‘We won’t let them keep us quiet ...’
Gendered strategies in the negotiation of power—implications for pupils’ health and school health promotion

KATJA GILLANDER GÅDIN and ANNE HAMMARSTRÖM
Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Umeå University, Sweden

SUMMARY
The aim of this qualitative study was to analyse gendered strategies among pupils in the negotiation of power at school, and to discuss possible implications for health. Twenty-seven single-sex focus group interviews were conducted with pupils from equal opportunity projects. The interviews were analysed using grounded theory. The girls used ‘alliance building’ and ‘resistance’, in order to increase their power, while ‘responsibility taking’ and ‘withdrawal’ could mean maintained subordination. The boys used mastering techniques (various types of abuse, claiming to be the norm, acting-out behaviour, blaming the girls, choosing boys only) in self-interest to maintain their dominance. The girls’ active and democratic actions for increased power could be of significant importance for their health. The boys’ health would benefit if they gave up striving for power over others. School health promotion needs to address the asymmetric and gendered distribution of power between pupils, as well as to challenge the existing gender regime at an institutional level.

Key words: equal opportunity projects; ‘power through’; public health; reconstruction of power relations

INTRODUCTION
Health promotion is a process where people gain increased control over factors that affect their health in everyday life. Health promotion is also a process aiming at equity in health, and this includes development of personal skills (WHO, 1986). According to Antonovsky (Antonovsky, 1991), it is important to identify both obstacles and opportunities for people to enhance their health. A salutogenic perspective on health focuses on the individual’s ability to act and achieve essential goals (Nordenfelt, 1987). Humans are not passive victims in stressful situations. On the contrary, we handle situations in different ways. One way is to master a situation, i.e. behaviour towards problem solving. Another way is adjustment, i.e. the ability of humans to adjust or withstand difficult situations in life (Hirschman, 1970; Halvorsen, 1994).

Schools have been considered as important agents in the construction of gender, through creating institutional definitions of masculinities and femininities (Walkerdine, 1990; Connell, 1987). The extensive research carried out on gender issues in schools shows how discursive practices within education influence the positioning of boys and girls at school, as well as in society more generally (Spender, 1982; Askew and Ross, 1988; Davies, 1989; Käller, 1990; Jones, 1993; Corson, 1997; Paechter, 1998). The construction of gender within schools is an on-going process, where boys and girls use different strategies in their struggle to maintain or gain control and power (Mahony, 1985; Thorne, 1993; Öhrn, 1993; Gulbrandsen, 1994; Gordon, 1996; Francis, 1997).
Awareness of gender inequality, arising from research and state policy initiatives, has resulted in a range of equal opportunity projects in schools, with the aim of reconstructing gendered power relations (Kruse, 1992; Ve, 1992; Berge, 1996; Davies, 1996; Kenway and Willis, 1998).

While extensive pedagogic research has been carried out on gender issues at school, there is a lack of studies linking pupils' health with their gendered situation at school, in spite of the obvious links between power and health. It might be useful to differentiate between three models of power in public health (Hammarström and Ripper, 1999): (i) power as an individual attribute could mean the ability to control others through, e.g. physical strength; (ii) a pluralist structuralist model of power recognizes power as an oppressive force related to, e.g. the gender regime (Connell, 1987), which negatively affects the social distribution of health; (iii) a Foucauldian post-structuralist model of power has redefined power as productive; as an interplay of forces which operates in all relationships and in all directions, from the ‘bottom up’ as well as from above (Foucault, 1980).

Most research on power and health has been performed on individual power, measured as lack of control, which has been shown to be an important ill-health mediating factor among adults at work (Aronsson, 1989) as well as among pupils at school (Hammarström et al., 1988). A high-strain work situation, characterized by low control at work in combination with high psychological demands, has been shown to be related to both illness and disease, e.g. cardiovascular disease, deteriorated sleep, depression and pain (Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Theorell, 1997).

The links between perceived control in a work situation and health have been studied in relation to psychophysiological processes. Low control is associated with degenerative bodily reactions such as increased catecholamine excretion, blood pressure elevation and a low pain threshold. A hypothesis is that low control is associated with an increased vulnerability of the organ systems (Theorell, 1997). Lack of control is connected to reactions such as learned helplessness, anxiety, depression, dejection and somatic problems (Aronsson, 1989).

In a quantitative study we found that among pupils high control in combination with low demand was associated with the best health status in relation to somatic symptoms, stress, tiredness and self-worth (Gillander Gådin and Hammarström, in press).

