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**Boys' experiences as readers in school contexts:
Exploring notions of diversity and difference**

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Abstract

Drawing on findings from a recent doctoral study, this paper examines differences amongst groups of boys and the complexities inherent in understanding the interactional influence of gender and disadvantage on reading achievement. Exploring the diverse nature of students' interpretations of their reading experiences this paper moves beyond broad generalizations about boys and girls, to consider the role of masculinity in boys' investment in, and perceptions of reading. Furthermore, how particular notions of masculinity, associated with disadvantage, are constructed among groups of boys and the influence of these constructions is considered. As part of this study 297 boys and girls took part in a survey, and thirty-four students participated in follow up semi-structured interviews. Cluster analysis indicated six distinct groups of students who presented in a similar manner. Within these six cluster groupings boys and girls were represented although in different ratios. The characteristics of each of these groups will be explored, highlighting differences between students' attitudes, beliefs and experiences. Of significance is the finding that while many males were represented in the lower achieving anti-reading groupings, boys were also well represented in the higher achieving, avidly reading groups, whose members expressed a 'love' of reading. From a social justice perspective, how some expressions of masculinity were interpreted as problematic for many boys, in personal and potent ways, and how these perceptions influenced their reading attitudes, reading frequency reading and subsequently their reading achievement is explored. It is argued, that there is a need to expand our understandings about the role of masculinity in creating and constraining reading experiences for boys at school and further develop understandings of the complex interplay of social class and gender that has the potential to exacerbate poor reading outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Introduction

Writing about the issue of apparent underachievement in literacy of boys, compared to girls, is common in popular, political and educational narrative. Indeed the "boys' agenda is an educational imperative that does not appear to abate (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard et al., 2009; Mills & Keddle, 2007; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Many generalizations about boys' underachievement, however, are not representative of particular groups of boys and focus on narrow constructions of masculinity that perpetuate a binary divide between boys and girls, positioning young males as a homogenous group. In this paper I aim to examine the influence of dominant discourses of masculinity on the systematic underperformance of some groups of boys, compared to those of girls, in reading. The focus is to explore differences between groups of boys from their own personal accounts, allowing the visibility of voices of difference, by providing a space that may not have previously been accounted for. While the systematic underperformance in literacy by some groups of boys has been acknowledged in Australia (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Lo

Bianco & Freebody, 2001; Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2002, 2007) and in other western countries (Connolly, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010) the ways that masculinity may be problematic for some boys and influential in determining educational outcomes has not been fully examined. In response, I will examine young boys' experiences as readers, acknowledging that notions of masculinity may be different for diverse groups of boys and influential in the positioning of reading in gendered identities. Further, while the focus of this paper is on making visible the inflections of boys' experiences in reading, it is acknowledged that girls also have differential experiences interrelated with issues of gender, disadvantage and ethnicity that are not addressed in this paper.

Literacy as social practice

This paper is informed by an understanding of literacy as socio-cultural practice, with reading considered a concept defined by social and communication practices that children engage in their everyday lives (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2005; Hamilton & Barton, 2001; Street, 1995). Further, it is proposed that, as literacy has social meaning, primary aged students make sense of literacy as a social phenomenon and position reading within their identities, which in turn influences their attitudes, actions and their learning (Barton, 2007; Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). While literacy has been referred to as the "...flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communication technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia" (Luke, Freebody & Land, 2000, p. 20) the focus here is specifically on reading literacy. Reading, as a dimension of literacy, is embedded in educational, social and cultural practices and is a significant economic resource for individuals and societies (Barton, 2007; Graff, 2001; Luke, 2004; Street, 1995). Significantly, traditional print reading is currently valued in schools and effective reading skills allow access to education, employment and participation in the emerging global economy. When literacy is considered social practice, boys are considered active participants in reading interactions with a focus on the multiple environmental contexts that directly and indirectly affect literacy experiences. Significantly, there is now recognition of multiple masculinities and the relationships of hegemony and marginalisation among groups of men (Connell, 2005; Connell & Wood, 2005; Mac an Ghail, 2000). To this end, empirical research highlights the social construction of masculinities in specific cultural, instructional and historical contexts (Connell, 2005; Gutmann, 2002; Morrell, 1998). Hegemonic constructions of masculinity have been

