

Being 'nice' or being 'normal': girls resisting discourses of 'coolness'

Carrie Paechter and Sheryl Clark
Department of Educational Studies
Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW UK
c.paechter@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper we consider discourses of friendship and belonging mobilised by girls who are not part of the dominant 'cool' group in one English primary school. We explore how, by investing in alternative and, at times, resistant discourses of 'being nice' and 'being normal' these 'non-cool' girls were able to avoid some of the struggles for dominance and related bullying and exclusion found by ourselves and other researchers to be a feature of 'cool girls' groupings. We argue that there are multiple dynamics in girls' lives in which being 'cool' is only sometimes a dominant concern, and that there are some children for whom explicitly positioning themselves outside of the 'cool' group is both resistant and protective. In this paper we focus on two main groupings of intermediate and lower status girls, as well as on one 'wannabe' 'cool girl'. While belonging to a lower status group can bring disadvantages, for the girls we studied there were also benefits.

Introduction

In this paper we consider groups of girls who are not invested in discourses of 'coolness' and consider the effects of this on their status and relationships in school playgrounds. We examine in particular the alternative discourses with which they associate themselves, and the possibilities of resistance mobilised by girls in these various positions. We focus on these girls, who are neither 'cool' nor aspire to be, and the discourses with which they are associated, for two reasons. First, their experiences are relatively, though not exclusively (Reay, 2001; Renold, 2001) undocumented; researchers have tended to focus on the more visible and more powerful groups of children. Second, our research suggests that, while it can bring its own problems (Thompson & Bell, 2011), investing in alternative discourses to that of 'coolness' provides one way through which girls can protect themselves from the sometimes vicious power relations in peer group friendships (George, 2007). Our findings therefore demonstrate some of the ways that girls resist involvement in these power struggles and instead find other ways of understanding themselves in relation to their peers. While 'cool girl' discourses position high status 'coolness' as a centrally important attribute, our research suggests that, for many girls, what matters is that one belongs *somewhere*, and that one has a group of friends on whom one can rely, rather than being part of the highest status group (Søndergaard, 2012).

We discuss case study data collected from one English primary school class. We argue that, contrary to dominant 'cool girl' discourses, not everyone aspires to be in this group. Indeed, alternative discourses of belonging can form part of an active resistance to such assumptions, and give girls who subscribe to them a more peaceful and stress-free school life. Not only did some of the girls

we studied not aspire to coolness, they did not operate their friendships in the competitive and surveillant manner that is seemingly ubiquitous among more dominant groups (Currie, Kelly, & Pomeranz, 2007; George, 2007; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011; Scott, 2002), where leaders constantly generate insecurity about individuals' membership in order to maintain control (George & Browne, 2000; Søndergaard, 2012; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011; Warrington & Younger, 2011). Defining themselves oppositionally to the 'cool girls', these lower status girls explicitly eschewed the exclusionary behaviours so much a feature of the former's group dynamics. Additionally, as we will explain, some of these 'non-cool' groups of girls were largely ignored by the 'cool' girls, who considered them unworthy of notice. While disadvantageous to them in some ways, this permitted lower status girls, most of the time, to carry on their lives relatively comfortably, untroubled by the fights and exclusions of the more dominant.

We have chosen to focus on discourses because they frame how individuals and groups interpret and understand their lives. In doing so, we follow Foucault (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, Mort, & Peters, 2005) in focusing not so much on the text of our participants' utterances but rather on a more overarching understanding of how they conceptualised their lives and friendships within the social world and power relations of the playground (Hook, 2004). In doing so we are able to identify these alternative understandings of how friendship works, and also to map their function as counter-discourses to the dominance of 'coolness'.

Data source and methods

The findings we report here were collected as part of a study of tomboy identities which involved case study data collection in one class in each of two London primary schools. Author spent on average two days a week in each school over two terms, from the start of the final term in Year 5 to the end of the first term in Year 6: the girls were therefore aged between nine and eleven during the research period. The children were observed in class, in the playground and dining hall, and in after school activities, and were interviewed in friendship groups and individually. Data analysis took place using progressively focused coding techniques, in which the analysis of successive periods of data gathering each feeds into subsequent observations and interviews. This progressive approach meant that, as power relations within and between groups of girls arose repeatedly in field notes and interviews, we spent some time explicitly looking at this issue. Because the inter- and intra-group dynamics being analysed here were mainly played out in playground interactions, much of our analysis is based on observational field notes, supported by the interview data. In this paper we focus on girls in one of the two schools, Holly Bankⁱ, where the competitive and hierarchical nature of classroom structures and playground relations made differences and oppositions between the girls' groups especially stark. Within the class, we identified three broad groups of girls, each focused around a different set of discourses associated both with their status positions in the class and their approaches to life and friendship. It included a highly dominant group of 'cool girls', about whom we have written elsewhere (Paechter & Clark, 2007, 2010). In this paper we will concentrate mainly on the rest of the girls in the class, comprising two main

