

Making Boys at Home in School? Theorising and Researching Literacy (dis)Connections

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Abstract: The relationship between home and school is often raised in public discussion about boys' education as an aspect of boys' overall lower achievement in school, and particularly in literacy, relative to girls. A critical review of two influential Australian and one UK government commissioned reports into boys' education sets the scene for our analysis in this paper. Analysing these reports, we demonstrate that their conclusions are drawn on the basis of minimal research engagement with students' out of school lives, relying instead on extrapolation from boys' orientations to school activities. We then examine conceptual resources developed by researchers taking a socio-cultural lens to relationships between students' in- and out- of school lives. We describe how we have drawn on these resources in designing and implementing a research project in collaboration with teachers in six schools in South Australia. In this paper, we report how, given the constraints of a mostly school-based project, we nevertheless were able to generate significant knowledge about students' encounters with literacy practices outside the formal classroom. What we learned as a result of our analysis of multiple data sets raises questions about the models which construct conflicting relationships between in and out of school learning, and how these models map onto gender. At the same time, we show how resourcing teachers to generate knowledge about boys' out-of-school literacies produced some pedagogical changes which benefitted the 'boys of concern' and all students

Introduction

The relationship between home/peer cultures and school is often raised in public discussion about boys' education as an aspect of boys' overall lower achievement in school relative to girls. This paper considers how this relationship is being understood and deployed in research which aims to address boys' relatively lower performance in school learning when compared to girls. We ask what claims are being made about boys' in- and out-of school lives and literacies, what evidence these claims are based on and what metaphors are employed to understand these relationships? A research project which deliberately set out to explore the relationship between boys' in- and out-of-school experiences of literacy is described and its findings discussed. On this basis we argue for the need to question assumptions that boys' home and peer cultures are inherently antithetical to school literacy learning. We advocate for educators to actively engage in the practice of inquiry, collaboratively with their students, in order to generate richer knowledge about boys' and girls' out-of-school literacies and literacy learning experiences and the relationships between these and school literacy experiences.

Boys in and out of school: Views from the commissioned research

The first half of this decade saw governments in a number of countries make direct interventions in debates about boys' education in general and literacy in particular. Through commissioned research, governments actively shaped knowledge production on this subject in partnership with academics. Our interest is in the ways that boys' participation in home and community cultures outside of school comes into the frame when accounting for boys' school participation and achievement. Three major reports, all published within three years (2002-2005), are discussed through this lens. They consist of two Australian studies, the first focused on literacy (Alloway et al., 2002) and the second on schooling more generally (Lingard et al., 2002), while the third – a UK study, focused on improving boys' school achievement (Younger & Warrington, 2005).

Lingard and colleagues' (2002, p. 1) Australian study used a multiple case study design to:

[I]nvestigate how systemic factors affect the educational performance and outcomes of boys and how these can be addressed in the school context. The 'environments' of 'family, home and school' are included in their list of factors; 'peer culture' is a separate item. Interviews with principals, teaching staff and students, student surveys, and examination of school statistics (attendance, achievement, disciplinary infringements) provide the basis of the researchers' analysis. Students' home lives come into the picture when it is noted that '[i]n many cases staff adopted deficit models of parents and students to explain some students' lack of achievement and behaviours' particularly mentioning 'single parent families (Lingard et al., 2002, p. 26).

While it appears from the use of the term 'deficit models' (which is generally employed in critiques of viewpoints that blame students' families and communities for school failure) that the authors are distancing themselves from these views, they later advance a version of this argument. However in so doing, they shift the attribution of deficit from boys' families to their 'cultures':

[W]hat does emerge is an apparent non-engagement with schooling in many boys' cultures ... It is important to note that boys from low SES backgrounds do not have equivalent cultural capital in terms of financial and educational resources at home to support their learning outside of school. (Lingard et al., 2002, p. 36)

While the pluralisation of 'cultures' could have been seen as a multicultural reference, the label 'low SES' clarifies that what is meant here is working-class

culture, rather than a diversity of ethnic, religious or community cultures. Thus, while the report distances itself from blaming families for boys' failure, their peer cultures are squarely blamed for the problems boys experience at school.

In the UK report by Younger and Warrington (2005, p. 17), the authors canvass a range of 'explanations' in the literature for 'the failure of boys to achieve at the same level as girls', including 'brain differences', concepts of masculinity, student attitudes to work, girls' maturity and gender interactions, before they come to a point that is 'crucial'.

Crucial to this discussion, however, is the need to understand how important it is for many boys to be accepted by other boys, to enable them to identify with and act in line with peer group norms, so that they are seen as belonging (Skelton, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) rather than as different. Such acceptance is often dependent on an act, negotiating an acceptable identity, and incorporating aspects of laddishness of behaviour and risk-taking (Jackson 2002, 2003). Expressed in behaviour, speech, dress code and body language, such laddishness often runs counter to the expectations of the school, but such behaviour is seen as a reasonable cost by boys if it allows them to protect their macho image, and enable them to ensure their acceptance as part of the chosen group. (Younger & Warrington, 2005, p. 18)

In this report, boys' peer cultures are seen as key to the explanation for gender differences and as an over-riding concern that runs across 'socio-cultural contexts' and location (inner city or rural or mining village etc.) The body of the report is given over to an analysis of schools' approaches to improving achievement for boys which are described in terms of five categories: pedagogic approaches, individual approaches, whole school organisational approaches, socio-cultural approaches, and interventions within special schools. A 'sociocultural approach', in Younger and Warrington's analysis of school interventions, refers to reforms at school level aimed at creating 'an achievement culture which offers students an alternative to the culture that often pervades the community and the locality, to challenge and attempt to modify the prevailing street culture.' (2005, p. 95) This 'achievement culture' is explicitly set in a relation of opposition to a set version of masculinity identified as 'laddishness' which is described as a 'culture of failure' which is in 'conflict with the ethos of the school' (p. 92). Thus, a masculine peer culture born on the street is seen as responsible for boys' failure in school.