considered problematic for some boys at school, and in literacy specifically (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt 2002; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Henderson, 2003; Connolly, 2004; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Younger, Warrington, & Gray, et al., 2005). Increasingly, contextual spaces are being recognized as influential on notions of masculinity boys internalise (Connell, 2005; Connolly, 2004) and interactional in literacy experiences (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Street, 1995). These contextual spaces can be considered within an ecological frame (Barton, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Barton (2007) proposes that an ecological metaphor is useful when considering literacy as social practice as it emphasizes diversity, considering this diversity a virtue and source of strength. An ecological metaphor provides an appropriate way of talking about literacy when the aim is to understand its role within other human activity, including its embeddedness in social life and thought, and its position in history (Barton, 2007). This framework provides a lens for developing adumbrated understandings about the multiplicity and textured nature of students' experiences while contributing to findings about differences. Contextualist theories, such as ecological theories, consider the individual and the context in which they are situated as explicitly linked (Tudge & Hogan, 2005). Significantly, ecological theories also provide a bridge between sociological and psychological conceptions of children and the nature of literacy as human activity, embedding this endeavour in social life, thought, within history and in language and learning (Barton, 2007; Tudge & Hogan, 2005). The psychological conceptions that have influenced public discussions concerning literacy and failing standards focusing on literacy as a set of skills to be measured and monitored have increasingly been critiqued as simplistic (Armstrong, 2006; Barton, 2007).

Increasingly, 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 (Mikulecky & Kirley, 1998; OECD, 2009; Parsons & Bynner, 1999; Stewart & Berry, 1999) and add urgency to the perceived need to address underachievement. 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; OECD, 2010). Further, 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 (ACER, 2010; Collins et al., 2000; Connolly, 2004, 2006; Masters & Foster, 1997; OECD, 2010). In addition, research indicates that social class influences and shapes boys' perspectives and behaviours at school (Connolly, 2006; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Mills & Keddie, 2007; Skelton, 2001). Reading outcomes are currently considered significant for students in western countries, with concern in Australia in response to the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicating Australia was the only high performing country to show a significant decline in reading literacy since PISA 2000 (ACER, 2010; OECD, 2010). The PISA data also indicated that the mean performance for Australian males has significantly declined, while the reading literacy score of students in the lowest socio-economic quartile is significantly lower than that of students in the highest socio-economic quartile (ACER, 2010, OECD, 2010). Also of concern are the findings that regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools with a high average socio-economic background tend to perform better than students enrolled in a school with a low average socio-economic background (OECD, 2010).

Boys' and schooling

The collective perception that males are underachieving has placed boys' education firmly on many Western nations' policy agendas since the early 1990s (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard et al., 2009; Mills, 2003; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Concerns about issues of a "gender gap" in educational achievement appear to be well entrenched in educational discourse and considered an international issue. Discourses evident in government policy, the media and populist literature include "poor boys", "failing schools, failing boys"; and "boys will be boys" (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard et al., 2009). Many responses to this perceived deficit have positioned "boys as victims", ascribing essentialist accounts that perpetuate conventional conceptions of masculinity and education. Such accounts include how boys' natural biological differences are a core feature that place them at odds with traditional schooling (see for example strategies by Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Ballew, 2003), and how these young men have been let down by society, including education (see for example Hoff Sommers, 2000). Essentialist and simplistic strategies include improving boys' literacy through a range of directives addressing conventional masculine stereotypes that assume all boys are lazy, difficult to motivate, competitive and intolerant of inadequate teachers (Lingard et al., 2009).

