



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Scholes, Laura](#)

(2021)

Popular girls aren't into reading: reading as a site for working-class girls' gender and class identity work.

Critical Studies in Education, 62(2), 179–194.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/132294/>

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1601633>

Critical Studies in Education: Accepted 26 March 2019

**Popular Girls Aren't into Reading: Reading as a Site for Working-
Class Girls' Gender and Class Identity Work**

Laura Scholes^{a*}

*^aSchool of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Queensland
University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.*

*corresponding author

Laura Scholes, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin
Grove, Queensland, Australia Laura.scholes@qut.edu.au

Popular Girls Aren't into Reading: Reading as a Site for Working-Class Girls'

Gender and Class Identity Work

Abstract: A seminal body of work emerged in the 1980s recognising reading as a site for gender and class identity work. However, understandings around working-class girls' reading identities are invisible in the current Australian education policy space where gender equalities with respect to curriculum subjects have disappeared. This paper draws on a broader study of the reading experiences of 615 boys and girls attending elementary schools in Australia to focus on interviews with eight girls (9-11 years old) attending schools in lower socioeconomic communities. The paper explores the girls' perspectives on reading, being popular at school, and academic success from an understanding of literacy as social practice. Highlighted are discourses of femininity associated with reading where popularity is associated with anti-reading identities; being pretty and hanging out with the boys is associated with higher social status; and doing well academically can lead to social marginalisation. Highlighted are tensions between the lived lives of the girls and the idealised feminine reader depicted in the educational policy context in Australia and broader performativity agendas where girls are illustrated as successful and motivated readers.

Introduction

Feminist scholarship recognises reading as a site for gender and class identity work (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1991), as texts and associated literate practices reflect how one sees oneself and is seen by others (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Moje & Luke, 2009; Street, 1994; Vares & Jackson, 2015). Working-class girls' struggles as they engage in

school curriculum subjects such as reading and negotiate the formation of gender identities at school are complex, influenced by discourses of femininity influenced by class (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2010; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; McRobbie, 2013; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Raby, & Pomerantz, 2015; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 1999). As one is born into gender and class to occupy the associated social positions feminist theorists highlight the ways class is central to girls' lives as they produce themselves through social and cultural relations (McRobbie, 2013; Reay 2001; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody 1999). Girls then live class on a daily basis, constructing their subjectivities through class-informed performances (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Reay, 2001; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Skeggs, 1997). As such, working class girls' relationship with reading is complicated by their social and cultural positioning (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Street, 1984). Adding to the complexity, girls play a role in constructing their reading identities influenced by their desire to be, and indeed the social necessity of being seen as normal within their particular context (Neilson & Davies, 2016). In this way, gender and identity are multiple and mobile, different across cultures, across social and political contexts, and across historical times (Neilson & Davies, 2016).

An understanding of some of the complexities associated with working-class girls' construction of identity and the interplay of curriculum subjects at school were evident in Australia in the 1980s and reflected in the seminal work of Davies (1996) on gender education policy and the *National Action Plan on the Education of Girls* (Australian Education Council, 1993). Overshadowing this feminine focused National Action Plan a new initiative, *Gender Equity: A framework for Australian Schools*, was developed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in 1997 with pressure to reposition boys as an equally (but differently)

disadvantaged category (for a review see Gannon, 2016). The Gender Equity initiative introduced a liberal agenda that envisaged equity between boys and girls that was then replaced by a narrower focus on boys' outcomes through the 2000s (Gannon, 2016). In the context of recuperative masculinity politics, Australia saw a range of inquiries and initiatives focusing on boys. In this way the policy agenda shifted quickly to boys' education while more recently Australia has stopped paying attention to gender equalities with respect to curriculum subjects and the plight of disadvantaged girls is largely invisible (Gannon, 2016; McLeod, 2011).

Despite evidence that disadvantaged Australian girls are left behind their more advantaged peers in school, in higher education, and post education job pathways (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000; Council of Australian Government [COAG], 2013), girls continue to be portrayed in the media, educational literature, and policy initiatives as successful readers. For example, while the Year 3 reading gap between advantaged and disadvantaged girls was 91.8 points in Australia in 2011 (COAG, 2013), simplistic binary representation of boys' and girls' achievement in reading positions girls as a successful group, out-shining boys on high stakes tests (ACARA, 2017; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; OECD, 2016). As a consequence, many girls' lives are not reflected in this educational rhetoric and studies that portray binary outcomes between boys and girls.

