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Kostas, M.

British Journal of Sociology of Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbse20

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To cite this article: Marios Kostas (2021): ‘Real’ boys, sissies and tomboys: exploring the material-discursive intra-actions of football, bodies, and heteronormative discourses, British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2021.1999790

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1999790

BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1999790

'Real' boys, sissies and tomboys: exploring the material-discursive intra-actions of football, bodies, and heteronormative discourses

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ABSTRACT

School playgrounds are critical arenas wherein children's gender performances unfold, and 'games' of gender subordination or domination transpire. Theoretically predicated on Butlerian and Baradian gender performativity approaches, this qualitative study analyses how children negotiate and perform gender, exploring the material-discursive effects of human and non-human agents (e.g. football, sartorial elements) in their intra-actions with the body. Data were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews with 80 pupils from two Athenian elementary schools. Findings showed that playgrounds were dichotomised into rigid gender zones, and the children reaffirmed their gender allegiances by forming gender-homogeneous playgroups and engaging in diametrical activities. Gender-zone transgressions were frequent, albeit with high social and emotional cost, especially for boys who were uninterested in football and lacked athletic dexterity. Finally, the results highlighted the effects of material-discursive forces in gender identity development and, specifically, how 'successful' masculinity, girly femininity, sissies, and tomboys emerged through the material-discursive intra-actions of playgrounds, bodies, football, and heteronormative discourses.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 January 2021
Accepted 15 October 2021

KEYWORDS
Football; playgrounds; gender discourses; posthuman performativity; children

Introduction

Over the last four decades, various play topographies have come under the feminist social microscope, with international research (e.g. Mayeza 2018 in South Africa; Bartholomaeus 2012 in Australia; Renold 2013 in the UK) focusing on pupils' playground activities in educational settings. According to these studies primary school playgrounds constitute critical sites for gender performances as pupils (aged 6–12 years old) 'collaboratively develop relational understandings of what it is to be male or female' by participating in certain activities (Paechter and Clark 2007, 319). However, the international literature has shown that elementary school-aged children also frequently experience homophobic bullying, misogyny, and gender-based schoolyard violence (Bartholomaeus 2012; Paechter 2012; Richards 2012). Hence, pupils' playground experiences 'might affect them and remain with

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them for as long as (or longer than) their educational experiences in the classroom' (Thomson 2005, 487).

Most studies (e.g. Bhana 2005 in South Africa; Renold 2005; Clark and Paechter 2007 in the UK; Bartholomaeus 2012 in Australia) have adopted an 'adult centric' approach to documenting the gender patterns in children's play, precluding a deep and meaningful engagement 'with children and the meanings they attach to gender' (Mayeza 2017, 476). Moreover, based on Connell's theory, these studies mapped the various forms of masculinities as they are hierarchically structured in relation to each other but disregarded the role of non-human agentic matter (i.e. space, time, objects) in the production of gender meanings. Conversely, this qualitative study elicits children's voices and draws on Butler's (1990) performativity theory to scrutinise the symbolic meanings pupils (aged 8–10) ascribe to their playground activities, through which they construct and police their heteronormative gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, based on Barad's (2007) posthuman performativity, this study explores the material-discursive intra-actions of space, activities, and somata with heteronormative discourses through which 'successful' masculinity and 'girly' femininity as well as tomboy and sissy identities materialise in two Athenian elementary schools, a domain that remains under-researched both in Hellas and internationally. Hence, this study shows how Connell's and Butler's theories (that have informed feminist research in school playgrounds) could be enhanced through a posthuman performativity lens.

At a practical level, the study's findings contribute to the wider debate about the salience of children's playground experiences and illuminate the symbolic gender cultures in primary education, highlighting the discursive-material practices that regulate pupils' gender performances during spontaneous play. Ultimately, this study offers suggestions for educators and policymakers (at the national and international levels) for instituting policies and practices to abate homophobic or misogynistic bullying and other forms of gender-related violence in school playgrounds.

Background: policing gender zones in school playgrounds

It is well documented in the international literature on gender differences in children's play that elementary school playgrounds are salient locales for gender performance wherein 'games' of domination/subordination transpire (Mayeza and Bhana 2020a), culminating in certain forms of femininity and masculinity being '… enabled or inhibited' (Paechter and Clark 2007, 319). Specifically, boys use playground spaces '…as a way of asserting dominance over girls' (Shilling 1991, 24). For example, recent studies conducted in Spanish and Portuguese preschools (Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez 2020a, Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020b) and in South African elementary schools (Mayeza and Bhana 2020b) have demonstrated that boys (aged 5 and 9–12, respectively) monopolise the largest space in playgrounds, while girls are consistently pushed to the peripheries of the boys' zone. Analogously, studies in Canadian and Australian schools (Kindergarten to grade 6) found that, unlike boys who controlled the largest area of the playground dedicated to team sports, girls congregated in the restricted space of the canteen courtyard (Dyment, Bell, and Lucas 2009). These gender zones are antipodal not only in terms of size and location but also in relation to the type and intensity of activities taking place therein. Specifically, crucial gender asymmetries have been observed in primary school-aged girls' and boys' games and physical activity levels. For instance, Dudley et al. (2018, 4) found that Australian

kindergarten and elementary school girls (aged 4–12) 'spent a significantly larger percentage of their recess and lunch breaks in sedentary activities ($p < 0.01$) (52.5%; SD = 30.0) than boys (40.7%; SD = 29.8)'.