The aim of this study was threefold: (i) to analyse gendered strategies in the negotiation of power among pupils in equal opportunity classes, as well as the potential of the strategies for reconstruction of gendered power relations; (ii) to discuss the gendered health consequences of the strategies; and (iii) to discuss possible implications of our results for school health promotion.

METHODS

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to explore complex phenomena which are poorly understood. Focus group interviews were used in order to search for common experiences in a social context, growing out of the discussion with other classmates (Patton, 1990). Other reasons for choosing this approach were to diminish the pupils’ subordination in relation to the interviewers, and to make the interviews more enjoyable for the children.

Pupils were recruited from two classes in an industrial community in the northern part of Sweden. The two classes were part of a larger quantitative, longitudinal study (Gillander Gådin and Hammarström, in press). They were followed from the second and fifth grade, respectively, and were interviewed once a year during 5 years, from 1994 until 1998. From grade two until grade six these classes were part of an intensive equality project, aiming at training both girls and boys in crossing the borders of gendered behaviour (Berge, 1996). The reason for selecting classes from equal opportunity projects was to study pupils who were more aware of gendered dominance processes than pupils in general.

Each class was divided into single-sex focus groups, with five–eight participants in each. The interviews were held in separate rooms at school during school time. In total, 29 interviews were held. For this article relevant parts of 27 interviews were used, half of them with boys and half with girls.

Thematically structured interviews were performed, with the authors alternating as active and structuring moderators. For this article the themes ‘strategies for enhanced well-being’ and ‘what does it mean to have influence at school’ were in focus. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed word by word and analysed in accordance with grounded theory (Strauss and
Corbin, 1990). The interviews were read and coded in the computer program ‘OpenCode’. Then the interviews were reread and selectively coded. When the core categories were defined they were recontextualized by both researchers.

To increase the validity, the authors coded some interviews independently. The codes were compared, and the final categories were questioned and discussed before being accepted. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee at Umeå University as being in accordance with ethical standards.

RESULTS

The interviews revealed a picture of an asymmetric distribution of power between the boys and girls in the different classes, with the boys dominating over the girls. The results were sorted into two major categories: (i) the girls’ actions in the negotiation of power in relation to the boys in the class; and (ii) the boys’ mastering techniques in relation to the girls.

The girls’ actions in the negotiation of power

Building alliances

In both classes the girls built alliances with other girls. However, in the older class the girls’ group was united, while in the younger class they were split into smaller groups and thus the collective support within the girls’ group was weaker.

Building alliances with other girls as well as with the teachers in order to feel supported seemed to be a prerequisite for resistance and thus for increased power. Alliances with other girls could protect them from future abuse: ‘I mean, if I protect her, then she will do the same for me later’. Confirming with the girl sitting next to them could give them courage to answer the teachers’ questions and thus risk being teased by the boys.

Alliances with the teachers could increase the girls’ chances to influence the content of a lesson. As the girls felt that their chances of having influence in the class were restricted when the boys were present, they could go and talk with, or ‘lobby’, a teacher before a lesson.

Resistance

When the boys exposed the girls to different mastering techniques in order to gain or maintain control in the class, the girls in both classes resisted the boys’ dominance in different ways. They could yell and shout at the boys or make comments about discrimination. The girls regarded themselves as more verbally competent and used this competence when, e.g. telling boys who were disturbing them to be quiet during the lessons, or in general discussions with the boys.

The girls dared to protest more when they were older, as expressed by the united group of girls in grade 8: ‘We get better and better at it … in the first grade we just gave up. We didn’t dare to disagree then’.

Striving for influence was so important that it was worth the risk of being harassed by the boys. ‘So no one can stop us from having influence. The guys make it more difficult, but they can’t stop it…’

Refusing to be quiet was a way of laying claim to more space in class, mainly used by the older girls. ‘We’ll never let them keep us quiet’ and ‘If we’re quiet we’ll never be able to have any influence’.

The younger girls also gave examples of situations when they resisted the boys, although in a less challenging way. Girls who were disturbed by rowdy boys might say: ‘Do you think you could be more quiet?’

Responsibility taking

In both classes the girls’ actions could be characterized by responsibility taking in relation to the boys. Older girls could feel responsible for the negative atmosphere in the class, as well as for the conflicts with the boys. ‘If we were quieter, maybe the boys would appreciate us more, maybe we would stick together better’. Responsibility taking could make the girls hesitate to fight back: ‘We know what it feels like’. It could even make them excuse the boys’ physical violence: ‘[A boy] is always hitting me really hard and it hurts like hell. But he doesn’t mean to hurt. He’s just sort of joking’.

