

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: BOYS, LITERACIES, AND SCHOOLING – AN AUSTRALIAN STORY

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This article focuses on issues related to boys, literacies, and schooling as played out in the Australian context. It reflects on the swathe of populist discourse centring on boys, and on literacy, that drives a potentially divisive education agenda. In providing more nuanced analyses of the debates surrounding the disputed territory of boys, literacies, and schooling, the article offers examples of disaggregated literacy test data to demonstrate the importance of adopting a “which boys” and “which girls” approach to the issues. The article also provides brief coverage of the Success for Boys program, introduced in Australia in 2006, that encourages teachers to swim against the tide of populism by embracing the agenda in all of its complexity.

Key words: gender, literacy achievement, schooling

Cet article porte sur des questions reliées aux garçons, aux littératies et à l'école dans un contexte australien. L'auteure étudie les multiples discours populistes sur les garçons et la littératie susceptibles d'entraîner une approche fractionnelle en éducation. Tout en fournissant une analyse nuancée des débats entourant le territoire contesté des garçons, les littératies et l'école, l'article fournit des exemples de données de tests de littératie non regroupées qui démontrent l'importance de distinguer de « quels garçons » et de « quelles filles » il s'agit. En outre, l'article présente brièvement un programme lancé en 2006, Success for Boys, qui incite les enseignants à nager à contre-courant du populisme en adoptant un point de vue qui tient compte de toute la complexité de l'éducation.

Mots clés : genre, rendement en littératie, éducation

In Australia, as in other countries – New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, for instance – the educational gaze over the past decade has turned towards boys. At a national level, serious concerns have been expressed, and generous federal funds have been invested in improving learning outcomes for boys in Australian schools, a case that has been mirrored nationally elsewhere (Educational Review Office [ERO], 1999; ERO, 2000; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted]/ERO, 1996; Ofsted, 2003a; Ofsted 2003b; Younger & Warrington, 2005). In focusing on the Australian context, this article documents some of the concerns about boys, literacies, and schooling that have plagued the media, worried parents, disturbed the wider community, spurred politicians into action, and generated a wave of research and consultancy activity across the country. On such a tide are we now afloat.

This article begins by exploring the perceived importance of a boys' agenda in Australia as instantiated in disturbing public discourse about boys, and about literacy, and in the political uptake of the issues. In investigating data commonly used to support claims that boys are in trouble, and that boys are failing at school, the article questions the legitimacy of public and political concerns and suggests that some of the momentum for a boys' agenda has been wrongheaded, first and foremost, because it has been based on too simple data analyses. When data are disaggregated, taking into account the interplay of other critical factors besides gender, the picture is shown to be more complex, more problematic, than one that rolls all boys together and essentialises them as a group. Although the exercise of disaggregating data supports the call for more nuanced responses to the issues, the article challenges the legitimacy of some passionately held, but largely unsubstantiated, explanations as to why some boys under-achieve at school, and in literacy classes in particular. The article concludes with a recount of one attempt to stem the flow of populist ideas in schools through the introduction of a research-informed, *Success for Boys* professional learning program that encourages teachers to grapple with the complexity of the issues and to swim vigorously against the tide of populism so readily captured in an over-simplified boys versus girls agenda. The goal of the federally endorsed, professional learning

program, introduced in 2006, is to achieve higher levels of success for boys – as well as for girls – in Australian schools.

DISTURBING PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT BOYS

There's a tangled web turning our boys into angry young men. [headline]
'You might as well just cut off their balls,' said one father of sons...
'What agenda is being pursued here? Is it feminism gone mad?' (Miranda Devine, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 18, 2005)

These media grab-lines from a widely circulated Australian newspaper offer an entry point for understanding how boys have been so squarely positioned in recent times on the education and political agenda. The journalist's outrage, articulated colourfully in the article, was triggered by what she read as one school's anti-male practices – practices that presumably would repress boys' natural expressions of masculinity and damage their innate sense of themselves as male subjects. At the school in question, a decision had been made to ban superhero play in the preschool centre because, in the teachers' experiences, such play so often disintegrated into aggressive and anti-social displays amongst young children.