Encouragingly, there is increasing awareness that there are no “quick-fix” solutions for raising boys’ achievement, particularly in literacy. 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 (Collins et al., 2000; Connolly, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Lingard et al., 2009). As I have argued previously (Scholes, 2010; Scholes & Nagel, 2011), to understand how boys’ position particular school endeavours, and to expand their repertoire of experiences, there is a need to consider diversity and difference. With this consideration foremost, this paper responds to growing impetus to consider the differences amongst boys and how masculinity is constructed and performed by different groups of boys influencing interactions at school particularly in terms of literacy (Alloway et al., 2002; Connolly, 2004; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002; Younger, Warrington, Gray, et al., 2005)

In this paper I have sought to develop greater understanding of boys’ experiences reading and attitudes towards reading at school. Children’s attitude to reading has been investigated in many studies (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Bunbury, 1995; 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 influence on engagement and practice. 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 et al., 1995; Millard, 1997; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Moreover, a national survey of children’s attitudes toward reading in the United States (McKenna et al., 1995) supports the theory that gender affects attitude independent of ability. This finding suggests that differential belief systems in girls and boys contribute to this pattern and that these beliefs may be related to cultural practices.

A more recent study by Logan and Johnston (2009) suggests there are gender differences in the relationship between reading ability, frequency of reading and attitudes. In their study, two hundred and thirty-two 10-year-old children (117 male) completed a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire exploring their reading frequency, attitude to reading, attitude to school, competency beliefs and perceived academic support (Logan & Johnston, 2009). Overall, findings indicated that girls had better reading comprehension, read more frequently and had a

more positive attitude to reading and school, with boys' reading ability associated with their attitude to reading and school. This is consistent with findings by Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, and Foy (2007), who in a comparison of reading literacy in primary schools in 40 countries reported students with positive attitudes to reading have substantially higher average reading achievement than those with lower attitudes towards reading. As this paper elucidates, there are complexities associated with reading attitudes that involve interactional influences of disadvantage and students' identity as readers. To explore these complexities, a recent PhD study was undertaken. This paper draws on data from the broader study that implemented a mixed method approach to examine primary school students' interpretations of their experiences reading. Findings indicated six groups of students who presented in a similar manner. In the following section an overview of the approach is detailed with a subsequent focus on three of the six cluster groupings. While all six clusters groupings are significant, due to the limitations of this medium, and for the purpose of this paper, three will be highlighted. The three cluster groupings were selected as they exemplify differences amongst the groups of boys in this study.

The study

The study implemented a mixed-methods approach to explore both general and specific ways in which boys interpreted their reading experiences. During the collection, analysis and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitatively different ways in which students experienced reading this study explored and considered the multilayered nature of descriptions and the interdependency of contextual influences on students' attitudes and beliefs. One of the main outcomes of this study was the identification of six distinct groups of students who presented group commonalities and between group differences. Boys and girls were represented in these six groups in different ratios.

The broad study involved students who were attending primary school in Year Four and Year Five (8 to 10 year olds) during the survey phase and subsequently in Year Five and Year Six (10 to 12 years olds) during the follow up interview phase. The cohort of students were attending seven schools located in low to high socioeconomic contexts, with the selection of schools ensuring representation within the four socioeconomic categories identified by the governing education department. All school principals, teachers, parents/guardians of students and the participating students, were provided comprehensive information about the nature and purpose of the study and all participants gave written consent. Participants were assured of the

confidentially of the information they shared and their anonymity was protected including the allocation of pseudonyms.

Implementing a mixed method approach this study involved a survey of 297 students (138 girls and 159 boys) and follow up semi-structured interviews with 34 students (11 girls and 23 boys). Initially, a paper and pencil survey collected information from 297 students about their attitudes, beliefs and enjoyment of a range of activities including reading books. Additional information was also collected concerning each student's reading level, reading frequency and the socioeconomic status of the participants' school community. Following analysis, six clusters of students who presented in a similar manner were identified. Representatives from each of these cluster groups then took part in semi-structured interviews to substantiate and further develop survey findings. Findings were then considered within a broad ecological framework. This conceptual framework provided a lens for developing understandings about the multiplicity and interconnected nature of contextual influences on boys' experiences as readers with an aim of making visible any differences amongst boys.