Moreover, a review of the international literature suggests that in primary school playgrounds, boys and girls engage in gender-appropriate activities. Typically, boys participate in rough and tumble games and competitive sport (Mayeza 2017). Among the traditionally rule-bound team sports, football stands out as a signifier of 'successful' masculinity (Swain 2003) as it is replete with masculinising practices and meanings that reinforce the association of boyhood with heterosexuality, physical and emotional strength, athletic prowess, violence, agility, domination, and speed (Bhana 2008; Campbell et al. 2018). Thus, football plays a central role in the construction of boys' gender and sexual identities (Bhana and Mayeza 2016). For example, Swain (2000, 107) postulated that in British elementary schools '… establishing oneself as a good footballer went a long way in helping to establish one as a "real" boy', as Year 6 'boys defined their masculinity through action, and the most esteemed and prevalent resource that … [they] drew on … was physicality/athleticism, which was inextricably linked to the body in the form of strength, power, skill, fitness and speed' (Swain 2003, 302). In this sense the football pitch becomes a male bastion of power that confers a material and symbolic significance to the construction of 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity.

Antithetically, primary school-aged girls are pressured to participate in sedentary and cooperative activities, such as verbal play and skipping (Blatchford, Baines, and Pellegrini 2003; Dyment, Bell, and Lucas 2009). For instance, Swain's (2000, 99) study in British primary schools demonstrated that, for most of their free play time, girls (aged 10–11 years old) engaged in activities such as 'hopscotch, and various hiding and running games'. Through these activities, girls reaffirm their allegiance to 'girly femininity', which revolves around heterosexuality, complaisance, congeniality, unassertiveness (Kehily et al. 2002; Clark and Paechter 2007) athletic incompetence and physical/emotional weakness (Fagrell, Larsson, and Redelius 2012; Paechter 2006). Ergo, girly femininity is 'defined as the absence of masculinity' (Kessler and McKenna 1978 in Paechter 2006, 256).

This has some critical implications: within the nexus of playground-gendered power relations, girls' ostracism from masculine sports such as football and rugby (where athletic prowess, competitiveness and aggression are required) is naturalised (Bhana and Mayeza 2016; Mayeza and Bhana 2020b). Specifically, girls cannot join in boys' games, as boys consider them to be weak players and deride their lack of sporting dexterity (Mayeza 2017). For example, in their study of Spanish pre-school children, Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez (2020a, 203) found that boys regularly scorned girls and referred to them as 'babies who do not know how to play football'. Similarly, in British elementary schools, even when girls participated in football matches, the boys refused to pass them the ball (Clark and Paechter 2007), and when '…a female defender had to do something important …the task was taken over…' by a boy (Paechter and Clark 2007, 324). These strategic practices confer a crucial symbolic significance, as boys uphold the masculinising associations of their sports and reaffirm their allegiance to 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity (Paechter 2010).

However, not all girls stoically accommodate boys' domination in school playgrounds. Girls employ various strategies of resistance to male dominance, varying from sexualised games (i.e. lifting their dresses and showing off their panties) (Bhana 2005) to embodying

the concept of a footballer and other atypical characteristics for females (i.e. little concern about physical appearance, sporting prowess, and aggression) (Craig and LaCroix 2011). Through these strategies, they distance themselves from 'girly' femininity and negate the disempowerment associated with it. Although these girls (physically and symbolically) gain a place in the playground (Paechter and Clark 2007), they pay a high social and emotional cost because they are regarded as masculine by their peers and are frequently subjected to derision and/or marginalisation. Mayeza (2017, 485), for instance, found that South African primary school girls who played soccer and failed to uphold their allegiance to 'girly' femininity were '…perceived to have masculine qualities…' and labelled as tomboys, a derogatory term used by boys to describe girls who try to be like boys.

Analogous exclusionary practices are applied to boys who are uninterested in masculine sports and do not embody the characteristics around which 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity is discursively constructed (e.g. sporting prowess, speed, emotional and physical strength). Typically, these boys are seen as effeminate by their male peers (Atencio and Koca 2011) and subjected to 'othering' practices such as name calling (e.g. 'poofs', 'sissies', and 'gays'). For example, Renold (2013) in the UK, Mayeza (2018) in South Africa, Gerouki (2010) in Hellas and Bartholomaeus (2012) in Australia have shown how primary school-age boys who play with girls and dislike physically demanding sport were ostracised. Swain (2006) also found that in British elementary schools, boys' poor performance in sport was pathologised and prompted homophobic remarks (i.e. wimp and girl) by their male peers. These derogatory terms are powerful discursive tools for policing gender boundaries and delineating the peripheries of 'successful' masculinity (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015), because by demeaning 'the weak, the dependent, and the feminine', boys establish 'the coherence and legitimacy of the dominant male' (Davies 2006, 73). Therefore, 'homophobia is used to regulate and control the general behaviour of boys and their sexuality and is used as a strategy to locate boys at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy' (Swain 2006, 329).

Human and posthuman gender performativity

Poststructuralist scholars reconceptualised gender as a polymorphic concept, constituted through individuals' routinised performances that produce the phantasmagoria of an intelligible, congenital, and fixed gender (Kostas 2014, 2018, 2021). Through this theoretical lens, gender is performed through discourse. Despite a plurality of discourses which offer 'individual[s] a range of modes of subjectivity' (Weedon 1987, 35), dominant heteronormative discourses align gender with heterosexuality and demarcate the culturally acceptable boundaries within which 'successful' gender performances must be enacted (Renold 2005). Thus, intelligible genders are ensconced within the 'heterosexual matrix', namely, a '…grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalised… and oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler 1990, 151).

Although Butlerian performativity offered new insights into how discursive powers produce individuals' subjectivity, it attenuated the role of material phenomena in the production of gendered subjectivities. According to Barad (2007,149) 'discourses and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another…' but rather intra-act. Intra-activity, in this sense, connotes the amalgamation of discourse with matter, an 'entanglement' that regulates the construction of meanings, as discourses, non-human material,

space, time and bodies are mutually implicated in the process of subjectification (Barad 2007). By attributing agency to matter Barad (2007, 144) emphasised that '…agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something someone says or does'. Hence, Barad (2003, 808) drastically reconceptualised the notion of gender performativity from a mere discursive-linguistic concept circumscribed to human actions, to an idea that 'incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors'. Through this lens, gender is constituted by the 'material-discursive intra-actions between non-human agentic matter, discourses, and other material things' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 8) in specific 'spacetimematterings', a term used to denote how '… time and space are produced through iterative intra-actions that materialise specific phenomena, where phenomena are not "things" but relations' (Barad 2007, 149).