The tone of the journalist's comments could be considered histrionic if not reprehensible, and her words could easily be dismissed if they were a one-off media event, but they are not: they reflect a spirit of contagion that has suffused public media here. As argued elsewhere (Lingard, 2003; Mills, 2003) stories like these have operated in Australia to position boys and men as the new disadvantaged. In an interesting discursive turn, stories about boys doing poorly at school have sometimes been seamlessly reconstituted into stories of reversals of power relations, of women taking over the world of work and, ultimately, of the emasculation of boys and of men – an echo of the unnamed father's lament that "you might as well just cut off their balls." Typically, in capitalizing on the populist theme of emasculation, one Australian newspaper noted the "crumbling concept of a patriarchal society" and cautioned, "Sometime in the new millennium, a new race of women may take charge – assisted, no doubt, by faithful male mutants

who speak in squeaky voices and shoot blanks" (David Crossen, *The Courier-Mail – Weekend*, February 10, 1996, p. 4).

It has not been unusual for public commentaries like these on changing gender relations to conflate a litany of female success stories with stories of penises shrinking to clitoral dimensions – literally or metaphorically. Continuing right to the time of writing this article, the media continues to trouble the public with stories of emasculation claiming that "our boys and men are being rendered a shell of their former testosterone fuelled hunter and gatherer selves" (Jane Fynes-Clinton, *Courier Mail*, April 6, 2006).

Given continuing media exposure in Australia for more than a decade, it is not surprising that anxiety about boys has gained momentum guaranteeing public support and government funding for research in the field. What is surprising is that the basis for generalised concern about boys – all boys, that is – is not borne out by achievement data as analysed in this article, or by trends associated with the labour market; likewise, the generalised silence about girls in educational discourse, research funding, and policy focus – other than what often appears as an apologetic aside – is not supported on the basis of achievement data, young women's impact on the labour market, or a range of other indicators either.

It is not the case in Australia that all boys are doing poorly at school, or in literacy classrooms, while girls outstrip them, and evidence of this claim will be presented further on in this article. Neither is it the case that girls are controlling the labour market as a result of their better school performance, or of the higher literacy achievement at school. Counter to media hype, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum reported a sobering reality based on their large-scale empirical studies into labour markets:

Two decades of feminist advances have produced important breakthroughs for all young women, but especially a small number of relatively privileged young adult women. At the same time, a significant minority of women are embarked on the down escalator, reduced to the fringes of labour markets and finding structured training difficult to access Three out of every five young adults in the bottom quintile of income earners is a female, but only one in three in the top quintile of young adult income earners is a woman. (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999, p. 7)

Similarly, in drawing on data from the United Nations Development Program, Connell (2000) argued that:

On almost any measure of resources – wealth and income, cultural authority, levels of education, political influence, control of organizations – and in all parts of the world, men are the advantaged group in gender relations (United Nations Development Program, 1999). It would require an unbelievable reversal, in an unbelievably short time, for boys to have lost this advantage and become a disadvantaged group. (p. 166)

Moreover, despite advances made by girls and women, the World Economic Forum ranked Australia tenth, behind Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK, on a comprehensive index measuring the global gender gap that still privileges males over females (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005).

In Australia, it seems that public discourse about boys, particularly that produced and maintained through the media, has contributed spiritedly to an unexamined, unsophisticated approach to a boys' education agenda. In looking more closely at the association between gender and literacy outcomes, this article argues for a more nuanced response to the current focus on boys' learning at school and for a re-examination of research and policy directions. These arguments, which depend on disaggregation of literacy data, will be taken up again after reviewing how literacy, like boys, has been constituted through public discourse.

DISTURBING PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT LITERACY

Just as the media has contributed to public opinion about boys being at risk of low level achievement and emasculation at school, so too has it contributed to concern about literacy outcomes in Australian schools. Given a context of public apprehension about how Australian students are failing at literacy, the media has played its part in perpetuating stories of degenerating literacy standards among students. As demonstrated in a recent instance, the political editor of a high profile Sunday newspaper provided a two page spread, headlining "This 'appalling' betrayal of kids" (Darrell Giles, *The Sunday Mail*, February 12, 2006). In what was produced as a "special report," the political editor

declared that “Spelling and grammar had been ‘sacrificed at the altar of relevance’ and primary school students in 2006 were no match for their counterparts of 1955” (p. 10). To demonstrate the point that schools were indeed failing students, the special report provided a sample of questions for a number of subject areas from a 1955 Queensland exam for year-8 students. For the key learning area of English some of the examples were as follows:

