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Boys, Masculinity and Literacy: The Influence of Notions of Masculinity on Educational Outcomes

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Abstract

The homogenizing and binary categorization of boys and girls in popular and political rhetoric continues in educational contexts. To explore differences in boys' experience at school a recent study examined the influence of disadvantage and related notions of masculinity on literacy outcomes. Specifically, this exploration included 297 surveys and 36 interviews with primary aged students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. While there was an overall tendency for more girls than boys to indicate higher reading achievement, higher reading frequency and higher levels of reading enjoyment these differences were not as significant as expected. While many were indeed doing well in literacy and positioned reading positively within their gendered identity, of concern were some expressions of masculinity that were interpreted as problematic for many boys in very personal and potent ways. For these boys, socioeconomic status was often associated with constraining experiences that interplayed with powerful constructions of masculinity that impacted upon literacy experiences and outcomes. Continued growth in social inequity in many Western societies, including the Mediterranean, makes understanding the influence of socioeconomic status on boys' literacy experiences significant for addressing social change and transforming notions of masculinity to include positive constructions that young boys can aspire to, and value.

Keywords: Masculinity, literacy, reading, disadvantage, educational outcomes

Chicos, Masculinidad y Alfabetización: La influencia de las Nociones de Masculinidad en los Resultados Educativos

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Resumen

La homogeneización de la categorización binaria de los niños y niñas en la retórica política y popular se mantiene aún en los contextos educativos. Con el objetivo de explorar las diferencias de las experiencias de los chicos en la escuela, un estudio reciente examinó la influencia de las desventajas y las nociones relacionadas con la masculinidad en los resultados de lectura y escritura. En concreto, esta exploración incluyó 297 encuestas y 36 entrevistas con estudiantes de educación primaria de un amplio abanico de niveles socioeconómicos. Si bien hubo una tendencia general a que las niñas obtuvieran mejor rendimiento en lectura que los niños, con porcentajes de frecuencia más altos y niveles de disfrute más elevados, estas diferencias no fueron tan importantes como se esperaba. En este sentido, muchos niños estaban teniendo un buen rendimiento en el ámbito de la alfabetización y obteniendo resultados positivos respecto a la lectura considerando su género, el motivo de preocupación real eran algunas de las expresiones de la masculinidad que fueron interpretadas como un problema real de forma personal y poderosa para muchos niños. Para ellos, el nivel socioeconómico se asocia a menudo con experiencias limitadoras que están estrechamente ligadas con potentes construcciones de masculinidad que han tenido un impacto sobre la alfabetización y los resultados educativos. El crecimiento continuo de la desigualdad social en muchas sociedades occidentales, incluyendo el Mediterráneo, hace que la comprensión de la influencia del nivel socioeconómico en las experiencias de alfabetización de los chicos sea significativa para abordar el cambio social y la transformación de las nociones de masculinidad que lleven a construcciones positivas que les permitan tener otras expectativas

Palabras clave: masculinidad, alfabetización, lectura, desventaja, resultados educativos

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Social and economic changes transform constructions of masculinities and contribute to the diversity of contextual notions of masculine identities. Research has established that there is no single masculinity, but rather multiple masculinities, both locally and globally, and that masculinities can and do change (Connell, 2012; Chopra, 2007; Morrell, 1998; Shefer et al., 2007). Although first articulated in Western societies, masculinity research is now being conducted in countries as diverse as Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa and Spain among others (Connell, 2012; Fuller, 2001; Gilmore, 2012; Gutmann, 2002; Kimmel, Hearn & Connell, 2005; Morrell, 1998; Morrell et al., 2009; Sinclair-Webb, 2000). The rapid internationalisation of these studies reflects the international dimension of gender relations (Connell, 2012). Masculinity, as a substructure of gender relations therefore has a global dimension, growing out of the history of imperialism and within the contemporary process of globalisation. Changes occur on a world scale although not always in the same direction or at the same pace (Connell, 2005). While Western countries share similar political, economic and educational trajectories, studies in emerging global economies such as Mexico reveal how the construction of masculinity is influenced by changing economic and political processes at the time (Gutmann, 2002). Increasingly, social factors such as social class and ethnicity are being identified as influential in the constructions of gendered identities with notions of masculinity influencing educational engagement and outcomes (Connolly, 2004, 2006; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Scholes & Nagel, 2012).

