Peer Groups, Power and Pedagogy: The Limits of an Educational Paradigm of Separation

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Abstract

In contrast to the plethora of literature that suggests that the increasing gulf between teachers and young people is due to the shifting interests and expectations of young people, the focus of this paper is on the roles teachers play in this relationship. Provoking our interest is a concern that some of the assumptions that underpin 'mainstream' pedagogic theory and practice might actually contribute, albeit unwittingly, to hardening rather than softening the communication divide. Drawing on an incident that took place between a group of 7–8 year old males in a primary school setting, we reveal the limits of a teaching paradigm that encourages teachers to adopt authoritative positions from which to separate and individualise student behaviour. In theoretical terms, we argue that the application of this paradigm asserts an exaggerated notion of agency to individuals in the construction of identity. In practical terms it promotes processes that individualise behaviour as a way of dealing with miscreance. Together these manifest themselves as a 'pedagogy of separation'. The process of building more productive pedagogic relationships, we conclude, needs to begin with teachers better recognising and engaging with the collective investments of young people.

Introduction

> The boys can be really difficult, especially the year nines. You ask them to be quiet and they ignore you. Separate them and they throw things across the room to each other. Send them to the principal and they come back with smiles on their faces. Threaten to call their parents and they laugh at you. It doesn't matter what you do; they're not interested

> what teachers have to say. They're only interested in who's the funniest, who is the coolest or who can push you the furthest. Sometimes I think about getting out of teaching altogether. (Claudia, Victorian secondary school teacher)

Whenever groups of teachers get together there is an alarming regularity with which the conversation turns to how difficult the practice of being a teacher has become, or is becoming. Whether such a perception is based on their qualitative experiences or romantic notions of what young people were like in the past, many teachers share a belief that their work has become more complicated and intensive (Dunham and Varma 1998, Huberman 1993). Testimony to this is the explosion of conferences and publications in which teachers and researchers enumerate the problems and frustrations experienced by teachers in their work with young people. Notable in this sphere of activity is the plight of those teachers who regularly deal with students in the middle-school years. Foremost in the positioning of this cohort as particularly problematic is a widespread recognition of the influence of the peer group. Indeed, it seems that combating 'groupness' presents teachers such as Claudia with their most persistent obstacle to creating an 'effective' teaching/learning environment (Coleman 2000, Letendre 2000).

Pivotal in the mainstream discourse of effective teaching is the practical imperative that teachers are able to manage and control the learning environment. Indeed, there is a bevy of literature available to expound the consequences for teachers not able to achieve this most fundamental demand. We have known for a long time that the absence of a 'constructive' educational environment will impinge on the learning process (Kozol 1994, Metz 2000). Further to this, we are also now warned of the negative consequences for teachers themselves, should they not be able to manage or control the learning environment (Guglielmi and Tatrow 1998, Kyriacou and Sutcliff 1987). Claudia's comments at the start of this paper exemplify the sorts of frustrations and self-doubts teachers can experience when they are unable to establish a harmonious teaching and learning environment.

While there are a number of issues that emerge when teachers like Claudia talk about their day-to-day frustrations in 'the classroom', for the purposes of this paper we want to focus on just two. The first issue is the way particular aspects of dominant pedagogical theory and practice seem to militate against teachers' capacity to recognise and work with the collective investments and interests of the cohorts they teach. It is clear that Claudia is not without pedagogical strategies for dealing with miscreant students. The problem is, however, that none of these strategies are working for her! She has tried separating, sanctioning, removing and reporting miscreant students, but none of these actions have had any sustained impact on her

ability to control the learning environment. In the end, Claudia is left to salvage what she can within a pedagogical framework that has her in direct conflict with at least some of her students. Further to the obvious educational consequences of the disharmony between Claudia and some of her students is the intangible cost associated with the erosion of Claudia's professional satisfaction.

The second issue that we want to comment on in this paper involves the narrow sphere of recognition of peer group affiliations. While there is a broad acknowledgment that peer groups exist at all layers of social interaction, it is only during adolescence that these affiliations are given due primacy. In the context of mainstream educational theory and practice, peer group influence is seen as ostensibly an adolescent phenomena. The narrowness of this focus dovetails with a broader anti-youth sentiment within which adolescents, particularly males, are viewed as anti-social and dangerous (see Kelly 1999, Tait 1995). This sentiment is grounded in the seemingly limitless empirical and anecdotal evidence that reveals the vulnerability to premature death, injury, self-abuse, assault and other such consequences of misadventure and risk taking among this age group.[1] A number of highly profiled violent acts (Lefkowitz 1997, Lesco 2000, Michaelis 2000) and growing concern that the scholastic performance of males is now below that of their female counterparts (Buckingham 2000, Cook 2001, Pollock 1999) help to propel issues of adolescence and masculinity into the educational spotlight. Indeed, the education of young males is receiving increased attention in many countries (Almeida 1996, Arnot et al. 1999, Epstein et al. 1998, Lesco 2000, Mackinnon et al. 1998, Powney 1996).