groups and a best-friend pair, plus a single girl, Mia, who aspired to join the 'cool girls' but was given the pariah status of 'wannabe', or 'stalker' by the other children (Goodwin, 2002) (Søndergaard, 2012).

It is important to contextualise these groups within the overall ethos of the school. Holly Bank was a large, almost exclusively middle-class school in which discourses of aspiration and competition pervaded daily life. Staff were proud of its local dominance in sports. The annual cross-country run gave every child in the school an individual placing within their year group, and competitive rankings and personal bests were hotly discussed thereafter. Similarly, children were very aware of their position in classroom hierarchies of academic performance, and many of the children were sitting examinations for competitive entry to selective and private schools. Although ethnically mixed, the ethos was monocultural, with children's varying backgrounds masked by an assumption of white, English Christianity. However, while we believe that this overarching discourse of competition makes it possible for groups such as that of the 'cool girls' to flourish, we want here to draw attention to the continued possibilities for resistance, and the construction of alternative discourses, at least in the social sphere, as evidenced by the activities of the other girls in the class.

Children's social groups are fluid entities, defined differently according to circumstances (Sedano, 2012). However, the groups on which we focus in this paper were openly recognised by members of the class, who gave them names and identified members with some consistency. While the label we have given to one of the three main groupings is our own (those used by children for lower status groups tended to be derogatory), the terms 'cool girls' and 'normal

people' come from the children themselves. Of course these groups were not entirely fixed during the period of study, with boundaries becoming more or less permeable over time. It is also the case that children's social groups define themselves oppositionally, and that this can lead to stronger apparent boundaries than is the case in practice. Both the 'nice girls' and the 'normal people' were explicitly looked down on by the 'cool girls', and distanced themselves from the 'cool girls' in response, while the 'normal people' joined in with the 'cool girls' in treating the 'nice girls' as low-status 'goody-goodies' or 'neeks'. However, the 'normal people' group, despite seeing themselves as clearly distinct from the 'nice girls', did frequently play with them. It must also be borne in mind that the rigid boundaries frequently maintained within school might be absent elsewhere. For example, Lucy, one of the low status 'nice girls' went cycling at the weekend with Chelsea, who was (most of the time) a 'cool girl', their connection being that they were the only two girls in the class allowed out without an adult.

It is not clear to us how girls originally came to be part of the groups to which they belonged when we arrived. The overwhelmingly middle-class intake of the school suggests that social class was not a factor, though habitus may have been (Sedano, 2012): the 'cool girls' were notable in their comparatively high interest in brand-name and designer clothing, and some had highlights in their hair (Pilcher, 2011), whereas the central trio in the 'normal people' group were high achievers. It is also the case that, in a setting in which ethnicity was played down so much that it was almost invisible, two of the 'nice girls' group and one of the intermediate-status best-friend pair were of ethnic minority origin (Melissa and Britney Turkish, Athena Chinese). It is therefore possible (though we have

not evidence one way or the other) that ethnicity was a factor, although not an overriding one: Britney had joined the 'cool girls' by the end of the research period.

The 'normal people' group had at its core a threesome of high achieving, sporty girls: Leafy Blue, Nirvana and Spirit. Their middling status was marked by their role as girls whom 'cool girls' could join when ousted from their preferred group; they were generally welcoming of others and frequently played with middle status boys as well as with the third, lowest status, group of girls. This latter group was referred to by us as the 'nice girls', but described derisively by other children as the 'goody-goodies'. Our name reflected these girls' strong investment in discourses of 'niceness' (Hey, 1997), something that is associated with compliant and co-operative femininity (Kehily, Mac an Ghail, Epstein, & Redman, 2002; Reay, 2001). The group consisted of Maria, Charlotte, Melissa, Athena and Lucy. Two further girls, Monica and Britney, formed a best friend pairing at the start of the research but had separated into very different status groups by the end. Finally, Mia was the lowest status girl in the class and was frequently spoken about in derogatory terms by others (Søndergaard, 2012). At the same time, she was remarkably mobile between groups and omnipresent in power relations. This seems to relate to her status as a conspicuously failing 'wannabe' member of the 'cool girls' group, who might be briefly included on the periphery, used to run messages to other children, and then discarded (Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011)