Educational outcomes for boys are of concern in Europe (European Commission, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Younger et al., 2005) with gender differences in educational outcomes in areas such as literacy recognized more globally by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2010). There is also growing acknowledgment of the salience of social class on boys experiences at school in terms of endeavours such as literacy and the interactional complexities associated with educational outcomes (Connolly, 2004, 2006; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Mills & Keddie, 2007; OECD, 2010; Scholes, 2010; Scholes & Nagel, 2012). Understandings about the

complexities associated with gender, socioeconomic status and achievement are entering educational inquiry and discussions at the policy level; however, in general implications of these dialogues have not filtered down into schools. There are barriers, as recognition of differences amongst groups of boys is not always evident in schools amongst staff who been uncultured by past generalizations made by educators and policymakers about all boys as a homogenous group (Francis, Skelton & Read, 2010).

Stereotypical images of boys that have been illustrated and reinforced in educational policy and practice are now being questioned with calls for research and practice that consider ‘which boys’ and ‘which girls’ are actually struggling (Australian Council for Education Research, 2010; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Connolly, 2006; European Commission, 2010; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009). Furthermore there is growing impetus to consider the differences amongst boys and how masculinity is performed by different groups of boys with recognition of the interactional influence of schools, particularly in terms of literacy. Acknowledging that notions of masculinity may be diverse and influential in the positioning of educational pursuits in students’ gendered identities is needed to make visible the inflections of boys’ experiences at school. As schools promote social relationships that are gendered in their organisation and practice, boys’ constructions of masculinities are influenced by the dominant school culture together and in opposition to femininities (Connell, 1996; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2001; Mac an Ghail, 1996; Mac and Ghail and Haywood, 2007).

There are inherent dangers in treating girls or boys as single homogeneous groups as issues to do with race and ethnicity, sexuality, poverty and rurality are intertwined (Connolly, 2006; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Scholes, forthcoming; Scholes & Nagel, 2012). Specifically, there is a need to consider how the underperformance of some boys, compared to some girls, is influenced by particular attitudes and actions that boys internalise through their everyday social interactions, and how these experiences contribute enabling and constraining influences on reading attitudes, reading frequency and subsequently reading performance. By deconstructing essentialist accounts of boys’ reading

experiences at school and interpreting students' everyday accounts there can be some measure of understandings of how gendered identities interplay in everyday literacy experiences in diverse and divergent ways.

While social class influences and shapes boys' perspectives and behaviours at school (Connolly, 2004; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Mills & Keddie, 2007; Skelton, 2001) the complexity of this influence and interconnected contextual nature of disadvantage is not always fully understood. While there is greater understanding of multiple masculinities, the influence of disadvantage on notions of masculinity is contextual and requires understandings of hegemony within particular institutional social orders. That is, hegemony is concerned with cultural centrality and authority, involving the broad acceptance of power by those over whom it is exercised (Connell, 2012). It involves relationships among social groups that can for some boys include narrow boundaries policed by peer groups at school. The significance of the contextual social structures is increasingly recognized as interest in notions of masculinity is taking place with an understanding of immediate and broader contexts including the cumulative effects of economic globalisation, multi-modal communication systems, changing work place environments and suggested feminisation of local labour markets.

Changing social contexts

Increasingly, there is focus on the significance of literacy skills as the world becomes more globally oriented. Market deregulation, electronic modes of communication and cultural integration are changing workplace environments and influencing the literacy skills necessary for inclusion. These changes are reflected in the decline in unskilled labour opportunities for boys without qualifications (OECD, 2009; Parsons & Bynner, 1999). Of concern is literature that indicates it is boys from low socio-economic backgrounds who are often marginalised at school and less likely to complete high school with a tendency to underachieve in literacy, particularly reading (ACER, 2010; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000, Connolly, 2006; OCED, 2010). Furthermore, boys are reported to under-perform in literacy, compared to girls, at all levels of socio-economic status, while boys from low socio-economic

backgrounds make up the lowest group (OECD, 2010).

In response to the need to develop more nuanced understandings about boys' literacy experiences at school a study was developed to examine *differences* between boys' attitudes towards reading, including their interpretations of their experiences as readers at school. Children's attitude to reading has been investigated in many studies (see for example Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Love & Hamston, 2004; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Millard, 1997; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004) with findings indicating that attitude affects the level of ability attained by a child through its influence on engagement and practice. Furthermore, gender differences in the experiences of reading have been identified with girls, as a group, indicating more favourable attitudes than boys (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Bunbury, 1995; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Millard, 1997; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). What has not been considered is the multiplicity of masculinities constructed by boys in the classroom, the influence of disadvantage and the different ways particular notions of masculinity influence reading engagement.