However, the critical point that we want to make in this paper is not so much that boys do not warrant special attention, but rather that exploration of the issues of masculinity that underpin this focus should not be restricted to adolescence. While we recognise the regularity with which adolescent males are being identified as especially 'problematic' (read disruptive and/or anti-intellectual) in the context of schooling (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Martino 1999), we believe that the antecedents for this problem are set in place long before this time. Currently, evidence of the antecedent behaviours are overwhelmingly dismissed or trivialised within the discourses of 'innocence' that pervade childhood (Alloway 1995, Clark 1993). While we concede that the behaviours of young males are often more confronting or severe around the adolescent years, there is a growing need to understand them within the overall context of the development of masculinity.

To give life to the issues outlined here we will recount an incident that took place between a group of 7–8 year-old boys in a primary school setting. Both Adam and Brian were 8 years old when Adam and two of his friends beat up Brian in the schoolyard. Our selection of this incident is not based on its severity or uniqueness,

for it was just one of a wide range of confrontations and contestations that took place during a six-month study of a young male peer group.[2] Rather, our reason for presenting this incident is to show that issues of groupness involving young males are not restricted to adolescents. Of particular interest to us here is the way that the school responded to the incident. Rather than try to understand *why* a group of boys beat up another boy, the school staff set about individualising what was ostensively a group event. It is interesting how much the pedagogic practices they invoked to break the incident up into component parts resemble those that are failing teachers, such as Claudia, in the middle-school years.

The research from which this incident is reconstructed focused on the interactions of an 'affinity group' of five young males, and corroborative observations of their behaviours inside and outside of the classroom. Following the lead of Mackay (1993), affinity group interviews were conducted in which members of the group were invited to discuss their experiences and understandings in the presence of people that 'typically' supported and/or shared their interest. Affinity, in the context of this study, was established from an exercise in which children in the class were asked to design their next birthday party and compile a list of six people they would invite. The boys that participated in the study were part of a clearly identifiable friendship group. In our representation of the incident we use the undistorted voices compiled from transcripts of the affinity group interviews, conducted on a weekly basis, as primary data. The other voices that appear in our representation of the incident include those of a number of teachers, namely Mrs W, the classroom teacher of the five boys, and Mr A, and Ms C, who also taught in the lower school program and therefore had direct contact with these children. These teachers, along with the school principal (Mr T), were also interviewed and observed as part of the study.

'Bashing up Brian'

It was well known to teachers at Banrock Primary School (Tasmania, Australia) that Adam did not like Brian. According to Mrs W, 'Brian and Adam were in the same class last year together, and they didn't get on.' While Brian did not enjoy total impunity in forging the acrimony that existed between the boys, it was ostensibly Adam's aggression towards Brian that sustained their animosity. Adam had taken a dislike to Brian at the start of the previous year, when both boys were only 6 years old. Of course it is not unusual for some children not to get on with each other, and the reasons for their conflict are not always clear or rational. Adam perceived Brian to be a 'show-off' and someone who was constantly seeking the attention of the children in their class, particularly the girls. Ironically, it was Adam who was the more notorious of the two for his attention-seeking behaviours. His teachers regularly remarked on Adam's 'active, loud and bossy' behaviour as characteristic of his

constant desire to be 'in the limelight'. Mrs W believed that being the 'centre of attention' was extremely important to Adam, '… he feeds off that'.

Behind the two boys' competition for attention were apparent incidents involving their overlapping interest in gaining the attention of particular girls. Prior to the incident, Adam made his objection to Brian quite clear in one of the affinity group interviews:

> 'Okay, what really pisses me off always with Brian is he's always got my girl, Zara. Yeah an' another fing too, last year 'e got Jessica Kenny', explained Adam.
> 'Was she your girlfriend?' Amanda queried.
> 'Yeah, I almost had 'er', Adam explained, 'I got really pissed off, 'cos Brian shows off to the girls all the time. All the girls like 'im 'cos he shows off with his tricks n' that, he goes, "Watch me BABY!"'
> 'So that's why you don't like him much?' Amanda asked.
> 'Well another thing too, 'e gets, he's always annoying, 'e always acts like a chicken an' um 'e always screams like a girl and 'e thinks 'e's so good', continued Adam.

The other boys, wanting to endorse Adam's perceptions of Brian, interrupted Amanda's discussion with Adam about his reasons for disliking Brian. It was quickly apparent that all of the boys in the group subscribed to Adam's condemnation of Brian. Not only did the other boys appear willing to support Adam's dislike of Brian, but they also seemed to embrace his aggression towards him. Beyond just lending their support to Adam, each of them seemed to have personalised his battle and adopted his intense dislike for Brian. Nowhere in any of the interviews is there any mention of anyone but Adam having a *reason* for disliking Brian. In fact, all of the other boys' references to why they disliked Brian are rooted in Adam's feud. Adam's influence over the group seemed to be so strong that all of the other boys now appeared deeply committed to detesting Brian. The intensity of their commitment is observable in the continuation of the transcript. It is noticeable in this section of the transcript that no new reasons are given for disliking Brian and the chorus line simply becomes a repetition of insults and abuse towards him.