Responsibility taking could also lead to adjustment to a situation where the girls could read in the boys’ faces what sort of mood they were in, and therefore kept back. The girls knew they had to keep their mouths shut that day and not say anything to that boy, ‘because then you have to pay for it’.

Another way of taking responsibility, more usual in the younger girls, was by agreeing against their will to sit between two rowdy boys, just because they knew it would be quieter in the class.
Withdrawal

One way to avoid the boys’ mastering techniques was to withdraw; a strategy used by girls of all ages. The girls in both classes who had given up protesting against the boys, and who felt lack of support from teachers, could resign themselves to the situation and ‘just sit and take it’. The girls could find themselves a place where they could be alone, as expressed by these girls in the younger class: ‘... and then we go and play football by ourselves, because girls don’t complain. Then the guys wanted to join in, but we didn’t let them because they just make trouble’.

Pretending not to care was a way of avoiding further abuse in all ages: ‘... because then, maybe they don’t think it’s so much fun to tease you’.

Another way of withdrawing was to sit quietly during the lessons. A girl in the sixth grade told us ‘... in the girls’ group I dare to speak. I hardly say anything when the boys are there’.

Even if they withdrew, the girls could get revenge on the boys in their imaginary thoughts.

The boys’ mastering techniques

Abuse

Abusing the girls seemed to be a recurrent phenomenon during school hours. Boys in the older and younger class described three main types of abuse.

- Physical violence included hitting the girls: ‘The guy shows up just like that. If he hasn’t got anything to say then he hits you instead’. Or as expressed by one boy: ‘Hit them until they’re quiet’. The younger boys could also spoil the girls’ games by running into them and pushing them.
- Verbal abuse, e.g. teasing girls who gave a wrong answer to a question during the lessons, started at an early age. The older group of boys told us about spreading lies about girls and making despising comments. The older group of girls told us about a clever and competent girl who had often raised her hand and answered the teachers’ questions when she was younger, but who turned silent during the lessons to avoid humiliating comments from some of the boys.
- Sexual abuse included sexual harassment. The girls told us about situations where the boys called them ‘whore’, but it was the boys who told us about other sexual abuse in the classroom. For example, when a girl in the older class expressed an opinion that the boys thought was wrong, a boy pretended to have sexual intercourse with her from behind.

Getting revenge on girls who protested against being harassed seemed to be an effective way of making them quiet, as expressed in the younger group of girls: ‘It only gets worse if you talk about it with him. Then he goes and tells the other guys, and then you get teased far more’. If the teachers became aware of the abuse and stopped it, the girls could be exposed to revenge later, when the teacher was not present. The girls concluded: ‘You never get away from it’.

Claiming to be the norm

The boys in both classes expressed a general contempt of females. They could also claim that they were the norm and thus had the power in society, while they regarded the girls as subordinated, as expressed by one of the boys: ‘It is the men who have built this society and they are born to rule over it. Women should stay at home by the stove’.

Normative behaviour meant claiming justice of interpretation, e.g. defining the effects of their actions. For instance, when a boy had hit a girl and she told him it was painful, he said: ‘But that couldn’t have hurt!’

Some kinds of behaviour, e.g. being ingratiating, were only acceptable for boys.

Acting-out behaviour

Acting-out behaviour seemed to be an efficient way for the boys of different ages to increase their power. The girls in both classes described how the boys’ behaviour (e.g. slamming the doors, yelling and shouting) influenced them in different ways, e.g. by taking away their teachers’ attention, as the teachers had to spend so much time telling the boys off.

The older boys defended their behaviour in the following way: ‘At least we dare to say what we think. Look ... if they get angry, they just sit quiet. Maybe we start to scream and slam the door. But it’s better to show our feelings than control them. The teacher ought to understand that’. The quotation also illustrates how the boys claimed to be the norm.

Blaming girls

Blaming girls was a strategy used at all ages. If the girls in the younger classes complained that a boy was disturbing them, the boy could blame
them for something else. When the older girls were successful, e.g. got higher marks, the boys accused them of favours due to gender. The girls were said to get higher grades and more benefits just because the teachers liked them better and were more often of the same gender. Lobbying the teacher was more criticized in the older class where the pupils got marks.

Choosing boys only

The boys in both classes used the method of choosing boys only, in order to maintain their dominant position. During sports lessons for instance, boys seemed to pass the ball to other boys most of the time.

During the interviews the boys let each other into the conversation. Was this a common thing to do in class as well? A boy in grade four said: ‘Yes, if [the teacher] asks me the question, I usually say—no, let him speak before me, he put up his hand first’.