In this, as in the other studies, we learn very little about the home, ethnic and other cultural contexts of the problematic boys. An exception, in terms of reported school interventions, is a survey on attitudes to reading of boys and male carers carried out by one school. The school's motivation for undertaking this survey was to 'rais[e] boys' self esteem and achievement in literacy and to continue and strengthen links with parents' (p. 36). To their surprise, they found that 'adult male carers responded with enthusiasm about their own (considerable) reading experiences and choices at home' (p. 36–37) and that boys' negativity towards reading was directed to reading *at school* not at home. The school decided to offer boys a more social, shared experience of reading at school by implementing a reading buddy system. This small-scale, school-based investigation challenged assumptions about boys' and their families' orientations to valued literacy practices and showed teachers that what they had assumed to be a negative attitude coming from the home was actually being created by boys' reactions to what was happening in school. Yet this investigation of home life was exceptional, not just in this report but in all the commissioned reports surveyed for this paper.

The third report we examined, by Alloway and colleagues (2002), was commissioned by the Australian government to research boys' literacy. From the outset, the authors explained that their focus was entirely on what happened at school, a decision which they obviously felt the need to justify:

We restricted our surveys and interviews to practical classroom-based issues because recommendations concerning, say, the need for parental re-acculturation of boys, or the need to overcome widespread cultural attitudes can amount to an acceptance and reinforcement of whatever hypothetical differences ... are deemed to characterise boys versus girls. The focus of the project is fundamentally about what schools can do, even in a relatively short time, and what we can show they can do in a valid and reliable way.' (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 16)

This somewhat indirect and qualified statement requires some unpacking. Considering what we infer is implied here (which we highlight in italics below), the authors' logic seems to be:

1. *If we had moved outside the classroom to gather data we might have found evidence which could lead to:* 'recommendations concerning, say, the need for parental re-acculturation of boys, or the need to overcome widespread cultural attitudes'.

2. *And this would have been problematic because we might then have been accused of:* 'acceptance and reinforcement of whatever hypothetical differences ... are deemed to characterise boys versus girls.'

In other words, there was a danger that research could uncover something amiss with how parents acculturate boys and with cultural attitudes more broadly. Thus, the attention of the study was pointed away from boys' families as a kind of dangerous territory, and the focus kept strictly on the school.

As with the Lingard et al., study (2002), teachers are reported as attributing the causes of boys' problems to outside-of-school causes. When asked which boys and girls had problems with literacy, teachers' answers yielded 16 categories of which the most mentioned were in order of weighting: home environment (123), low SES (43), NESB (17), behavioural/emotional problems (11), inattention (10), indigenous (10), maturity (10). It is interesting to note that female teachers and highly experienced teachers were much more likely to cite home factors than male teachers and less experienced teachers. Perhaps there is something about the 'acculturation' of teachers into the school's professional community that entrenches these views.

In this study, 294 parents were surveyed but, in keeping with the stated intention, the scope of questioning was mainly limited to parents' views about boys' performance in school. Unsurprisingly, parents did not attribute boys' difficulties to their home environments. The most common explanation given was 'short concentration span' (56) followed by boys' preference for physical/outdoor activities (52). Some parents (16) pointed to relevance of reading materials or slower rates of maturation (13).

Interestingly, although this study was deliberately restricted to considering data gathered in school, or views about school, three out of eight recommendations foreground teachers' roles in connecting with boys' out-of-school experiences and knowledge. The first recommendation states:

That, as part of their ongoing community analyses, schools and teachers acknowledge and explore the varied social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that boys bring with them to the literacy classroom, paying particular attention to the ways that constructions of masculinity influence boys' behaviour and learning in literacy. (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 7)

Note that here schools are presumed to already be engaged in 'ongoing community analyses' so no guid-

ance is given as to how this should be done, and the reported research does not provide a model. The scope of these analyses is defined in terms of those aspects of the sociocultural context which impact on the construction of masculine identities in so far as these 'influence boys' behaviour and learning in literacy'. How teachers should determine which aspects of boys' lives are most implicated in this, in order to explore and analyse them, is not explained.

The primary way in which boys' out-of-school lives enter into considerations of boys' education in government commissioned research, is through the constitution of boys' peer cultures as antithetical to school engagement. The solution to the problem of boys' disengagement in the case of each report is described in terms of changing how schools respond to boys so that the school experience represents a compelling and viable alternative, or parallel, to the attractions of peer culture. In contrast to their peer culture, boys' family and community contexts are out of focus for the most part in these studies. Interestingly, given this concern for peer cultures, first-hand information about boys' out of school lives is hard to find; instead there are brief demographic sketches of school communities characterised by class and ethnicity.

As a set, these three commissioned research reports deploy boys' out of school lives in quite contradictory ways. Even though each, in different ways, identifies boys' peer cultures and other aspects of their out of school contexts as implicated in their relatively poor performance, none directly investigates these contexts. Moreover, family contexts are barely touched upon and, in one case, deliberately excluded from consideration for fear of what might be found. In spite of this, teachers are encouraged to engage with these contexts, as they attempt to find ways to make schooling more compelling for boys. Missing is any substantial guidance for teachers on how to investigate and interpret the nature of the connections between boys' in- and out-of-school lives.