1. From the underlined words in each of the following sentences substitute one word derived from the root given in brackets:
 - He could talk freely on any subject (verto)
 - The man felt angry and insulted at the unjust accusation (sentio)
 - These lawless men planned secretly to take control of the country (spiro)
2. Select three of the following extracts taken from your School Reader and write in your own words the meaning of the passages selected:
 - I grieve for his Majesty’s exchequer, after keeping thee two months or more – *An Interview with Judge Jeffreys*
 - The Saracen wheeled his steed with inimitable dexterity – *The Crusader and the Saracen*
 - Full well they laughed with counterfeited glee at all his jokes – *Pictures from the Deserted Village*

Although current year-8 students may not score well on such a test, the story – and the literacy test that supported it – could easily have been reconstructed to demonstrate a different point. For instance, the investigators could have examined whether those who did well in answering questions about Latin derivatives and quotations from their School Reader in 1955 – even with the benefit of an additional half-century of opportunity – could now demonstrate levels of command comparable to what so many young people demonstrate in employing contemporary literate practices requiring mastery of multi-mediated forms of communication and modes of exchange. The sense of longing for the past, and of grief, expressed in “this ‘appalling’ betrayal of kids” resonates strongly with what Luke and Luke (2001) describe as “an

unquenchable desire among (a particular generation of) educators ... for a return and restoration of childhood before the Fall" (p. 95).

Counter to the trend of pining for Paradise Lost, Education Departments across Australia have moved steadily to embrace broader definitions of literacy, some even have incorporated the concept of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996). As explained, for example, in one state's literacy strategy review:

... being a child, being an adolescent and indeed, becoming literate have changed in some fundamental ways. The tool kit of basic skills that served many of us well in the 1950s is inadequate today. ... young people's capacity to produce, read and interpret spoken language, print and multimedia will become their central means of livelihood, the survival skills needed for work and leisure, for citizenship and community participation and for personal growth and cultural expression. For these youth, the capacity to manage, process and interpret information will be as important as the 'three R's' were for people educated in the 1950s, when economies and communications were simpler and employment was virtually guaranteed. (Education Queensland, 2000, p. 7)

Although such changes have occurred at policy level, they are not always manifest in transformations of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices as required by schools to embrace policy directions. And the changes are not always strongly supported by Education ministers who participate in the political manufacture of national literacy crises, even in the face of evidence that for reading literacy at least, Australian children sit comfortably near the top of the international league table with Finnish, New Zealand, and Canadian children (See Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000, 2003).

As Luke and Luke (2001) argue, there may be material reasons for the constant whipping up of panic about the decomposition, rather than celebration of the recomposition, of young people's literacy practices:

...the crises of print literacy and their preferred ameliorative social strategies are being used as a nodal point in public discourse both to delay and sublimate the emergence of new educational paradigms around multiliteracies, around new blended forms of textual and symbolic practice and affiliated modes of identity and social relations, and to forestall a substantive debate over the implications

such shifts might have for an aging, creaky, industrial, print-based schooling infrastructure. (p. 96)

Luke and Luke present their polemical position that “the continued crisis in early print literacy has become a default stalling tactic by educational systems that are unable to come to grips generationally and practically with multiliteracies and increasingly alien and alienated student bodies” (p. 96).

The constitution of literacy crises in exclusively traditionalist terms is important to consider in the context of public concern about boys’ literate practices. Such concern is likely to have been inflated, skewed at least, by the measures that are used, given that research consistently indicates lower levels of engagement with print-based texts (Millard, 1997; OECD, 2000, 2003a, 2003b) and higher levels of use and mastery of digital communications and multi-mediated modes of exchange among boys than among girls (American Association of University Women, 2000; Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, 2000).

INVESTIGATING LITERACY DATA

In Australia, concerns about boys and concerns about literacy have been conflated over the decade into a powerful political agenda focusing on boys’ achievements in literacy-related tasks at school. Apart from media stories that intensify public anxieties, concerns about boys’ achievements have generated largely from research reports showing that, on average, boys demonstrate lower level outcomes than do girls on a range of literacy measures at school.