This paper reports on a study that examined the interface between boys' and girls' conceptions of reading and differences amongst boys' reading experiences in everyday school spaces. The study focused on boys' experiences reading with an understanding that particular constructions of masculinity are problematic for many male readers who may not epitomize the narrow gender constructions idealized in schools. The study resonates with the work of others who consider some forms of masculinity as problematic, and indeed problematic for many boys themselves who are marginalized, suggesting the need to develop greater understanding about the ways masculinities are constructed among diverse groups of boys (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Connolly, 2004; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002).

The Study

The study was conducted in seven primary schools located within South East Queensland, Australia. Schools were selected to represent each of the four socio-economic categories defined by the state governing authority, Education Queensland, Australia, with the seven participating

schools located within lower, lower to middle, middle to higher and higher socio-economic locations. The aim was to implement a mixed methodological approach to explore broad brush and in-depth ways that girls' and boys' interpreted their enjoyment of a range of experiences including reading. After an initial pilot, a paper and pencil survey was conducted with 297 students including 137 girls and 159 boys ranging in age from eight to ten years. The survey, adapted from the work of others (Love & Hamston, 2004; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995), collected responses on a likert scale, concerning students' attitudes, beliefs and enjoyment of reading and other school related endeavours. Furthermore, information was collected regarding each student's reading frequency, reading level and the socio-economic location of the school community. Factor analysis and subsequent k-means cluster analysis of the survey data indicated six categories of students who responded to the survey in a similar manner. Follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the six clusters with a total of 34 students involved in the interview phase. The interview sampling plan included boys and girls who scored closest to the cluster centres, with the aim of confirming or challenging the cluster solution, while simultaneously developing more textured understandings. More specific details about the survey and interview analysis are now provided.

The Survey

Survey data was coded and analysed implementing Software Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Cronbach's alpha was run to test the reliability of the full scale of survey items and also the subscale scores, determining internal consistency (Francis, 2007; Field, 2005). Cronbach's alpha for items indicated that coefficient reached acceptable levels ($> .7$) in each case. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) of sampling adequacy also indicted the factorability of data with a score of .844 indicating the factor analysis was suitable (Field, 2005). Principal Component Analysis was selected to determine the maximum variance from the data as this method establishes linear components existing within the data (Field, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). K-means clustering refined by Hartigan (1975) was subsequently conducted to determine groups of participants who presented similar profiles. The

table below details the six cluster solution identified. To aid interpretation the differences between the clusters' mean for each variable and the cohort's mean for each variable are considered. This measure is referred to as the standardised mean with a standardised mean greater than 0.5 or less than -.05 considered significant, indicating that the participants in the cluster are, on average, scoring well above or well below the entire sample's mean. In the following table standardised means are presented with standardised means greater than 0.5 or less than -0.5 printed in bold and standardised means greater than 1 or less than -1 underlined. For example in cluster one the standardised mean for 'computers and the internet' is 0.64 indicating that this group is characterised by students who indicated above average enjoyment for this activity.

The table above indicates six distinct groups identified by k-means cluster analysis. This method was implemented as an exploratory data

Table 1

		<i>Clusters Standardized means</i>					
		The Dream Team <i>N = 53</i> <i>f=24,m=29</i>	The Archetypal Commoners <i>N= 52</i> <i>f=30,m=22</i>	The Bored and the Banal <i>N = 29</i> <i>f=8,m=21</i>	The Clandestine Readers <i>N= 60</i> <i>f=17,m=43</i>	The Outsiders <i>N = 64</i> <i>f=38,m=26</i>	The Low Riders <i>N = 38</i> <i>f=20,m=18</i>
Factor 1:							
Computers and internet		.647	.320	<u>-1.604</u>	-.724	.654	-.055
Factor 2: Books and reading		.516	.044	<u>-1.091</u>	.567	-.102	-.609
Factor 3: Social aspects of reading		.549	.297	<u>-1.504</u>	-.689	.698	-.145
Factor 4: Music, drama and non competition		.602	<u>-1.469</u>	.327	.644	.326	-.623
Factor 5: Electronic games		.305	.243	-.180	-.133	.221	-.786
Factor 6: Competition sport		<u>1.129</u>	.164	-.034	.326	-.492	<u>-1.463</u>

Note: N=Number; f=female; m=male

analysis tool. Participants were sorted into groups so that the degree of association between two participants is maximal if they belong to the same group and minimal otherwise (Francis, 2007). Cluster analysis discovered structures in the data and follow up interviews then confirmed this solution.

