

## **‘Just be friends’: exposing the limits of educational bully discourses for understanding teen girls’ heterosexualized friendships and conflicts**

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*(Received 16 March 2007; final version received 3 January 2008)*

The present paper explores the conceptual limitations of the bully discourses that ground UK anti-bullying policy frameworks and psychological research literatures on school bullying, suggesting they largely ignore gender, (hetero)sexuality and the social, cultural and subjective dynamics of conflict and aggression among teen-aged girls. To explore the limitations of bully discourses in practice, the paper draws on a pilot, interview-based study of girls’ experiences of aggression and bullying, illustrating how friendships and conflicts among the girls are thoroughly heterosexualized, en-cultured and classed. Drawing on girls and parent interview narratives, I also trace some of the effects of bully discourses set in motion in schools to intervene into conflicts among girls. I suggest these practices miss the complexity of the dynamics at play among girls and also neglect the power relations of parenting, ethnicity, class and school choice, which can inform how, why and when bullying discourses are mobilized.

**Keywords:** aggression; bullying; power relations; gender; ethnicity; class

### **Introduction**

Anti-bullying policy and guidance development and implementation is a growing priority for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), with some version of an anti-bully policy now compulsory in all schools. However, in the varied DCSF anti-bullying policy recommendations and the most recent House of Commons Education Select Committee’s Special Report on ‘bullying’ (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2007, 2), the only guidance around issues of gender, sexuality and culture is that specific types of bullying are to be defined as ‘prejudice-driven’ (i.e. ‘sexist’, ‘sexual’, ‘racist’, ‘faith-based’ or ‘homophobic’).<sup>1</sup> Complexity in the ways, forms, expression and effects of bullying are experienced very differently by boys and girls, and the specific issues surrounding how gender and sexuality might impact bullying *among* girls has been absent from anti-bullying guidance.<sup>2</sup> A range of research across the social sciences and caring professions is now pointing to this knowledge vacuum around issues of gender/sexuality in relation to girls’ emotional and physical well-being in school.

Research in behavioral needs indicates that, because boys’ behavior is typically viewed as more disruptive than girls, boys are receiving more than two-thirds of support available for behavioral problems such as bullying (Cruddas and Haddock 2005). Research on school exclusion has found bullying to be a highly significant factor in girls’ exclusion, particularly self-exclusion/truancy, but schools were found to have difficulty in addressing the ‘invisible’

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and 'hidden' 'psychological' effects of bullying for girls (Osler and Vincent 2003, 21; Lloyd 2005; YWCA 2002). Audrey Osler and colleagues (Osler and Vincent 2003, 11) suggest the widespread policy and school neglect of issues for girls has led to an assumption that girls are 'not a problem' and to an 'institutional failure to tackle bullying among girls effectively' nationally (Osler and Vincent 2003, 5).

Likewise, health research has found much higher rates of self-harm for girls than boys as a result of bullying, but again girls 'internalized' responses were found to be difficult for schools to either detect or address.<sup>3</sup> Child-protection research also indicates that the lack of professional understanding of gender differences in bullying for girls means schools are not addressing girls' needs (Wood 2005). Finally, the lack of suitable provision has meant girls are unwilling to take up what help is on offer in schools, referral services and national help-lines.<sup>4</sup>

The present paper suggests that the invisibility and poor understanding of the issues facing girls is related to problems in the conceptualization of gender and bullying in much of the psychological literature on school bullying. The paper explores the conceptual limitations of educational bully 'discourses', and also critiques recent attempts to redress gender blindness in bullying literature through gender-differentiated theories of aggression in school psychology research. Then, turning to my research, I use a qualitative, feminist, sociological and poststructural approach to examine in detail the discursive practices of power missed in the conceptual frame of bullying. In particular, through analysis of one instance of conflict in a friendship group, I explore how (hetero)sexualization, racialization, culture and class shape girls' conflicts. Then I illustrate how the bully discourses employed by parents and the school miss these aspects of conflicts between girls, and instead escalate conflict and heighten anxiety and defensiveness. Finally the data show that bully discourses are mobilized in ways that relate to issues of parental fears and 'school choice', indicating the complexities of how bully discourses operate, and their far-reaching effects in the practices and processes of schooling.