It is important to recognise here that some of the measures used to demonstrate the case that boys are under-performing in relation to girls are based on relatively narrowly defined aspects of literate practice – for example, results for basic skills tests or for reading and writing benchmarks – while other measures offer broader reflections of literacy achievement – for example, achievement results in the key learning area of English at the senior secondary level of schooling. To this end, an abundant supply of state and national data on various aspects of boys’ and girls’ performance across a range of literate practices, demonstrated across a range of year levels at school, has been collected in Australia

(MCEETYA, 1999–2003; Australian Council for Educational Research 1997a, 1997b; Marks & Ainley, 1997; Masters & Foster; 1997) However, school-based measures typically do not take account of newer literacy sites or practices. As argued elsewhere:

Concerns about boys' literacy performance usually refer specifically to their demonstrated competence in the context of literacy as it is done and evaluated in schools, despite the fact that this represents only one literacy site, and one broad set of literacy practices. Many boys have literacy skills that are not recognised in the classroom, that are potentially powerful and useful in the communication technologies of the future. Surfing the net, reading video screens and engaging with computers all demand levels of literate competence that do not figure highly in school measurements of literacy. And significantly, such literacy sites and literacy competence do not clash with boys' and young men's desire to take up positions as 'masculine' subjects even in the pre-school years. (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p. 54)

Gendered difference with electronic modes of communication is well-documented in research and has been regarded as being implicated in boys' poor levels of achievement in print modes of literacy, and their disengagement in literacy classrooms which frequently rely upon older modes of technology (Beavis, 1999; Frater, 1997; MacDonald, Saunders & Benfield, 1999).

An important point to tentatively pose, therefore, is that boys may underachieve in school-based literacy, but they may not necessarily underachieve in other forms of socially valued and more desirable literate practice. In fact, it is important to consider why it is that the new literate subject, who lives and plays with and through multimedia representations of globalised culture and the new literacies such a culture creates, is not more prominently represented in school cultures, school pedagogies, and assessment regimes. In this sense, it is worth investigating whether it is girls who are foregoing mastery of the literate practices of the future through their lesser engagement with new digital technologies.

Although school-based measures of literacy achievement remain to be further interrogated by researchers and policy makers, the case for a more nuanced reading of gendered learning outcomes in Australian

schools has gained considerable momentum. Given a strong lead, underpinned by large-scale empirical research (Teese, Davies, Carlton, & Polesel, 1995), Australian studies have continued to provide evidence that supports a “which boys?” – and “which girls?” – approach. Large-scale studies have addressed issues related to, for instance, male and female students’ performance at school and their post-school pathways (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000), boys’ educational needs (Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Hahr, 2002), and boys’ school-based literacy achievements (Alloway et al., 2002). Nationally-funded studies like these have been informed and further supported by ethnographic studies and literature on boys’ education (for example, Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Henderson, 2003; Connell, 2000; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Martino, Lingard, & Mills, 2004).

The corpus of research demonstrates the inadequacy of employing the binary category of gender to explain differences in school achievement when learning outcomes can be shown to be more deeply embedded in a web of individual, socio-cultural, and historical understandings about what it means to learn at school, and what it means to be literate in twenty-first century, post-industrial, globalising communities. It is easy to demonstrate the importance of factors other than gender, and to highlight the interplay of gender with other factors in influencing learning, when school results are disaggregated. Although many examples can be offered, two examples may suffice to demonstrate how the question about “which boys” and “which girls” are at risk of failing at school, and its corollary, which boys and which girls are schools likely to fail, is not ideologically driven – quite the contrary, they have a strong evidential base in hard statistical data.

EXAMPLE 1: THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC (DIS)ADVANTAGE

The following graph illustrates the importance of disaggregating achievement data as reflected in the results of a literacy testing program conducted across Australia.¹ The graph in Figure 1 displays the average result for male and female students as well as illustrating the interaction of gender with socio-economic (dis)advantage for the year-7 reading test.

Because of space restriction, only one graph is reproduced here but the same pattern of results was apparent for reading and for writing, for students at each year level tested, that is, years 3, 5 and 7. This same pattern of interaction between gender and socio-economic factors was shown in earlier work by Davy (1995). Importantly, where gendered learning outcomes are a source of national concern and debate, more sophisticated analyses have not been routinely provided by education departments, state or national.