Although the 'non-cool' groups shared some experiences and characteristics, they were different in various respects, and we will therefore discuss them separately. We start with the lowest status group, the 'nice girls',

before going on to the two middle-status groupings: the 'normal people' and Britney and Monica's best-friend pairing. Finally, we will look at Mia's experience of the pariah status of 'wannabe'. First, however, we will briefly consider what it is to be a 'cool girl'.

Discourses of 'coolness'

A key feature of 'cool girl' status is a strong investment in a discourse that assumes that everyone wants to be part of this group (Currie et al., 2007). This commitment to 'cool girl' discourses associated with competitive friendship relations was borne out in this group's self-description as 'mean girls', following the 2004 film of the same name. It was more or less taken for granted that to be part of the 'cool girls' group required participation in a constant struggle for positioning, both in relation to Kelly, the dominant member of this group, and to each other, in particular through demonstrable group solidarity in the periodic outsting of individual members (Paechter, 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2010). George (George, 2007) argues that girls within such groups are held in thrall to a central dominant girl by the ever-present risk of temporary or permanent exclusion, and their belief that to lose one's place in this supposed elite would consign one to social oblivion. For those girls who lead these groups, or who maintain a position in the inner circle, there are social benefits: they are perceived by teachers and many students as the important and socially most adept members of the class (George, 2007). The price of this, however, is a constant state of mutual surveillance in order to ensure that nothing one says or does transgresses the group's hidden rules (Paechter & Clark, 2010). For those on the periphery, the occasional opportunity to bask in a brief sense of being 'popular' is balanced, or

even outweighed, by the constant striving for belonging and the scorn of those in the inner circle who deride them as socially climbing 'wannabes' (Currie et al., 2007: 30), another term popularised by the film *Mean Girls*.

Being 'nice' and being 'good'

The 'nice girls', Maria, Charlotte, Melissa, Athena and Lucy, could be found together most playtimes, though they sometimes joined in with larger games involving the majority of the class. They exhibited considerable group loyalty and mutual caring, though this was not overtly policed within the group as is sometimes the case with higher status girls (Kehily et al., 2002). This reflected their strong investment in discourses of being 'nice' and being 'good', that is, conforming to school rules and avoiding being in trouble with the teacher (George, 2007; Hey, 1997; Kehily et al., 2002; Reay, 2001). In contrast, they explicitly characterised the behaviour of the 'cool girls' as 'not nice' and eschewed it themselves. In that sense, 'niceness' operated as a form of oppositional counter-discourses to that of 'coolness'. Being 'nice' was particularly associated with loyalty to one's friends and not leaving people out. While the 'cool girls' frequently deliberately isolated one or other of their number, the 'nice girls' went to some trouble to ensure that everyone in their group was always included. For example, there were times when playground games broke down or could not get going because someone refused to play, resulting in negotiations and compromises in order to avoid leaving her alone:

Maria runs off to play with the stilts, leaving Melissa standing there. I ask Melissa why she doesn't go and try it but she says, 'I can't do it so I won't try.' Her friends say, 'come on, give it a try', but she answers no.

Maria comes back and says she won't abandon Melissa...Lucy seems especially frustrated with Melissa's refusal as she wants to play bulldog but Melissa won't do this either and this means they don't have enough people. They try to compromise by telling Melissa they'll play walking bulldog but she still refuses. Out of pity, I agree to play with them so they can have enough numbers (only Lucy, Monica, Charlotte and I play since Maria stays with Melissa). (field notes)

These girls' emphasis on 'niceness' was coupled with a concern for being 'good', that is, well-behaved and not courting trouble in any way. This was noticed both by their teacher and by the other children in the class. Sanuthi Sekera, their class teacher in Year 6, referred in an interview to 'the Melissas, Britneys and Athenas of this world, who never complain and always do the right thing', while Bridget, from the 'cool girls' group' remarked that 'they're very good, unlike the rest of us' (field notes). Both the 'cool girls' and the 'normal people' referred to the 'nice girls' as 'the goody-goodies' and distanced themselves from this overtly good behaviour. However, while for the rest of the class the 'good girl' position was a pariah status (Francis, 2009), for this group it was highly positive. For example, when Author was invited to join the group for Athena's birthday party, and Athena needed to call her mother to check whether it was OK, Melissa suggested that 'Athena tell her mum, 'Author's not naughty and won't be a bad influence'' (field notes). Such a public investment in 'good girl' discourse would not have been volunteered by members of any of the other groups in the class.