### **Research on bullying, aggression and gender**

Recent reviews of research on school bullying literature indicates that it has been overwhelmingly undertaken by psychologists interested in bullying as a developmental psychological problem among children (Smith and Brain 2000). Much of the literature defines bullying as 'a subset of aggressive behavior characterized by repetition and an imbalance of power', arguing 'a student is being bullied or victimised when he/she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative action on the part of one or more other student's with the intention to hurt' (Olweus 1999, 10 ; Smith and Brain 2000; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, and Voeten 2005). Power in these definitions of bullying is conceived as an individual psychological and intentional acting out of aggression from bully to the victim, setting up a bully/victim binary. It is also common to locate the reasons for bullying as attributable to psychological characteristics and to search for personality and family causes so both bullying and victimization become individualized and pathologized *vis-à-vis* what are constituted as 'neutral' or un-afflicted children (Connolly and O'Moore 2003). The bullying literature has been critiqued for its focus on psychological typologies of bullies and victims, and its failure to address the situational and socio-cultural dimensions of power along the lines of gender, class race and sexuality (Lloyd and Stead 2001; Renold 2002).

It follows that most early research on school bullying was also 'gender blind', focusing implicitly on boys as both perpetrators and victims of bullying (Rigby 1998). This traditional focus stemmed from definitions of bullying as mostly physical with research studying

male cultures of peer abuse (Duncan 1999). Some educational researchers are now attempting to address gender blindness in bullying literature by drawing on a psychological literature on gender-differentiated aggression (Owens, Slee, and Shute 2000; Shute, Owens, and Slee 2002; Woods and Wolke 2003). The research on gender differences in aggression is based in socio-biology and developmental psychology, is quantitative and uses developmental scales and instruments to research girls as being 'indirectly' and 'relationally' aggressive (Bjorkqvist 1994; Crick and Grotpeter 1995; Moretti, Odgers, and Jackson 2004; Pepler et al. 2003; Putallaz and Bierman 2004).<sup>5</sup> These approaches essentialize gender and the categories 'girl' and 'boy', with girls' aggression constructed as a universal feminine developmental problem of expressing aggression in 'covert' and 'indirect' ways, against 'normal' masculine forms of direct and physical aggression (Ringrose 2006).

What is troubling is a school psychology literature is now amassing that takes girls' indirect and/or relational aggression as a premise for behavioral management and anti-bully policy (Besag 2006; Woods and Wolke 2003). The uncritical incorporation of gender-differentiated theories of aggression into UK educational research and policy guidelines has very serious implications for understanding issues of girls' aggression and bullying because it individualizes, essentializes and pathologizes girls' aggression (Ringrose 2006), largely ignoring the literature on the 'socio-cultural dimensions' of bullying and aggression, which argues girls' conflicts are organized through social hierarchies and structural/discursive power (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007, 27; Duncan 2006).<sup>6</sup> Socio-cultural research on bullying has also been largely neglected in the policy terrain, an issue that relates to the hostile political context in the United Kingdom, with scant uptake of feminist or critical sociological research by policy-makers (Shain and Ozga 2001). But it is these very perspectives that are needed to reorient the approaches and interventions around bullying.

### **Feminist, poststructural research**

Nearly two decades of feminist poststructural research in education has mapped the binary symbolic structures of femininity and masculinity and illustrated how gendered and sexualized discourses constitute educational terrains and subjectivities (Davies 1989; Walkerdine 1991). As those who draw on Butler's (1990) work on gender/sexual (hetero)normativity and intelligibility suggest, young people's relationships are normatively structured through imperatives for (hetero)sexuality (Kehily 2002; Renold 2006; Youdell 2006). Butler (1990, 151) writes, 'I use the term "heterosexual matrix" ... to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized'. Emma Renold's (2005) combined findings from two studies on (hetero)sexualized cultures in primary schools, found being macho, tough and/or physically violent in various degrees and manifestations represented a normative way for boys to approximate hegemonic, heteronormative, masculinity. A wealth of research on girls and femininities has likewise explored at length how the performance of the normative/idealized subject position of 'girl' in the contexts of compulsory heterosexuality (in schooling and wider culture) compels girls to represent themselves as nice, good, caring, pre-maternal, innocent, passive, nurturing and accommodating (Brown 1998; Walkerdine 1991).