We now turn to consideration of how these connections have been addressed in a particular research project. An important aspect of this process was providing theoretical tools for teachers to use when exploring connections between boys (and girls') in- and out-of-school lives.

Considering theories of connectivity

As the research reports analysed above point out, it is not uncommon for ('deficit') views of students'

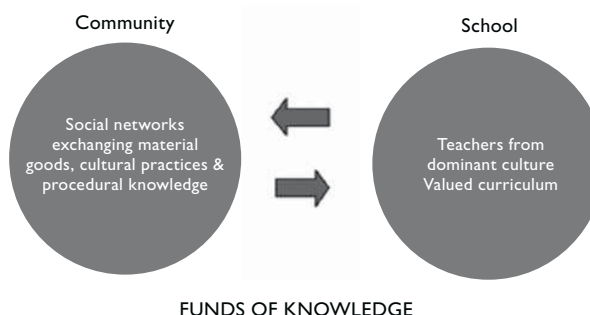


Figure 1: Moll and colleague's (1992) model of funds of knowledge

home lives as antithetical to school learning to be deployed in staffrooms, to explain some boys' poor achievement. However, we have found that educators are open to alternative explanations including those that implicate the school. The key has been to find ways of envisioning connectivity that open up our own and teachers' thinking to look beyond simple binaries and understand students' experiences as they move between home and school, community and peer group, in terms of more fluid and multilayered processes (see Figure 1).

Moll and colleague's (1992) metaphor 'funds of knowledge' involves understanding that people who live in diverse and poor communities develop powerful ways of knowing and doing within households to earn a living and manage socially and politically. Thus the concept of funds of knowledge:

is not meant to replace the anthropological concept of culture, it is more precise for our purposes because of its emphasis on strategic knowledge and related activities essential in households' functioning, development, and well-being. It is specific funds of knowledge pertaining to the social, economic, and productive activities of people in a local region, not 'culture' in its broader, anthropological sense, that we seek to incorporate strategically into classrooms. (p. 139)

Underpinned by ethnographic studies of neighbourhood social and economic practices, this approach argues not only that there are important sources of knowledge in these communities, that schools should make use of in the curriculum, but also that the learning that takes place in the communities is qualitatively different: 'within these contexts, much of the teaching and learning is motivated by the children's interests and questions; in contrast to classrooms, knowledge is obtained by the children, not imposed by the adults' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134).

The opening chapter of Thomson's (2002) *Schooling*

the rustbelt kids describes two archetypal students – Vicki, a white middle class girl, and Thanh, a Vietnamese son of refugees – starting school. The metaphor of the ‘virtual schoolbag’ represents all that these children ‘have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live’. While the virtual schoolbags are both ‘full’ of these students’ life learnings, Vicki and Thanh’s knowledge is differentially recognised as valuable by teachers and the curriculum (refer to Figure 2). This means that only Vicki has a chance to use what is in her bag:

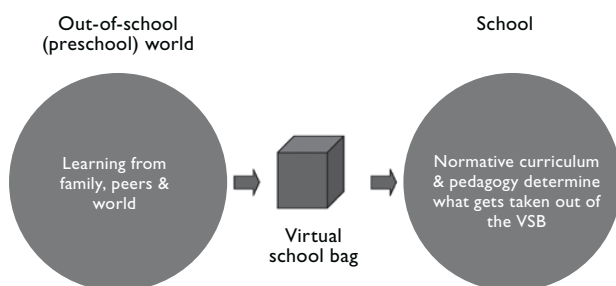


Figure 2: A representation of the Virtual School Bag model (Thomson 2004)

Vicki’s schoolbag contains many things she is able to use in school everyday, whereas Thanh is only required to open his virtual schoolbag for arithmetic. Thanh’s teacher is not unaware of this, but cannot find the time and space in her busy and crowded classroom to organise alternative learning activities for him – and all of the other individual students with their particular schoolbags, their unique interests and knowledges. (Thomson, 2002, p. 7)

Here the challenge is for teachers and educators to change the official classroom space, so that Thanh can bring his ‘virtual schoolbag in from the corridor into the main classroom’ (p. 9). This metaphor represents a call to both teachers and educators to be open to knowledge not usually valued in the mainstream curriculum and find ways to recognise and use this knowledge in the classroom. What virtual schoolbags and funds of knowledge aim to do is ‘turnaround’ (Kamler & Comber, 2005) educators’ understandings of the children in their schools; a plea to look again at those who we perceive as failures and to cast their problematic knowledges as resources that may act as a bridge to the valued school curriculum.

Dyson’s (1993) work on the ‘permeable curriculum’ represents a related concern to recast different aspects of children’s lives as relevant to their learning in school and not as a problematic ‘background’ (Comber, 1998) that hinders school success. Dyson uses the

work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) to show that in any act of learning (in this case, learning to be literate in the early years), the learner must work dialogically with language and meaning that traverses different domains, ways of thinking and representing the self, in order to construct hybrid identities that traverse different ‘spheres’ of their lives. In a study of early years children in one classroom she noted that they:

were, in fact, learning to participate in varied imaginative universes. Their classroom was a complex social place, one in which a number of worlds coexisted and intersected ... There was the official school world, in which they were ‘students’; the peer world, in which they were ‘co-workers’ (and perhaps ‘friends’); and the world of their respective home communities, which re-formed in the classroom amidst networks of peers. Each world required particular kinds of social work and valued particular kinds of ways with words. To negotiate their membership vis-à-vis these groups, the children drew on diverse cultural resources. Among these resources were the oral folk traditions learned at home, the popular or common traditions that pervaded all of their lives (particularly through the media), and the written traditions they experienced at school and/or at home. (Dyson, 1993, p. 2)

For Dyson, classrooms and curricula that draw strict boundaries around school knowledge and other ways of knowing prevent this necessary process of negotiation across worlds – a process much more fraught and difficult for children from homes where the literate culture is different from that valued in school.