The survey

The survey, informed by current literature and adapted from the work of others (Love & Hamston, 2004; McKenna et al., 1995), collected participants responses on a likert-scale, concerning their attitudes, beliefs and enjoyment of reading and other school related endeavours. For example, participants were asked to indicate if they enjoyed an activity such as reading a book, a lot, a little or not at all. Students were also asked to self report their frequency of reading. The questionnaire was designed for ease of completion requiring little rewriting and including boxes to be ticked. Further, it was constructed for attractiveness for this age group, including smiley faces for activity enjoyment, and sad faces for lack of activity enjoyment.

After piloting the survey the main survey data was collected, 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).

Table 1. Principal Component Analysis - Rotated Component Matrix

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Like competition sport						.874
Like other sport				.623	.352	
Like art		.437		.385		-.332
Like musical instrument				.655		
Like drama				.734		
Like computer	.710					
Like electronic games	.396				.793	
Like internet	.791					
Like fact books		.534	.537			
Like story books		.658	.301			
Like comics and mags		.346				.353
Feel getting book		.786				
Feel starting book		.740				
Feel reading in holidays		.587	.468			
Feel visiting library			.591			
Feel using computer	.798					
Feel using internet	.857					
Feel playing electronic games	.468				.753	
Feel reading to teacher			.725			
Feel reading to friend			.776			
Feel taking reading test			.702			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. a Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

K-means clustering refined by Hartigan (1975) was subsequently conducted to determine groups of participants who presented similar profiles. Table 2 below details the six cluster solution identified. To determine clusters each participant was allocated a score for each of the six factors. These scores were then used to group participants into homogenous groups. K-means cluster analysis, in SPSS, provides a method that produces non-hierarchical groups. The process involves selecting the number of clusters required and defining a cluster “seed point” with each participant’s data set assigned to the cluster with the closest seed point (Francis, 2007). Initially the unstandardized means were calculated and then to aid interpretation the

standardized differences between the clusters" mean for each variable and the cohort's mean for each variable were considered with standardized means greater than 0.5 or less than -.5 considered significant indicating that participants in the cluster are on average scoring well above or well below the entire sample's mean and standardised means greater than 1 or less than -1 highly significant. The standardised means have been presented in Table 2.

Standardised means greater than 0.5 or less than -.05 are 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 for Cluster Four, The Clandestine Readers, the standardised mean for Factor Four (the social aspects of reading) is -0.689 indicating that this group is characterised by students who indicated significantly below the average enjoyment for this factor.

Table 2. Overview of cluster groupings standardized means

	Clusters Standardized means					
	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 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

Table 2 indicates six distinct groups identified by k-means cluster analysis, implemented as an exploratory data 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 semi-structured interviews confirmed the solution.

The Interviews

Individual follow up semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted. A total of 34 students, from the six cluster groupings, were involved in this phase. The interviews, conceptually and explicitly, highlighted links to the cluster solution. Further, 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. These scenarios were adapted from the work of Love & Hamston (2004) that developed scenarios to explore the notion of agency in boys' decisions to pursue specific types of print and electronic based leisure reading. Outcomes from their study developed understandings about boys' choices and how decisions carried immediate pragmatic and social investments contributing to the construction of their masculine identities. Interviews in this study additionally included questions pertaining to participants' survey responses, providing a means of confirming survey data and expanding understandings. Further, from an understanding of literacy as socio-cultural practice (Barton, 2007) interview question 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.