Because it essentializes and homogenizes girls and does not theorize femininity or masculinity, both the gendered aggression and the bullying discourses miss how the normative and idealized qualities of femininity set up contradictions for girls in the expression of direct and open aggression (Ringrose 2006). Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007), for instance, have recently explored explicitly how girls' friendships and fighting is often organized around academic and social competition and popularity *vis-à-vis* boys, which sets up

a terrain of brutal heterosexualized competition between girls that becomes fertile ground for claims of bullying and girls being positioned as ‘relationally’ or ‘indirectly’ aggressive. The contradiction, which remains un-scrutinized in these claims of aggression and bullying, is that competitive schooling and peer and popular cultures inculcate hierarchies that young people must somehow manage, and which girls must balance alongside attempted performances of femininity (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007; Ringrose and Renold 2007). The bully discourses therefore miss how normative power structures discursively organize ideals of masculinity and femininity, and how (hetero)sexualization, class cultures and ethnic identities (and other intersecting axes) structure and *differentiate* femininities and masculinities (Reay 2001a). The way these complex power relations shape girls’ relationships and their conflicts, fighting and expressions of aggression (the dynamics of how they ‘do friendship’) are apparent in qualitative ethnographic and interview based research on girls (Brown 2003; Hey 1997; Kehily et al. 2001; Reay 2001b) and I drew on this feminist research to develop my study and analyze my data, as I illustrate throughout.

### The study

Responding to the weaknesses I have outlined in the policy and research on gender and bullying, I undertook a small-scale pilot study funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2004–2006: ‘Girls and the Subject of Aggression and Bullying’. The pilot study mapped out the media, policy and research contexts around issues of girls and bullying, and explored issues of friendship and conflict among girls attending an ethnically diverse and economically marginalized school in South Wales.

In a research climate where it is increasingly difficult to gain access to schools, particularly for research on highly sensitive issues like bullying, I opted to do community-based research. I contacted a community centre in Portsvie, a highly ethnically diverse and working-class area of the city. I first interviewed the director of the centre about the issues facing the young people in the area. I was introduced to another member of staff, Sue, whose daughter attended Herbert Secondary. Sue told me her house operated as a sort of ‘home base’ for her daughter’s friends. From here I was able to establish a relationship with Sue’s daughter, Gwyneth, and her friendship group.<sup>7</sup> I conducted two successive focus group interviews with the entire group and then in-depth individual interviews with each of the girls ( $n = 5$ ) and with Sue, exploring girls’ friendships, conflict and bullying.<sup>8</sup> This methodology drew on work in cultural and youth studies, which have developed strategies for working with girls outside of the regulative institutional context of schools (Hall 2000; McRobbie and Garber 1976).

Pilot studies have been identified as increasingly relevant for collecting preliminary data, determining what resources are needed for further study, focusing the research questions and research plan, and convincing funding bodies and other stakeholders that a larger study is feasible (Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001, 2). In this case the pilot forms the basis for a larger comparative study of girls, bullying and anti-bullying policy in England and Wales. However, pilot studies are also likely to be ‘underdiscussed, underused and under-reported’ (Prescott and Soeken, cited in van Teijlingen and Hundley, 4), with reports of pilot studies ‘rare in the research literature’ (van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001, 5).

### The school

Although the interviews were not conducted at the school, the spatial and cultural dynamics at work in the neighborhood and the school<sup>9</sup> were central to girls’ friendships and conflicts

and to the ways in which bully discourses were deployed by parents and staff at the school, as I will explore. The school was experiencing problems over the catchments area, which was divided between a wealthier middle-class neighborhood a more economically marginalized and ethnically diverse area. The school was increasingly losing students from the wealthier ‘side of tracks’. Anecdotal stories that Herbert was ‘rough’, had the ‘the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe’, and ‘a lot of bullying’ circulated among the postgraduate students and faculty at my university. Similar notions about the school were elaborated in discussions with other members of the community. In a context of ‘failing schools’, a standards agenda, and school performance and school choice discourses, schools that are viewed as providing inadequate education and protection for students, and/or disciplinary problems are subject to increasingly ‘demonization’ and public and governmental scrutiny (Lucey and Reay 2002). The schools’ positioning *vis-à-vis* discourses of performance, discipline, cultural diversity, class and sexual cultures is relevant for how bully discourses were mobilized by parents and staff, as I will explore.