Drawing on Barad's (2007) posthuman performativity, this study examines how gender intelligibility materialises through the practice of 'mattering' and how heteronormative/'successful' femininity and masculinity are produced, as specific material and discursive phenomena intra-act during children's free play. In particularly, the focus is on the discursive-material agential intra-actions of space and the non-human aspect of playground activities through which 'successful' femininity and masculinity crystallise in school 'spacetimematterings'.

Materials and methods

Situated within the postmodernist paradigm, this study used semi-structured interviews and playground observations (structured and unstructured) to collect data in two state-funded elementary schools in Athens. The two schools were randomly selected from a list of settings provided by the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs. Compass Primary School was in the city centre, a built-up are with few open spaces and had six classes (141 students in total) and a small all-concrete playground. Rainbow Primary School was situated in a suburb of Athens with a good deal of open spaces and had eight classes (189 students in total) and a large all-concrete playground. The student population at both schools was predominantly white (over 98%) and middle class, but Rainbow Primary School had a wider range of ethnic backgrounds. The sample, however, was socio-economically, racially and ethnically homogeneous, not allowing for an exploration of the possible intersection of gender with these other social categories.

Before fieldwork began, a decision had been made to focus on the third- and fourth-grade pupils (aged 8–10) of each school because this age group of children has been overlooked or rendered invisible by research on gender and play. Most international studies on gender differences in play have focused on upper elementary schoolchildren's (aged 10–12) experiences (e.g. Swain 2000; Mayeza and Bhana 2020a). Five classes of children (120 pupils in total) aged 8–10 participated in the project (two in Compass Primary School and three in Rainbow Primary School).

During the first phase of the data collection process, structured and unstructured observations were conducted in school playgrounds. The purpose of the structured observations was to explore gender differences in physical activity levels, using the System for Observing Play and Leisure Activity in Youth (SOPLAY) (McKenzie 2006) and the System for Observing Children's Activity and Relationships during Play (SOCARP) manuals to guide data

collection (Ridgers, Stratton, and McKenzie 2010). Children's physical activity levels were recorded as sedentary (such as reading, lying down, sitting, standing), moderate (walking, hide and seek, crawling), or vigorous (climbing, running jumping, sports such as football, and chasing games) (Ridgers, Stratton, and McKenzie 2010). Covariates included students' gender, activity type, and area type (football pitch or surrounding area) (McKenzie 2006). Through direct observation a separate count was conducted of boys and girls by physical activity level (sedentary, moderate, or vigorous). The researcher used visual assessment to rate gender. Gender differences in physical activity levels were examined by means of scans from left to right, which was done by a stationary point from which the scanning of the entire play area was possible. To avoid reactivity, the researcher behaved as unobtrusively as possible. Each scan encompassed two eye sweeps over the playground. In the first sweep, girls were counted and coded as engaging in Sedentary (S), Moderate (M), or Vigorous (V) activities. The same process was followed in the second sweep for the number of boys with respect to their physical activity levels. The scanning was repeated three times during each observation hour using a momentary time-sampling technique. A total of 80 scans were conducted at each playground over four weeks.

In parallel, unstructured, non-participant observations were conducted to capture children's playground experiences (Bryman 2012). A decision was made to adopt the role of 'complete observer' and to keep interaction with children to a minimum (Gold 1958) 'in the interest of being non-reactive' (Robson 2002, 310). During the observations, the focus was on whether pupils play, what and where they play, and with whom they play. The unstructured observations were conducted every break time and included four episodes per day, five times a week, over a period of four weeks (26.6 hours in total). The narrative description method was used to record the data from the unstructured observations, and at the end of each observation day, the field notes (i.e. short descriptions of settings, activities and sounds) were developed into full transcripts (Lofland and Lofland, 1984).

Since observations (especially structured observations) cannot 'provide reasons for [the] observed patterns of behaviour' (Bryman 2012, 284), method triangulation was used by employing semi-structured group interviews with 80 third- and fourth-grade pupils (40 boys and 40 girls). Each group comprised two boys and two girls, and 20 mixed-gender group interviews were held in total (8 group interviews in Compass Primary School and 12 group interviews in Rainbow Primary School). This type of interviewing can generate rich data in a time-efficient manner, as it encourages interaction among participants (Kitzinger 1994) and enables 'the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses' (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989, 83). Additionally, it minimises the likelihood of obtaining routinised responses by one child, which can frequently occur in individual interviews (Lewis 1992).

With the help of their teachers, the children were organised into groups taking into account their friendships (Lankshear 1993), because the presence of the other children in the group can contribute to reducing some children's levels of trepidation and encourage spontaneous and candid responses (Lewis 1992). The mixed-gender composition of the groups encouraged a free-flowing conversation (Spruyt-Metz 1999) and allowed for an exploration of children's views 'as they operate within a social network, and …explore how accounts are constructed, expressed, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction' (Kitzinger 1994, 159). During the interviews, the researcher ensured that all pupils

expressed their ideas freely, and their views were contested in a courteous and affable manner that fostered debate. Data were recorded through extensive written notes that were developed into full transcripts at the end of each day. Finally, throughout the research process, the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2018) and Hellenic Ministry were followed.

Findings

Gender zones in school playgrounds

In both schools, the playgrounds were dichotomised into rigid gender zones. The boys controlled the largest area designated for team sports, while the girls were limited to the peripheral space owing to their inability to control any other areas of the schoolyards (Clark and Paechter 2007; Swain 2000). These gender asymmetries in children's spatial distribution are indicative of the preponderance of boys over girls in the play areas (Fagrell, Larsson, and Redelius 2012; Martínez-Andrés et al. 2017). Moreover, most third- and fourth-grade boys (12 and 16, respectively) symbolically dominated the playgrounds by participating in a few physically demanding activities such as rule-bound team sports (e.g. football) and racing and chasing games.