Overview of clusters

Within the frame of this study six separate clusters of students were identified with distinct profiles including reading outcomes. Names were assigned to cluster groups for ease of reference (see Table 2) and included *The Dream Team*, *The Archetypal Commoners*, *The Bored and Banal*, *The Clandestine Readers*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Low Riders*. These titles were selected to reflect the dominant language taken up by students during their descriptions

and interpretations. While not an attempt to homogenize group members, or paint groups in particular light, naming aimed to facilitate ease of reference while making visible group differences. For example, The Bored and Banal were named accordingly, as members used language to repeatedly refer to activities as “boring”, reading as “nerdy” and school as “dull”. The students themselves are not identified as being bored or banal. Further, they conveyed a sense of apathy concerning their experiences reading at school during interviews. The Clandestine Readers, conversely, conveyed a sense of enjoyment about reading while describing a peer group context that was unsupportive of this endeavour. As a consequence, responses indicated that while this group enjoyed reading, they felt compelled to conceal their endeavours; hence the clandestine factor in the title.

The highest achieving groups, in terms of reading outcomes, included the female dominated group 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. Findings from this study signify a number of interdependent factors were influential in these outcomes including peer group cultures and the socio-economic status of the school community. It is also proposed that students’ interpretations of their experiences contributed to apparent differences in gender performances in reading. Within the context of this paper, three groups will be discussed, with a general summary offered to highlight a number of differences identified. The aim, in this paper, is to begin to explore some of the differences identified and to open up further discussion about notions of diversity.

The Dream Team

The Dream Team consisted of 53 students (24 females and 29 males) attending a fairly even spread of schools in diverse socioeconomic communities. These students were avid readers (64% read daily) who enjoyed books and tended to be rated highly by their teachers in terms of their reading skills (45% exceeding year requirements). Findings signified that these students indicated significantly high levels of enjoyment for Factor 1 (computers and internet), Factor 2 (books and reading), Factor 3 (social aspects of reading), Factor 4 (music, drama and non competition sport) and the highest score of all clusters for Factor 6 (competition sport). Moreover, his group was the only group to score significantly high on five factors. It is notable that this cluster included 18% of the male cohort and typically expressed positive attitudes towards reading expressing enthusiasm and enjoyment in contrast to the negative attitudes of

boys reported in previous studies (see Connolly, 2004; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2001, 2003, Millard, 1997; Woollcott, 2001).

During discussions students referred to their enjoyment of a range of reading genres including magazines, comics and story books. There were many remarks that conveyed the student's enthusiasm and enjoyment for reading such as Trent's succinct comment when he declared "I love reading. I'll read anything, comics, books, anything if I can get my hands on it" (CL1 5). Many of the students in this group referred to their "love" of reading and also discussed reading as "fun", for example: -

And I just like made up stories 'cause they're fun to read. (CL1 6, Mitch)

I just do it [reading] 'cause it's kind of fun sometimes. (CL1 2, Tiana)

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 example:-

I like story books a lot because I've been reading a series called Rowan of Rin, that's an adventure book. Its adventurous, it's got like, you have to think what you do before you do it. (CL1 3, Jeff)

I do read novels 'cause they're pretty good...like with lots of animals in them and stuff. I like reading a storybook better than any of the others (facts, comics, magazines). Story books are more made up than comics and magazines and fact books because magazines can have facts in them, and comics possibly could have facts in them. (CL1 6, Mitch)

I like reading a storybook better than any of the others [facts, comics, magazines]. Story books are more made up than comics and magazines and fact books because magazines can have facts in them, and comics possibly could have facts in them. And I just like made up stories 'cause they're fun to read...I have read Spiderwick No. 1, Spiderwick No. 2, Spiderwick No. 3 and Spiderwick No. 4 and Spiderwick No. 5. I've finished the Spiderwick series and right now I'm reading the Tiansheng Tigers. (CL1 4, Tom)

The cluster solution indicated that the students in this group would have positive attitudes towards books and talk about high levels of enjoyment for reading with the resulting interviews supporting this proposition. It is interesting to note the high levels of enjoyment for books and reading expressed by boys in this group with a preference for story books expressed during the interviews. These positive attitudes towards reading are in contrast to those often reported in the literature, proposing that subject choices reflect a binary divide between boys and girls, with traditionally masculine subjects including the sciences, technology and business studies, and

feminine subjects dominated by the humanities (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994), with literacy highlighted by boys in many studies as a feminised subject (Martino, 2001, 2003; McKenna, 1994; Millard, 1997).