Dyson also calls on teachers to treat resources pulled from popular culture, ‘folk traditions’ and the like as necessary resources for school learning for these children:

In entering school literacy, all of the focal children drew on rich language resources, and they all used those resources to engage in social work, managing relationships with peers and adults. As will be elaborated upon in the chapters to come, their resources included interrelated folk and popular cultural traditions ignored and treated as problems (not helps) in most discussions of literacy development. Moreover, their social ends included relationships with others, their audience, that rendered problematic many pedagogical suggestions for teachers (Dyson, 1993, p. 5).

Such perspectives provide persuasive insights into why some students ‘fail’ school and, equally, suggestive pathways for addressing the longstanding challenge of doing better by those groups who traditionally achieve relatively poor educational outcomes.

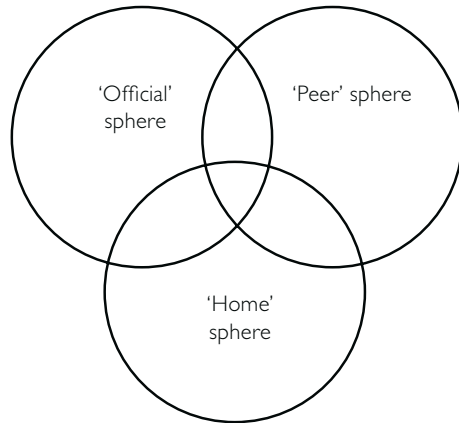


Figure 3: Multiple social worlds of the classroom
(Dyson, 1993, p. 3)

Importantly, these perspectives show connectivity and foreground the way that learning is, at least in part, a process of negotiation for students as they straddle different worlds (refer to Figure 3). These models stand in contrast to current neoliberal reforms which focus on 'school effectiveness' driven by cycles of standards-setting, testing and remediation which rigidify the curriculum and individualise literacy problems.

Researching boys' literacies: A collaborative action research project

As our review of the major research and reviews of boys and schooling and/or literacy has shown, the (dis)connection between home (or family) and school was seen to be foundational to explanations for success or lack of success at school and in literacy. Interestingly, and possibly because they were seen as *foundational* in the establishment of boys' identity and social practices and *prior* to school, the home/family contexts of the boys were then bracketed out of these studies when it came to considering what might be done in schools to address boys' relatively poor performance. We argue that by not exploring these issues and differences, these research reports serve to underline this separation and reinforce the role of the home as a different and deficient space for students who do not succeed at school. However, even as they did not research boys' experiences in the home and community, Alloway and colleagues' report (2002) recommends that teachers should engage in forms of 'community analyses', yet provide no guidance for teachers as to this process.

Our own research project began in the context of these assumptions and recommendations. It was commissioned by the South Australian Catholic Education office and operated over two years, involv-

ing a team of university researchers working with six schools in the northern region of Adelaide. Teams of two teachers came from each of the schools – two high schools and four primary – which had volunteered to participate in the project. All schools were situated in the northern suburbs of Adelaide – a region which contains some of the poorest postcodes in Australia, although there are variations depending on housing estates and redevelopments. All the schools served local students and those who were transported to the school from surrounding suburbs as they were low-fee paying schools in the Catholic education system.

We had considerable experience in working with teachers in designing action research projects which attended to teachers' questions and aspirations as well as to wider research questions from scholarly research (Cormack, 2004; Cormack, Kerin, & Comber, 2000; Cormack & Nichols, 2001). Such research is not straightforward; it must negotiate between what teachers can do within often tightly constrained school and policy structures, teachers' own levels of confidence and interest, and university researchers' concerns for creating new knowledge and establishing research designs which will warrant evidentiary claims. Our time was limited; on average about two days a term over a four term year was available for whole-team research workshops. The budget was limited, too. An application for research support from the federal government's research council was unsuccessful, which meant that the planned ethnographic element of the study had to be curtailed.

Teacher-academic collaborative projects have the advantage, however, of ensuring that research is designed to take account of real-life settings and provide feedback about what's possible within current structures and policies. Perhaps most importantly, collaborative research over time allows for everyone's perspectives to be stretched and challenged and for several 'cycles' of research, action and reflection. As a team, teacher- and university-researchers learned from their mistakes and explored territories not initially identified as significant but, through reflection on experience, later identified as significant to further understanding.

A real challenge for the project was to find ways to explore the spheres of literate activity and their connections to boys' identities both within and beyond the school. To explore boys' experience of literacy within the schools, we undertook with the teachers a comprehensive 'stocktake' of literacy practices in their class-

rooms. That element is not discussed in this paper but has been reported elsewhere (Cormack et al., 2007). In the remainder of the paper we describe how, working with the teachers and their students, we explored boys' (and girls') experiences of literacy and learning in their lives outside of school. We also discuss how our findings challenged and complicated assumed boundaries and relationships of difference between the spheres of home, school, popular culture and peer culture.