### *The politics of (hetero)sexuality and friendship*

The conflict explored in this paper is narrated by the members of a friendship group that included five girls: Faiza (age 14) and Safa (age 12) who were sisters, both Iraqi-Welsh; Lucy (age 13), Vietnamese-Welsh; Elizabeth (age 13), White-Welsh; and Gwyneth (age 13), White-British. Faiza, Lucy, Elizabeth and Gwyneth were all in Year Nine, and Safa was in Year Eight. The girls were a mixed-ability, mixed-ethnicity group. Not uncharacteristically, in an attempt to individualize and differentiate their friendship group from other girls, they described themselves as ‘the spice girls’ (see also Reay 2001b):

It’s like we’re the Spice Girls, there’s a sporty one, there’s a fashionable one, there’s a girl one, there’s a baby, it’s like that. There are groups in school that everybody knows about. We are not the popularest of groups but we are not unknown. Like say eighty five percent of year nine and below know us. (Faiza)

Being ‘known’ was a delicate balancing act for the girls between being popular enough and being too ‘known’, which signaled for them the ‘hard’ ‘bad’ girls with a ‘reputation’ who ‘do things with boys’. Indeed, from the outset, sexuality was a central feature of our conversations, although our discussions were ostensibly meant to focus on bullying. During the first 15 minutes of the first focus group the girls described a lengthy episode of squabbling between Gwyneth and Elizabeth over a boy they both liked. They then engaged in a lengthy debate over who was a slut at school and why.

Faiza: Amy Turner She’s kind of slut if you think of, in my perspective, it’s not like she’s fat and she’s like, she looks horrible, she has got a nice figure but like she shouldn’t do it, she shouldn’t show it off to everyone.

Elizabeth: She wears skirts about that big.

Faiza: Because having a reputation isn’t a good thing, it’s a bad thing because [...] will go, Oh don’t go out with her, she’ll go out for a week and then.

Safa: No but go out with them because she’ll do anything with him and stuff like that.

Faiza: In other words the boys are taking advantage because ... the only reason they start going out with her is because they think she’ll do stuff with them but like,

[Loud conversation ...]

Lucy: Shut up! Not me! Gwyneth Robertson, slut!

Jessica: Why are they joking about this with you?

Gwyneth: Because they’re horrible! Just because I’ve gone out with all of them – I haven’t, I haven’t really!

- Lucy: She's been around!  
 Gwyneth: But I don't do things with people I go with out with, like Amy.  
 Faiza: No, no, it's just a joke when we say she's a slut.  
 Gwyneth: So you have to cross it out now, you have to cross it out now!  
 Elizabeth: No she doesn't do anything.  
 Faiza: She's [Gwyneth] nice to be friends to but she's not flirting, she's just being nice ... But they [boys] might take it the wrong way. They might get the wrong end of the stick.

This conversation shows the girls discursively constituting and negotiating the subject position of 'slut'. They first position Amy as a slut because she will 'do anything'. Then when someone suggests Lucy is a slut, she deflects the label onto Gwyneth, who distinguishes herself from Amy, saying she does not 'do things', which Elizabeth confirms. Faiza then works to position Gwyneth as innocent, unintended victim of male advances, saying it is her niceness that boys take the 'wrong way'. Attention from boys must be managed in the appropriate ways, staked through codes of sexual propriety and respectability (Skeggs 1997) *vis-à-vis* cultural, ethnic and class specificities in the friendship group (Hey 1997). As Valerie Walkerdine's (1991) and Beverly Skegg's (1997) work has illustrated, sexuality and class operate together, with 'slut' an historically classed designation where working-class girls/women have been positioned as hyper-sexual and in need of regulation and sanitation. Valerie's Hey's (1997) important work on class and friendship among girls illustrates how this historical trajectory of 'working-class' girls as sexually available can make it more urgent for those who might fall into the 'slut' category to distance themselves from such labels and work to position themselves as appropriately sexual, which seems to be influencing the dynamics in this friendship group. (Hetero)sexual practices in friendship groups are also organized through racial/ethnic/cultural group micro-specificities of appropriate feminine conduct (Shain 2003; Weekes 2006). Conflicts over breaching these boundaries were being constantly negotiated, as I explore more fully below.

### *The politics of (hetero)sexuality and conflict*

When I pressed the girls to discuss the issue of fighting in greater detail, the following conversation emerged:

- Jessica: Okay, do you ever get in fights? Like you told me about your small fight, do you ever get in like bad fights?  
 Faiza: Bad fight is making you fight your other friends on your side, so your best friend doesn't get anyone on their side.  
 Jessica: Has it ever happened?  
 Faiza: Katie ...  
 Elizabeth: She thought she was better than us ... like, O who fancies you, no one, O well I guess they all fancy me then ...  
 Gwyneth: Like she would say really horrible stuff to me and Elizabeth like, make us feel all small and that and like, then one day we were talking we realized she'd been saying it to both of us ... because we thought she had just like to one of us like, so we thought we'll talk to her about her and then she went ... and told her mum.  
 Jessica: So when you talked to her at school what happened?  
 Elizabeth: We got her by herself like because we didn't want to say it in front of everyone ...  
 Gwyneth: Yeah and we really didn't want to embarrass her because we wanted to see if she had an explanation of about what's been saying, like if she was upset about something ... she was like denied it all ...  
 Jessica: So how do you feel about this girl now?  
 Gwyneth: I hate her.