> 'Yeah, he screams like a girl', Jack agreed.
> 'Mrs Waaallkeer!' Justin screeched in a high pitched voice, imitating Brian.
> 'Yeah, he screams like a girl, like he shows off n' that', continued Adam.
> 'I seen him scream like a girl in the toilet', Justin interjected.
> 'Yeah and for chasies he goes arhhhh arhhhh arhhhh', Adam added

> with a high pitched shriek. 'And he goes arhhhh, don't get me I'm running! Arsehole!'
> 'And you don't like that?' Amanda queried.
> 'NO!', Adam said emphatically.
> 'He's an arsehole', Justin added.
> 'Yep, he's a bitch', Matthew agreed.
> 'Yeah and a bitch', Justin reiterated.
> 'A son of a bitch an' I say, what I would say, I say "hey Brian, I know you are but what am I, y' no good arsehole"', Adam elaborated.
> '… and I go "you're a dickhead"', Justin asserted. 'I hate his guts!' he added surely.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Brian was the target of considerable harassment from these boys. When Mrs W was summoned by some of the girls in her grade to break up a fight, it was no shock to her to find Adam and Brian involved. Finding that these two were not the only ones involved was also probably not surprising to her. Mrs W had previously expressed concern about the influence that Adam had over some of the other boys in her class. Of particular concern to her was the effect he seemed to have on Matthew and Justin. Under the influence of Adam, she had seen Matthew regress from being a 'likeable and pleasant little boy' to being someone who was capable of 'bullying people and pushing people around'. Mrs W felt that Matthew was particularly vulnerable to Adam's influence because he lacked confidence and was desperate to fit in. She explained, 'Matthew's not really that sort of kid but because he wants to be popular with the "in" crowd he's doing it'. Justin was another of Adam's group that she felt was vulnerable on account of his desire to fit in.

When Mrs W arrived at the incident she found Adam, Justin and Matthew beating up Brian. Flushed with a mix of anger and frustration she separated the boys and swiftly sent them to face the school principal. Her anger was the result of seeing Adam and Brian fighting again. Her frustration was brought on by the fact that Matthew and Justin were also involved. At the point of her entry to the fight scene, however, her anger prevailed and she promptly marched all those involved in the incident to the principal's office. Her action was swift, decisive and free of favour.

Later in the week the boys met with Amanda, in accordance with the established research protocol, and the following discussion took place in their affinity group discussion. On her arrival to the school Amanda had no knowledge of the incident that had taken place two days earlier. By this time the boys had fronted the principal and had been allocated penalties/detentions deemed commensurate with the severity of their involvement in the incident. While she had been given a brief account of what

had taken place by Mrs W on her entry into the classroom to collect the boys, Amanda knew little of the detail surrounding the incident when she met with the boys.

> 'Ah well, first of all, guess who I bashed de crap out of?' said Adam.
> 'I know, fishface dork', Matthew remarked, looking at Adam.
> 'Bingo!' Adam shouted, folding his arms across his chest with a smug look on his face.
> 'So what happened there?' Amanda inquired.
> 'Ah, don't know, well I bashed 'is head in', Adam replied in a matter-of-fact way.
> 'He bashed 'is head in', Matthew reinforced.
> 'Ask Matthew, 'e was there', Adam interrupted, turning to Matthew.
> 'He punched 'im 'round the face an' all that. Punched 'im in the jaw', Matthew chirped.
> 'What happened after that?' Amanda asked the boys.
> 'I had to go to Mr T's office', Adam remarked casually.

Of particular note here is the obvious lack of remorse shown by the boys. In describing the incident to Amanda both Adam and Matthew focused on their victory over Brian. Rather than revealing any remorse for being caught fighting and sent to the principal's office, Adam and Matthew reflected on the incident as an occasion on which they prevailed over Brian. For Adam, in particular, the fact that Matthew was able to verify that he landed multiple blows on Brian was a badge of honour. Despite his own active involvement in the incident, Matthew seemed more eager to pay homage to Adam, on account of him punching Brian in the 'head … face and … jaw'. While Adam clearly felt justified in his actions on account of Brian being such an 'annoying and unlikeable person', Matthew's motivations appear less about disliking Brian and more about pleasing Adam. Matthew's deference to Adam in his reflections of the incident is consistent with Mrs W's assessment of his 'declining' behaviour. If Mrs W is right then it seems that Matthew will clearly go to quite considerable lengths to secure the approval of Adam. In the following, Amanda queries how the event finished.

> 'Mrs W came up 'cos Kate went an' dobbed', Adam replied.
> 'Kate went and dobbed', Amanda repeated, 'and Mrs W came up, what did she say?'
> 'Yep', Adam answered, 'she said "GET TO MR T'S OFFICE RIGHT NOW!"'
> 'And off you went?' Amanda inquired.
> 'Nuh', Adam slurred, 'I didn't, I told de bitch ta get stuffed!'