In contrast, the girls spent most of recess hanging around and engaging in various sedentary behaviours and cooperative activities, particularly verbal play, conversation, watching others engaged in an activity, and skipping, activities stereotypically associated with their gender and the limited space available to them in the playgrounds. Rarely would some girls partake in vigorous activities such as running, chasing, and football (see Figure 1). Corroborating previous research, analyses of boys' and girls' physical activity levels suggest a strong discursive nexus between masculinity and physicality (a point to be discussed later). Conversely, in both schools, femininity was identified in the absence of athletic dexterity (Dyment, Bell, and Lucas 2009; Mayeza and Bhana 2020a).

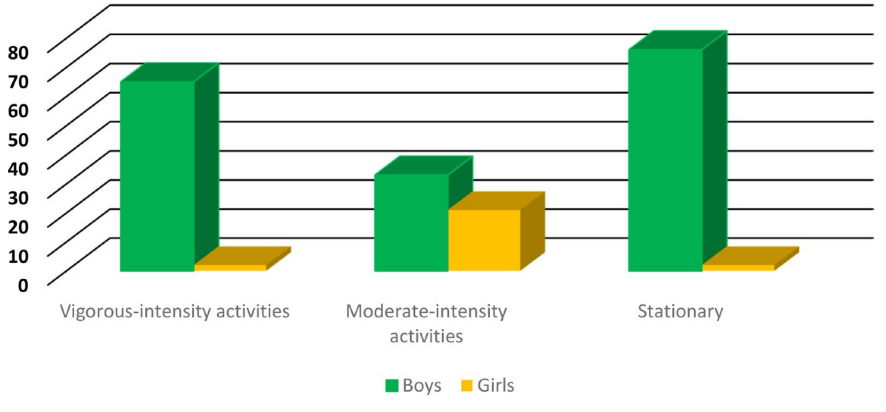

Figure 1. Gender differences in children's physical activity levels.

It was also observed that most third- and fourth-grade boys predominantly participated in medium (comprising five to eight children) or large gender-homogeneous playgroups (comprising nine or more children) because of their predilection for rule-bound team sports (Campbell, Gray, and MacIsaac 2018; Light 2008; Renold 1997; Richards 2012). This is emblematic of the rigid gender zones established in schoolyards. Some of the boys (three grade 3 and four grade 4) zealously policed these gendered boundaries by repudiating cross-gender games and playing exclusively with other boys.

Theodore: 'I play only with boys … girls play silly games.'

Nikolas: 'Girls play silly games.'

In these excerpts (that are not sequential but from different conversations), Theodore and Nikolas drew on the discourse of silliness and contemptuously repudiated girls' games as foolish. By upholding the gender binary of idiocy/sensibility, these boys sustained a gendered division of activities/games into masculine and feminine and constructed the two genders as oppositional categories. Participation in the so-called masculine activities was crucial to the construction of masculinity, as it enabled the boys to delineate their differences from girls and proclaim their allegiance to 'successful' (sensible) masculinity. Tassos's response provides evidence of this:

Tassos: '…Girls cannot play the games we play…because they are frightened…and cannot run.'

Here, we can observe how femininity is constructed around the absence of physicality and sportiness, as the antipode of masculinity (Paechter 2006), which culminates in girls' exclusion from competitive and physically demanding sports (Bhana and Mayeza 2016; Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez 2020a, 2020b).

Through an agential posthumanist lens these examples reveal the significance of playground activities in the constitution of boys' gender subjectivities. We can particularly observe how 'successful' masculinity intra-actively comes into existence in school spacetimematterings through the material-discursive intra-actions of playground activities, other non-human agentic matter (i.e. physicality in the form of speed), boys' bodies and heteronormative discourses. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the absence of physicality and the 'non-human aspects of a location and activities…' intra-act with the girls' bodies and heteronormative discourses to produce 'girly'/heteronormative femininity (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 27).

Conversely, most third- and fourth-grade boys (15 and 13, respectively) sporadically played with girls at school or outside school hours.

Manos: 'We play different games … chasing …'

Petros: 'Sometimes I play volleyball with the girls.'

Costas: 'We play board games…'

It was observed, however, that these boys had devised strategies for safeguarding their masculinity, thereby avoiding being labelled as effeminate, a denigrating characterisation with significant social ramification for boys (i.e. exclusion) (Paechter 2012; Renold 2013; Thornberg 2018). Such methods comprised playing episodically with girls and avoiding activities that were seen as 'silly' or girly games (e.g. dancing, singing). Additionally, these boys would join girls' playgroups in pairs or small groups since individual participation could instantaneously call their masculine status into question (Mayeza 2017).

Nikolas: 'No, I wouldn't play alone with girls…I am not a girl…it would be boring.'

These examples illustrate how the gender composition of playgroups and playground activities/games intra-act with heteronormative discourses to produce a heterosexual embodiment. Thus, these '"practices, doings and actions" … operat[e] as constitutive material forces in producing what is cool (intelligible)' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 28).

Unlike the boys, most third- and fourth-grade girls (15 and 12, respectively) played in small groups (2–4 girls) and were not averse to participating in gender-heterogeneous playgroups, provided that the boys were interested in their games and conformed to the game's rules. For example, all third- and fourth-grade girls played regularly with some boys who seemed interested in their games.

Antigone: 'We play with Achilleas because he likes dancing and singing…'

Athena: '…can't play with boys the games we like…they don't like them…they are silly and just like football…'

These girls drew on the binary of sensible/foolish to delineate the ostensible differences between girls and boys, whereby boys are silly and girls are discursively positioned as sensible, an enduring gender dichotomy which has been highlighted by research on symbolic gender cultures in primary education (Francis 1998). Furthermore, for this group of girls, participation in same-sex playgroups and engagement in sedentary activities were central practices in the construction of a valorised form of femininity. For these girls, playing with the boys was justified in finding a boyfriend.