As the paper shows, positioning reading positively within ones' feminine identity can be challenging if reading is not a sanctioned endeavour within the dominant peer group. From this perspective, the paper considers reading to be a social practice taken up by students in educational contexts in ways that are influenced by gender, class and location. Against this backdrop, the paper outlines reading as social practice and nuances that are particular to working class girls' experiences as school. It then draws

on a large scale study in Australia that explored 615 boys' and girls' attitudes and beliefs about reading. It focuses on the narratives of a group of 9-11 year old girls attending school in disadvantaged communities. How the girls' reading identities are influenced by their peers and broader experiences are of particular interest, as their narratives illustrate how their identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read and talk about (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Reading as social practice

New Literacy Studies provides an ideologic model of literacy, recognizing the literate practices of groups and communities including power relations and embedded specific cultural meanings of such practices (Street, 1984). These literate practices are always rooted in a particular world view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and also marginalize others (Street, 1984). Recognizing literacy practices as social recognises that people's identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about (Moje & Luke, 2009). In turn, the positioning of reading as a schoolgirl plays a significant role in girls' identity work (Davies, 2003; Nielsen & Davies, 2016; Scholes, 2013, 2018). Vares and Jackson (2015), for example, highlight the ways preteen girls engage with magazines as they negotiate their young sexual femininities. In their study of the magazine consumption and reading practices of 71 preteen girls in a New Zealand Vares and Jackson (2015) found the girls employed interpretative repertoires of "too young" "too old", and "just right" to categorise "tween" and "teen" magazines based on their sexual content and mark their personal identities to and/or distant from the categories of child, "tween", and teenager.

Contextual experiences impact on how girls take up 'being a reader' as a result of identity boundary work (Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). Attention is therefore needed to

understand how working class girls' position reading, as they define and re-define their identities, subject to the social environment of their schooling context and influences of the popular peer group culture including broader contextual influences. This identity work is defined by gender categories that serve to determine affiliation or acceptance with particular school peer groups (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992; Davies, 1989).

Adding to the complexity, gender categories interplay with class as girls produce themselves as particular sorts of 'girls' in relation to place, how they are recognized and public narratives of what it means to be a working-class girl (Skeggs, 1997).

Interactions then involve perceptions of idealised classed images of femininities at school that attribute particular characteristics to the "popular kids". These attributes include social norms and values that articulate into stratified social orders (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). For girls, these social orders often include higher status associated with being pretty, fashionable and attractive (Adams & Bettis 2003; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007; Paechter & Clark, 2007). For white middle-class girls, popularity can also be based on girls being "nice", or being a "good girl" (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Currie et al., 2007; Merten, 1997) however this positioning has been challenged and rejected by working-class girls (Reay, 2001).

Being one of the "nice girls" can have derogatory connotations for working-class girls (Francis, 2009; Reay, 2001). According to Reay (2001), working class girls reject feminist research which positions "being nice" as formulation of white, middle-class femininity as being a "nice girl" signifies an absence of the toughness and attitude that they were aspiring to. Boyfriends, fashion and beauty, along with feminine anti-school cultures, have long been articulated as ways for working class girls to distance themselves from the "brainy" middle class girls (McRobbie, 2013).

Talking about “working class girls” at school

‘Working class’ is a relational category with girls born into social and structural inequalities that influence how they construct their subjectivities through class-informed performances (Skeggs, 1997). Both gender and class mediate academic identities that do not come easily, naturally, and without struggle for working class girls (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015), as being socially successful can entail performing femininity in a way that is at odds with academic success (Renold & Allan, 2006; Skelton, Francis, & Read, 2010). There are foreseeable problems for girls who are perceived as too academic (Renold & Allan 2006) and so there is a need for a delicate balance between “doing girl” and “managing achievement” (Skelton et al., 2010). Girls who place value on their academic success and the importance of such cultural capital often play down such academic performances as they consciously navigate their social context at school (Francis et al., 2010; Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold & Allan 2006). In this way some girls hide, downplay, or deny their successes and feel pressure to conform to normative cultural representations of what it means to be a girl in their particular school community (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold, 2005; Renold & Ringrose, 2008).

Previous work highlights school-rejecting students, who as a group are characterised by their resistance to schoolwork and their rejection of school values, such as the “ladettes” in Jackson and Tinkler’s (2007) work and “spice girls” in Reay’s (2001) work. Discourses on troublesome young femininities have been illustrated as far back as the 1920s with constructions of “problematic” youthful femininities in Britain (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007), “troublesome” modern girls in Ireland (Ryan, 1998), and “Mean Girls” and “Queen Bees” associated with negative constructions of girlhood in the USA (Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2007).

How to talk about gender is problematic when trying to highlight diversity in experiences (Francis et al., 2017), especially for researchers genuinely interested in opening up discussions about differences in students' experiences. For the purpose of this article, I draw on a large body of work by feminist researchers concerned about the way girls are positioned in educational research and the way gender and class are integral to a successful social identity (Davies, 1989, 2003; Francis, 1999; McRobbie, 2013; Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1991). As this paper will show there are different ways of constructing oneself as feminine that may include traditionally labelled masculine traits (e.g. completion) or contradictory conceptions of gender. The aim of the research is to draw on feminist scholars work to illustrate the discourses offered by the girls in this study and how gender is constructed in relation to their developing reading identities.

Acknowledging the positions above, the study aims to expand understandings about "girls" experiences at school that are outside the popular politics of the "passive feminine reader", and constructions of "being" that are outside the stereotypical "feminine", to disrupt taken for granted assumptions about gendered performativity. Against this backdrop, the paper draws on interview data with girls attending elementary schools in low socioeconomic locations in Australia.