- Faiza: The things she did, at one stage she was dressing up in skirts the length of her knickers and we talked, dressed like that, with like nothing there and she would be all really weird, in other words, she made herself small ... It was like, O she walked past a boy and she goes, O he fancies me or.
- Lucy: Not you, because I'm prettier than you.
- Faiza: When in fact she was the ugliest girl in our year.
- Lucy: But you don't exactly want to hear that you're ugly.
- Jessica: So if she left ...
- Faiza: She left for the group for the good of herself and for the good of us.
- Jessica: But you think you would say in your own mind maybe that you won or ...
- Lucy: Not won.
- Faiza: Won what, the fight, yeah, why not. She would, why ... What did she say to you?
- Elizabeth: Because ... when ... me and Luke were boyfriend girlfriend, she said that she would kiss Luke even though I was going out with him and I was meant to be one of her closest friends and then I asked her to her face is that true that you said that? She said no, that she never said anything like that.
- Lucy: She admitted to little Gwyneth she said it.
- Faiza: She's two faced, a two faced little pig.

This lengthy narrative reveals how sexual regulation is integral to the micro-dynamics of the friendship group and deployed in complex ways that relate to class, culture and ethnicity. The conflict with Katie is described as a response to Katie's competitive behavior. She is described as lacking boundaries and saying she would kiss the other girls' boyfriends and lying about it afterwards. Much like Rachel Simmons' (2002), who writes in the US context about how a girl thinking 'she's all that' motivates harsh reprisals, the girls describe Katie as thinking everyone 'fancies' her. Faiza describes Katie as wearing skirts that are too short, and as thereby making herself 'small'.

What is crucial for an analysis of gender, conflict and aggression is that it is through codes of sexual propriety and respectability (Skeggs 1997) that Katie is disciplined and the girls' anger openly expressed. Within a cultural milieu of where idealized femininity is marked by norms of 'niceness' (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007; Brown 1998, 2003), sexual regulation of self and other appears as one of the *only* legitimate means through which these girls could openly perform anger and hatred toward another girl. When Katie steps outside the specific regulative boundaries of femininity established by the group – who have staked their friendship through constructing boundaries around specific micro practices of sexual performance, and have in some senses rejected a 'hyper-sexual, girlie-girl' femininity (Renold 2005, 162) – she is sanctioned.

Indeed, Gwyneth declares 'I hate her', and Faiza goes on to describes the inappropriately, sexualized practices/embodiment that justify such hatred. While Lucy hesitates to say they 'won' this fight, Faiza – the most condemning of Katie's behavior – agrees unequivocally to my provocative question. Faiza goes on to call Katie a 'two faced little pig' – a metaphor evoking dirt and filth. Although sexual and moral regulation was common from all the girls, it was intensified in both Faiza and her sister Safa, who were the only two members of the group whose parents would not let them date boys, an issue probably related to their Muslim background. Faiza and Safa's use of cultural values to condemn sexual displays corresponds in some ways to Farzana Shain's (2003) research on Asian and Muslim girls, particularly the group of 'faith girls' in Shain's study, who openly critiqued values that defied their religious principles, although Faiza and Safa articulate their critiques of inappropriate sexual performance within a mixed-ethnicity friendship group. My findings also have resonance with Debbie Weekes (2006) research, which found that black teen girls who were marginalized from dating cultures and from ideals of white, feminine desirability, worked to hyper-sexualize 'popular' white girls as 'blowers' (i.e. would give boys blow

jobs). It is also interesting that the girls repeatedly distinguish Katie's 'class' status from their own, at other points positioning her as 'spoiled' and 'greedy' and getting more clothes, money and sweets than the others. And yet the highly class codes of the signifier slut are still used much like the girls' in Weeke's (2006) study, to regulate/pathologize Katie, who – even though she may have access to more resources and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), as I explore further below – can still be positioned as a slut.