Antigone: '…sometimes…because I am looking for [a] boyfriend.'

Antigone evoked the boyfriend discourse to legitimise her participation in cross-gender play activities (Renold 2006) and to pledge her support to heterosexuality. This is illustrative of the effects of the 'heterosexual matrix' on children's friendships and playground behaviours as well as the salience of playgrounds as arenas for the performance of heterosexuality. In conclusion, in both schools, most third- and fourth-grade girls embodied a form of femininity, namely, girly femininity, which was discursively constructed around heterosexuality and the absence of physicality/sportiness (Kehily et al. 2002; Mayeza 2018).

The role of football in the performance of masculinity

In both schools, football gained prominence and was the favourite activity for boys. The football matches were characterised by heavy physical contact, intense running, and shouting, while aggressive behaviour (in the form of verbal teasing and taunting others) was not uncommon. Boys' dynamism and determination during the games are illustrative of their passion for football as well as the role of football in the performance of 'successful' masculinity. For instance, boys frequently shouted at each other as a way of praising or reprimanding their teammates.

Andreas: '… run… pass the ball.'

Thanos: '…you lost … don't cry now. '

Christopher: 'Powerful shot …'

In these games, the boys also demonstrated their football skills, speed, and physical or emotional strength. Boys who successfully embodied the concept of the footballer and the aforementioned characteristics (three third- and four fourth-grade boys) assumed a prominent role in the playgrounds and were considered playground leaders by their male peers (Swain 2006). In particular, these boys performed a valorised form of masculinity, namely, 'successful' masculinity, which was discursively constructed around physicality, aggression,

and emotional and/or physical strength (Atencio and Koca 2011; Hickey 2008; Wellard 2009). For example, Theodore, an outstanding 10-year-old footballer, had a preeminent status in the playgrounds and was bestowed with the authority to select who would be excluded or allowed to play.

Theodore: '…I will kick you out; you are not playing with us again…'

Manos: '…Theodore and Nikolas allocate the positions…they know our strengths.'

The football boys were cognisant of their elevated status and frequently exhibited aggressive behaviour (i.e. teasing, yelling, maledictions, ridicule and threats) toward their teammates, as a means of asserting their status in the playgrounds and policing gender binaries (Light 2008; Renold 2013). Theodore, for instance, regularly intimidated his peers and made derogatory comments about their athletic/football prowess when they missed the ball during a cross or when the ball would not find its way into the net.

Theodore: 'You are stupid…how can you miss that …don't play like a girl.'

Theodore: '…You run like a girl.'

This episode reveals the role of speed and football skills in the construction of masculinity (Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez 2020a; Mayeza 2018) and is symptomatic of how femininity is constructed as the absence of masculinity (Paechter 2006). Specifically, through an agential realist prism, we can observe how gender intelligibility emerges through the intra-actions between football skills, speed, heteronormative discourses, and 'other agential parts of the body' (e.g. muscles) (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 28). Furthermore, this episode elucidates how the absence of physicality (in the form of speed and/or football skills) invoked gayness (the discursive) through its intra-actions with heteronormative discourses and the football pitch (the spatial), which are all mutually implicated in the production of gendered meanings (a point we will pick up on later).

Participation in football matches, however, did not guarantee a prominent status in the playgrounds. Thus, most third- and fourth-grade boys (15 and 13, respectively), although they regularly played football, did not assume a leading role in the playgrounds because they did not embody all the characteristics of 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity (e.g. physical/emotional strength, football skills, speed).

Manos: 'I am a central defender…because I can't run very fast.'

Nevertheless, participation in traditionally masculine sports was a way in which they proclaimed their allegiance to heterosexuality. Heterosexuality, therefore, was central to the construction of masculinity, because as long as the boys reaffirmed their heterosexual masculine identity, they were regarded as 'normal' boys and thus reaped the benefits of being boys.

Moreover, central to the maintenance of 'successful' masculine performances was the display of emotional neutrality, in the form of holding back tears when injured (Anderson 2009; Hickey 2008). Failure to do so resulted in boys being scolded for showing weakness and could call a boy's heterosexual identity into question, as crying was equated with being a sissy (Barnes 2012; Renold 2004). Typical to this strategy for policing 'successful' masculinity in the playgrounds is the example of Manos, a third-grade boy who was parodied by his peers for crying and leaving the football pitch after suffering a fall.

Nikolas: 'Don't leave!…it's nothing!…you little girl.'

This example illustrates how some boys safeguarded and policed masculinity by devaluing and pathologising any behaviours that transgressed dominant conceptions of gender,

in an effort to reinforce conformity to a known gender order (Barnes 2012; Mayeza and Bhana 2020a). If we explore this episode in depth, we can observe how Manos becomes a 'girl' through the intra-actions between tears, heteronormative discourses and the girls, which is indicative of how the material (unemotionality) and the spatial (playgrounds) are mutually implicated in the production of a hetero-masculine embodiment (discursive). Hence, it can be argued that football was associated with bodily and behavioural characteristics (i.e. physical and emotional strength, speed, aggression, outstanding football skills) (Anderson 2009; Campbell et al. 2018; Hickey 2008), which coalesced 'with socio-cultural meanings of gender and sexuality' to produce a sanctioned form of 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 28).

Maintaining the association of football with 'successful' masculinity was an onerous task, requiring boys to persistently police its masculine purity by ostracising girls from their matches (Mayeza and Bhana 2020b; Paechter 2010). Specifically, girls' participation in football matches (or other masculine sports), conferred a symbolic significance that imperilled the game's association with 'corporeal masculine ideals' (Swain 2000, 103) and 'presented[ed] an attack on dominant playground masculinities' (Clark and Paechter 2007, 274). Therefore, girls' ostracism upheld the association of boys' rule-bound games with masculinity (Bhana and Mayeza 2016; Martínez-Andrés et al. 2017; Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez 2020b). Common exclusionary strategies included deriding girls' lack of football skills and not allowing them to take part in the matches.