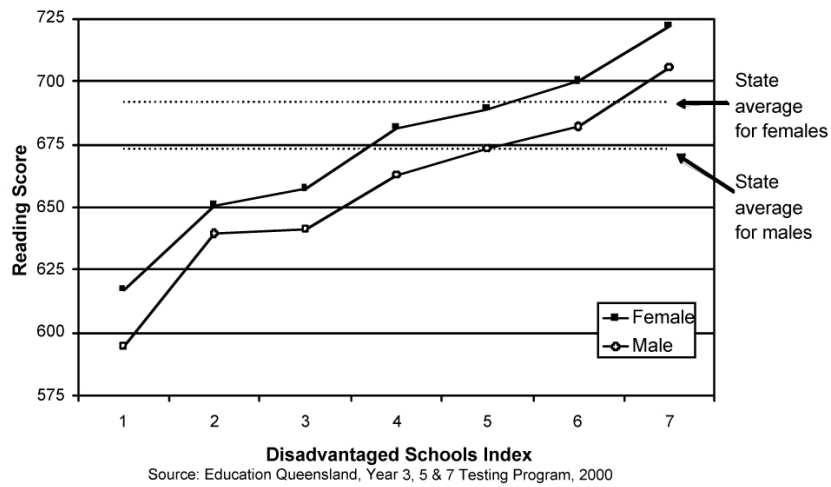


Figure 1: Reading, Year 7: Gender X Disadvantaged Schools Index

By looking first at the state average for females and males, indicated in the horizontal lines in Figure 1, it is clear that girls outperformed boys in reading at year 7. However, when gender is employed as the single identifying feature of the student body, nothing more can be said other than girls, on average, score better than boys. However, when data are further disaggregated, for example, to examine the interaction of gender and socio-economic (dis)advantage, a more complex picture emerges

and a more nuanced story can be extracted from the data about who is under-performing in literacy classrooms.

To this end, Figure 1 displays the interactive effect of gender and socio-economic (dis)advantage as plotted in the roughly diagonal lines on the graph. The graph was constructed using the Disadvantaged Schools Index, available for each school, based on population and housing census data for the catchment area that each school serves. This index² takes account of variables like employment/unemployment, income, education, family structure, housing characteristics, Aboriginality, and English language fluency. In this graph, schools are located in relation to one another with '1' denoting the most disadvantaged, and '7' the most advantaged, catchment areas from which schools draw.

In comparing the roughly diagonal lines with one another, Figure 1 confirms that girls outperformed boys at each step along the index of socio-economic (dis)advantage, testifying to the influence of gender. However, the graph invites more nuanced readings, allowing for other conclusions as well:

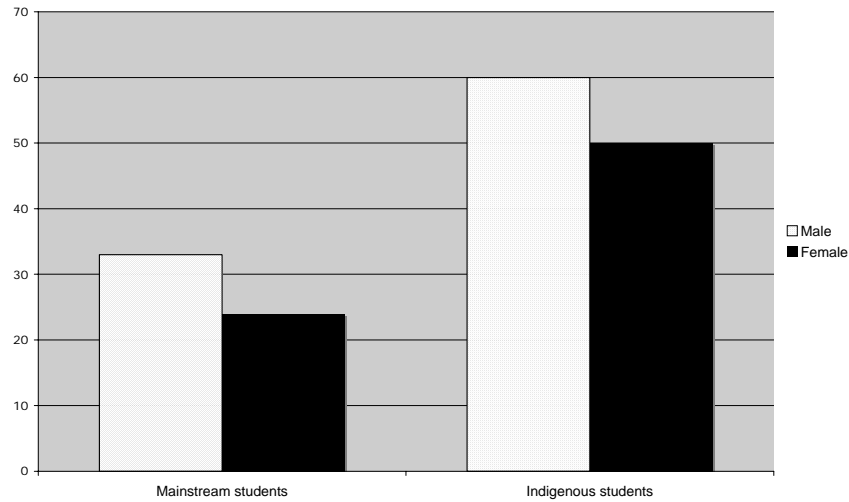
- First, the spread of scores among boys, and among girls, associated with socio-economic (dis)advantage is clearly much greater than the difference in scores between boys and girls. On the basis of these data, it can be argued that an exclusive focus on gender – merely comparing average scores for girls and boys as groups – makes invisible the more powerful impact that poverty and privilege can have on the uptake of school literacy practices, an observation that is borne out by multi-level statistical analyses as well (Masters & Forster, 1997).
- Second, boys at schools that drew from the most advantaged socio-economic catchment areas outperformed girls at schools that drew from the least advantaged socio-economic catchment areas. That is, identifiable cohorts of boys outperformed identifiable cohorts of girls. Compare, for instance, boys in schools drawing from the most affluent catchment areas – for instance, those with a Disadvantaged Schools Index of 7, 6, 5 and 4 – with girls in school catchment areas

marked by relative poverty – for instance, those in schools with a Disadvantaged Schools Index of 1, 2 and 3.