What is significant about this episode, and separates it out from other similar conflicts the girls discussed, is that the school treated it as an incident of bullying, setting up a meeting with a head and the girls to discuss the problem. I was able to gather from individual interviews with each of the girls and with Gwyneth's mother, Sue, that this meeting happened after Katie's mother Emily complained to the school. Katie is also described as having left the school after the conflict (to go to Chapel Hill Secondary), the meanings of which are discussed more fully next.

### *'Just be friends': Some effects of bully discourses in practice*

The girls' reflections in individual interviews on the conflict and school meeting highlight what bully discourses miss (the heterosexual, en-cultured, racialized and classed meanings, discourses and dynamics through which the conflict is staged) but also show us some of what bully discourses 'do' or what the discourses activate (they create anxiety and escalate conflict):

We were friends then, but she [Katie] used to make comments and stuff, because I had like, boyfriends and she didn't to start off with. And she would say ... how many people have you been out with like ever, and I goes I don't know. And she goes oh well I've never been out with just as many people as you, I don't say yes all the time. I would say yes, because I felt rude like saying no, might like embarrass them if I say no to them, if they ask me out kind of thing. So she like made out that I was like a slut only she was. And then she like was really horrible and told a secret of Elizabeth's to like boys ... And we were angry with her. And then, it probably would have blown over, it probably would have been just a little fight and we wouldn't have talked for a few days and then make friends. But then her mum got involved and like rang up the school and said that we were bullying her. But Katie said no they are not bullying me because I did something horrible ... Its like I can see why they'd be angry and mean and stuff like that ... but her mother said no, like rang in and we all got in trouble and we got told that we were bullying her but they didn't even hardly listen to our side of the story. They just believed her mum and stuff. But then when we told them what happened they said oh. Ok you weren't bullying her and everything, but just like be friends. But then ... She just left the school. (Gwyneth)

Again, heterosexualized femininity and negotiating the subject position 'slut' is absolutely central to the power relations. Pushing the bully discourse onto this specificity, however, erases the content of the girls' lived experiences. Gwyneth recounts being told they were bullying Katie, and then told they were not. How much this memory corresponds to the 'actual' events is not as important in the context of narrative-based research, where the story is to be analyzed for what it means to the narrator (Andrews, Sclater, and Squire 2001). What *is* particularly relevant about Gwyneth's narrative is it serves to illustrate the overall ineffectualness of bullying concepts, to address the dynamics at play. Indeed, the teacher's incredibly astute order to 'just be friends' simultaneously trivializes the conflict, obscures the competitive economy of heterosexualized power relations, pushes heteronormative femininity onto the girls (be nice and get along), and deflects responsibility for coping with difficulty back onto girls – 'just be friends', no matter what the context or

cost. The discourse of bullying ('we got told we were bullying') employed also set in motion a great deal of anger, defensiveness, and anxiety among the girls, apparent in Faiza's account:

- Faiza: Well Katie was saying how she was better than the girls ... how she thinks boys like her better than us. When boys are speaking about it behind her back but we just didn't want to say anything to hurt her ... And she had this thing, like when she didn't get her way, she'd pinch people with, oooh disgusting nails about that long, painted black ...
- Jessica: And what happened at school?
- Faiza: I personally thought that we had sorted it. We all gave each other hugs, we walked home the same way and then suddenly she didn't come to school anymore. Why? First of all she was ill, but she wasn't because we'd see her in town ... all of a sudden she'd want to change school ... Katie's mind switched and wanted to go to St. David's to go with her best friend, Hannah. She'd stopped phoning us, she didn't have an explanation and then ... she'd be so scared to say it to our faces, she'd go on MSN oh, you stupid cow na, na, na ... If she had guts, she would say it to my face. And ... every time she was around me she would be like 'Oh god; I'd never want to start a fight with you.'
- Jessica: Really?
- Faiza: She said to us that her mum made her change school ... Make up your mind mum. She took her daughter off school for three months, so she can find her another school ... Her mum would have been arrested, put in jail for not letting her daughter to go to school. But now she is in Chapel Hill, she is probably happy now. She didn't get accepted in St. David's.
- Jessica: It seems like it was ... a difficult situation.
- Faiza: She brought it onto herself. She talked about Gwyneth to me. She talked about me to Gwyneth. She talked about Lucy to Lizzy. She talked about Lizzy to Lucy, how stupid is that? If you are going to talk to someone about someone else, it would be someone ... we weren't best friends with. Then at last, she just left. And that had to be the happiest bit of Herbert for us four girls. She made us go through all that trouble of coming into a classroom and the teacher locking us in and we had to sort it out and then she left. Good.