The interviews

Follow up interviews were conducted one year after the survey when students were approximately nine to eleven years of age. A total of 34 students, from the six cluster grouping, were involved in this phase. The interviews conceptually and explicitly highlighted links to the cluster solution. Furthermore, the interviews added richness to the survey findings, facilitating more in-depth understanding of participants' responses. The aim was to identify defining characteristics within each cluster group, while being cognisant of any emerging themes between and amongst the groupings.

Interview scenarios were included to initiate discussions with students, to assist participants to feel more relaxed and to evoke conversations about the different attitudes and beliefs students may hold about reading. Interviews also included questions pertaining to the survey responses and provided a means of confirming survey data and expanding understandings. Furthermore, from an understanding of literacy as socio-cultural practice (Barton, 2007) interview questions also explored students' interpretations of their peer group culture, interpretations of parental values of reading, and dialogue about the perceptions of societal value of reading in terms of job trajectories.

Names were assigned to the six cluster groups identified for ease of reference. Each group consisted of both boys and girls, although in different percentages. Group names (see Table One) were selected to reflect the clusters characteristics and the dominant language taken up by students during their descriptions and interpretations. These names are not an attempt to homogenize group members or paint groups in a particular light, but rather to facilitate ease of reference while making visible group distinctions.

Findings

Six clusters of students were identified with boys represented in each group. Of interest, The Clandestine Readers included the highest percentage of boys, while The Bored and Banal indicated the lowest percentage. As indicated below the percentage of boys in each cluster grouping ranged from 11.5% to 27%.

- The Dream Team (boys 18%)
- The Archetypal Commoners (boys 14%)
- The Bored and Banal (boys 13%)
- The Clandestine Readers (boys 27%)
- The Outsiders (boys 16.5%)
- The Low Riders (boys 11.5%)

In this section each of the six cluster groupings will be discussed with the characteristics of each group highlighted.

Cluster One students are referred to as The Dream Team and they typically indicated high reading achievement, enthusiasm and enjoyment for the activities discussed and indicated what could be perceived as ideal outcomes. This group of respondents scored well above the overall mean for five of the six factors. That is, they indicated a significantly high level of enjoyment for books and the social aspects of reading in addition to indicating the largest significantly positive mean for competition sport. The Dream Team were avid readers who enjoyed books and tended to be rated highly by their teachers in terms of their reading skills. These students were attending a range of schools in diverse socioeconomic communities and included 53 students consisting of 24 females (45%) and 29 males (55%). Many of the students in this group referred to their “love” of reading and also discussed reading as “fun”. The boys interviewed were very specific about their reading interests offering lengthy and elaborate replies that articulated in detail their preferences for particular reading materials. For this group of boys and girls 45% were exceeding reading requirements and the majority indicated they read daily. Students attended schools in a spread of socioeconomic locations.

Students in Cluster Two are referred to as The Archetypal Commoners as one of the attributes of this group was their average scores. This cluster of respondents scored close to the overall mean for most factors with the exception of a very large negative score for music, drama and non competitive sports. It should be noted that the unstandardised mean for Factor Two, books and reading was relatively high at 1.84 indicating that while these students were allocated scores close to the mean they did express relatively positive responses for this factor. The Archetypal Commoners as a group were similar in size to The Dream Team and included 52 participants attending schools from a range of socioeconomic communities, although a divergence in gender balance was noted with the group comprising 30 females (58%) and 22 male (42%) students. This group was also rated highly by their teachers in terms of their overall capacity to engage in the daily reading requirements of their classroom. Within this group 42% were exceeding reading requirements while the majority indicated they read daily. Again there was a spread of socio-economic locations for schools attended.

Cluster Three is referred to as The Bored and Banal, as one of the distinguishing features of this group was the participants' repeated references to activities as "boring". The repetition of this description could be interpreted as unimaginative and unoriginal and subsequently banal. For example repeated comments included "I don't read anything because some books are boring" (Grant) and "I don't like reading story books because some of them are pretty boring" (Wes) and "the nerdy kids, they like reading" (Wes). The name for this group was selected to represent the repeated language offered by members of this group. Rather than an attempt to homogenize participants, this name was selected to distinguish this group of students and for ease of reference. This group of students also scored significantly below the mean on three factors. That is, they indicated very large negative score for computers and the internet, books and reading, and again for the social aspects of reading. Furthermore, they indicated scores close to the mean for the remaining three factors. This group comprised of 29 students including 8 females (28%) and 21 males (72%) with 41% meeting year requirements. Of significance, this group indicated the highest number struggling or receiving reading support at 17%. Of concern, the majority indicated they hardly ever read. This group was also skewed with 69%

attending low/mid low SES schools with students in this group attending schools in the lowest socio-economic locations of the study. It should be noted however that only 13% of the boys in the total cohort were represented in this group.