Thanos: 'No we don't want you…you can't play football…you are scared of the ball.'

Thanos and most third- and fourth-grade boys considered the girls to be weak players and regularly derided their lack of sporting dexterity (Barnes 2012).

Christopher: 'No…they are silly… and cry if they get hit by the ball'

Theodore: 'They can't run, and they are afraid of the ball… they are not strong'

Christopher and Theodore drew on discourses of silliness and physical and emotional weakness to validate girls' exclusion from football matches. Specifically, most third- and fourth-grade boys regarded girls as unskilled footballers lacking physical and emotional strength, speed, and stamina (Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez 2020a). Girls' perceived fragility and lack of physicality were 'presented as benchmarks that make them fail in…' football (Mayeza 2017, 487–488).

Although girls sometimes reacted passively (i.e. returned to girls' area) to these exclusionary practices through which boys demonstrated their hegemonic status in the playgrounds, on several occasions, they employed strategies of resistance by interrupting boys' games, reporting them to their teachers, and stealing the ball (Bhana 2005; Prout and James 1997). These strategies were sometimes effective in granting permission to some girls to participate in the matches. Nevertheless, the girls held an inferior footballer status and never fully participated in the games (i.e. the boys frequently refused to pass the ball or positioned them as fullbacks or goalkeepers) (Pawlowski et al. 2014)

Sophie: '…if you don't run like them, they don't pass the ball and ignore you…'

Xenia: 'Most of the times I am the goalkeeper.'

The division of activities into masculine and feminine and the resultant dichotomisation of the playgrounds into gender zones have crucial implications: not only do they preclude cross-gender play, but they also prevent the establishment of cross-gender friendships

among children, which as discussed were regarded as aberrant and resulted in social disapproval (Mayeza 2018).

Gender transgressions in playgrounds: Sporty femininities/tomboy girls

Against this backdrop, a few third- and fourth-grade girls (two and four, respectively) were frequently allowed to participate in football matches. These girls embodied a tomboy identity, or more precisely a 'sporty' femininity, which was a form of 'resistant femininity' in both schools, as it challenged traditional ways of performing gender (Renold 2008; Renold and Allan 2006). For instance, Maria and Medea (two self-professed tomboys) regularly played football with boys.

Maria: 'I play football…and I dislike Barbie dolls…'

Medea: 'I am a tomboy…I run and play football with boys.'

Maria emphatically asserted her antipathy towards Barbie dolls (symbols of normative femininity), in an attempt to distance herself from girly culture, portray herself as different to girly girls (as a tomboy), and repudiate the disempowerment associated with it (Renold and Ringrose 2008). Research has highlighted that 'such rejections are a central aspect of claiming…' a tomboy identity (Paechter 2010, 228). Analogously, Medea categorically warded off the vulnerability associated with the epithet 'girly girl', and in a display of agency positioned herself as a tomboy (Renold 2005). Remarkably, these girls used the English term 'tomboy' to describe themselves, rather than the Greek equivalent 'boyish girl' ('*agorokoritso*'), which is laden with pejorative connotations of female homosexuality, and it is commonly used as an insult for girls who deviate from heterosexual femininity (i.e. embody physical or personality characteristics typical of a boy) (Bouna 2018). Specifically, as Cleopatra explained:

'…boyish girls [unlike tomboys] are not girls…they look like boys…'

The negation of this term, therefore, signifies these girls' conscious effort to construct tomboyism as an intelligible position, ensconced with the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (a point we will pick up on later).

This heterosexual tomboy identity was maintained and performed in school spacetimematterings through participation in vigorous activities, especially football, and the embodiment of characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity, such as physicality.

Medea: 'I like football … you run a lot and must be very fit…'

In addition to being physically adventurous, these girls differentiated themselves from girly girls through their clothing.

Maria: 'I don't wear skirts often…because I can't run or play any games…Sometimes I do, but then we just talk…I prefer running trousers.'

These findings are consistent with those of similar studies, suggesting that the tomboy identity is diametric to girly femininity as it is discursively constructed around physicality, engaging in competitive team sports, and wearing boys' clothes (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Robinson and Davies 2010; Renold 2008; Renold and Allan 2006). Through a posthumanist lens, these extracts also reveal the central role of sartorial elements (i.e. running trousers) and physicality in the construction of 'sporty' femininity/tomboyism. Specifically, we can

observe how the material-agentic force of running trousers intra-acts with girls' somata, playground activities (especially football), the non-human aspect of the playground, and athletic dexterity to re-signify and produce a resistant femininity, namely, 'sporty' femininity/tomboyism.

However, unlike previous research on tomboy identities, the tomboys or sporty girls in this study were not considered masculine/non-heterosexual (e.g. Mayeza 2018; Paechter 2010), for they employed a panoply of strategies to preserve 'their embodied sexed classification as girls' (Renold 2008, 138). Hence, although they frequently played with boys and were athletic, their tomboy/'sporty' femininity performances aligned with the 'heterosexual matrix'. In particularly, these girls upheld their allegiance to heterosexuality by repudiating the pejorative term 'boyish girl', maintaining friend relations with same-sex peers and romantic relations with the opposite sex, while also ensuring that their bodily characteristics (i.e. hair length and fitness level) differentiated them from the boys. Typical of this were Medea's and Xenia's responses:

Medea: 'I am not a boy…I like football and play with boys, but I also play with girls… have long hair and a boyfriend…'

Xenia: 'I am not muscular…'

These examples elucidate how having or actively looking for a boyfriend was crucial to maintaining a heterosexual identity. Notably, these self-identified tomboys drew on the boyfriend discourse to affirm their heterosexual status when their playground activities, attire or physical characteristics (i.e. embodiment of sporting qualities such as speed and football skills) deviated from socio-cultural notions of gender, potentially calling their heterosexuality into question. Moreover, through an agential posthumanist prism, we can also observe the Daedalian material-discursive choreographies between girls' long hair, the playground, the practice of looking for a boyfriend, the absence of muscles, and heteronormative discourses which intra-actively produce a hetero-tomboy embodiment in school spacetimematterings.