Faiza describes with great anger and frustration how Katie called her a 'stupid cow' within the virtual space of MSN, but positioned Faiza as object of fear whenever they spoke in person. Katie is recalled as saying Faiza is someone she 'never wants to start a fight with' or having an 'oh god' face when Faiza went over to her house. It is significant that Faiza is a racialized/ethnicized/'religioned' (Youdell 2006) Asian/Muslim (Shain 2003) subject, which intersects in complex ways with being positioned as a threatening, masculinized, bully and, particularly, as *abject other*, whom Katie and her mother fear. The effects for Faiza are extreme defensiveness. She calls Katie 'a two faced pig', 'slut', 'weird', 'ugly' and 'making herself small' at various points in the group and individual interviews, expresses outrage at being 'locked in' a classroom and fantasizes about Katie's mother being locked up in retribution (put in jail) for her part in the episode.

Faiza's narrative also puts the dramatic issue of Katie leaving the school into social and relational context as we learn that Katie's mother pulled her out of the school, and after some time off Katie is finally accepted into Chapel Hill, which was the most successful comprehensive in the city. In my interview with Gwyneth's mother, Sue, the politics of the 'hot knowledge' (local storytelling, rumor, and reputation shaping parental 'school choice') (Ball and Vincent 1998) surrounding the school, and which informed this episode, became clearer. Sue described how parental fears about Herbert Secondary had led to several students leaving, which repeatedly disrupted the dynamics of the friendship groups:

I suppose what became clear to me in the infants school was this fear that a lot of the parents that I knew had about their children going to Herbert's ... There were all these different strategies people had got to stop that from happening. So, one thing you can do is go to a Welsh school ... And I remember somebody explicitly saying to me that it was a good way of avoiding having to go to a school with so many black people in it ... I found it quite disturbing but ... probably eight or nine people had left in various ways ... and in the group that Gwyneth ... went to school with, within a couple of weeks, another one of them had gone ... there was a lot of anxiety ... and this [Hannah's] mother kept phoning up and worrying about it all the time ... she was really, really anxious ... she was up half the night the night before her daughter went and then after two weeks, I think it felt like the first time her daughter felt upset about something, and who goes to school and doesn't have worries, the daughter left but without telling anybody in the school, even her best friend ... they had kept a place open in St. David's. So nobody was told about that, so that felt like this extremely disruptive thing for this group of friends ... the girl who left after the two weeks was her [Katie's] best friend and they had been best friends all the way up through school. So it seemed to me that some of what was going on for Katie ... that thing of trying to find another best friend and ... there being difficulties with that. (Sue)

Sue's complex story about parental anxieties over Herbert Secondary offers important social, cultural and racialized context to a politics of parental choice, since Katie's best friend Hannah is transferred into a prestigious Welsh-language school a few weeks after starting at Herbert, which probably fed into Katie's mother's similar response and transfer of Katie.

Katie's mother was committed ... she was one of the people who was clear that her daughter was going to Herbert but nevertheless it was a difficult situation for her because she felt very hurt by what happened but it also felt like it sort of destabilised something, it made the situation filled with much more anxiety ... because it was almost like there was this fault line about this school, whether you stay in the school or don't and so it played into the anxieties that were around there for her parents ... I mean it felt with that situation, there was very much this fear about the word bullying and about whether bullying had gone on and I think there was some unfortunate stuff happened at the end but my observation of it up until then wasn't that, it wasn't bullying, it was girls falling out with each other and Katie was in there as much as anybody else was. But we couldn't support the girls to a resolution partly because, due to that background Katie went, she just vanished ... (Sue)

Sue's analysis of how the word bullying worked to heighten anxiety and led to an escalation of events – school anti-bullying interventions, and another parent's removal of her child from the school – is instructive. In this very specific context, one interpretation of how bully discourses work and their effects is they fail to address the content of the girls' conflict, which I have illustrated surrounded classed and cultural negotiations over heterosexualized performances and statuses within the friendship group. Sue herself does not name or discuss these specific nuances of what transpired to provoke the girls 'falling out with each other'. Rather than identify, unpack or address conflicts, what I am arguing is that the bully discourses work to obscure meaning and heighten anxieties – in this case particularly parent's fears over cultural and racial differences, at the school. This opens a space for Katie's mother to manipulate the boundaries of school allocation, eventually securing a place for Katie at the most successful comprehensive in the city in the wake of this series of events. This adds to the conceptual critique being made in this paper about the inadequacy of the bully discourses when imposed onto conflicts, since they fail to help understand or address the specific meanings and dynamics of young people's relationships. Rather, bullying discourses escalate anxieties, and, due to the considerable political purchase it holds, the notion of bullying appears to have much broader and far-reaching effects than may be understood at present.