> 'No you didn't?' Amanda quizzed.
> 'Nah, I went to, I went to de office', he recounted.
> 'And then what? You went too didn't you Justin?' Amanda asked.
> 'Got growled at, that was awesome!' Justin remarked smugly.
> 'You got growled at? Did Mr T find out what happened?' Amanda queried.
> 'Yep, kicked our arses', Adam confirmed.

Again we see Adam dominating the conversation, only this time having his views supported by Justin. Just as Matthew had done in the previous set of interactions, Justin's reflections on the incident seemed to fall directly into line with Adam's. Whatever the repercussions were for beating up Brian, none of the boys seemed to show the slightest evidence of remorse. In fact, Adam was outwardly, albeit playfully, disparaging of his teacher's directive for him to go to the office. His reference to Mrs W as 'a bitch' who could 'get stuffed' is a compelling insight that Adam was neither sorry nor remorseful about his involvement in the incident. Indeed, the only thing that Adam appeared to regret was having to face the rituals associated with punishment. Justin was similarly dismissive of the discipline process and sarcastically refers to the dressing-down he received from the principal as 'awesome!' Of course, all three of the boys, namely Adam, Matthew and Justin, conceded that they were forced to endure a substantial line of interrogation from Mr T and were cautioned of more serious recriminations were they to be involved in events like this one in the future. The most substantial of these proposed recriminations was to be the summoning of their parents. While their respective responses to the reproach of Mr T would clearly have been different in different contexts, in the company of their friends they projected a deeply dismissive and trivialising attitude toward the authority of their teachers and the principal.

What is particularly interesting about the boys' attitude to authority is that this was not the first time they had been in trouble. All four (including Brian) of the boys had been in trouble for previous incidents involving fighting. Of particular note here was a more serious incident that took place in the previous year involving Adam and Brian. On that occasion Adam had bitten Brian and caused him to bleed. Given current social concerns about the exchange of blood and other body fluids this incident was treated seriously and parents were called into the recrimination process. A year later, and in the wake of another incident for which he was once more in trouble for fighting with Brian, Adam reflects on the incident last year:

> 'Las' time when I went dere las' time it was a lot more serious 'cos it involved blood wiv Brian 'cos I took a big chunk outta 'is back. Dat was las' year.'

'Oh?', Amanda responded.
'Yeah I…' Adam began to explain.
'Took a big chunk out…' Matthew interrupted earnestly.
'I got a big chunk of 'is um back', Adam continued.
'You bit him?' Amanda asked.
'Yeah', Matthew remarked with a wide-eyed nod.
'Put a hole frough 'is shirt', Adam added casually.
'Why did you bite him?' Amanda asked.
'I'm angry, I'm a beast', Adam remarked. 'I'm just tellin' ya, Brian touches me and he won't have a head.'
'Yeah but why…' inquired Amanda.
'I'd kill 'im', Adam seethed.
'But what did he do to you?' Amanda asked.
'I don' know', Adam replied, 'he jus' sort of shows off so I go payback time y' know n' that.'

It is clear in this transcript that Adam had little remorse about the incident and was not stifled by whatever forms of retribution he was forced to endure as a result of it. For Adam, the desire to beat up Brian was far more pressing than the consequences he would face for getting into trouble. Matthew and Justin demonstrate a similar hierarchy of commitments in their words and actions. The main difference is that Matthew's and Justin's desire to beat up Brian is a desire based on recognition and acceptance. For example, only a short time after the incident, Justin spotted Amanda entering the schoolyard and came racing across to her.

'Can I tell y' somethin', can I tell y' somethin'', Justin said eagerly.
'Yes Justin', Amanda stated, turning towards him.
'I bashed up Brian Sumner last week!' he said, as if it were a badge of honour.

'You mustn't bash up Brian'

It is interesting to look at the way the teachers responded to the incident that involved Adam, Justin and Matthew besetting upon Brian. It needs to be stated at the outset of this critique that events such as this are never easy for teachers to deal with. Working within a highly litigious and scrutinised profession, teachers are limited in what they can and cannot do. Further, teachers operate within a system that has clearly established protocols for addressing incidents of student miscreance and violence. Invitations for teachers to assert their authority in situations involving their students are always tempered by regulations in which their profession is ensconced. Failure to comply with these regulations carries a wide range of career-threatening penalties. To

this end, it is not unexpected that teachers will speak and act with a high degree of uniformity when confronted by incidents that require some sort of student disciplining and punishment. As the first teacher to arrive at the scene of the fight, Mrs W can be seen to have acted swiftly and in accordance with the accepted protocol. Believing the incident to be of a 'serious' nature, Mrs W clearly opted not to invoke any form of on-the-spot penalty, and promptly sent all perpetrators to the principal's office.

In the following explanation Mrs W reflects dutifully on her decision. Here, she portrays a sense of satisfaction in making sure that such an incident was dealt with in a way that reflected its seriousness within the school community.