Beyond their investment in 'niceness' and 'goodness' discourses, the most salient feature of the group was their lack of self-consciousness about the

unwritten rules that seemed to govern everyone else, and particularly the 'cool girls'. It was not clear whether this was because they were unaware of these, or because they were invested in conformity with school rules and so regarded such minor infringements as inappropriate behaviour. This was especially noticeable with regard to their hair and dress, where they seemed to stand completely outside of the conventions of the other children. For example, while the other girls made subtle or not-so-subtle adjustments to their school uniform, this group did not. Similarly, the 'nice girls' did not seem to be either interested or involved in the constant knowledge-based power struggles taking place in the rest of the class (Paechter & Clark, 2010). This is possibly because their lack of status led others to assume they possessed no useful or important knowledge, but may also have been due to a lack of interest on their part, or, indeed, a conscious resistance to involvement, given their expressed dislike of this behaviour as 'not nice'. While other children were endlessly engaged in the acquisition and exchange of supposedly important forms of knowledge, much of which involved some level of malicious gossip, this group barely participated. Alongside what for others was a constant vying for power and positioning in the hierarchy, trading knowledge to improve one's relative position, the 'nice girls' seemed either to be unconcerned with these power plays, or to understand themselves as so far removed from powerful positions that they did not bother to try.

This commitment to 'niceness' and concomitant lack of interest in dominating others also affected responsibilities given to them by teachers, which they at times ceded without a fight, or even apparently noticing that it was

happening. Here, for example, Lucy makes no attempt to prevent Holly, a 'cool girl' from taking over:

In groups the children choose three rules and then envoys go around the other groups and negotiate the rules they've chosen....When Lucy comes to our group with the rules, Holly reads them out and starts changing them...Lucy doesn't seem to notice how quickly her role was usurped by Holly. (field notes)

This non-engagement in the constant jostling for status extended to a lack of interest in the activities of children for whom it was of paramount importance. The 'nice girls' were notable in that they were the group in the class who were least bothered about the competitive and exclusive antics of the 'cool girls'. It was unclear whether this lack of interest in the intrigues of the 'cool group' was related to their continued involvement in playground games. Certainly they were less likely to see what was going on in the 'cool girls' corner if they were racing around rather than sitting watching, but it is also possible that their lack of investment in these power struggles left them free to play. Unlike the rest of the class, they did not get involved in discussions of who fancied whom (Renold, 2005), and appeared generally to be uninterested in sex-related activities. The other children certainly regarded them as non-sexual, but this may simply reflect their low status; sexual attractiveness and an interest in liaisons were markers of 'coolness', so to ascribe them to this group would have undercut their subordination. While they were aware of what the 'cool group' did, and occasionally watched their disputes from a distance, the 'nice girls' did not join in with these arguments at all. This lack of interest was reciprocal: the 'cool girls' generally ignored the 'nice girls'. This was in stark contrast to the dominant boys'

treatment of the lowest status boys. High status boys spent a good deal of energy and inventiveness bullying and tormenting weaker boys, and appeared to need to be publicly 'on top' of everyone else in the class, including the 'cool girls'.

Being ignored by the 'cool girls' made for a peaceful existence for those in the 'nice' group, though it did require acceptance of their low status position. This latter was partially enabled by their investment in the 'good girls' discourse, which, while derided by other children, was for them a source of solidarity. Indeed, their explicit counter-positioning of themselves as the opposite of the 'cool' girls, whom they saw as both 'not nice' and 'naughty' can be seen as a form of resistance to dominant power relations within the class, as well as a source of relative safety and security. For much of their day, particularly at playtime, they could get on with their own activities unregarded and unmolested. Although the 'cool girls' regarded the 'nice girls' with disdain, they usually left them alone: bullying them was not considered worthwhile. This reflects previous research which suggests that girls' exclusionary practices include the positioning of lower status and pariah children as non-persons who may legitimately be ignored (Svahn & Ewaldsson, 2011). In this regard, the 'nice girls' were in a much more comfortable position than both the 'cool girls', who were constantly vulnerable to isolation and exclusion by other group members, and the low status boys, who were a constant target of the powerful 'cool boys' group.