To generate data about out of school experiences we used a range of 'outsider' and 'insider' methods. The classic social research methods of surveying and interviewing were used to generate data which were analysed by the academic researchers and fed back to the teachers. All the students in each teacher's home class (including girls in co-ed schools) were surveyed regarding their preferred activities.

Individual and focus group discussions were conducted by a male research assistant exploring boys' perceptions and experiences of literacy both in and out of school experiences with literacy. The individual interviews were conducted with boys deemed by their teachers to be 'of concern' whereas the focus group interviews included any volunteer boys (in some schools most of the boys in the class volunteered). Results from the analysis of surveys and interviews

were discussed in research workshops and were important in influencing teachers' design of their innovations for the action phase of the project (Cormack et al., 2007).

Teachers were also exposed to examples of research in which students had been involved as co-researchers (see, for example, Beach & Finders, 1999; Morrow, 2001; Pryor, 2004). Based on these examples, teachers trialled activities in which students conducted and documented their own observations. For example, an activity conducted by all the teachers was a home literacy observation task designed by the academic researchers for student use.

Finally, throughout the project members of the research team continued to interrogate the question of continuities and discontinuities between students' lives and learning across all their contexts. An activity which enabled teachers' to represent their thinking in process about this complex issue was a concept mapping task undertaken in groups. An example of a group of teachers' concept maps is shown in Figure 4.

We now turn to a discussion of what our analysis of the surveys, interviews and household literacies task revealed about boys' and girls' literacy learning and identities outside of school, and the complex relations between these and school contexts.

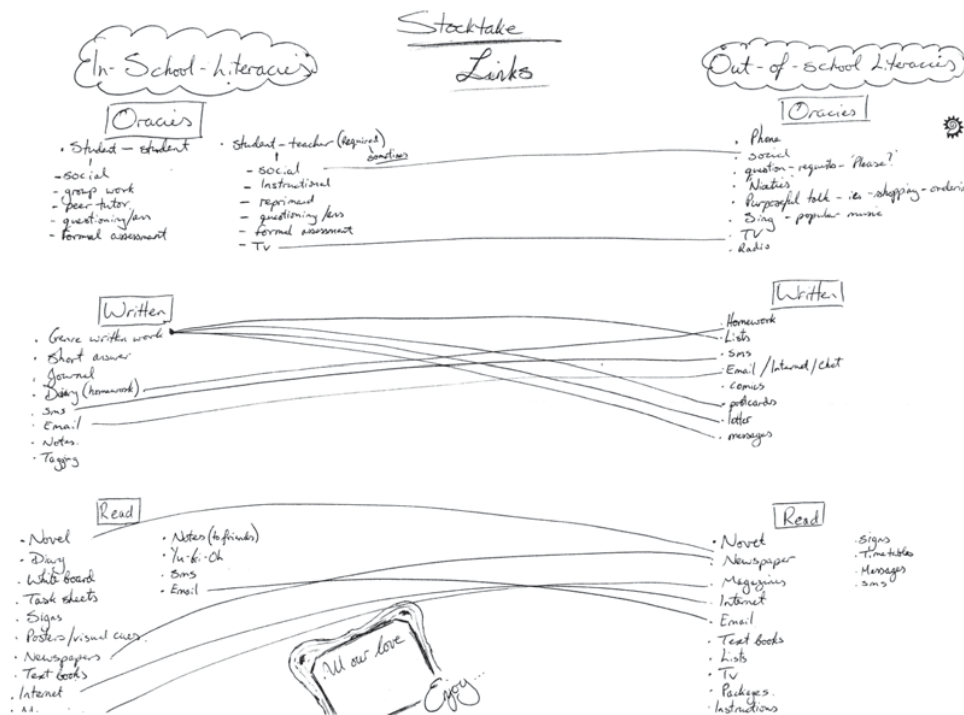


Figure 4: A teacher group representation of in- and out-of-school literacies

Student survey

All students, boys and girls, in all 11 classes, three of them all boys' classes, were surveyed. The questions focused on student access to, or ownership of, various goods and services and always asked the students to list or explain their preferences. The survey was presented in three sections:

- A. *What do you have?* This focused on students' out-of-school resources including technological equipment, languages and people at home.
- B. *What do you enjoy?* This focused on students' preferred activities; a wide range of options was given with the intention of capturing minority as well as majority interests.
- C. *Favourite place, person or possession.* This invited students to create a visual or written representation of something important to them.

Overall, there were 260 responses with just under two thirds from boys. The majority of those surveyed were aged from 11 to 14 years .

Table 1 shows the responses from students to questions about communication technologies. Computer access was high. Both mobile phones and the internet were owned/accessible by around three quarters of the students with no significant differences between males and females.

Table 1: Communications technologies owned/ accessed

	Mobile	Computer	Internet
All	73%	94%	75%
Male	69%	93%	73%
Female	81%	95%	77%

In relation to popular culture (Table 2), movies, music and television were enjoyed by nearly all students. Games were enjoyed by nearly 90% of students overall but, while almost all boys accessed computer games, around seven out of ten girls did so. There was no gender difference, however, in relation to attendance at sporting events.

Table 2: Popular culture enjoyed

	Movies	Music	Games	Sport (watch)	TV
All	98%	95%	87%	68%	98%
Male	98%	93%	96%	69%	99%
Female	99%	98%	72%	68%	98%

Another category was around different hobbies,

activities and interests (Table 3). Playing sport and drawing were activities that showed no significant gender difference. Playing a musical instrument or singing was enjoyed by significantly more girls than boys while 'fixing or playing around with mechanical things' was much more favoured by boys than girls.