> I just sent them straight to the office, because anything physical like that they don't even get a warning. Just straight into the office. And so Mr T rounded all of the people up who were involved and there ended up being about half a dozen. Yeah, so they went to Mr T and he got to the bottom of it after a lot of roaring and just saying, 'What happened? Did you punch? Did you touch?' You know this sort of thing and they'd start to say, 'I but, but, but' and he'd say, 'No, did you touch?'

Knowing that the perpetrators had a history of engaging in physical conflict clearly vindicates Mrs W's decision not to issue a warning or invoke any form of on-the-spot remediation. Notwithstanding this, Mrs W was clearly convinced that the incident had a degree of seriousness that required the intervention of the office of school principal. At a personal level, she felt that Mr T would be able to get to the bottom of the dispute and issue appropriate penalties to the perpetrators. She referred to his persistence to find out what happened as a notable strength of his in reconciling such incidents. As well as having seniority, Mr T had greater programmatic flexibility, on account of not being committed to a classroom setting, to undertake a comprehensive interrogation of the participants. After all, Mrs W was due to be back in front of her class at the end of lunchtime.

In the following extract Mr T explains how he undertook the task of sorting out what had provoked the altercation. Here Mr T outlines what he refers to as his 'no-nonsense approach' for getting to the bottom of the dispute.

> I looked at each one and ended up with more kids than you might have seen to start with. We had a kid who instigated it all and who had taken it back a week or so but he wasn't game to do his own settling up – he got other kids to do it. So we've got the instigator and those that went to do what they were told to do, Adam, Matthew and Justin. Then we

> had the ones who butted in on behalf of the victim and then we had the victim himself who fought back. We had another one who was in the background just agitating and so on.
>
> So, it was complicated and so was the list of punishments. It was just, 'right this was your role' and we always make them go through it. My stock phrase to them is, 'Well, are you guilty? Did you do it?' And if they say 'yes', well that gets rid of all that other garbage that you don't need to carry. Yeah, once they've actually verbalised 'yes, I did that set of things', well you don't have to keep going through it. You can start talking about, 'okay you said you've done that, now what's a suitable consequence?' Or you can say, 'these are the consequences', as well as giving them advice on what they should have done and what they shouldn't have done. It was a bit complicated but it was over and done with in about twenty minutes.

At the core of Mr T's strategy was a desire to sort out the individual roles and deeds of each person involved in the dispute. While beginning with a questioning approach, Mr T clearly demonstrated his willingness to use considerable assertion with the children. That is, once he had certain information he was able to piece together other bits to comprise a picture of who did what and why.

Once each person's role in the dispute was established, Mr T had a straightforward formula for issuing punishment. Quite simply, 'the worse the level of involvement the worse the punishment'. Agitators were not viewed as being directly involved in the dispute, so their punishment amounted to detention for one recess. The person who instigated the fight, but interestingly did not take a direct role in it, was issued the harshest penalty. Mr T believed that he was the core protagonist in the whole dispute and had exploited Adam's dislike of Brian to provoke the assault on Brian. He received a punishment of detention for three lunchtimes. This is outlined in the following extract from an interview with Mr T.

> We had a huge variation on things so we started off with the one who was doing the agitating as being the smallest amount so he actually did one recess time in 'time-out', up to the one who instigated it all but was behind the scenes. He did three lunch hours in time-out and lots of firm talking-to from Mr A and I. The rest were just ranked in between.

Interestingly, despite his knowledge of their histories, Mr T perceived Adam's role to be no more provocative than that of any of the other boys in the fight. To this end, his penalty was the same as Justin's and Matthew's. Like the other two boys, Adam

was 'convicted' of fighting and forced to endure detention for two lunchtimes. Accompanying this were 'firm talking-to's' within which Mr T warned each boy about the 'more serious' consequences associated with their future involvement in such incidents.

Probably the most long-lasting consequence of the incident was the initiation of strategies to separate Adam, Matthew and Justin and impinge on their ability to collude with each other. Mrs W was at the forefront of a campaign to develop and implement strategies to ensure that Adam, Matthew and Justin did not play or work together. Not only did she propose this embargo in the context of her classroom but also she actively sought to extend it into the playground. Mrs W explained her approach to this in the following interview extract.

> I have banned them from playing together, Justin, Matthew and Adam. They are not to be seen together in the playground. I've also said that at staff meetings, so if any other staff see them together they are to remind them that they're not to be together.

From his position as the school principal, Mr T was clearly considering extending the 'strategy of separation' into the formation of next year's class groupings.

> It's perfect timing that it's happened at this time of year, when we're working out classes. We can have a look at it and see if they should split up!