Students in Cluster Four are referred to as The Clandestine Readers as participants in this group conveyed a sense of enjoyment about reading while describing a context that was unsupportive of this endeavour. Responses indicated that while this group enjoyed reading they felt compelled to conceal their endeavours. This group of respondents scored significantly above the overall mean for books and reading in addition to music, drama and non competitive sports. They conversely scored significantly below the overall mean for computers and the internet along with the social aspects of reading. That is, they indicated significantly high levels of enjoyment for reading books and significantly low levels for the social aspects of reading. The Clandestine Readers consisted of 60 students comprising of 17 female (28%) and 43 male (72%) students. The majority of participants in this cluster were meeting or exceeding year level requirements for reading according to their teacher and students indicated that the majority read a few times a week. These rates of reading are lower than indicated by students in the first two groups although higher than The Bored and Banal where the majority indicated they hardly ever read. Within this group the majority were meeting reading requirement, read a few times per week and 60% of students attending schools in low/mid low SES.

The Clandestine Readers are significant in a number of ways. First, the group is dominated by boys with 72% of the cluster identified as male. It is interesting to note that while these students indicated a lower frequency of reading than many other students they indicated the highest for the enjoyment of books and reading. The students in this cluster also indicated low levels of enjoyment for the social aspects of reading. Moreover, there appears to be some tension for students within this group as they indicated they personally enjoy books and reading but conveyed lack of the enjoyment for the social aspects, and didn't typically read daily.

Students in Cluster Five are referred to as The Outsiders as this group indicated a significantly high level of enjoyment for the social aspects of reading, typically positioning themselves "outside" the parameters of

the popular group or the “naughty” students who did not enjoy reading. While typically an “outsider” may be positioned outside the group by others, in this case students typically positioned themselves outside the popular peer group during discussions about reading. Furthermore this group is characterised by a significantly high level of enjoyment of the computer and internet. The group included 64 students with 39 females (60%) and 26 males (40%).

The Outsiders were the highest reading achievers with the number of students exceeding year level reading requirements marginally higher than The Dream Team and over half the group indicating they read daily. This group, in contrast to The Clandestine Readers, was characterised by a female majority. This cluster indicated scores close to the mean for four factors with the exception of significantly high scores for Factor One (computers and the internet) and Factor Three (the social aspects of reading). This group was entitled The Outsiders as participants had a tendency to talk about their personal enjoyment of the social aspects of reading, in opposition to their peers’ aversion, placing themselves outside the “popular” peer culture. In addition to their own social positioning “outside” the parameters of the popular group they had a tendency to talk of their binary perception of “naughty” and “good” students, with reading as a designated benchmark. The majority of participants in this group indicated that they read daily. They were also rated highly by their classroom teachers rated as exceeding (46%) and meeting (38%) year level reading requirements. Students attended schools in a range of socio-economic locations.

Students in Cluster Six are referred to as The Low Riders as this cluster of respondents conveyed a sense of ambiguity and lack of enthusiasm for the activities discussed and scored below the overall mean on all scales with significantly low scores indicated on four out of the six factors. Specifically, The Low Riders consisted of 38 students including 20 female (53%) and 18 male (47%) students indicating fairly even gender balance. Teachers indicated that for this group the largest group of students were meeting the year level requirement (42%). More than a third (37%) was exceeding however and a small percentage below (16%) or struggling (5%). Furthermore these students were typically not avid daily readers, with the majority indicating that they read a few times a week. Over 60% of students in this group were

attending schools in lower or lower to middle socio-economic locations.

As noted, within the frame of this study six separate clusters of students were identified with distinct profiles including reading outcomes. The highest achieving groups included the female dominated groups The Outsiders and the more gender balanced clusters The Dream Team and The Archetypal Commoners. The lowest reading achievers included the male dominated groups The Bored and Banal and The Clandestine Readers and the gender balanced cluster The Low Riders. Of note boys were represented in all six groupings. Findings from this study signify a number of interdependent factors influenced students' perceptions about reading and it is postulated that these interpretations contributed to apparent differences in gender performances in reading. Specifically, it is argued that the systematic underperformance of some boys, compared to some girls, is influenced in part, by particular attitudes and actions that boys internalise through their everyday social interactions and that those experiences contribute enabling and constraining influences on reading attitudes, reading frequency and subsequently performance. These findings are considered in the following discussion.