Research has demonstrated that the tomboy label is a powerful discursive tool often employed by boys to police gender boundaries in an attempt to delegitimise girls' presence in the playground (Mayeza 2018) and maintain their physical and symbolic domination of the playground space. In this study, however, while the tomboys/sporty girls frequently engaged in competitive sports (i.e. football) and challenged traditional ways of doing girlhood in primary schools, they did not impugn boys' domination of the playground because of their putatively inferior (to boys') athletic skills. Manos's response if typical of this:

Manos: 'Cleopatra plays football with us sometimes…she is better than the rest of the girls…but she is not good.'

Thus, the sporty girls/tomboys, despite being athletic, playing with boys, and being interested in football and other traditionally masculine rule-bound team sports, did not deregulate masculinity or question the discursive entanglement between 'successful' masculinity and physical/athletic superiority. Tomboyism was intra-actively constructed through material-discursive practices as a subject position diametric to girly femininity (a form of resistant femininity) and not in terms of being a boy. Thus, the tomboys, despite subverting girly culture, managed through complex strategies to uphold the ubiquitous hegemonic heterosexual matrix and harmoniously coexisted with other forms of

masculinities in the playgrounds, especially 'successful' masculinity. Consequently, the epithet 'tomboy', contrary to research (Renold 2005), had not acquired a derogatory connotation, but this form of femininity was widely recognised as 'sporty' femininity, attaining an exalted status in the specific school spacetimematterings.

Gender transgressions in playgrounds: Sissy boys

Boys who transgressed dominant ways of performing gender in the playgrounds experienced marginalisation and were subjected to verbal homophobic bullying (Gerouki 2010; Silva, Botelho-Gomes, and Goellner 2012). In particularly, these boys were assigned the epithets sissy (*'floros') or little girl*, derogatory terms used to describe boys who were not interested in rough team-based sports (especially football) and lacked athletic dexterity and physical or emotional strength. Typical of this is Achilleas (aged 10), whose lack of football skills was pathologised by his male peers (Richards 2012; Thornberg 2018).

Theodore: 'He is a girl…he can't play football…'

Nikolas: 'He is a sissy…he can't run or kick the ball.'

Similarly, boys who were not interested in 'masculine' sports were regarded as effeminate, endured marginalisation/stigmatisation, and were subjected to verbal homophobic bullying (called such pejorative names as 'sissy boy' or 'little girl'). This finding reflects findings of the limited research on homophobic bullying in the Hellenic primary schools, postulating that the term 'sissy' (*'floros'*) is a powerful discursive tool systematically used as gender-policing strategy for boys who deviate from orthodox masculine norms (Bouna 2018). From a posthumanist perspective, these examples unravel the material-discursive intra-actions between the absence of materialities such as physicality (in the form of speed) and athletic dexterity with boys' somata and heteronormative discourses through which an unintelligible gender identity (the sissy boy) materialises in school spacetimematterings. Likewise, we can observe how discursive-material intra-actions and non-human agentic matter such as playground activities and space '…shape the constitution of gender and sexual bullying events' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 8).

Although these boys did not acquiesce to bullying and frequently employed resistance strategies (i.e. reporting bullying to their teachers or teaming up with girls and disrupting boys' games by stealing the ball), they were predominantly positioned by their male peers as 'social pariahs' in the playgrounds. The absence of anti-bullying LGBT policies and established anti-bullying interventions and practices in Hellenic schools together with the silencing of sexual diversity in the Hellenic curriculum and teachers' lack of diversity training (FRA 2016; Ioannou 2018) contributed greatly to the stigmatisation and exclusion these students experienced. In particular, scholars have postulate that in Hellenic schools, teachers either did not challenge homophobic language because they reckoned that children 'were too young to understand the content of such vocabulary and that they were merely parroting words they had heard…' (Gerouki 2010, 342) or their interventions were typically ineffective (Athanasiades and Deliyanni- Kouimtzis 2010). For example, Karakiozis et al. (2015) found that a large percentage of students (36.7%) who had experienced bullying felt that their teachers did nothing to abate such phenomena. Remarkably, throughout the observation period, none of the teachers in either school intervened when students used homophobic language. The only effective strategy to avoid derision and

marginalisation was to eschew the company of their male peers and befriend their female classmates. Therefore, these boys forged cross-gender friendships and participated in girls' activities.

Achilleas: '…I only play with girls.'

Manos: 'Achilleas is a girl because he can't run and only plays with girls…[he] likes dancing and singing.'

Their participation in these activities that their male peers regarded as girly/foolish became a vicious circle as it gave rise to increasing homophobic bullying. Analogous to the findings of previous studies, cross-gender friendships in these schools were viewed '…as transgressing normative constructions of masculinity…' and led '…to criticism and rejection' (Mayeza 2018, 490). This is emblematic of the role of the 'heterosexual matrix' in regulating pupils' friendships and playground activities. Moreover, through an agential posthumanist lens, we can see how the sissy boys come to matter through the discursive-material intra-actions between heteronormative discourses, participation in activities such as dancing and singing, and the absence of 'capacities involved in practicing "footy" and friend relations (rather than heterosexual relations) with girls' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 26).

Crucially, the policing of gender boundaries in both school playgrounds was carried out by boys who subscribed to 'successful' masculinity. Hence, it can be hypothesised that these boys engaged in category maintenance work and used homophobic bullying to delineate the boundaries of 'successful' masculinity (Chambers, Van Loon, and Tincknell 2004; Pascoe 2007). Consequently, it is arguable that in both schools, 'successful' masculinity was so deeply ensconced within the 'heterosexual matrix' that the mere existence of any non-heteronormative identities was inconceivable. These findings are in consistent with those reported by research in the UK (Paechter 2012; Renold 2013; Swain 2000), South Africa (Mayeza and Bhana 2020a), and Australia (Bartholomaeus 2012), suggesting that the term sissy is used 'by the children as a strategy for policing not only gendered games but also cross-gender friendships in school' (Mayeza 2018, 489).

