Schools showcasing and celebrating a diverse range of academic, sporting and sociocultural achievements are also presented as imperative in generating inclusive group identities that legitimize difference and diversity and foster active citizenship. In pursuing gender justice with boys suggestions here involve schools increasing the recognition and celebration of ‘traditionally feminine’ genres such as poetry, drama, creative arts, fashion, music and dance (for example, the ‘Rock Eisteddfod’) and ‘non-combative’ sports (which are not necessarily linked to either a female or male body) such as softball, tennis, swimming, athletics, table-tennis, golf, archery and cross country as well as activities like debating and ‘tournament of minds’. Within a transformative agenda, these examples can be seen as offering boys diverse possibilities for expressing themselves and alternatives (to narrow versions of gender) which are known not to be harmful or belligerently competitive and which are not sexually exclusive. Most importantly, in this respect, dominant masculine constructions can be disrupted and reimagined in relation to a sense of being to which boys can aspire (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Key understandings of masculinity for critical reflective and transformative practice within a gender justice framework

Boys’ collective or group identities have an important focus of research in the area of masculinities and schooling within the sphere of adolescence (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Connell, 2000) and early primary settings (Connolly, 1995; Keddie, 2003). This research has illustrated how ‘groupness’ or peer culture is powerful in shaping boys’ understandings of masculinity but can work in self-limiting ways to amplify hierarchical masculine conventions. In this sense, boys’ group identities can enforce essentialist gender understandings and practices that work in exclusive ways to subsume or disparage difference and diversity (Keddie, 2003). Single sex programs for boys, underpinned by recuperative masculinity politics that aim to recapture an essential maleness, are often critiqued in this regard (Lingard et al., 2002). The peer group’s disciplining force however is also seen as enabling of social collectivities, moral bonds and political agency (Seidman, in Keddie, 2003). In recognizing the potency of group identity or peer culture in this regard, we can view this context as a productive space for identifying and exploring affirmative alternatives to narrow
constructions of gender (Hickey & Keddie, 2004). In terms of generating active citizenship, we might tap into this space to foster boys’ sense of community, connection and responsibility for the welfare of others (The State of Queensland, 2001).

Doing so however will require moving beyond a superficial enactment of the consciousness raising strategies identified above. The issue here is that these strategies may actually perpetuate narrow constructions of identity through reinscribing essentialist and simplistic notions of difference as ‘other’—strange, unfamiliar and disconnected or removed from boys’ lifeworlds. A genuine commitment to inclusivity and active citizenship will require connecting with boys’ realities to heighten their capacities to appreciate injustices and mobilize their sense of responsibility for the welfare of others (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Within a social justice framework, as mentioned in reference to intellectual quality, this will mean recognizing, connecting with and legitimizing affirmative spaces that are relevant to boys’ personal and group experiences of difference and marginalization.

Most importantly perhaps, facilitating boys’ connections with issues of difference and diversity and, in particular, their commitment to active citizenship within the school environment, will require genuinely positioning students with agency and autonomy. Within the hierarchical contexts of schools and broader cultures this will mean a shift in established relations of power and authority. According to Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003), this will be a difficult paradigm shift for schools given that many of their student representative and leadership bodies have a token style input in school decision making rather than having a genuine role in terms of making a difference for students in schools. To illustrate, a selection of adolescent boys in their study disparagingly describe these leadership roles as students being the ‘principal’s puppets’. In this sense, we can see how token student leadership or ‘activism’, in positioning students as relatively powerless over their everyday lives, would do little to encourage the feelings of genuine agency and autonomy necessary to instill student-centred active citizenship within the school environment.

Concluding remarks

In exploring strategies and initiatives that seek to improve boys’ educational outcomes, through enhanced connectedness; social support; critical literacy; and group identity, this paper has illustrated the importance of teachers moving beyond simple and prescriptive strategies to contextualized and productive pedagogies that are informed by key feminist understandings of masculinity. These understandings are presented as central to teachers developing a critically reflective and transformative approach that seeks to challenge and rework (rather than normalize and reinscribe) boys’ narrow constructions of gender.

Given the current tenor of school and classroom environments in Australia, facilitating this approach will signify a considerable paradigm shift in thinking and enacting (The State of Queensland, 2001; Martino et al., 2004). Most notably, perhaps, the simplistic and essentialist understandings of gender that continue to drive curriculum and pedagogy in our schools can be seen as aligning with the tenor of our classroom
environments. Here we can see that an environment located and enmeshed within broader masculinist authority structures and characterized by an overemphasis on management, basic skills and narrowly defined success and achievement is not conducive to the critical interrogation of dominant masculine constructs. Indeed, it is probably more conducive to perpetuating and legitimizing these constructs (Kenway & Willis, 1998; The State of Queensland, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, in facilitating this paradigm shift, key research argues the significance that broader structures represent in supporting teachers to improve their practice (Lingard et al., 2000; The State of Queensland, 2001). In relation to enacting a framework that resonates with the one detailed in this paper, ongoing teacher professional development, within the context of professional learning communities is seen as vital in teachers and schools developing and implementing frameworks and strategies that respond effectively to particular issues within their specific contexts (Louis & Marks, 1996; The State of Queensland, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002). Moreover, as Darling-Hammond points out, for teachers ‘to succeed at new kinds of teaching (we) must understand that the process of change requires that teachers have time and opportunities to reconstruct their practice through intensive study and experimentation’ (1997, p. 223).

This study and experimentation will begin with ongoing professional development around issues of gender, masculinity and schooling that allows for teachers to explore and examine in depth their own understandings and knowledge about gender and inclusive teaching practice (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino et al., 2004). However, constructing effective and coherently enacted whole school frameworks and strategies, requires the deprivatization of practice—the sharing of values through dialogue, collaboration and informed reflection—key elements of teacher professional learning communities (Louis et al., 1996; The State of Queensland, 2001). Principle here is the positioning of student learning as a collective whole school responsibility (Lee & Smith, 2001). In relation to improving boys’ learning outcomes in the ways outlined in this paper, this will involve teachers collaboratively and regularly drawing on current research and gender theory to critically reflect on their understandings and strategies and their potential effects (Lingard et al., 2002).

A critical process here relates to teachers and schools articulating a common vision or policy about gender justice and boys’ education that engenders broad support and commitment. In effectively addressing the educational needs of boys, a coherent set of programs and practices, framed within this common vision is imperative (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard et al., 2002). Most importantly, these programs and practices will be developed within the context of continued professional learning and through the ongoing trial, monitoring, evaluation and amendment of ideas and strategies negotiated by teachers to respond to the multiple ways that gender interplays with all facets of a particular school’s operation (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard et al., 2002).

Against this backdrop, we can see the important role broader school structures play in supporting teachers to improve their practice within a climate of ongoing and
collaborative professional learning. However, the key issue remains that the sphere of boys’ education is complex, multifaceted and contextual and as such there are no simple prescriptions or ‘quick fix’ strategies for improving boys’ academic and social outcomes in sustained ways (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). In effectively addressing these issues within a framework of gender justice we must devise pedagogies that respond to feminist knowledges and locate our understandings of boys within the complex, multifaceted and often inequitable relations of the social. Only then can effective and sustained approaches to transforming boys’ educational outcomes be developed.

References