Gendered strategies in the negotiation of power

Our results are summarized and further interpreted in Figure 1.

The figure illustrates that the girls seemed to have less space at school compared to the boys. The girls strove for increased space and power in the classroom. Their aim was not to take over the boys’ dominant position but to bring about equal rights between the boys and the girls. The boys were more self-centred; they strove in self-interest to ensure themselves of a dominant position in relation to the girls.

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**Fig. 1:** Gendered strategies for negotiation of power at school.

Some of the girls’ actions (resistance and alliance building) had a potential for increasing their power, and thus for reconstruction of the gendered power relations. On the other hand, the boys’ mastering techniques as well as the girls’ withdrawal and responsibility taking could maintain, and therefore reproduce, the hierarchical and asymmetric pattern of gender relations.

**DISCUSSION**

**The method**

We used different measures in order to ensure the trustworthiness of our results. By having two observers and analysts we reduced the potential bias that comes from one person doing all the interviews as well as the analysis. Face validity and theoretical validity were ensured, as results and substantial categories were recognized and considered as logical by teachers and pupils in this, as well as another equality project. Therefore, we claim that our results could be transferable to similar settings and contexts. As the pupils in our study were part of an equality project, the results are not valid for pupils in other contexts. However, the boys’ dominant behaviour seems to be a general problem for the girls’ situation at school (e.g. Mahony, 1985; Thorne, 1993; Gulbrandsen, 1994; Paechter, 1998).

Ethical questions need to be raised in relation to studies of children. As all pupils participated in the focus groups, the group pressure might have made it difficult to refuse to participate. Therefore, we made sure that those who did not want to speak could remain silent during the focus groups. This was a balancing act, because we also wanted to make sure that shy and less verbal pupils would be able to share their views in the group. Despite our efforts to give everyone a chance to speak, it was obvious that the interviews were dominated by some of the pupils. Thus, when interpreting our results we should be aware that it is mostly the dominant discourses that have been expressed. This was especially obvious in the interviews with the boys, where some of the boys harassed other boys during the interviews. We should be aware of the collective dimensions of masculinity, which means that the dominant forms of masculinity tend to prevail within peer groups (Connell, 1996). Boys, who otherwise are calm and co-operative,
can maintain a violent and aggressive style of behaviour at school.

The focus group method did not enable us to differentiate the strategies used by different individuals within the boys' and girls' groups, e.g. in relation to social background and ethnicity. Thus, our results should not be interpreted as if all boys and all girls acted in the same way.

On our findings
In our qualitative study we have described a number of gendered strategies in the negotiation of power among boys and girls at school and their potential for reconstruction of gendered power relations. As there is a lack of studies on gendered strategies among pupils related to power and health issues, we will first discuss the strategies identified in our study in relation to pedagogic gender research. Thereafter we will discuss possible implications for health, as well as for health promotion.

The strategies identified among the girls in our study have been described in pedagogic gender research. Francis defines six different types of strategies used by girls against the sexism they meet at school (Francis, 1997): (i) telling a teacher; (ii) rebuking the sexist person; (iii) ignoring the sexist person; (iv) arguing for equality; (v) collective resistance; and (vi) demonstration of equality. The fourth and sixth strategies are not found in our study, which could be explained by the different focus of the studies.

Building alliances through supporting each other in girls' groups was a prerequisite for daring to protest against the boys. Equal opportunity projects have been shown to increase the likelihood of girls supporting each other (Kenway and Willis, 1998). Girls need mutual support to deal with harassment from boys (Paechter, 1998), and the most effective way of challenging sexism is through collective resistance (Francis, 1997).

Resistance has also been described in other studies. Girls in classes with equal opportunity projects can be empowered to defend themselves against gender-based harassment (Kruse, 1992; Kenway and Willis, 1998). Also in schools without equal opportunity projects girls can protest against sexual harassment, through, e.g. telling the boys off (Francis, 1997).

Girls seem to be more responsible taking at school compared with boys (Gillander Gådin and Hammarström, in press). Responsibility taking, which in our culture is an important aspect of femininity, may reinforce the hegemonic masculinity among the boys in the class (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997).

Similar strategies to those used by the girls in our study can be found in the literature about coping and stress. Whereas our study revealed a gendered pattern of strategies, formed in a context of asymmetric power relations, studies on coping place their emphasis on personal characteristics and make the power aspect invisible by, e.g. claiming that coping strategies are invariant with respect to gender (Sandler et al., 1994).