Outline of the study

The research reported here is part of a wider project in which I am trying to understand how masculinities and femininities are constructed in relation to school related subjects such as reading and wider social life. The wider project includes broad surveys with 615 boys and girls when they were in Year 3, 4 and 5 and 80 in-depth interviews one year later. The surveys collected information about students' enjoyment for a range of school

related activities including reading, their frequency of reading, their teacher reported reading levels and the socioeconomic status of the school locations. During the interviews students were asked to confirm their survey responses concerning their enjoyment of reading and frequency of reading, on the one hand, and then to describe their experiences as readers at school, on the other hand. Surveys were used to select interview participants. This paper draws on the in-depth interview data to address three inter-related research questions.

1. How do working class girls describe their attitudes towards reading and experiences as readers at school?
2. How do working class girls describe their peer groups' attitudes towards reading?
3. How do working class girls describe popularity at school?

This article draws on interviews with eight girls aged 9-11 (Year 5 and Year 6) who were attending three schools in lower socioeconomic locations. This group was selected first, as they represented girls attending school in the most disadvantaged locations and, second, as they represented the oldest of the female cohort and attitudes towards reading typically decline through the elementary school years (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004), as they are influenced by sociocultural experiences (McKenna, Coradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012). It was anticipated that peer group influences would also be more salient for these girls at this age. While the sample is small, the eight interviews represent narratives of girls in disadvantaged communities that are largely invisible in current Australian educational policy discussions.

The girls in the study were attending schools in lower socioeconomic school communities. Demographics of the schools were based on the Australian Bureau of

Statistics (ABS) Index of Relative Socio Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) that identifies schools across four broad categories: 1) lower; 2) lower to middle; 3) middle to high; and 4) high. In the IRSED, “lower” is considered to have high socioeconomic disadvantage and “high” to have low socioeconomic disadvantage. Variables to determine the IRSED include family income, educational attainment, occupation, unemployment, dwelling ownership and occupancy, single-parent families, marital status and fluency in English.

Interviews were conducted individually with students in a quiet space close to their classrooms and participants were reminded of the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw from the interview at any time, and the use of pseudonyms. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded for later transcription.

Against this methodological backdrop, the subsequent representation and analysis of the interviews with eight girls attending elementary school in low socioeconomic community explores: first, the ways in which enjoyment of reading was described; second, the ways popularity was perceived at school; and, third, problematics associated with how girls’ navigated academic achievement.

Reading’s not my thing

Six of the eight girls commented that reading was not something they were personally “into” and that they were “not too keen on reading books”. They also related stories about their friends who were not interested in reading. In response to my question “do you and your friends enjoy reading”, for example Annie commented:

I don't like reading, not real much it's like, *not my thing*. They all [girls in the class] go "oh no, not reading time". All my friends they're like that, I'm kind of like that too a bit.

As noted in the narrative Annie's reading identity included positioning books as not important or valued by her. As girls tend to position themselves in relation to gender discourses according to the peer group context (Reay, 2001), it was not surprising that Annie recounted how her friends also felt the same way about reading. Femininities are constructed within local communities of feminine practice (Paechter, 2010) and individuals learn ideas about what it means to be female from their immediate relationships (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold, 2005; Renold & Ringrose, 2008) and the popular media including film and magazines (Vares & Jackson, 2015). As a result, social orders are constructed with idealised images of what it means to be a girl in a particular context (Adler et al., 1992). In this instance, Annie, who was a member of the popular group at school, associated higher status with being a non-reader like her friends.

Subsequently as Annie constructs her reading identity influenced by her peer group she is also agentic within a reciprocal cycle of influence on her own peer group's feminine identities as readers. The disadvantaged community of her school locale was significant as working-class girls tend to underachieve in state education systems with lived experiences of oppression (Plummer, 2000; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989) with aspirations socially constructed (DeJaeghere, 2018). Discourses of femininity are then taken up differently in disadvantaged communities as peer groups are influenced by their social class (Francis, 1999; Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 2003). In this case, Annie's identity was constructed in opposition to reading, and as we will see later, in opposition to schooling.

Annie's sentiments about her classmates' negative attitudes towards reading were echoed by Santana who declared, "Yeah, a lot of the girls in my class don't read. They don't like it at all". Reading was referred to as "boring" and a preference for doing other things was noted as a rationale for not engaging in such endeavours. As Tatiana noted, "I don't have much time to read so it's not really important to me and sometimes it gets pretty boring. I'm more into socialising, I find socialising very important in my life". In response to my question "what do you see the girls doing at reading time" Tatiana commented:

When we go to the library some of the popular girls they just choose little kids books or picture books that are really cute. I think they don't like reading and I think they're acting like cool or something like that.

There was a collective emphasis from the eight students that their friendship groups at school were "not into reading" and this tendency had developed over time with attitudes towards reading more negative as they moved through the school year levels (McKenna et al., 2012). While reading attitudes are reported to become more negative gradually and steadily through elementary school (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004), as they are gradually shaped by social factors and expectations (McKenna et al., 2012), girls, as a group, in large-scale studies are reported to articulate more favourable attitudes than boys on all grade levels (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). These studies, however, often do not report nuances associated with class, race and geographical location, with the girls in this study challenging such assumptions with their descriptions of personal anti-reading attitudes and stories of their anti-reading peer groups. As attitudes towards reading are constrained by normative cultural representation of what it means to be a girl in school communities (Renold & Ringrose, 2008), opportunities for reading

engagement and practice at school are limited, with the cumulative influence that exposure to reading has on higher reading outcomes jeopardised.