There was also a high level of personal enjoyment of the social aspects of reading expressed. Importantly, these participants also contended that members of their peer group enjoyed reading with congruence between personal enjoyment of reading and perception of their “popular peers” sanctioned endeavours. As the ongoing construction and presentation of self within peer cultures is not stable, it is subject to daily interactions (Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011). These interactions involve perceptions of idealized images of masculinity and femininity that attribute particular characteristics to the “popular kids”, in turn influencing discourses taken up in school contexts. Attributes include social norms and values indicating the constructions of stratified social orders (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992; Connolly, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Pratt & George, 2005). It is these social orders that are influenced by a boy’s perceived popularity and attributes such as “doing” heterosexuality, athletic ability, “coolness”, and “toughness” (Adler et al, 1992; Pratt & George, 2005). For many boys, reading becomes a criterion for benchmarking or demarcating “uncool” students with a boy’s commitment to reading and schoolwork challenging his masculinity (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2003).

The Bored and Banal

The Bored and Banal were a male dominated group of 29 students (8 female, 21 males) who indicated significantly negative scores for Factor 1 (computer and the internet), Factor 2 (books and reading) and Factor 3 (the social aspects of reading). Follow up interviews supported the cluster solution indicating low levels of enjoyment for these activities and highlighting this groups resounding reference to activities as “boring”. The majority (69%) of these students were attending schools located in lower and middle to lower socioeconomic locations. The high percentage of students from lower socioeconomic communities is significant, as much of the literature demonstrates that socioeconomic background plays a considerable role in educational outcomes (ACER, 2010; Collins et al., 2000; Connolly, 2004, 2006; Lingard et al., 2009, OECD, 2010). Findings established there were a range of reading abilities within this group although the cluster was defined by the smallest number of students exceeding year level reading requirements (21%) and the largest number of students identified as struggling with year level

requirements or receiving support (17%). In addition, this group indicated the lowest frequency of reading with 41% indicating they hardly ever read.

It is significant that only 13% of the total cohort of boys in the study were represented in this group, as it is the attitudes reported by members of this cluster that resonates with much of the literature advocating boys' perception of reading as feminine and outside the boundaries of sanctioned pursuits (see Connolly, 2004; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2001, 2003, Millard, 1997; Woollcott, 2001). The Bored and Banal responded in the least positive manner of all clusters in terms of their enjoyment of reading. The subsequent interview comments illustrate and support the cluster solution in this case with student commentary quite negative and again containing references to the activity as "boring" and "nerdy", for example:-

...I don't read anything because some books are boring (CL3 3, Grant)

I don't like reading storybooks because some of them are pretty boring because it's only about little kid's stuff (CL3 4, Wes)

...the nerdy kids, they like reading (CL3 4, Wes)

People that read to much must have to get the life I reckon. (CL3 1, Tim)

The comments made by boys interviewed in this group collectively portrayed a negative attitude towards reading and during discussions participants talked about how they would rather be outside or doing other things, resonating with literature that implies many boys consider reading sedentary and potentially at odds with the desirable ways of being male (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2001; Millard, 1997). The significant difference in this study is that this group of students make up the smallest group in contrast to much of the literature that tends to homogenize boys as a narrowly defined stereotypical group (for example, Frater, 1997; Gurian, 2001).

While collectively, boys in this cluster are typical examples of masculine readers portrayed in the media and much literature, it should be noted that 27% of this group consisted of girls who indicated similarly negative responses on their survey. Moreover, while this group is dominated by boys, the presence of girls highlights the need to consider similarities in boys and girls negative positioning of reading and perceived negative experiences with reading. The small size of this group also indicates the need to further consider the diversity of boys in schools and the risks associated with homogenizing understandings of male reading behaviours.