Discussion

In both schools, boys dominated the playgrounds (spatially and symbolically) and reaffirmed their gender allegiance through participation in competitive rule-bound team sports. Football, in particular, was a signifier of 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity as it allowed the boys to demonstrate their football skills, fitness, speed, aggression, and physical and emotional strength, qualities around which 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity was discursively constructed in both schools. A more-than-discursive approach to children's playground activities revealed that football was also a significant material force on the players, as through its intra-actions with corporeal materialities (e.g. football skills, muscles), behavioural characteristics (i.e. aggression and emotional strength), heteronormative discourses, and the non-human aspect of location (i.e. football pitch), it produced a hetero-masculine embodiment (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015). However, most boys did not personify all of the aforementioned characteristics of 'successful'/heteronormative masculinity, resulting in a lower status in the playgrounds. Nonetheless, these boys upheld their allegiance to heterosexuality by taking on some 'masculine' qualities (i.e. aggression, muscles, speed, football skills) and, most importantly, by playing with same-sex peers and engaging in competitive team activities traditionally associated with masculinity

(e.g. football). This evidences how the absence of specific corporeal agents intra-acts with boys' somata, heteronormative discourses and the non-human aspect of the playground to produce an alternative, less prestigious hetero-masculine embodiment.

In this context, the absence of somatic materialities (i.e. muscles, speed, football skills, and physical strength) and the lack of interest in so-called 'masculine' sports invoked sissiness/gayness. Since this was an unintelligible subject position, diametrically antithetical to heteronormative masculinity, those who embodied it experienced stigmatisation and marginalisation in the playgrounds. These boys, in particular, were at the bottom of the gender pyramid/taxonomy and were frequently subjected to verbal homophobic bullying (i.e. labelled as effeminate/sissies) and other exclusionary practices, which served the purpose of policing masculinity and heterosexuality. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to the corpus of research on young masculinities and sexual- or gender-based violence by demonstrating how our understanding of bullying can be enhanced through a posthuman performativity lens, which considers a panoply of human and non-human materialities in their intra-action with boys' somata. Additionally, this study's more-than-discursive approach to homophobic bullying has highlighted some of the inadequacies of current anti-bullying school policies internationally, which focus exclusively on censoring offensive language for abating gender-related violence while ignoring the role of a range of human and non-human materialities (e.g. play activities).

Similarly, different performances of femininities co-existed in the playgrounds. Most girls performed 'girly femininity', which was discursively constructed around heterosexuality, compliance, emotionality, and lack of physicality. The other form of femininity, namely, sporty femininity/tomboyism, was performed only by a few girls who refused to conform to ideals of 'girly' femininity and thus negated the disempowerment associated with it. Specifically, this alternative femininity required girls to display athletic dexterity and football skills, play with boys, and participate in rule-bound competitive sports (Renold 2008). Unlike in previous research, the tomboys did not rupture the coercive heterosexual matrix, although their gender performances subverted girly culture. They achieved this by forming romantic relations with boys and friend relations with girls while maintaining a feminine physique (i.e. absence of muscles) and other markers of femininity (e.g. long hair). Barad's (2007) agential realist approach has been particularly useful for unravelling how the corporeal materialities intra-acted with girls' bodies, heteronormative discourses, the non-human aspect of the playground and play activities to produce an intelligible hetero-tomboy subject position in the specific school spacetimematterings. Consequently, by upholding their allegiance to heterosexuality, these girls were accepted as 'sporty' girls by their male and female peers and avoided stigmatisation and marginalisation. Thus, in the specific schools tomboyism was intra-actively constructed through material-discursive practices as a subject position diametric to girly femininity (as a form of resistant femininity), and not in terms of being a boy. This suggests that tomboyism is contingent upon the specific spacetimemattering in which it is produced and in which it operates. The Baradian posthumanist approach to performativity has helped us to map a context-specific type of tomboyism and to rethink and understand the role of a range of materialities, intra-acting agents and even space and time in the constitution and/or resignification of tomboyism as 'sporty' femininity (an intelligible subject position strictly ensconced within the heterosexual matrix). Therefore, echoing other research findings, the results of this study call for a

re-evaluation of the material/discursive dichotomy on the premise that matter is agentic and, matter and discourse are thus co-implicated in the production of meanings.

In conclusion, the study's findings have highlighted that school playgrounds constitute crucial arenas for children's gender performances, as they develop an understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Additionally, playgrounds have been shown to be dangerous locales wherein children actively police gender boundaries; thus, certain forms of femininity and masculinity are facilitated or impeded, giving rise to homophobic bullying (Bartholomaeus 2012; Mayeza and Bhana 2020a). The Baradian posthumanist perspective has offered valuable insights into how bullying phenomena materialise, assisting a revaluation of current anti-bullying and other sporting school policies at the national and international levels. Specifically, a preventative approach to gender and sexual bullying in school settings means that educators play their part in fostering gender-inclusive environments and actively intervening to challenge such behaviours by implementing zero-tolerance policies (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015). Furthermore, educators through their classroom practices need to methodically mitigate the effects of gender-normative discourses on children's understanding of gender and prevent bullying (Kostas 2021). For this, however, policy makers need to organise and offer training for teachers to address homophobic bullying while devising national school curricula that include the topic of gender and sexual diversity. Finally, effective anti-bullying policies should include protected categories of students and ensure that sporting policy practices in education do not '…celebrate the fit, heroic masculine body in physical education to the detriment of other forms of being [a] boy' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 29).

Acknowledgement

Warm thanks to all the girls and boys, teachers and school heads who enabled this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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