Discussion

Findings indicated six different groups of boys who responded and articulated experiences in distinct ways. The social processes that boys engaged with in their everyday school contexts contributed to the narratives they shared and the constructions of masculinity that they described. As masculine identities are internalised and constructed over a period of time, cultural and social values within socioeconomic communities influence the development of boys' identities and subsequently the positioning of reading. When there is reluctance to read on the part of boys there is an impact upon outcomes as attitudes affect reading ability due to lack of engagement and practice (McKenna et al., 1995; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Reluctance indicates they may be missing out on the cumulative influence that exposure to print has on the accelerated development of reading processes (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Freebody, Maton & Martin, 2008; Maton, 2009; Stanovich, 1986). It is argued that as students have increasingly less exposure to text the gap between skilled and unskilled readers will be

compounded (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997)..

Conversations with participants in this study highlighted that for many students there was a perception of changing identities, typically these descriptions were of the changing nature of the boys in schools who demonstrated increasing anti-reading behaviours. These observations were typically offered by male students, who reportedly are more at risk of narrowing the construction of their identities and positioning perceived feminine pursuits, such as reading, outside the boundaries of sanctioned behaviours (Connell, 1989; Connolly, 2004; Martino, 2001, 2003). The nature of this change is evident in the following comment by Luke:

Because as they grow older [boys] lack concentration and they just, they go a bit strange and they don't think that reading is that important because they don't think it's cool, they don't think its, they don't care about like their vocabulary or anything...they've grown up more and their thoughts are different. Like last year the bad boys were like nicer but this year they've gone worse.

In this study, many boys from low socioeconomic communities talked about the increasing anti-school behaviours that they observed that often included bullying and referred to students as “being mean”. The descriptions often resonated with behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not fixed and evolves over time taking on different forms in different contexts. Currently Western hegemonic masculinity mobilizes around traits such as physical strength, control, assertiveness and competition. Boys from lower socioeconomic communities have been found more likely to exhibit increasingly more anti-school behaviours and demonstrate more resistant to what they perceive as feminine pursuits, such as reading, constructing their identity with an emphasise on physicality (Connolly, 2004). The following excerpts highlight some of the experiences for boys who were all attending schools in low socioeconomic locations. The boys were however members of different groups that included. The Bored and Banal, The Clandestine Readers and The Dream Team.

The Bored and Banal

For the male dominated The Bored and Banal, fewer than ten percent indicated they enjoyed story books with this group indicating the lowest scores for reading outcomes. Significantly, this group included a majority of students attending schools in low or low to middle socioeconomic communities with responses resonating with literature demonstrating that socioeconomic background plays a considerable role in educational outcomes (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Connolly, 2004, 2006; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009). The boys interviewed in this group typically talked of reading as ‘nerdy’ and ‘uncool’, often describing reading experiences as ‘boring’, for example:

- I don’t read anything because some books are boring (Grant)
- I don’t like reading storybooks because some of them are pretty boring because it’s only about little kid’s stuff (Wes)
- ...the nerdy kids, they like reading (Wes)
- People that read too much must have to get the life I reckon (Tim)

Jimmy, a member of The Bored and Banal, offered an explanation of why reading was unpopular in his peer group and said ‘not a lot of boys like it. All of them think it’s boring and rather play other games’. There were also indications that students constructed peer cultures with idealized images of masculinity and femininity attributing particular characteristics to the ‘popular kids’ and influencing the discourses boys took up in school contexts. These attributes included social norms and values indicating the constructions of stratified social orders (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). In a similar manner to findings by Adler, Kless & Adler (1992), many boys in this study attributed boys’ popularity on athletic ability, ‘coolness’, and toughness. This finding also resonates with research by Connelly (2004) who found that boys tended to create a culture of physicality and this form of masculinity was exemplified for boys from lower socioeconomic communities. Findings by Connelly (2004) indicated that disadvantage compounded problematic masculinity. It is significant to note that the majority of boys from ‘The Bored and Banal’ were attending schools located in low and low to middle socioeconomic communities. It became apparent that for many of these boys, reading

was a criteria or benchmark for demarcating ‘uncool’ students with a boy’s commitment to reading and schoolwork a challenge to their masculinity (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). While the boys in this cluster portrayed many of the stereotypical responses to reading indicated in the literature, it should be noted that a small percentage of girls were also members of this cluster, bringing into questioning taken for granted assumptions about girls and their enjoyment of reading.