Comments, during interviews, placed an importance on physicality that had not been noted by members of The Dream Team, and indicated that physicality appeared to be a valued feature of masculinity within these students' school spaces. These comments supported findings by others who have described how physicality and fighting are often associated with the construction of masculinity in lower socioeconomic communities (Connolly, 2004; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Skelton, 2001). During interview discussions, many boys talked about the increasing anti-school behaviours that they observed including bullying and referred to popular students as "being mean".

The Clandestine Readers

The Clandestine Readers consisted of 60 students (17 females and 43 males). This cluster of respondents indicated the highest positive scores of all clusters for Factor 2 (books and reading) and Factor 4 (music, drama and non competitive sports). Conversely, they also presented significantly negative scores for Factor 1 (computer and the internet) and Factor 3 (social aspects of reading). Moreover, scores for the social aspects of reading were the second lowest, with The Bored and Banal indicating the lowest score for this factor. Of interest, in this paper, are tensions between the considerably high score for Factor 2 (books and reading) and notably low score for Factor 3 (social aspects of reading). Further, over half (60%) were attending schools located in lower and middle to lower socioeconomic communities and included a range of reading abilities. To be specific, only a quarter of students were reported to be exceeding year level requirements (23%) for reading, far less than The Dream Team (45% exceeding reading requirements). Students in this cluster reported that largest number read a few times a week (33%), not as avidly as The Dream Team, although more frequently than The Bored and Banal. Of note, this cluster accounted for 27% of the total cohort of males in the study.

Boys in this cluster tended to describe their "love" of novels, magazine and non fiction, often describing experiences with reading material that have traditionally held less value in educational settings such as shooting magazines, cook books and comics. In the following example Jett talks about the types of books he enjoys and conveyed a sense of excitement to the researcher at the time as he talked about particular series and authors he enjoyed:-

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. 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. (CL4 5, Jett)

Jett then commented about the influence of his mother and his teacher on his reading behaviours making it apparent that he valued these adult interactions:-

Yeah mum gets me some things but mostly because last year our teacher would read these "Just" books like "Just Disgusting" and stuff and I started to like them so I bought most of them and read them. And then there was Unbelievable I think I got out , oh it was "Unreal" I got out of the library and I like it so I got more of the series and yeah started to really like it. (CL4 5, Jett)

Mum mostly [thinks reading is important], yeah mum, she says it helps your brain to attune or something so, yeah....Yeah she encourages me a bit, so that's why I started reading a lot probably 'cause she said, "oh just read this one book to see if you like it, if you don't like it then you don't have to read it," but I like it so... (CL4 5, Jett)

The above indicate that Jett enjoys reading a range of genres including academically sanctioned novels and magazines that traditionally carry less status in educational contexts. It is apparent that he seeks out reading material that appeals to him and is significantly influenced by adult role models. The high level of enjoyment expressed by Jett was not typically expected as he was attending a school in a low socioeconomic community. Low social demographics and maleness are often associated with lower levels of engagement (for example Connolly, 2004). During discussions Jett attributed his enjoyment of reading to his mother and also acknowledged "that it is mostly because last year our teacher would read these 'Just' books" (CL4 5, Jett). It could be assumed that Jett's interaction and engagement with significant adults in his immediate daily environment were enabling in terms of his positive reading experiences.

The Clandestine Readers indicated a significantly high level of enjoyment for personal reading and conversely significantly low negative score for the social aspects of reading, including associated activities such as visiting the library, reading to a teacher and reading to a friend. These contrasting scores define this group and provide conceptual insights concerning students not typically accounted for in the literature. That is, these students personally expressed their enjoyment of reading but very clearly conveyed that the dominant peer groups within their everyday social settings did not value reading and went out of their way to avoid this activity. 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" (CL4 2, Tess). 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.