As Mia noted, “last year the girls in my class did like reading, but this year they don’t”. She went on to explain that no one likes reading now they are in Year 6 and there was a shift in priorities:

Not any more, no one does [like reading]. It’s just like as soon as we started Grade 6 stories are out, “cause they kind of got a bit you know, bad, I was in the goody group last year and then I did a couple of bad things and I thought that was a lot more fun and I found I got a lot better friends.

Mia talked in binary terms of the “goody group” and, in contrast, her friends who did some bad thing and were “not into” reading. She spoke of doing “bad” things enthusiastically and with pride, reflecting unwritten norms about being in the “cool” group. Investment in group norms and disdain for the “goody-goodies” is a feature of maintaining group hierarchies whereby girls invest in discourses of “coolness” (Paechter & Clark, 2016). “Cool girl” discourses position high-status “coolness” as centrally important to belonging to their peer group with belonging to the group central to wellbeing (Paechter & Clark, 2016; Søndergaard, 2012). For these girls being one of the “nice girls” had derogatory connotations similar to the working-class girls in the study by Reay (2001) where being a “good girl” has the risk of being viewed as a pariah (Francis, 2009). The “nice girl” discourse is rejected as it signifies an absence of the qualities and attitudes required for high status in this context. As Mia explained, you need to “have a mean side” and:

if you really suck up to all the teachers and like you never do anything whatsoever bad and you’re always perfect that’s just like, then you’re in the goody group.

The need to conform to what it means to be “cool” in working class contexts is often associated with girls being “mean” and unkind to each other (Currie et al., 2007; Gonick, 2004).

Comments by the girls were reflective of an anti-school and anti-reading culture, suggesting that, for these girls, attending schools in lower socioeconomic communities, there were socially constructed expectations about the positioning of reading that were impacted on by their peer relations. As there can be foreseeable problems for girls who are perceived as academic (Renold & Allan, 2006), Mia appears to have chosen between being popular to have “better friends” and engaging in school academic endeavours. Reading at home was also not a priority. Mia, who lived on a farm, did not read at home for enjoyment and her parents never asked her to read because “we have a farm and Mum and Dad are always out so I’m just left to do what I want.”

Doing working class femininity by rejecting academic reading

Shiloh and Trinity were more enthusiastic about reading and talked about their enjoyment for reading particular genres. Their engagement with reading was not typically within the narrow concept of what constitutes academic reading that is embedded within schooling and the superiority attributed to reading literary fiction. For these girls, their reading preferences were perhaps more reflective of their home practices as literacy is social and embedded in broader cultural practices (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 2012). Children’s attachment with caregivers and the nature of on-going interactions are important for reading development (Ninio, 1990) and very much related to children’s reading outcomes (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). Adults, enable or constrain literacy experiences by establishing and maintaining literacy interactions, or

conversely, by suppressing literate practices at home (Brandt 1998). In this way, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be exposed to differentiated literacy experiences that may not reflect the academic value placed on literary fiction. Shiloh, for example, talked about the non-fiction books she sees at home and how “mum’s got a garden book she loves to read that, she’s also got a bird book”.

Trinity enjoyed cookbooks and had developed very personal reading preferences associated with real world experiences as “she likes cooking the stuff [from the recipes]”. She also talked about how much her mother liked cookbooks. As Barton and Hamilton (2012) point out, literacy is primarily something people do, in this way; it is an activity that is located in the space between thought and text. For Trinity, literate practices associated with cookbooks involved social and cultural activities that were part of her everyday life. In this way her literacy practices were situated, repeated activities that were part of her daily life. Home literate practices associated with the functional use of cookbooks and the high value placed on classic literary fiction at school may have caused some tensions for Trinity.

Shiloh liked “reading the girl magazines that come out every week or fortnight [and] maybe cookbooks because they’re pretty interesting as well”. She went on to also describe her literate practices that involved reading magazines.

Just thick books, I don’t like reading them. I like little books that have got a few pages though. I like reading magazines. I like *Total Girl*, *Girlfriend* and I do like books with a little bit of information.

While magazines are not a sanctioned reading genre at school, many young girls have had an affinity with “tween” magazines since their introduction in the late 1990s and early 2000s amid concerns they exploit the lucrative preteen audience sexualising readers through the use of inappropriate materials in the form of beauty, fashion,

romantic relationships with boys and celebrities (Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006). In this way the girls were engaged in reading magazines considered highly feminine as the popular culture reflected in magazines is used as tools by young people as their social identity is negotiated, tested out and developed (Vare & Jackson, 2015; Waerdahl, 2005). In the sexualisation of girls discourse, “tween” magazines are seen as propelling preteen girls into premature adolescence (Vares & Jackson, 2015); however, in this context magazines may facilitate the complex ways in which the transitional space is negotiated around higher status associated with being beautiful, fashionable and popular with the boys in the idealised feminine world in the girls particular communities. As Currie et al. (2007) point out, being popular and subsequently “cool” is associated more with fashionable and being attractive than with being liked.