- Third, consistent with other research that has identified a tail of boys at the bottom end of school achievement (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Collins et al, 2000; Cresswell, Rowe, & Withers, 2002), Figure 1 shows that boys at schools serving the most disadvantaged socio-economic catchment areas were the lowest scorers of all. At this point, it is worth considering whether the cohorts of girls attending schools marked by higher concentrations of poverty are much better off than boys who share their circumstances. Girls, as well as boys, who were drawn from relatively poor areas fell considerably below the average reading scores for the state. It is doubtful whether the differential by which these girls beat boys from the same catchment areas would stand them in any better stead with respect to future success at school or in relation to the labour market. Whether such girls are likely to be glossed over, lost from sight completely, in the name of a boys' agenda is another question altogether.

EXAMPLE 2: THE IMPACT OF INDIGENEITY

In Australia, Indigenous students generally demonstrate considerably lower levels of literacy achievement at school than non-Indigenous students. This situation has been well documented and is a source of national concern (MCEETYA, 1999–2003). Further arguing the case for more careful reading of data, Figure 2 identifies the percentage of mainstream boys and girls and the percentage of Indigenous boys and girls who were identified as being in the bottom two bands of a state-level year-3 Basic Skills Test for literacy. The reason for exploring 1999 test results is that the disaggregation of data showing gender's association with Indigeneity was available only for that year. With the exception of 1999, Australia's national reports on schooling do not offer even the simplest of disaggregated results like these, providing instead, single factor comparisons between boys and girls, mainstream and Indigenous students, and students from English and other linguistic backgrounds.



Extrapolated from data presented in the NSW report to MCEETYA (1999)

Figure 2: New South Wales Basic Skills Test, 1999. Per cent of Year 3 Students identified within Bands 1 and 2 for Literacy

At a glance, Figure 2 confirms gender's association with year-3 literacy skills for mainstream and for Indigenous students. That is, for each cohort of students, more boys than girls are locked into the lowest bands of skills achievement. However, it is also the case that a much higher percentage of Indigenous girls are locked into those lower skills levels than are mainstream boys, identifying Indigenous girls as being a higher risk category than mainstream boys.

In brief, gender is an influential factor to consider when examining school-based literacy outcomes; its impact cannot be denied. But gender cannot, by itself, explain how students take up literacy practices at school. As others have noted, "the 'underachievement' of boys at school is a strongly classed and racialized phenomenon" (Epstein et al, 1998, p. 11) and other factors not considered in this article, including the geographical location in which students attend school, their language backgrounds, and sexuality will be important features to consider as well (ACER, 1997; Epstein, 1998; Martino, 1999). With its restricted focus, this

article demonstrates that boys from low socio-economic backgrounds and Indigenous boys are at high risk of being among the bottom performers in literacy classrooms. At the same time, identifiable cohorts of girls share this space with their brothers, a situation that may offer them no more certain rewards.

In Australia the “which boys” movement has been further boosted by the recent release of large-scale, multilevel modelling analyses that illustrate “the error in the general statement that ‘boys are underperforming in relation to girls’, based on overall patterns in aggregated data” (Richardson, 2005, p. 112). In researching the variable of student ability, Richardson has shown that at every ability level, boys and girls score both above and below their predicted score. “The typical pattern was that bright boys achieved as well, if not better than bright girls, but more lower-ability boys performed worse than lower-ability girls” (p. 115). In choosing to work with ability measures – while acknowledging their contested nature – Richardson argues that the educationally sensible questions to pursue are “Which boys are performing better than similar ability boys within the school?” and “What factors are influencing some low ability boys to perform well, while other low ability boys do poorly?” (p. 115). The same questions are asked in relation to girls.

Given more than a decade of public and professional debate, political buy-in, and research studies addressing issues related to boys, literacies, and schooling, a steady momentum has been gathering across Australia wherein the complexities of the agenda are more readily recognised. When teachers are given the opportunity to explore literacy and other schooling data in more sophisticated ways, they recognise the interplay of gender with social and cultural variables; they understand that it will be *necessary*, but *insufficient*, to continue focussing on gender’s association with school literacy outcomes; and they realise that the task of reform is conceptually complex.

What many educators – in schools, education systems, and universities – now recognise is that there is a real danger in *not* moving towards more complex analyses and understandings, of not asking “which boys?” – and “which girls?” – are most at risk. The danger, of course, is that government funding can be misdirected, diluted in its

impact, as it is spread to enhance boys' education – across boys who are “at risk” of not mastering literacy practices, and those who are not at risk at all. And, of course, based on the assumption that it is boys who are not doing well in literacy, there is a danger that groups of girls who underachieve in literacy can be overlooked altogether. