This chapter explores the practices of violence performed amongst boys in schools. Whilst most boys are not violent, violent practices performed by some boys serve as a means to privilege men and boys, in relation to women and girls, within the current gender order. Connell (1987, p. 98) has referred to the gender order as the historical set of relations between men and women that construct normalised definitions of masculinity and femininity. Violence is integral to maintaining the current gender order. The normalisation of boys’ capacities for violence, especially against girls and women, and its contribution to a gender order that favours the interests of men and boys have been well documented by feminist literature (see, e.g., Bhana, 2006; Jones, 1985; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Mahony, 1989; Robinson, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). However, it is important to acknowledge that not all men and boys benefit equally from this state of affairs. Boys’ violent practices, and the fear associated with them, also work to shore up the privileges of particular boys (and men). In this chapter there is an exploration of how violence is implicated within anti-schoolwork cultures in ways that can disadvantage working-class boys academically and of how violence within an elite school is used to maintain meritocratic justifications of privilege. However, the chapter also demonstrates the commonalities within these different communities relating to the ways in which homophobic discourses work to privilege heterosexist constructions of masculinity. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the ways in which violence is a presence in the various ways in which many boys ‘survive’ schooling.

The chapter draws on data collected through a number of different research projects conducted in Australia. These projects include an exploration of the implementation of gender and violence programmes in schools; an evaluation of anti-racist strategies adopted in schools; and...
a national study of boys’ educational issues (see, e.g., Lingard et al., 2009; Mills, 2001; Milojevic et al., 2001). The schools from which data are taken include Irish Saints, a small Catholic primary school located in an urban low socioeconomic area; Mountainview, a small rural co-education government high school; Tamville, a large urban high school located in a mid-range socioeconomic area; St Adams, a large Catholic boys’ school located in a low socioeconomic area; and English Queen’s, an elite boys’ private school. In each instance interview data were collected from students, teachers and administrators at the school, alongside classroom and playground observations. Common across these projects was an association between masculinity and violence. In this chapter there is a focus on the interview data collected from students in order to explore the dynamics operating between boys.

Within each of these schools there are, as Paechter (2007) would suggest, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), ‘communities of masculinity practice’. These communities intersect with other communities of gendered practice and shift and adapt to changing times. Thus, men and boys (and indeed girls and women) move in and out of such communities of masculinity practice both within schools and beyond. Within each of these communities various masculinities and femininities are not fixed and are constantly being negotiated, (re)constructed, policed and valorised (see, e.g., Keddie, 2005). Each community confers certain benefits on its members. However, membership of these communities is not automatic. As Bauman (2001) indicates in his work on communities, the notion of a community is not a harmless one; a community can only exist when there are outsiders who are deprived of community benefits. Thus, it often takes significant work to be accepted as part of a community. As Paechter (2007, p. 23) states:

To be accepted as ‘fully masculine’ in a particular social grouping, one must therefore display certain characteristics and behaviours; without this, one is not seen fully as a member of a group. Hence, it is not simply a matter of claiming membership of a particular community of masculinity or femininity; one has to be accepted as a legitimate participant by those who are already members.

In by far the majority of instances, outsiders to the dominant communities of masculine practice operating within schools are girls and women. However, there are particular boys and men who are also denied access to such communities. The communities of masculine practice that exist