It has been noted that it is boys from marginalized backgrounds who are more likely to develop anti-school cultures to compensate for their relative lack of success in education in attempts to gain status through the construction of hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connolly, 2006, 2009; Mac an Ghaill, 1996). Findings from this study indicated that boys, more than girls, were more inclined to talk about discourses of anti-school behaviours that they observed in educational contexts with boys from lower socioeconomic communities more inclined to describe physicality such as fighting and issues such as bullying and teasing. For The Bored and Banal there may be high risks and the threat of marginalization for not conforming to the social gender norms of their particular context (Connolly, 2004; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 2000, 2003) suggesting that their reality involves negotiation expectations within school spaces.

The Clandestine Readers

While The Clandestine Readers indicated a lower frequency of reading than the higher achieving groups, these students indicated the highest score for the enjoyment of books and reading. The students in this cluster also indicated low levels of enjoyment for the social aspects of reading. Moreover, there appears to be some tension for these students as they indicated their personally enjoyment for books and reading while conveying lack of the enjoyment for the social aspects. This tension is significant as it could be interpreted that their personal enjoyment for books and reading was constrained by their perceptions of their peer groups’ attitudes, influencing their engagement in this endeavour. Some typical responses concerning reading preferences included responses from Jake and Angus attending schools in low socioeconomic locations:

I like to read Goosebumps, a lot of Goosebumps and just books; Andy Griffiths' books and I like to read the Simpsons magazines and Futurama magazines. (Jake)

Yeah I like reading comics and magazines now, well Mum got four of the Simpsons magazines just for us to read on the way, when we're driving places and I started to like them a lot. (Jake)

Its 'cause I've done, I reckon its 'cause I've done a lot more reading that I've come to liking it. My favourite book I've read it once and its Goosebumps and I'd read it again if I wanted to. And I'm reading other Goosebumps; I want to get the full books in the case, yeah. (Angus)

It became apparent that for these students their everyday school social setting involved peer groups who typically expressed anti-school and anti-reading cultures and that popularity was not associated with doing the right thing at school because 'being like really good or a goody-goody they like aren't that popular'(Angus). It could be assumed that for this group their enjoyment of the social aspects of reading is diminished in some ways due to their perception of the boundaries of behaviour within the dominant peer groups.

Furthermore, there was a collective perception that the dominant peer group expressed explicit aversion to reading evident in participants retelling of their friends comment such as 'oh no, not reading time'. This anti-reading sentiment was rationalized as part of getting older because 'as soon as we started Grade Six stories are like out'. Friends and popularity were deemed important for this group with popularity typically associated with athletic ability and comments suggesting that the popular boys 'would rather go out and do sport and stuff like that then do reading' (Jake). Popularity was also associated with anti-social activities such as 'if you tease they call you popular 'cause they don't want to get teased and if you're strong they don't want to get bashed up, so they try and be friends with ya' (Angus). The popular boys were not portrayed in a positive manner with Angus declaring that 'some of the popular boys they're actually bad.'

There was a tendency to position anti-reading sentiments along with 'bad' behaviour and 'fighting'. During discussions Angus talked about his own behaviour and how in the past he 'wasn't really that nice to

people' and how he used to 'argue and get into a bit of a fight with someone.' He also talked about his belief that when he was engaged in these behaviours he didn't like reading as much. When Angus was asked why he enjoyed reading now, he attributed his change in attitude to the positive experience of coming to know a particular series that he enjoys:

Its 'cause I've done, I reckon its 'cause I've done a lot more reading that I've come to liking it. My favourite book I've read it once and its Goosebumps and I'd read it again if I wanted to. And I'm reading other Goosebumps; I want to get the full books in the case, yeah.
(Angus)

It became apparent that Angus was aware of his behaviour choices and he had changed his positioning of reading. The positive experience of finding a favourite book appears to have been an enabling factor for Angus encouraging him to read and talk about his enjoyment of this endeavour. Previously Angus talked about his belief that reading is associated with better grades and getting the job that he wants. He also talked about not being in the popular group at school as he did not fit in. What became apparent during this research project were the voices of boys who portrayed themselves as the 'odd one out' when discussing reading, describing a sense of marginalization. This would suggest the need for a more sophisticated approach to understanding young male's experiences with recognition of 'othered' boys (Lingard, Martin & Mills, 2009).

The Dream Team

Trent, a member of The Dream Team, was an anomaly and distanced himself from the physicality he described in the playground of his school, situated in a low socioeconomic community. He talked about the physicality that he observed in the playground and how he perceived that the other boys thought they were better than him, describing the way they said "Oh I'm better than you, I've got a gang, I can come and bash you up whenever I like". He also went on to describe some of the fights and how "everyone just gets into it" and claiming the boys fight "whenever they get a chance they go up to the top oval where the teachers don't see them". Trent also remarked "I could smash them

whenever I like” and commented that he “played rugby league and they call me the gentle giant because I don’t really want to hurt anyone but I could smash any boy whenever I like”.