Research on equal opportunity projects suggests that boys may react with increased dominance strategies when girls get more space (Kenway, 1996). An Australian study concludes that equality work is challenging for certain masculinities, and that boys adopt strategies in order to reassert their dominant position and control. Kenway found that boys in schools where teaching methods support equal opportunities feel discriminated against, and claim that giving girls more space is against the natural order (Kenway, 1996). This results in mastering strategies among boys, aiming at punishing the girls and taking back the superior position of the male. Action research has shown that it is more difficult to change boys’ dominant behaviour than to support a more assertive style of behaviour among girls (Ve, 1992; Berge, 1996). The possible health effects of the equality project in our study will be analysed in future research.

Studies from schools without gender equal opportunity projects show similar dominant behaviour among the boys. The construction of hegemonic masculinity among boys at school includes sexual harassment of girls (Mahony, 1985; Francis, 1997), taking space and place in the classroom (Gordon, 1996; Paechter, 1998), as well as abuse of girls (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997). Physical violence is a way for boys and men to gain power over women (Bacchi, 1998), and the negative effects on health of sexualized violence are well documented (Schwartz, 1991; Heise, 1993).

Our model of the gendered struggle for power was inspired by Stina Jeffner, who has studied adolescents’ understanding of rape. She analyses how unequal gendered space is created through the conceptions of rape in young heterosexual relations (Jeffner, 1998).

Overall, the main categories for negotiation of power were the same in the older and younger
class. This finding is supported by other studies (Francis, 1997). However, the context in which the strategies were developed differed to some extent between the two classes (e.g. a supportive and united group of girls in the older class). Furthermore, the older class had longer experience of the equal opportunity project.

Implications for health and health promotion

The strategies found in this study were identified in relation to pupils’ negotiation of power. All strategies identified in our study, except for withdrawal and responsibility taking, had a potential for increased power. Our discussion will be restricted to the links between control and health, although there are other possible health consequences of gendered strategies in relation to, e.g. injuries due to physical abuse (Hammarström and Janlert, 1994). Withdrawing and taking responsibility can also have positive effects on health through avoiding abuse.

A Foucauldian and structuralist model of power could have two different gendered implications in relation to our results, which can be illustrated by the two concepts: (i) ‘power through’; and (ii) ‘power over’ (Aronsson, 1989; Kenway and Willis, 1998). The Foucauldian model could be used to describe how the girls strive from below to increase their power through democratic actions in relation to the boys, built on collaboration, consensus and equality. ‘Power through’ is expandable and does not require anyone to lose power. The way in which the boys strive for increased power and dominance over the girls through different mastering techniques could illustrate a structuralist model of power, based on hierarchies and dominance which is not expandable. Power over others may lead to increased individual control and better health for the boys at the top of the hierarchies, but could also have emotional and physical costs, associated with the stress and violence needed to maintain the hierarchies (Connell, 1996). Besides, the mastering techniques might have deteriorating consequences for the pupils that are exposed to them. A more democratic style of behaviour, where the boys negotiate their will and develop a method to increase their control through participation, could be beneficial for their health as well as for the health of other pupils.

As shown in the Introduction, power and control in life are important prerequisites for health. However, few empirical studies have analysed the importance of gendered power for public health. In our quantitative baseline study of the pupil cohort (which these pupils are part of), we found that individual power, measured as control at school, seemed to be more important for the health and self-esteem of girls (Gillander Gådin and Hammarström, in press). There is a need for more research concerning the importance of the different models of gendered power for health.

What are the implications of the gendered strategies identified in our study for health promotion? In school health promotion there is a lack of gender awareness (Oinas, 1999) and also of pupils’ active participation (Kalnins et al., 1992; Hagquist and Starrin, 1997). To be successful, school health programmes should be based on theoretical models combined with links between the curriculum and other health-promoting school actions, as well as professional development for teachers (St Leger, 1999). Our study is one of the first in public health research to combine gender theories and pupil participation, through emphasizing the need to consider gendered strategies for power among pupils in relation to health. A conclusion from our study is that health promotion programmes at school need to address the asymmetric and gendered distribution of power between pupils. The programmes should emphasize the need for teachers to encourage girls’ democratic strategies for increased power, and to find ways of working against hegemonic masculinities and towards more democratic behaviour among boys.

New methods need to be developed, where children’s perspectives are the starting point, but also where children’s health is placed in a broader social context (Kalnins et al., 1992). The results from our study can be useful in the development of health promotion programmes where boys and girls are active participants in democratic decision-making at school. In future research there is a need for the development and evaluation of gender-sensitive school health promotion programmes.

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