Table 3: Enjoyment of selected hobbies/activities

	Sport (play)	Music/ singing	Mechanical	Drawing	Writing	Reading
All	90%	47%	42%	71%	32%	90%
Male	95%	38%	57%	70%	25%	87%
Female	82%	62%	19%	73%	43%	96%

Significantly, reading was as popular as sport, with only a slightly larger percentage of girls enjoying it than boys. In contrast, writing was not chosen as enjoyable by nearly as many students but much more favoured by girls than boys.

Looking across the survey categories, there is evidence of thematic linking of students' activities. The games played often corresponded with other favourite leisure time activities. Boys (and girls to a lesser extent) who played soccer, for example, also enjoyed playing the FIFA soccer game on their X-Box, Game cube or PlayStation; boys who played racing car or motorcycle games also read car or motorcycle magazines and/ or liked working on engines, indicating that in many cases game playing was one feature of a cross-platform,

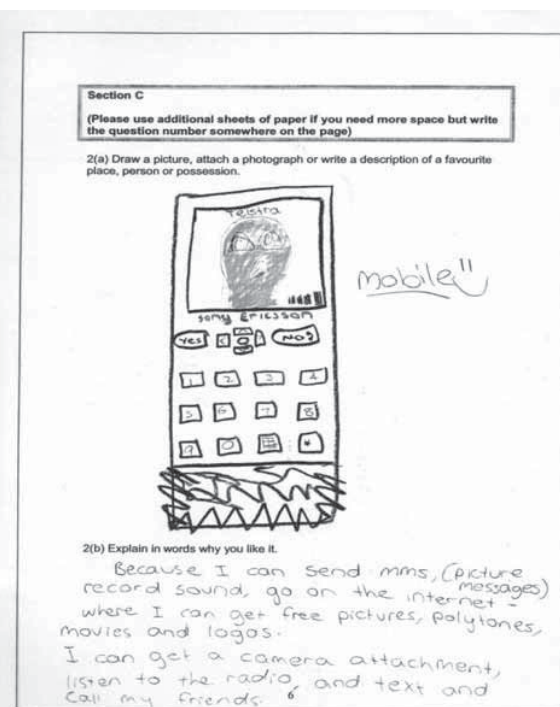


Figure 5: One students' representation of a favourite object

multi-modal engagement with a particular area of interest.

While some of this information seems to confirm popular understandings about gender patterns in students' out-of-school activities and assumptions about what boys like, there are equally some questions raised by the results. Computing was a ubiquitous technology in the home lives of these children. How does that compare to what happens in school? Sport was attended and enjoyed by high percentages of both boys and girls: What kinds of texts are connected to these media and what kinds of textual practices? Playing with mechanical things was one activity where boys had a clear preference. How do boys learn to do these things and what are the implications for school literacy pedagogy? The survey findings counter the popular assumption that boys, as a group, don't like to read. What kinds of reading do boys engage in, for what purposes, and what can school curriculum and teaching learn from this?

One suggestive source of data in the survey was a section we provided toward the end where we invited the students to 'draw a picture, attach a photograph or write a description of a favourite place, person or possession' and to 'explain in words why you like it'. Many students took the opportunity to draw a favourite object and the objects represented tended to reinforce the other parts of the survey which showed that information and communication technologies were important in these students' lives (see Figure 5). However, both the drawings and the students' comments demonstrated that these objects were valued as much for their context of use as they were in their own right.

Overwhelmingly, the context of use mentioned was the family not, as might be expected, the peer group.

The illustration shown in Figure 6 is one example of a reference to family; here a favoured object – a PlayStation 2 game console – is shown, but the explanation qualifies the value of the object because it is a gift from the boy's mother. Such representations show that it is too simplistic to consider objects as having value in their own right: instead, they need to be understood as elements in social practices. The social context of their use is crucial to understanding their value to young people. For these adolescent boys, the family is still an important aspect of social context.

Focus group and individual interviews

In order to gain a richer insight into boys' perceptions



2(b) Explain in words why you like it.

Well, my mum bought it for me for my birthday so it means a lot to me

Figure 6: A games console in family context

of literacy, we held a series of focus group discussions with boys nominated by their teachers as 'students of concern'; that is, boys who the teachers felt were not achieving as well as they might. The focus group discussions centred on boys' perceptions of literacy in school. While we will not deal on this aspect in any depth here, a summary of the findings is given since it forms the context within which the researchers explored the relationships between different contexts for boys' learning. Also, boys themselves frequently described school in terms of comparison with other contexts.

School was described as a place of containment, both physically and mentally. This feeling of containment was associated with a desire for greater space and more free time. A related theme was that of choice. Boys expressed a preference for more control over what they read, wrote, made, watched and did, the ability to choose what projects they embarked on and how they went about them. Students in general did not insist on the desirability of absolute freedom but, broadly, the more say they had in what they did in class, the better they felt about being there.

Greater sociability in class was seen as desirable by many boys. Many said they preferred group work and those lessons that arose out of, or resulted in, class debates and discussions. Some made suggestions regarding features of class organisation that could facilitate interaction such as freedom to move about. Finally, some boys had strong views on the need for school learning to be relevant and applicable in their lives outside school. This was particularly the case for boys who could articulate what they wanted to do when they finished school.