Working class girls’ feminine ideals

The complexities and problematics associated with these working class girls’ positioning of reading within their identities at these schools was inter-related with their perceptions of the popular peer group and the sanctioned behaviours within such contexts (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Currie et al., 2007; Paechter & Clark, 2016). Diversity in productions of femininity is subject to social factors such as social class, and how girls’ bodies are used and adorned (Paechter, 2010; Skeggs, 1997). For these working class girls, popularity was dependent on physical attributes and being popular with the boys, a tendency that has been noted in previous studies (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Currie et al., 2007; McRobbie, 2013; Paechter & Clark, 2007). Academic reading was to be avoided if you were concerned about your social status as “the popular girls think reading’s not cool.” In this way reading became one criteria for categorising popular

and unpopular girls and a way of enacting a particular feminine performance. The girls however offered diverse perceptions of the merits of the “popular girls” as they positioned themselves inside, or outside, of the popular peer group at their school. Annie, for example, said she had lots of friends who were very important to her and she spent a lot of time “hanging out” with them. Annie positioned herself within the popular group and from her perspective the popular girls were “better friends”.

Popular girls however were also positioned as “mean”, “not that nice” and characterised as “teasing” other girls, reflecting the power hierarchies identified by others working with girls in disadvantaged communities (Currie et al., 2007; Francis, 2009; Gonick, 2004). Gabby, who positioned herself outside the “popular” peer group noted, “sometimes they can act a bit up themselves and liking themselves a bit too much”. As Gabby elaborated:

Well there’s some girls that are popular but they’re not as good as a person... they say mean thing to people but everybody likes them. I don’t know why, they just do.

For these girls there was also concern with competing with peers for popularity (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Merten, 1997; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011). Although competition is traditionally a masculinised construction (Francis, 2008) these girls offered narratives about competition for popularity based on having boyfriends. There were tensions evident as striving to be popular was a mix of accentuating the feminine (attractiveness, having a boyfriend) and the masculine (anti-reading and hegemonic relations). For example:

Because they get all the boyfriends or all the boys like them and, because my friend she had a boyfriend and everyone started to hang out with her but as soon as she lost her boyfriend everyone just left her alone (Georgie).

Along with being liked by the boys, being pretty with fashionable clothing was also an important criteria for popularity. As Cassie explained:

They're pretty, they're good looking ...They're pretty and they're sporty...and boys like them. They have all the clothes and everything.

Gabby also explained that the popular girls would rather “hang out with the boys” than read and talked about the popular girls’ physical appearance and their attractiveness to boys highlighting the social status associated with such attributes.

They're pretty and all the boys like them. The whole group's pretty and it's all about fashion to them. They're not friendly; they only care about each other. They do quite a lot of flirting. They think that other girls are pieces of dirt.

[You get teased] if they have glasses or they don't wear the right things.

Being pretty and flirting with the boys signified higher status for the girls, with Gabby expressing she felt inferior to the popular girls. Lower social status was attributed to girls who did not live up to the idealised feminine image with a sense of hegemony over the lower status girls who were viewed as “pieces of dirt” (Paechter & Clark, 2016; Reay, 2001).

Cause I'm not good enough for the popular girls and that I don't want to put anybody down if I was in the popular group. I don't think I'm pretty enough for them. That I'm not mean enough. I'm not as coloured (suntanned) as them and pretty. I mean do the right clothes – matching together.

Given the above comments, it would appear that in this context one's femininity and attractiveness are dependent on very narrow normative cultural representation of what it means to be a feminine with pressure to conform to such ideals (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold, 2003; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose, 2008). It would also appear that Gabby did not perceive herself within the boundaries of the popular group who she

described as pretty and fashionable although it a natural desire to be accepted within the group with anxiety associated with social exclusion (Søndergaard, 2012). The toxic power of the peer group was evident as the girls were “just like different people when they’re in a group but as soon as they’re apart from each other they’re really nice”.

The criteria for higher social status was clearly articulated by the girls including social norms and values that contributed to their particular stratified social order. While attractive physical attributes and boyfriends (Renold, 2003) were highly desirable, being a reader at school was social sabotage. The idealised femininities at these three schools did not reflect the “nice”, passive “good girl” images often attribute to white middle-class girls (Bettis & Adams, 2003; Currie et al., 2007 Merten, 1997). Rather, doing “bad” things and not being a “goody-goody” challenging white-middle class girls’ values (Reay, 2001) illustrated the ways these girls were navigating within peer groups that value traditionally masculine traits such as positioning reading as undesirable and competing for social status, with hegemony within and between peer groups. In this way, if one desired to be popular there was a need to navigate gender as a careful balance between both feminine and masculine norms. High achievement in reading is then fraught with tensions for girls who aspire to be “popular” and “academic” within lower socioeconomic communities.

Girls who read are smart

Girls who like to read, although not popular, were described by all the girls as “smart”. That is, while reading was a benchmark used to categorise the “popular” and “unpopular” students, it was also used to make assumptions about academic achievement. As Lily explained:

Girls that like to read they're *really smart* and everything...and they don't get in trouble. The unpopular girls are more smart than popular girls and the popular girls aren't as good at maths and reading.