These 'cool boys' also bullied the 'nice girls', though only when the latter were brought to their attention, usually by teachers. This was one arena when 'nice girl' and 'good girl' discourses became problematic, as they made it much harder for these girls to resist the torments of the 'cool' boys, of whom they were obviously frightened. They were particularly wary of Humphrey, the most

dominant child in the class, who frequently bullied weaker children.

Unfortunately, however, the propensity of these girls to be well behaved, and their investment in 'being nice' and not complaining, led teachers to put them with these difficult and dominant boys in ways that were often highly distressing, leaving the girls vulnerable to sexual and other bullying. Two examples serve to illustrate what could occur. In the first, the children have been learning rugby techniques in single-sex groups of four:

The groups of four then have to form groups of eight and Miss S. puts Humphrey's group (Humphrey, Glazer, Frederick and Owen) with Lucy's group....The girls are uncomfortable and the boys seem to enjoy this and make jokes about pairing with them. Humphrey regularly humiliates Charlotte by moving close to her and calling her 'sexy', and he hints at this now (how he wants to be paired with her). The girls try to shift so that they can stand away from the boys. Glazer moves in close to Athena and when she moves away he shifts to be closer (touching each time). She tries to get away several times but he just stays beside her. (field notes)

In our second example, the class are rehearsing a 'Christmas dance' which has been choreographed by the teacher to involve symbolically romantic movements and be performed in couples. The teacher had deliberately paired the children randomly because she felt that the class was too much divided into separate groups who did not know each other well. However, the result exposed Melissa to being tormented by Humphrey:

The dance movements require the children to face each other, pressing their hands together and making arm motions 'like hearts'.

Whereas Melissa is unhappy to be paired with Humphrey, Humphrey seems to delight in this chance to torment her and moves in close to make her uncomfortable...When Melissa is reluctant to touch Humphrey's hands he calls to the teacher 'Melissa's not co-operating'....Afterwards, Humphrey wipes his hands as though he has cooties. (field notes)

In this example it is clear that Melissa's investment in discourses of 'goodness' make it harder to object to her positioning by the teacher, and, indeed, allows Humphrey to pile on the torment by accusing her of being uncooperative. It is alarming to note that although the teacher later commended Melissa to Author for not complaining about being paired with Humphrey, she seemed to be unaware that Humphrey might have an ulterior motive for his subsequent enthusiasm for dance rehearsals, leaving Melissa in this repeatedly vulnerable position.

Being 'normal'

The trio of Nirvana, Spirit and Leafy Blue, and the best-friend pairing of Britney and Monica formed the core of an intermediate, much more fluid, layer in the hierarchy of the class. Of the five girls, only Britney seemed to have any aspiration to 'coolness', and she did finally join the 'cool girls' group towards the end of the research period, after an acrimonious split with Monica, who, in turn, became one of the 'nice girls'; until then, they largely stuck with each other. In a paired interview, Spirit and Nirvana, clearly aware of class hierarchies, referred to their group as 'the middle-status group', and as 'the normal people'. Reflecting these discourses of 'normality', and the related implication of non-exclusivity, the

group as a whole had relatively open boundaries, and often contained boys. They hung around together talking, joking, and play fighting, as well as playing occasional games involving all but the 'cool' children. Unlike the 'nice girls', all of this in-between group conformed to unwritten norms about clothing, although they were not as invested as the 'cool girls' in designer clothes and make-up. They also spent a fair amount of time discussing romantic liaisons between children in the class, and some of them participated in relationships themselves. They shared with the 'cool girls' the latter's disdain for the 'nice girl' group, referring to them as 'goody goodies' and explicitly distancing themselves from their good behaviour.

Because of this group's fluidity, it had an important function within the overall power relations of the class, by providing a non-stigmatised space to which one could 'drop down' if excluded from the 'cool girls' circle. While a place sitting with the 'cool girls' was clearly a privilege accessed by invitation only, the focus on 'being normal' meant that children could simply join in with this group and be accepted; for example, they were sometimes joined by the 'nice girls' in large group games. Both Chelsea and Joanna, for example, during periods in which they had been excluded from the 'cool' group, sought refuge with these children.

Perhaps because of their position as a group to which excluded 'cool girls' could 'drop down', these middle ranking girls were vulnerable to bullying by the 'cool girls' in a way that the 'nice girls' were not. As a group, they were noticed by the 'cool girls' and this left them exposed to their ridicule and gossip. Britney and Monica, in particular, were terrified of the 'cool girls'; it is possible that this was because Britney, at least, secretly aspired to join them, putting her in the

vulnerable position of being a 'wannabe' (Goodwin, 2002), invested in 'cool girl' discourse but excluded from that group. However, unlike the 'nice girls', these middle-ranking children were also aware of the 'cool girls' methods and resisted them in various ways. This example occurs after Hedgehog (a boy) has called Mia, a 'wannabe cool girl', a 'chav'ⁱⁱ, which the children know is a derogatory term while being unsure of its meaning. Their discussion calls into play a discourse of resistance and derision, as they name Kelly's question as 'spam':

Britney warns the others, 'Mia's talking to Kelly now', and sure enough, Mia comes back to ask Hedgehog what a chav is. Before answering, Chelsea [temporarily ousted from the 'cool girls' group] warns that it's 'a spam from Kelly' ...[...]...They tell me that a 'spam' is a question from Kelly via someone else that is not a legitimate question but simply designed to make fun of the answerer. (field notes)

Unlike Britney and Monica, Nirvana, Spirit and Leafy Blue showed neither fear of the 'cool girls' nor any desire to join them. While perceptive and articulate about the power relations within the class, they appeared happy with their middle-ranking status, and strongly invested in the idea of being 'normal'. This trio was notable for being high achievers who were heavily involved in activities outside of school: both Leafy Blue and Nirvana played musical instruments to a high standard and belonged to local children's orchestras, while Spirit was a keen runner who trained with a local club. Their commitment to activities and interests, as well as friendships, beyond school may have protected them from the need to pursue 'popularity' or 'coolness' within it. This reflects the earlier findings of Gulbrandsen (Gulbrandsen, 2003) that having other personal and

social interests allows girls to dissociate themselves from both heterosexual romance and the requirement to strive for 'popularity'.

Discourses of derision: life as a 'wannabe'

Mia was in an unusual position within the overall groupings and power dynamics of the class, inasmuch as she seemed to occupy a more or less permanent pariah status. This seemed to be related to her position as a publicly known 'wannabe' member of the 'cool girls' group, putting her in a position of constantly having to beg for attention (Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011). This underlined her marginality and led her to be treated as a scapegoat and victim by most of the class. Unlike the other non-'cool' girls, she was strongly invested in 'cool girl' discourse, valuing these girls' position and striving constantly to be one of them. This in turn led them to label her as a 'stalker', as she tried constantly to join them. Her commitment to becoming part of the 'cool girls' group lost her solidarity with the rest of the class, as she did not share their resistant/oppositional positioning. This meant that she was the only girl who was unable to use the 'normal people' group as a place to 'drop down' to in the way others could: she was not trusted not to run straight back to Kelly, taking with her the highly valued commodity that was other children's secrets.

Mia's status as a 'wannabe cool girl' was well known in the class and remarked upon in several interviews. Søndergaard (Søndergaard, 2012) argues that, in a situation in which people are anxious about being socially excluded, this fear is alleviated by contempt for and condemnation of those positioned as Other. This is what seems to have happened to Mia; every other girl was eager to distance themselves from her. While she was an easy target for Kelly and her

friends, she was also used by them to run messages, stirring up trouble between others in the class, as well as herself starting off friction within friendship groups. She was particularly exploited by Kelly, who used her eagerness to be friends both to enhance her own power and as a source of vicious amusement. Mia's lack of loyalty to those outside the 'cool girls' group meant that the other children did not usually defend her. Indeed, it sometimes appeared that she was used as a 'stand-in' for others whom one did not dare to challenge. For example, when everyone laughed at Titanic when he fell over while running, he shouted 'shut up Mia' rather than confronting the rest of the class. Similarly, in conversation, lower status children might move from speaking critically about the powerful Kelly, to discussing how much they disliked Mia, a much safer target.

Overall, Mia's strong investment in 'cool girl' discourse and constant striving to be part of the 'cool girls' group put her in the most problematic position of all the girls in the class. It left her open to exclusion from all sides, because her tendency to take all secrets and disputes to Kelly made her distrusted by the other children (Sedano, 2012). Allowing herself to do more powerful girls' 'dirty work' in bullying or setting up others at Kelly's request meant that she was frequently blamed for causing trouble, while, her relative lack of power meant that other children, even the 'nice girls', felt that they could condemn or reject her with impunity. Her public failure, in the face of public striving, to be accepted by the 'cool girls' clique gave her a pariah status which left her open to ridicule from all sides. While, unlike the 'nice girls', she could at times openly resist and fight back, particularly against the boys, her constant desire to please Kelly, in the face of Kelly's frequent rejection, made her school

life frequently miserable, if occasionally exciting. Taken all together, her experiences suggest that, for a girl, being a 'wannabe', on the extreme fringes of the 'cool group', invested in 'cool girl' discourse but not regarded as 'cool', is a particularly uncomfortable position.

Conclusion

This case study suggests that there are some advantages for young girls in not subscribing to 'cool girl' discourses. By eschewing 'coolness', girls can avoid mutual surveillance, constant competition, and the ever-present possibility of painful, sudden, and frequently inexplicable exclusion (George, 2007; George & Browne, 2000; Paechter & Clark, 2010). At the same time, there are some costs to this position. The 'nice girls' in particular, were aware of their low status, although their investment in 'niceness' as a counter-discourse, including in-group loyalty, was highly valued by them and allowed them to position themselves with some pride as different from (and, indeed, better than) the 'cool girls', whose behaviour they considered to be 'not nice'. Their compliance with school, as well as being derided by the higher status children, also laid them open to being bullied by the dominant boys, as it made it hard for them openly to resist sexual harassment in particular. The 'nice girls' lack of engagement with status competition also meant, at times, that they were unable to take up opportunities made available to them, as was the case when Holly took over Lucy's 'envoy' role as discussed above. Thompson and Bell (2011) note that quiet students in secondary school frequently miss out on opportunities to contribute in class, and that this restricts their ability to be creative or inventive. It is likely that the 'nice girls' investment in discourses of 'niceness' and 'goodness' had a

similarly restricting effect. Nevertheless, the 'nice girls', had a quiet life as long as they could avoid the dominant boys. This was generally possible except when contact was forced upon them by the school staff; at this point they were bullied mercilessly as part of the 'cool boys' overall strategy of dominance. It was particularly distressing to us that so much of this bullying was of a sexual nature, and included unwanted touching as well as physically threatening behaviour.

Intermediately placed girls can also have a reasonably easy time of it as long as they have other things in their lives apart from the social world of school. In our study this appeared to give them sufficient confidence to ignore discourses of 'cool'. Their comfortable positioning of themselves as 'normal people' also kept them out of the most intense competition for status, allowing them greater physical freedom and fewer constraints on their behaviour. While avoiding the pejorative labels of 'neek' or 'goody-goody', the 'normal people' group in particular enjoyed a full social life, which encompassed awareness of the unwritten rules of the playground and, from a safe distance, an insight into, and occasional amusement from, the antics of the 'cool' children.

The least comfortable position seems to be that of 'wannabe', strongly invested in 'cool girl discourse', and aspiring to 'cool girl' status but never really achieving it. However, Mia's situation was exacerbated by the overt nature of her approaches to the 'cool girls' and her vulnerability to their antics. Because she did not make her assault on their group from a position of having a secure friendship elsewhere, she had little to fall back on when things went wrong and few alternatives to continuing to pursue this single goal. By comparison, Britney, who started off as best friends with Monica, had a relatively straightforward transition into the 'cool girls', though at the expense of this former friendship.

Generally, more research is needed into 'non-cool' groups in school. Although previous researchers have suggested that these have pariah status (Francis, 2009; Renold, 2004; Renold & Allan, 2004), our evidence suggests that this does not have to be the case. Although our 'nice girls' were described by higher status girls as 'goody-goodies' and the 'cool girls' referred to them as 'neeks', they did not really experience life as outcasts; this was reserved for the one girl so transparently desperate to join the 'cool girls' that she abandoned other possible friends for a temporary chance of inclusion. Our study suggests that, while it requires acceptance of lower status, and may close down some social and educational opportunities, resisting discourses of 'coolness', and investing instead in 'niceness' or 'normality' has definite advantages. For some girls at least, it leads to a happier school life than is likely to be possible for those constantly striving to be, and remain, 'cool'.