Individual interviews were held later in the project and were designed to learn more from the 'boys of concern' regarding their identities as learners in out-

of-school contexts. Boys were asked to identify one or more activities they really enjoyed and which they spent time on outside of school. They were then asked how they had learned to participate in this activity, whether they were involved in teaching others, about the literacy/language aspects of undertaking the activity and whether, and if so how, they might take knowledge and skill gained in this activity into school.

The activities identified by the boys were diverse and included the domains of sport, art, game playing and cooking. Boys were able to identify literacy dimensions to all of the activities they nominated. For instance, 'Rick' was passionate about playing cricket. Not only did he play matches but he developed his skill and knowledge by playing computer games, reading magazines, watching television and talking with his coach and team mates. 'Nigel', as well as enjoying computer games, also liked cooking with his mum and this involved reading food packaging and recipes.

These boys had a lot to say about what helped them to learn in out-of-school contexts. Clear, explicit and timely advice from a skilled practitioner was appreciated by many. The credibility of the instructor was key; this was not related to age or formal training but to evidence of expertise shown in performance. As they became expert, these boys expected to be in a position to pass on their knowledge to others either by giving 'tips' or through modelling a competent performance. The willingness of some boys, who were known for their lack of cooperation in school, to take criticism and strive to improve in their chosen pursuit, was striking. Rick explained how his cricket coach was a significant teacher:

Rick: He's a fair but honest guy; he teaches us to do the best – he wants us to be the best we can be, but like still having fun and not being too serious.

Researcher: But how does he actually go about improving your skills?

Rick: If we make a mistake, he'll come straight up to us and tell us what we're doing wrong, and he'll show us the correct way of doing it, so in the future we can do it properly.

For some boys, the resources they brought to school were not necessarily recognised as such by their teachers. Rick was considered to be a particularly difficult student by his Religion Studies teacher (one of the teacher-researchers in the project). Rick, however, did quite well at a task which involved responding to an

animated film which the teacher had chosen to illustrate Christian virtues. He wrote 'The dinosaurs need hope, faith, teamwork so they can all get to the nesting grounds all together without losing any dinosaurs from the herd.' His language here echoed his description of the qualities needed to be a good sportsman. However, while his teacher rewarded this task with a good grade, she did not hear these echoes. She felt that sport did not offer good role models for boys: 'We're regurgitating this information about heroes, all the time it's been sporting heroes. ... [I want] to change the notion of the way kids understand heroes.'

Some boys did experience connection between in- and out-of-school contexts in relation to their key interest. 'Bao' was very keen on cartooning. He drew at home on his own and at lunch time with a school mate. Although cartooning was not included in the school art curriculum, he showed his drawings to his art teacher who made encouraging comments. However, his facility with visual text production could probably have been put to even greater use to support his learning at school. Coming from a Vietnamese family, Bao's English was not as fluent as most of his peers and writing was particularly hard for him.

Engaging boys (and girls) as co-researchers

From the outset of the project we were keen to work with and through the teachers to position students as co-researchers. Informed by the new studies of childhood (James, Jenks & Prout, 1997) and critical literacy (Luke, 2000; Comber & Simpson, 2001), we took the view that young people could best inform our research by contributing directly to it. However we were also very much aware that teachers were already adding to their workloads by taking on the research; that they had very full curriculum obligations; and that they may not be familiar with this approach.

The strategies used allowed us to build teachers' knowledge of the rationales for, and specific approaches to, engaging young people as co-researchers whilst trying to avoid adding to their workloads or overcrowding the curriculum. At the same time we hoped to communicate to the young people in the various participating Catholic schools in the northern suburbs that they were part of a larger research project which was valued by their teachers and by the Catholic Education system. This meant that many of the young people saw the curriculum in which they were engaged as part of the research. Their enthusiasm could be developed more easily in the upper primary classes

Students as researchers into household literacies

We want you to be a researcher into the literacies that take place in your household. Later, we'll use the information you collect to compare with the kinds of reading and writing that go on in the classroom to see what we can learn from that for improving what we do at school. This is a task that can be completed over one twenty four hour period on a weekend. It contains plenty of choices so that you can adapt it to your place. It is a three part task.

Part 1 – listing all the reading and writing activities in your household over 24 hours

Observe and list all the reading and writing activities that people, children and adults conduct in your house over 24 hours – for example 8pm Friday to 8pm Saturday. Make sure it's ok with the people involved to include this activity and respect their privacy. Use the attached chart as a guide. Here is a guide on what to record under each heading.

Column heading	Example 1	Example 2
Activity (what happens, where) Briefly describe what is going on making sure you indicate where in your household it occurs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> older brother is reading the racing guide at the kitchen table. He is using a highlighter to circle horses he is interested in. He notes down some information in a notebook including odds, weights and jockey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> my sister is on MS Messenger to her two friends in her class at school – she is trying to organise to meet them at the shops later to go to a sale
Time/day Note the time and the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7.30pm Friday 7 April 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saturday morning, just after breakfast
Who is involved Note everyone who is participating in or connected to event. It can include grandparents, visitors etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> older brother (alone) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> my sister friend Jackie friend
Reading and writing involved The reading and writing activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reading racing guide highlighting noting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reading on screen as messages appear hearing the sound made when a message arrives using keyboard to type message (uses two fingers) uses mouse to open and send messages
Texts/resources used or referred to Not just print resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> racing guide note book 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> computer screen catalogue from shop

Figure 7: The Household Literacies observation task (extract) (Cormack et al., 2007)

where teachers had more time to follow student leads and engage students in reflective evaluations about their work.