While these stories of male physicality in the playground of low socioeconomic schools is not unexpected, what is surprising is the fact that Trent has navigated away from these constructions of masculinity and is a member of The Dream Team exclaiming “I love reading, I’ll read anything” during the interview even though he believed that the “other boys in the class think it’s gay”. Trent indicated enabling experiences in the school context and had a tendency to relate to his peers who did enjoy reading but who were also outside the dominant peer group. He also talked about how his parents thought reading was important and “wanted him to be an engineer because they think its good money”, indicating the influence of his parents’ value for reading. Enabling interactions at home may provide support for Trent to negotiate his positioning of reading at a school within an anti-reading dominant peer group.

Conclusion

Narratives of students’ experiences indicated that social interactions impacted upon boys’ perceptions of reading along a continuum although there were examples that exemplified polarity. For instance, male members of The Dream Team had a tendency to describe enabling reading experiences indicating positive attitudes towards reading, participating avidly in reading and indicating high reading outcomes. In contrast, members of The Bored and Banal described constraining experiences and were more likely to discuss negative attitudes towards reading, to rarely read and to achieve lower levels of reading success. It is argued that this contrast is constructed as boys’ internalize their interactions, subsequently influencing their attitudes, engagement and outcomes in reading.

There was also evidence that students constructed peer cultures with idealized images of masculinity and femininity attributing particular characteristics to the “popular kids” and influencing discourses boys took up in school contexts. These gender roles are interdependent and one’s sense of masculinity or femininity appears to be based to some extent on attractiveness with popularity and status attribution of

girlfriends and boyfriends in primary playgrounds well documented (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Connoll, 2004; Renold, 2003). Contextual social norms and values indicate the constructions of stratified social orders (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). In a similar manner to findings by Adler, Kless and Adler (1992) many boys in this study attributed boys' popularity to athletic ability, "coolness", and toughness. The outcomes of this study indicate that disadvantage compounds problematic masculinity with the majority of The Bored and Banal and The Clandestine Readers attending schools located in lower and lower to middle socioeconomic communities. It became apparent that for many of these boys reading was a criterion or benchmark for demarcating "uncool" students with a boy's commitment to reading and schoolwork challenging their masculinity (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Of concern, boys from The Clandestine Readers who positively positioned reading within their masculine identity, regardless of an unsupportive dominant peer group, may become further marginalized or conform to the policing of their popular peers.

A noteworthy outcome of this study was the finding that many boys described experiences not accounted for in discourses concerning literacy that view boys through a normative lens without differentiating versions of masculinity (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). This was exemplified in narratives by boys who expressed their "love" of reading novels, how "reading does make me feel good", and expressed intimate imaginative connections with characters sharing that if the main characters are boys "I just imagine them as me". These intimate portrayals of reading journeys challenge literature presenting literacy as a highly gendered activity solely within a binary frame. It could be contended that these positive reading experiences conveyed were from boys marginalized or lower within the hierarchy of masculinity as the link between the collective power of deploying hegemonic heterosexual masculinity at school which enforces anti-school and anti-reading cultures has been well made (Martino, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolla, 2005). Of concern is the invisibility of boys who expressed personal connections with reading, as the pervasive role of normative masculinities in school contexts often polices and silences marginalized voices, providing no spaces for these students within schools (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005).

Also of note, while there was an overall tendency for more girls than boys to indicate higher reading achievement, higher reading frequency and higher levels of reading enjoyment these differences were not as significant as expected. Many boys were indeed doing well in literacy and positioned reading positively within their gendered identity. Of concern however, were some expressions of masculinity that were interpreted as problematic for the boys themselves. For some of these boys, socioeconomic status was associated with constraining experiences that interplayed with powerful constructions of masculinity that impacted upon literacy experiences. Economic disadvantage became visible as a contextual influence and added to the complexity of masculinities constructed. The two groups indicating the lowest reading achievement were the male dominated clusters The Bored and Banal and The Clandestine Readers. These groups included the highest proportion of students attending schools in lower socioeconomic status communities, resonating with literature that contends that it is boys from socioeconomic communities that are the lowest achievers in literacy (ACER, 2010; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; OECD, 2010). While it is argued that “underachievement” of boys at school is strongly classed (Connolly, 2006; Espstein et al., 1998) how socioeconomic status interacts with gender is unclear. Inflections evident in this study imply the need to further investigate *differences* in boys’ experiences at school, the ways that social processes influence engagement with literacy, and how contextual influences exacerbate particular notions of masculinity.

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