Annie, who previously positioned herself in the popular group, also elaborated on the ways that girls who read were doing better academically at school. She described the girls in binary terms, those who like reading, and those who do not like reading, and subsequently have a tendency to "have lots of fights".

Most of the people [girls] that like reading are normally really good and friendly and they don't have many fights but the people that don't read they don't do good, they haven't been doing good in spelling or maths and they have lots of fights with all the other girls.

What is interesting is that Annie previously admitted she did not like to read and that she found she had better friends once she started to do some "bad" things. Her comments were then reflective of the girls who have lots of fights.

Mia also conveyed a belief that people "that don't read they don't do good", suggesting that she has internalised and positioned reading as indicative of success in other domains such as spelling and maths and reflective of the individual as a person. The apparent tension between her expressed desire to be in the dominant peer group and her unsanctioned enjoyment of reading may be a source of dissonance for her that she will have to resolve.

Given the raft of comments about unpopular girls being smart it was surprising that six of the girls in this study cohort were achieving the class average in reading and two girls were actually reading above class expectations for their year level. Annie, for example, who positioned herself within the popular group and talked about reading not being her thing, also talked about the anti-school culture of her friendship group. Her

classroom teacher, however, commented that Annie was achieving well in reading and meeting the Year 6 class benchmarks. It would appear that, for these girls who work within narrow boundaries of the idealised feminine image at their schools, there are some tensions as they try to maintain popularity and high reading outcomes.

The narratives of these girls resonate with previous accounts of girls who experience tensions as they navigate “doing girl” in their particular school context and “managing achievement” (Skelton et al., 2010). All eight girls suggested a relationship between reading and academic success and the importance of such cultural capital; however, six of the girls also played down their own academic performances, perhaps in attempts to navigate their social identities in ways that conformed to the normative feminine discourse in their educational context (Francis et al., 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2016; Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold, 2003; Skeggs, 1997).

Conclusion

For the girls in this study, academic reading was characterised as a non-sanctioned social practice for the popular girls, however, the importance of such cultural capital was clearly articulated. Of concern, down playing academic success and prioritizing popularity with the boys may have long term consequence in terms of school academic pathways and post school trajectories. There were clear tensions for these girls, who attend schools located in low socioeconomic communities, where girls who are “really good or a goody-goody they like aren’t that popular.” Personal enjoyment for reading was diminished by the girls’ perception of the boundaries of behaviour within the dominant peer groups. Peer group anti-reading attitudes influenced the girls reading identities (Moje & Luke, 2009) and their practices were mediated by the texts they read (or not) and how they talked about reading. Findings illustrate how the positioning of reading as a school girl plays a

significant role in girls' identity work (Davies, 2003; Nielsen & Davies, 2016; Scholes, 2013, 2018; Walkerdine, 1991) with challenges associated with the ways class interests are inscribed on the 'the self' manifesting in limitations for working-class girls (Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 1997). As Francis, Skelton and Read (2010) also observed, for these girls, friends were an important and enjoyable part of school life. One seminal connection worthy of exploring further is how the girls in this study support their own reading endeavours to meet the classroom expectations, while navigating their peer group cultures.

Findings highlight problematics for this group of working class girls attending schools in Australia as they experience narrow boundaries around feminine discourses as readers at school. As Skeggs (1997) contends, working-class girls are born into structures of inequality which circumscribe their movements within educational and social spaces. The dominant discourses around idealised femininity associated with being pretty and popular with the boys (Jackson, 2006) that are highlighted by the interplay of class (Paechter, 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2016; Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) are incompatible with a positive reading identity. To succeed socially at school, these girls were compelled to invest in a set of productions that compromised their positive reading identities. However, at the same time, the girls were very aware of the social capital associated with reading and described the link between reading and academic success.

The image of the idealised feminine reader portrayed in the Australian policy space was not supported by the narratives of the girls in this study. Rather, they recounted stories where girls positioned reading as undesirable and uncool. The girls also talked of hegemony between the girls, stratified social orders with dominance associated with popularity, and being marginalised and treated like "pieces of dirt" for

girls who did not live up to the specified feminine ideal. The feminine ideal however, for these girls, along with being pretty and hanging out with the boys, included performances often associated with the masculine, such as doing “bad” things, “having a mean side”, “fighting” and not being “into reading”.

The girls’ narratives highlight two critical lines for further inquiry. First, how can teachers support girls in disadvantage schools where there are clear tensions between normative femininities and the need to develop cultural capital associated with reading? It could be argued that educators need to become responsible for challenging problematic feminine discourses in classrooms and provide alternative images that working class girls can related to, engage with and aspire to become. This vision would include critical pedagogies that challenge both girls’ taken for granted assumptions about their identities and associated gendered relationships.

The second line of inquiry includes how to make visible lived realities of the girls in this study who challenge the idealised feminine reader in the Australian policy space, in the media, international reports on schooling and much of the educational literature that filters down into schools. Working towards recognition in the Australian Policy space is one such way. Concurrently, disrupting the focus on performativity on benchmark testing that narrowly assesses reading as a skill and reports binary comparative data sets on boys’ and girls’ outcomes is needed. As teachers focus on preparing and meeting benchmark literacy requirements there is little time left for developing critical pedagogies and disrupting normative discourses. Educators need to broaden literacy as a social practice in schools to encourage enquiry-based, learner-centred, critically-oriented models that develop relationships with literacy education that are culturally appropriate, reflect different “situated perspectives” and support but

also expand working class girls' cultural value systems, attitudes and personal investments.

