The ‘boys in crisis’ discourse is a well established feature of policy debates within British education. This paper aims to contribute to literature on masculine subjectivity in secondary education by offering an examination of how a group of key stage four secondary school boys negotiate and manage their emerging masculine identities through the lens of one of their subject choices—Religious Studies. Numbers opting for Religious Studies have remained heavily skewed towards girls. From a critical perspective, Connell (2000) has shown that subject preferences carry gendered meanings, which has led some commentators within education policy to suggest that Religious Studies is a ‘feminised’ arena.

Drawing from post structuralism and masculinities theory, this paper critically analyses qualitative data from interviews with a group of key stage four boys who had opted for GCSE Religious Studies in contrast to the majority of their male peers. The research site was a co-educational 11-16 comprehensive school in a suburb of a large city in the North West. Using ethnographically orientated methods, data collection took place over a four week period consisting of: classroom observations of lessons; semi-structured group interviews, made up of one female and three male groups, enabling ‘purposive sampling’ (Silverman, 2006) of pupils for individual interviews and individual semi-structured interviews with six boys.

Thematic analysis of the interview data demonstrates that the boys were able to use Religious Studies as a discursive resource constituting themselves as emerging critical subjects through their relationship to existential questions of meaning, purpose and value. In addition the interview data also offers insights into the gendered ontology of young masculine subjects and the paradoxical complexity of these boys’ lives. The boys eluded the reductive categories of the essentialist ‘boys in crisis’ discourse demonstrating reflexive self awareness as they negotiated socially successful identities through their relationship to the dominant masculinising forces of sport, physicality and authority and through their engagement with the educational technology of Religious Studies.

This paper concludes that subjects such as Religious Studies which create spaces for criticality also act to produce progressive masculine subjectivities outside of restrictive gendered norms thus providing a particularly valuable lens through which to interrogate the construction of masculine subjectivities.

References