Unresolved issues

Several weeks after the incident there was little overt sign that anything had happened. All those involved in the incident had served their allocated penalties and Adam and his friends were keeping their distance from Brian, which was relatively easy since they frequented different areas of the playground and had different friendship groups. While Mrs W maintained her vigil to keep Adam, Matthew and Justin apart from each other in class the three were regularly seen in the same social group at lunch and recess breaks. For all intents and purposes the incident was considered 'dealt with'. Providing Adam, Matthew and Justin were able to keep out of trouble and stay away from Brian, it was unlikely that there would be any long-term consequences of the incident. At worst they would face the prospect of being placed in separate classes in the following year. However, given the limited number of class configurations that could be generated across this age group it was inevitable that some of these boys would end up in the same class in the following year. Moreover, unless there were unforeseen departures from among the group, Brian too

would probably end up in the same class as at least one of his assailants. While this situation would clearly be dealt with with a heightened degree of sensitivity, for the most part life at school for Adam, Matthew, Justin and Brian would continue in much the same way it had been before the incident took place. What concerns us is not that the teachers failed to treat the incident with the appropriate level of seriousness but that the logic and strategies they used to dissect and respond to it are not likely to have any long-term efficacy.

At the heart of our concern about the way the incident was dealt with is the extent to which the relational politics and practices within and between the stakeholders (the boys and their teachers) were advanced. To be sure, we believe that under the guidance of a philosophical and pedagogical orientation toward individualism the logic and strategies employed in response to the incident deal disproportionately with its symptoms, not its cause. Indeed, we believe that the two issues that we raised in the introduction of this paper are pertinent to our analysis of the incident and its ensuing interventions. The first concerns the educational paradigm that has great difficulty recognising and responding to the fact that incidents such as this take place in groups. Inherent within this paradigm is a pedagogical framework that encourages teachers to overcome issues of groupness through practices associated with separation and/or individualisation. The second relates to the tendency of teachers to distinguish and rationalise childhood behaviour as unconnected from behaviour in later developmental stages. Underpinning this is a view of childhood as innocent and free of malice. While the problematics associated with both of these issues did not manifest themselves in overtly destructive ways, they are, we believe, inexorably linked to problems that occur in later developmental stages.

Our criticism of the lack of emphasis given to the potency of peer group investments in the construction and implementation of mainstream pedagogy cuts right to the heart of the dominant educational theory and practice. Foremost here is our criticism of the fundamental educational assumption that adults are the primary source of socialisation for young people. Forged in the intellectual roots of developmental psychology (exemplified by Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget), such an assumption places teachers at the centre of the young person's socialising framework. Under this theoretical hyperbole a symbiotic relationship between effective adult role models and young people's behaviour is unproblematically asserted. A powerful contemporary example of this relational conviction can be seen in the 'recuperative men's movement' currently being mobilised as a response to evidence that suggests that young males experience heightened forms of social risk and dislocation (Lingard and Douglas 1999). Here, commentators such as Biddulph (1997) and Browne and Fletcher (1995) assert that social concerns about the deleterious behaviours of boys, inside and outside of schooling, are manifestations of their lack of access to effective

adult male role models. While we concede that adults can certainly play influential roles in the development of young people, their contribution is far from absolute. Indeed, we believe that the work of Judith Rich Harris (1998) offers an important corrective to the overemphasis on the 'nurture assumption', within which adults are seen as the primary socialising agents for young people. While acknowledging the centrality of adults in the very early years of human life, Harris asserts that the influence of peers gathers prominence as children grow. As a child grows his or her peer group typically expands to include more and more people. Once inside the institutional practice of schooling it is inevitable that their social group includes a great many people around their own developmental level. Within a sort of inverse relationship, as peer group investments increase the influence of adults is diminished. The important point for educators to realise is that this happens progressively from early childhood, not suddenly at adolescence.

Of course announcing the importance of the peer group would not be a revelation to many teachers. They live and work among young people in peer groups on a day-to-day basis and know all too well the capabilities of their collective power. Claudia's comment at the beginning of this paper exemplifies the omnipresence of peer groups in the lives and work of teachers. Indeed, Mrs W and her teaching colleagues also revealed their recognition of the peer group influence in the actions of Adam, Matthew and Justin. The following interview transcript reveals Mrs W and Ms C's awareness of how important the peer factor is in these children's worlds.

> 'The other kids are in awe of Adam', said Ms C.
> 'Yeah', Mrs W agreed, 'I mean here we are we're talking about three children [Adam, Matthew and Justin] and who's dominating the conversation?'
> 'Adam', Ms C confirmed.
> 'Our ringleader', Mrs W continued. 'Matthew just aspires to be like Adam.'
> 'I notice that big time when they're working together. I notice that he just follows whatever Adam says. Adam's the director of everything', Ms C adds.