References

- Adams, N., & Bettis, P. (2003). Commanding the room in short skirts: Cheering as the embodiment of ideal girlhood. *Gender & Society, 17*(1), 73-91. doi:10.1177/0891243202238979.
- Adler, P. A., Kless, S. J., & Adler, P. (1992). Socialization to gender roles: Popularity among elementary school boys and girls. *Sociology of Education, 65*(3), 169-187. doi:10.2307/2112807.
- ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority). (2017). *NAPLAN achievement in reading, persuasive writing, language conventions and numeracy*. Sydney: ACARA.
- Australian Education Council. (1993). *National action plan for the education of girls 1993-97*. Curriculum Corporation: Melbourne.
- Baker, C. & Freebody, P. (1989). *Children's first school books. Introductions to the culture of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Barton, D. (2007). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2012). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. New York: Routledge.
- Bettis, P., & Adams, N. G. (2003). The power of the preps and a cheerleading equity policy. *Sociology of Education, 128*-142. doi:10.2307/3090273.
- Brandt, Deborah. 1998. Sponsors of literacy. *College Composition and Communication 49*(2), 65–185.
- Collins, C., Kenway, J., & McLeod, J. (2000). Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and their initial destinations after leaving school. Canberra: DETYA.
- COAG (Council of Australian Government). (2013). *Tracking equity: Comparing outcomes for women and girls across Australia*. Sydney: COAG Reform Council.
- Currie, D. H., Kelly, D. M., & Pomerantz, S. (2007). 'The [ower to squash people]': Understanding girls' relational aggression. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28*(1), 23–37. doi:10.1080/01425690600995974.
- Davies, B. (1996). *Power/Knowledge/Desire: Changing School Organisation and Management Practices*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Youth Affairs (DEETYA).
- Davies, B. (1989). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Frogs and snails and feminist tales. Preschool children and gender*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Davies, B., & Saltmarsh, S. (2007). Gender economies: Literacy and the gendered production of neo-liberal subjectivities. *Gender and Education, 19*(1), 1–20. doi:10.1080/09540250601087710.
- DeJaeghere, J. (2018). Girls' educational aspirations and agency: imagining

- alternative futures through schooling in a low-resourced Tanzanian community, *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(2), 237-255, doi: 10.1080/17508487.2016.1188835
- DiPrete, T. A., & Buchmann, C. (2013). *The rise of women: The growing gender gap in education and what it means for American schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Francis, B. (1999). An investigation of the discourses children draw on their constructions of gender. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29(2), 300-316. doi: 10.1080/13639080410001677392
- Francis, B. (2008). Teaching manfully? Exploring gendered subjectivities and power via analysis of men teachers' gender performance. *Gender and Education*, 20(2), 109-122. doi:10.1080/09540250701797226.
- Francis, B. (2009). The role of the boffin as abject other in gendered performances of school achievement. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 645-669. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01866.x
- Francis, B., Archer, L., Moote, J., de Witt, J., & Yeomans, L. (2017). Femininity, science, and the denigration of the girly girl. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(8), 1097-1110. doi:10.1080/01425692.2016.1253455.
- Francis, B., Skelton, C., & Read, B. (2010). The simultaneous production of educational achievement and popularity: How do some pupils accomplish it? *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 317-340. doi:10.1080/01411920902919265
- Gannon, S. (2016). Kairos and the time of gender equity policy in Australian schooling. *Gender and Education*, 28(3), 330-342. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1175783
- Gonick, M. (2004). The mean girl crisis: Problematizing representations of girls' friendships. *Feminism & Psychology*, 14(3): 395-400. doi: 10.1177/0959353504044641
- Jackson, C. (2006). *'Lads' and 'Ladettes' in school: Gender and a fear of failure*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Jackson, C., & Tinkler, P. (2007). 'Ladettes' and 'Modern Girls': 'Troublesome' young femininities. *The Sociological Review*, 55(2), 251-272. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2007.00704.x.
- McKenna, M., Coradi, K., Lawrence, C., Jang, B. . G., & Meyer, P. (2012). Reading attitudes of middle school students: Results of a U.S. survey. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(3), 283-306. doi:10.1002/rrq.021.
- McLeod, J. (2011). Vulnerable youth: Gender visibility and disappearing policy acts. *Redress* (August), 13-18.
- McRobbie, A. (2013). Working class girls and the culture of femininity, in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Women's Studies Group, *Women take issue: Aspects of women's subordination* (pp. 96-108). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis
- Merten, D. E. (1997). The meaning of meanness: Popularity, competition, and conflict among junior high school girls. *Sociology of Education*, 70(3), 175-191. doi: 10.2307/2673(207).

- Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1997). *Gender equity: A framework for Australian schools*. Canberra: Australian Capital Territory on behalf of MCEETYA.
- Moje, E.B. & Luke, A., (2009). Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 415-437. doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.44.4.7
- Nielsen, H. B., & B. Davies. (2016). Formation of Gendered Identities in the Classroom. In: Wortham S., Kim D., May S. (Eds.) *Discourse and Education. Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (3rd ed.) (pp. 135-145). Springer, Cham.
- Ninio, A. (1990). Early environmental experiences and school achievement in the second grade: An Israeli study." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 13(1): 1–22.
- OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). (2016). *PISA 2015 results*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Paechter, C., (2010). Tomboys and girly-girls: embodied femininities in primary schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 31(2), 221-235. doi: 10.1080/01596301003679743
- Paechter, C., & S. Clark. (2007). Who Are Tomboys, and How Do We Recognise Them? *Women's Studies International Forum* 30(4), 342–354. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2007.05.005.
- Paechter, C., & S. Clark. (2016). Being 'Nice' or Being 'Normal': Girls Resisting Discourses of 'Coolness'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37(3), 457-471.
- Papadopoulou, L. (2010). *Sexualisation of Young People Review*. London: UK Home Office, accessed at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-young-people>.
- Plummer, G., (2000). *Failing Working-Class Girls*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Raby, R., & S. Pomerantz. (2015). Playing it Down/Playing it Up: Girls' Strategic Negotiations of Academic Success. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(4), 507-525. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2013.836056.
- Read, B., B. Francis, & C. Skelton. (2011). Gender, Popularity and Notions of in/Authenticity amongst 12-Year-Old to 13-Year-Old School Girls. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(2), 169–183. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2011.547304.
- Reay, D. (2001). 'Spice Girls', 'Nice Girls', 'Girlies', and 'Tomboys': Gender Discourses, Girls' Cultures and Femininities in the Primary Classroom. *Gender and Education*, 13(2), 153–166. doi:10.1080/09540250120051178.
- Renold, E. (2003). 'If You Don't Kiss Me, You're Dumped': Boys, Boyfriends and Heterosexualised Masculinities in the Primary School. *Educational Review*, 55(2), 179-194. doi:10.1080/0013191032000072218.
- Renold E. (2005). *Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

- Renold, E., & A. Allen. (2006). Bright and Beautiful: High Achieving Girls, Ambivalent Femininities and the Feminisation of Success in the Primary School. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 27(4), 457–473. doi:10.1080/01596300600988606.
- Renold, E., & J. Ringrose (2008). Regulation and Rupture: Mapping Tween and Teenage Girls' Resistance to the Heterosexual Matrix. *Feminist Theory*, 9(3), 313–338. doi:10.1177/1464700108095854.
- Ringrose, J. (2007). Successful Girls? Complicating Post-feminist, Neoliberal Discourses of Educational Achievement and Gender Equality. *Gender and Education*, 19(4), 471–489. doi:10.1080/09540250701442666.
- Ringrose, J. (2008). 'Just be Friends': Exposing the Limits of Educational Bully Discourses for Understanding Teen Girls' Heterosexualized Friendships and Conflicts. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(5), 509–522. doi: 10.1080/01425690802263668.
- Rush, E. & La Nauze, A., (2006). *Letting children be children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. Canberra: Australia Institute.
- Ryan, L. (1998). Constructing 'Irishwoman': Modern Girls and Comely Maidens. *Irish Studies Review*, 6(3), 263-272. doi:10.1080/09670889808455611.
- Sainsbury, M., & I. Schagen. (2004). Attitudes to Reading at Ages Nine and Eleven." *Journal of Research in Reading*, 27(4), 373-386. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9817.2004.00240.x.
- Scholes, L. (2018). *Boys, Masculinities and Reading: Gender Identity and Literacy as Social Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Scholes, L. (2013). Clandestine Readers: Boys' and girls' Descriptions of Going 'Undercover'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (3): 359-374. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.826899.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London, California & New Delhi: Sage.
- Skeggs, B. (2003). *Class, Self, Culture*. New York & London: Taylor & Francis. Skelton, C., B. Francis, & B. Read. ((2010). Brains Before 'Beauty'? High Achieving Girls, School and Gender Identities. *Educational Studies*, 36(2), 185-194. doi: 10.1080/03055690903162366.
- Søndergaard, D. M., (2012). Bullying and Social Exclusion Anxiety in Schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(3), 355-372.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sullivan, A., & Brown, M. (2015). Reading for pleasure and progress in vocabulary and mathematics. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(6), 971–991.
- Vares, T., & Jackson, S. (2015). Preteen girls, magazines, and the negotiation of young sexual femininity. *Gender and Education*, 27(6), 700-713.
- Wærdahl, R. (2005). 'May be I'll Need a Pair of Levi's Before Junior High?' Child to youth trajectories and anticipatory socialization. *Childhood*, 12(2), 201-219.
- Walkerdine, V. (1991). *Schoolgirl Fiction*. London: Verso Books.

- Walkerdine, V., & Lucey, H. (1989). *Democracy in the Kitchen*. London: Virago.
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J. (1999). Class, attainment and sexuality in late twentieth-century Britain. In P Mahony & C Zmroczek (eds), *Women and social class: International feminist perspectives* (pp.51-68). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J., (2001). *Growing up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.