There was a collective perception that the dominant peer group expressed explicit aversion to reading, evident in participants retelling of their friends' comments 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" (CL4 3, Tamara). 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" (CL4 5, Jett). 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" (CL4 5, Jett). The popular boys were not portrayed in a positive manner, with Angus declaring that "some of the popular boys they're actually bad" (CL4 6, Angus). While students in this group talked of physicality and anti-reading behaviours, in a similar manner to *The Bored and Banal*, in this case students had a tendency to talk of their personal enjoyment of reading that was not shared by their peers, and reading as a pursuit that they enjoyed outside of their peer culture, such as in the home.

As key researchers have illustrated (Stanovich, 1986, 2000; Freebody, Maton & Martin, 2008), interactions within environmental contexts that are more likely to encourage and support reading on a daily basis, contribute to cumulative development of reading skills and expertise facilitating higher reading outcomes. Practices that engage students in authentic everyday reading and develop associated skills are essential when understanding language and literacy as disciplinary knowledge that develops over time and is conceptualised in terms of "cumulative learning" (Freebody et al., 2008; Maton 2009). Furthermore, differences in exposure to print have been found to predict differences in the growth in reading comprehension ability through primary school. The reciprocal and cumulative influence that exposure to print has on the accelerated development of reading processes and knowledge bases has been referred to as the *Matthew effect* (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Stanovich, 1986).

Given the negative portrayal of boys from low socioeconomic communities and reading, this group of students provide an insightful portrayal of the exceptions that are apparent and some of the positive influences upon reading experiences. Enabling factors for this group included connecting with a wide range of reading materials and finding personally enjoyable genres, viewing reading as functional and positioning reading as valuable for long term trajectories.

Conclusion

This paper offered the beginning of an exploration of boys' attitudes and beliefs about reading, in response to the homogenizing and binary categorization of boys and girls in popular and political rhetoric. While overall girls were more likely to be members of clusters where participants indicated positive attitudes towards reading and higher reading outcomes than boys, there were differences amongst groups of boys. Drawing on findings from a recent study, the paper illustrated that being a boy influences investment in and perceptions of reading in various ways. Further, negotiations of individual and group identity, during the pursuit and expression of being a boy, contribute to enabling and constraining reading experiences. The study included 297 surveys and 36 interviews with primary aged students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Analysis of the survey responses indicated six groups of students who presented in a similar manner with diversity in the gender balance of the clusters. Follow up interviews confirmed the six cluster solution and identified explicit links with the survey response, providing further understandings concerning enabling and constraining influences on students' reading experiences. Three of these clusters were discussed with analysis revealing that boys who perceived reading as "nerdy" and "uncool", such as members of The Bored and Banal, were more likely to describe constraining reading experiences and were less likely to read, and indicated lower achievement. In a similar manner, boys who personally enjoyed reading but were conscious of the dominant peer groups anti-reading attitudes, such members of The Clandestine Readers, described an unsupportive social environment at school and did not read avidly or in the same way as The Dream Team. Unexpectedly, male members of The Dream Team had a tendency to describe enabling reading experiences describing positive attitudes towards reading, positive attitudes of their peers positioning themselves within the dominant peer culture. They were also avid readers indicating high achievement. Critical, are the differences expressed by these students in their descriptions and interpretations of their reading experiences.

Contrary to understandings of literacy purely as a set of skills, outcomes from this study align with the work of Barton (2007) who advocates an ecological approach to literacy, situating reading practices within broader social relations and recognizing that people's literacy practices do not reflect abilities in any straightforward way. To account for the apparent systematic underachievement of some groups of boys it is necessary to move beyond psychological

processes involved in cognition or thinking associated with reading (Barton, 2007). Outcomes developed in this study support the need to recognize that mental activities reside in cultural activities as much as in the head and while socially constructed it is the social practices around literacy which shape consciousness (Barton, 2007). According to Barton (2007, p. 45) “we have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide our actions”. While the aim of this paper was to begin exploration and discussion about notions of differences amongst groups of boys, how students encounter reading cultures in specific school space and the fluidity of identities and practices in positioning reading needs further exploration.

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