The problem, as we see it, is that any attempt to recognise the importance of peer groups is ultimately dissolved within the dominant neoliberal ideology of 'individualism'. Within this ideology the focus is on the individual as a self-determining agent. Under this prevailing influence, teachers are armed with a relatively narrow set of strategies for addressing issues of groupness. Testimony to this is the way the actions of Adam, Matthew and Justin were separated. Here, 'the collective is made respective', and the incident was broken down into component

parts so that each boy's role could be analysed and he could be apportioned some sort of 'commensurate' reprisal. At no stage was the sum of the parts, or the collective dimension, of each boy's participation in beating up Brian bought into focus. Given the obvious centrality their groupness played in the incident it seems remiss, if not negligent, of the school not to address this more purposefully (Hickey and Boyer 2002). Indeed, it is our belief that many of the problems teachers have in connecting with young people in groups emanate from the limits of the prevailing ideology of individualism.

It must be said that all of the teachers worked responsibly to convey a strong and unequivocal message that such acts of aggression and violence were 'not acceptable'. While this was entirely the right thing to do it was here, we believe, that their pedagogic resources (assumptions and practices) failed to provide them with an appropriate framework to support this message. Rather than work with the boys to reconcile their aggressive attitudes and behaviours, the teachers invoked an intervention and prevention program that existed entirely around separating the boys from each other. Such an approach confronts the overt recognition of 'groupness' with strategies of individualisation. Such an approach is, we believe, inherently contradictory. As we see in Justin's enthusiasm to tell Amanda that he had 'bashed up Brian', the admonishment he received from Mr T appeared to do little to dilute the 'currency' he drew from his 'victory' over Brian. The fact that Justin was so eager to tell Amanda of his 'triumph' some time after the event signals that the ensuing punishment had done nothing to address any of the issues that lay at the very heart of the incident. Further evidence of the ineffectual nature of the practice of separation emanated from Mrs W's concession that she had previously enacted a policy of separation on Adam, Matthew and Justin. 'Well, as far as in the classroom goes they don't work together; I've kept them separated since a couple of weeks into first term.' In light of the resounding failure of this practice to prevent the three boys coming together to assault Brian, it is both interesting and alarming that the practice of separation was once more invoked, albeit extended. The message that was being sent to the boys was that teachers will isolate individuals who cannot work effectively in groups. Not only does this orientation support a pedagogic framework that is both authoritative and punitive, but it is also counter-intuitive to developing any sense of shared responsibility for working with young people in class settings.

Further diminishing the perceived severity of the assault on Brian was the long-cherished notion of 'childhood innocence' (Clark 1993). Within early childhood educational theory and practice this orientation tends to position young children's behaviour as fundamentally free of malicious intent. Supporting this viewpoint are a raft of well-established rationalisations that work to interpret acts of miscreance as merely forms of experimentation that are 'natural' within the developing and inquiring

child. Litigious constructions of 'loco parentis' help to shift responsibility and accountability for particular behaviour away from the child and normalise the perception that, while children can do wrong, acts of miscreance are fundamentally mistakes of judgment underpinned by their inexperience. This is well captured in the following interaction between Mrs W and Mr A.

> 'Look they're of the age where you don't need to be too heavy with them', Mrs W explained. 'They respond readily and I mean they want to please me. I'm their teacher, they're only little kids and they want to please me. All I have to say to them is look down to the ground and say "I'm disappointed" and they're devastated and they lift their game straight away. I mean, I've got this "time out" chair at the back of the classroom and the only person I've had on there all year is Billie 'cos she drives me insane with her talking.'
>
> 'Yeah, they're still little boys', Mr A agreed, 'and with Adam you assume that he's being forced to grow up probably quicker than he really probably wanted to. He's still a little boy and still has emotional needs. He's around with the men and he still wants cuddles from his mum.'

Drawing on the paradigm of childhood, both Mrs W and Mr A clearly believed that the boys' behaviours were readily available to adult inspection and correction. This is consistent with the child development paradigm in which the prevalence of a view of childhood innocence consolidates a strong power differential in which the adult is seen as the decision maker. Given that children are not seen as being capable of measured and reasonable decision making, their indiscretions are easily seen as merely representations of the 'quality' of their adult supervisors. As a result, the quality of childhood behaviour is often taken personally by parents or guardians, including teachers acting in 'loco parentis', as a direct reflection of their level of care and surveillance. Where acts of miscreance occur, interventions are more likely to be invoked at the level of adult surveillance than child accountability (Alloway 1995).

Contributing to the lack of accountability demanded of Adam, Matthew and Justin following their assault on Brian was a view that they were only doing 'what little boys do'. It was against this very backdrop that the aggressive behaviour of Adam, Matthew and Justin did not particularly alarm Mr T. To be sure, in his reflections on the incident Mr T describes their behaviour as 'typical sort of boy's stuff'. Underpinning his lack of concern was a belief that the actions of Adam, Matthew and Justin were characteristic of boys their age. Mr T explained that 'boys of that age are heading into that really boisterous stage where everything is physical'. Convinced that the incident was little more than manifestation of 'boyish' enthusiasm, Mr T clearly believes that

no 'real damage' was done through the incident. Moreover, Mr T explained that such incidents are more often than not the unintended consequences of misguided and boisterous games that manage to 'get out of hand':

> We're all having good fun, we're all pushing each other. I push you hard and you fall on your head instead of on your bum and so the reaction is you get up and you want to fight or you want to push him back harder… The physical violence side of things is the boys' domain. They're all going at a thousand miles an hour, playing their fighting games of kung fu or pretending to shoot each other … they just thunder through their games.