References

- Currie, D. H., Kelly, D. M., & Pomeranz, S. (2007). 'The power to squash people': understanding girls' relational aggression. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 23-37.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M., Mort, F., & Peters, R. (2005). Foucault recalled: interview with Michel Foucault. *New Formations*, 55, 9-22.
- Francis, B. (2009). The role of The Boffin as abject other in gendered performances of school achievement. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 645-669.
- George, R. (2007). *Girls in a Goldfish Bowl: Moral Regulation, Ritual and the Use of Power Amongst Inner City Girls*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

- George, R., & Browne, N. (2000). 'Are you in or are you out?' An exploration of girl friendship groups in the primary phase of schooling. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4(4), 289-300.
- Goodwin, M. H. (2002). Building power asymmetries in girls' interaction. *Discourse and Society*, 13(6), 715-730.
- Gulbrandsen, M. (2003). Peer relations as arenas for gender constructions among teenagers. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 11(1), 113-131.
- Hey, V. (1997). *The Company She Keeps: an ethnography of girls' friendship*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hook, D. (2004). Discourse, materiality, history: Foucault and discourse analysis. *Theory and Psychology*, 11(4), 521-547.
- Kehily, M. J., Mac an Ghail, M., Epstein, D., & Redman, P. (2002). Private girls and public worlds: producing femininities in the primary school. *Discourse*, 23(2), 167-177.
- Paechter, C. (2010). Tomboys and girly-girls: embodied femininities in primary schools. *Discourse*, 31(2), 221-235.
- Paechter, C., & Clark, S. (2007). Learning gender in primary school playgrounds: findings from the Tomboy Identities study. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 15(3), 317-332.
- Paechter, C., & Clark, S. (2010). Schoolgirls and power/knowledge economies: using knowledge to mobilize social power. In C. Jackson, C. Paechter, & E. Renold (Eds.), *Girls and Education 3-16: continuing concerns, new agendas* (pp. 117-128). Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Pilcher, J. (2011). No logo? Children's consumption of fashion. *Childhood*, 18(1), 128-141.
- Read, B., Francis, B., & Skelton, C. (2011). Gender, popularity and notions of in/authenticity amongst 12-13 year old school girls. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(2), 169-183.
- Reay, D. (2001). 'Spice girls', 'nice girls', 'girlies' and 'tomboys': gender discourses, girls' cultures and femininities in the primary classroom. *Gender and Education*, 13(2), 153-166.
- Renold, E. (2001). 'Square-girls', femininity and the negotiation of academic success in the primary school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 27(5), 577-588.
- Renold, E. (2004). 'Other' boys: negotiating non-hegemonic masculinities in the primary school. *Gender and Education*, 16(2), 247-266.
- Renold, E. (2005). *Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities: exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. London: Routledge.
- Renold, E., & Allan, A. (2004). [Bright and beautiful: high-achieving girls, ambivalent femininities and the feminisation of success].
- Scott, K. A. (2002). 'You want to be a girl and not my friend': African-American/Black girls' play activities. *Childhood*, 9(4), 397-414.
- Sedano, L. J. (2012). On the irrelevance of ethnicity in children's organization of their social world. *Childhood*, 19(3), 375-388.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (2012). Bullying and social exclusion anxiety in schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(3), 355-372.
- Svahn, J., & Evaldsson, A.-C. (2011). 'You could just ignore me': situating peer exclusion within the contingencies of girls' everyday interactional practices. *Childhood*, 18(4), 491-508.

- Thompson, G., & Bell, J. (2011). Mired in the shadows: quiet students in secondary schools. *Discourse*, 32(3), 399-413.
- Warrington, M., & Younger, M. (2011). 'Life is a tightrope': reflections on peer group inclusion and exclusion among adolescent girls and boys. *Gender and Education*, 23(2), 153-168.

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant RES-00-22-1032

ⁱ Pseudonyms were chosen for the school and children, in the latter case by the children themselves.

Names therefore do not necessarily correspond with ethnicity, and are sometimes rather silly.

ⁱⁱ 'Chav' is a derogatory term with strong working-class connotations. Given the overwhelmingly middle-class context it is likely that it was being used as a general term of abuse rather than referring to Mia's actual class positioning.