In one classroom, the girls were invited to participate in the 'literacy research' from the outset and they were given opportunities to consider and compare girls' and boys' responses to various tasks and opportunities. They were also involved in interviewing and video-recording small groups of boys about their views on the ways their teacher had allowed an expanded approach to literacy in conducting and presenting their research.

In another case, teachers engaged students as co-researchers in a unit investigating 'place'. As a result, the teacher began to notice that different students had different knowledge both of local and more distant geographies. Once the classroom became a site for sharing information as a collective, students began to demonstrate unanticipated knowledge of specific places.

The **Household Literacies** activity was undertaken

by students in all participating classes and was designed by the university researchers as a means of both gathering data about students' out-of-school contexts and for providing teachers with a resource for training students as ethnographers. For this activity, students in participating classes were asked to observe and list all the reading and writing activities that people participated in at their houses over 24 hours. This was explicitly set up as a research task for students as is shown in the extract in Figure 7.

On the reverse side, an observation form was provided with the headings:

- Activity (what happens, where)
- Time/day
- Who is involved
- Reading and writing involved
- Texts/resources used or referred to

Analysis of these data focused on the modality of the literacy activity (writing, reading, viewing etc), the

range and type of activities, purposes of activities and participants. Broad comparisons were made between these results and those for the in-school literacy stocktake, with the caution that different time frames and data collection methods were involved.

The relative importance of reading and writing emerged as a difference between school and home literacy practices with the former more common in homes and the latter in schools. Using writing to produce a textual product was not nearly as important at home, although writing was part of many processes such as, reminding, listing and highlighting. Another difference was the much greater diversity of reading practices undertaken in homes, particularly considering that only a short period was sampled by each student. Altogether 42 different reading practices were counted with students taking the expanded view of literacy seriously by including the reading of packaging, TV captions, forms, collector cards and many other texts.

One valuable aspect of this task is it allowed us some insight into the kinds of literacy practices modelled to students by significant others in their lives. Assumptions are often made about the impact (or absence) of male role models on boys' attitudes to literacy. Looking at parents' reported literacy activities, we found that parents' reading scores did not differentiate by gender; however in the case of writing, a difference was found:

Table 4: Instances of parents reading in the household

Instances of mothers reading	78
Instances of fathers reading	74
Instances of mothers writing	36
Instances of fathers writing	16

Household literacies are heavily contextualised and this activity allowed us to imaginatively reconstruct some important activity contexts within which opportunities for literacy participation were offered. We found four activity contexts were particularly important: sport, other leisure, food and family networking. For each of these contexts, we were able to group a set of literacy activities which may be involved. For instance, in relation to sport we listed the following:

- Reading sports pages in newspapers
- Reading sports magazines
- Reading sports calendars
- Watching sport on TV – reading scores, players' names and positions; listening to commentary

- Watching sport in person – reading scores, writing scores, reading players' numbers and positions
- Tipping
- Betting
- Gaming
- Communicating scores & commentary in person and by phone.

Sporting participation was a context that involved the interweaving of reading, writing, talking, viewing and numeracy. For instance, the tipping game Fantasy Footy involves creating an imaginary team which then 'plays' each week, its performance being calculated by the individual statistics of its players in the real competition.

This section on engaging boys and girls as co-researchers has provided a few highlights of a rich set of data generated by the students. None of these data could be said to provide the basis for generalisable 'findings' about boys' literacy practices beyond the school and this was not the intention, given the very limited scope of the project. However, these data do suggest that any simplistic assumptions about boys' experience of literacy as, say, influenced by lack of male role models, dominated by ICTs in ways that separate them from family life, or anti-reading must certainly be questioned.

Conclusion

This paper has contrasted a number of large, government commissioned research studies into boys' education with our own, small-scale, practitioner-research oriented investigation into boys' literacies in- and out-of-school. We have highlighted the way that the commissioned studies all, for a variety of reasons, avoided investigating boys' educational/literacy lives outside of school. Even as they did this, each report problematised aspects of boys' out-of-school lives as either antithetical to schooling or a too-dangerous territory to explore for fear of confirming stereotypes about class- and culture-based approaches to raising boys.

In contrast, our own study deliberately explored boys' literacy practices beyond the school. In doing so, we found that many of the stereotypical assumptions about boys' experience of literacy, what they saw and were immersed in, and what they valued, were not confirmed. Instead, we found that there are many overlaps between what goes on at home and in school that

can easily be overlooked by educators. Importantly, these boys' homes and lives could be seen to provide a rich array of literacy practices in which they could be successful, provided a sufficiently expanded view of literacy was used.

While our research provides no definitive picture of boys' literacy practices beyond school, it is strongly suggestive of the need for educators to go beyond their assumptions about what goes on in boys' homes and peer cultures and find ways to explore these fields. Until this is done, assumed binaries of difference and opposition will continue to dominate the logic of programs of intervention. At the very least, we argue, such interventions will miss the point and, at worst, will serve to intensify essentialist approaches that do disservice to all students. Instead of seeking or hoping that boys' families will better support their school literacies, we should explore the potential of learning from these sites about how boys actually do successfully engage in learning and literacy – this should lead us to treat as more permeable, previously bounded categories of home, school and peer culture.

Note

- 1 The term 'sociocultural' can carry different meanings. We were most familiar with its use in literacy research where it emerges from a tradition of community-based studies informed by anthropology and sociolinguistics (see, for example, Heath, 1982; Street, 1994), an approach which was then taken into schools (see, for example, Compton-Lilly, 2008), but this is not the meaning used in the Younger and Warrington report.

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