In such reflections Mr T reveals a high tolerance toward the aggressive and violent practices of boys. Indeed, his comments convey a view that he actually 'expects' such behaviour from boys. Underpinning this is the appropriation of a hegemonic masculine ideology within which aggressive behaviour is constructed as somehow 'normal' among males (Connell 1995, Miedzian 1992). Proponents of this view draw on traditional gender profiling (biological and psychological) to argue that the attributes of strength, control and competition are intrinsically, albeit socially constructed, male (Kindlon and Thompson 2000). Indeed, in many male-dominant institutions, such as sport and the military, these very attributes are outwardly and vociferously celebrated.

Implications

Behind the sociological ardour about the emergence of 'new times' or a 'postmodern paradigm' the theories and practices of mainstream pedagogy have shown a remarkable resilience to change. Pedagogic change, it seems, has come in the form of adaptation as a response to the failure of previous practices to respond to new challenges. Most notable here have been a range of pedagogic adaptations implemented, with lesser and greater success, within the middle-school years. Such adaptations have been ushered in amid widespread concerns about the proliferation of anti-educational and anti-social practices across this age group. Pedagogy within the primary or elementary school sector, on the other hand, is more noteworthy for its capacity to sustain its traditional form and reason. Rather than continue to see the different stages of schooling (namely, lower, middle and upper) as distinct, we believe that there is a burgeoning need for them to be bought into relation. On the basis of evidence presented in this paper we argue that the very practices that appear to be failing teachers and students in the middle-school years are also failing teachers and students in the lower years. The difference is not in the degree of failure but in the manifestation of the consequences of failure. In the middle-school years the

implications of a flawed pedagogy are immediate and tumultuous, whereas in the primary school years they are very often more subtle and delayed. The continued separation of the different schooling sectors helps to mask the commonality of their practice and constituency. Adolescence should not be seen as a unique phase during which young people all of a sudden become 'the enemy'. It is both unfair and unproductive to assume that in adolescence young people are not the same people they were in childhood.

At the heart of the need for pedagogic reform is the demand for a greater practical and theoretical recognition of the influence of peers in the process of education. Harris's (1998) work is particularly informative here because it highlights that, for even very young people, peers' relations are the most significant social force in their everyday lives. What beckons is a paradigm shift in mainstream pedagogic theory and practice in favour of new approaches that enable teachers to work more effectively with, rather than in opposition to, young people in their peer groups. Traditionally, teachers have been led to believe that one of the key ingredients in establishing 'effective' pedagogic relationships between themselves and their students involves them being able to control or dilute the effects of the 'peer group'. Underpinning this is the 'nurture assumption', that adults are the major determinant in the socialisation of young people. Consequently, when things do not work for teachers and they find themselves in conflict with young people they tend to either blame young people or their own incapacity to implement the pedagogic methods they have been 'armed with' through teacher education programs. Interestingly, regardless of how widespread feelings of teacher frustration or failure might be, there is little questioning of the viability of their methods or the appropriateness of the ideologies inherent in them.

Pedagogic reform needs to begin with a questioning of the dominant pedagogic paradigm built on vertical power structures and individualism. This reform requires a realignment or extension of current pedagogic methods in favour of more democratic and consensual strategies that accommodate groupness. To be sure, teachers need to recognise the limits of a pedagogic paradigm where teachers are positioned as powerful, knowledgeable and purposeful while students are seen as passive, subordinate and receptive. More importantly, they need an alternative pedagogic framework, formulated around the pursuit of a collaborative culture where teachers and students work together to create and support the conditions of harmony. While we recognise that this transition is not straightforward we believe that it will be underpinned by a number of strategic pedagogical shifts. These include a shift from:

- an emphasis on punitive intervention strategies to the provision of invitations to responsibility;

- the positioning of teacher as authority to teacher as facilitator; and
- an overemphasis on individual interests and investments to the recognition of collective interests and investments.

Such initiatives need to be introduced at an early age and must be invoked across the entire education system. To be fully effective, young people must be inducted into such a culture at an early age and not be expected to learn different cultural values and practices at different stages of their schooling. It is both unrealistic and unfair to expect the majority of young people to unlearn one set of cultural conditions on the presentation of another. Wedded to this is the need for support from a wide range of mindful and influential stakeholders (such as policy makers, administrators, parents and teacher educators) who see the positive implications of such a paradigm shift.

Notes

[1] For statistical data that reveals young males as a high risk category see Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998, 1999), Drummond (1995), Girard (1993), Moore and Michael (1998), Pampel and Williamson (2001), Pfeiffer (1998), Rockett and Smith (1989).

[2] The study referred to here was undertaken by Amanda Keddie as the empirical component of her PhD studies. Christopher Hickey was her principal supervisor for this award.

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