## Conclusions

In concluding, it would seem new conceptual frameworks for approaching girls' conflicts are needed that critically engage with the limitations of the psychological discourses of aggression and bullying, which dominate the policy and research terrain. We need a dialogue between the bullying research and the important interdisciplinary research that has come out of feminist, sociological, educational, youth and child studies on girls, boys, femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality, friendship, peer dynamics, bullying, conflict and violence in schools and beyond (Leach and Mitchell 2006). Through qualitative research, and particularly by employing a feminist, poststructural analysis, we can begin to unpack the complex, site-specific dynamics of girls' conflicts. We can also analyze the discursive effects of the conceptual framework of bullying applied to school conflicts, and begin to understand the nuances of how and why bully discourses are mobilized, what bully discourses miss, and what they 'do' or activate in practice.

In this paper, through analysis of the necessarily limited data from a pilot study, I have analyzed the dynamics of (hetero)sexualized, classed, racialized and culture-bound conflict among a girls' friendship group, and how the discourses and practices around bullying used at the school missed the meanings of this conflict. The findings show that, rather than help address conflict, the bully discourses enlivened feelings of defensiveness and anxiety among the girls. Moreover, I illustrated how parental fears (particularly, it appeared, over cultural difference) were instrumental in the mobilization of bully discourses at the school; and once set in motion, the bully discourse enabled one parent to exert their own class and cultural capital to maneuver the educational marketplace, securing a placement in a 'better' performing school (James and Beedell 2006). This indicates the need for better educational resources, particularly for 'demonized schools', in addressing and coping with school conflicts at the level of both student and parental cultures (Lucey and Reay 2002). It also illustrates how bully discourses influence the politics and discourses of school choice, a space of inter-discursive complexity that highlights the need for further research on the far-reaching effects of the bullying discourses in communities and schools.

In particular, however, this paper indicates that further research is needed to explore the limitations and possibilities of school anti-bullying interventions for working with girls. Indeed, it appears that what is urgently needed in our current post-feminist climate, rife with assumptions about girl power, girls' success (Ringrose 2007) and convictions that girls are 'not a problem' (Osler et al. 2002), is research that listens closely to girls' experiences and works with them to find appropriate supports for coping with conflict. What policy-makers, schools and parents need is a better understanding of the contexts of brutal academic and social competition of schooling, but particularly the ongoing and perhaps even intensifying heterosexualized competition (constituted through class-specific, race-specific and culture-specific codes of practice) through which the complex micro-politics of girls' friendships and conflicts at school are staked.

## Notes

1. Considerably more attention has been paid recently in the DfES and Welsh Assembly (<http://uk.gay.com/headlines/8407>) to issues of homophobic bullying in schools, but this focuses largely on boys as perpetrators and victims (Warwick et al. 2004).
2. The prior DfES anti-bullying policies also largely neglected the complexities of gender.
3. <http://www.rcn.org.uk/news/display.php?ID=1085&area=Press>
4. <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/html/home/informationresources/pateenagegirlshelplines.htm>. See also Mental Health Foundation/Camelot Foundation (2006).

5. This research has claimed that girls bully and aggress in covert and manipulative ways, and suggests that if gender differences in forms of aggression are measured then girls may be *more* aggressive than boys (Crick and Rose 2000).
6. The school psychology literature appears to exist in isolation from social psychology, sociology and socio-cultural education literature. Even the most recent review of literature on bullying among girls in *School Psychology International* (Besag 2006) totally ignores existing literatures on girls friendships, including a special edition of *Feminism and Psychology*: 'The Best of Friends: The Politics of Girls Friendships' (Frith 2004).
7. Informed consent for interviews was gained from parents through the cooperation of Sue, whose help I am extremely grateful for.
8. Informed consent was also attained at every focus group and individual interview from all participants.
9. The Estyn (the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales) report describes Herbert Secondary as an '11–19, mixed, community school', as 'economically disadvantaged with 45% of students entitled to receive free school meals, with 65% of students from "minority" ethnic backgrounds, 55% of students English as a second language, and 90% of pupils with levels of reading below their chronological age upon entry'. Herbert Secondary is well below national averages for national curriculum and GCSE results. These statistics have been altered slightly for sake of anonymity of the school.

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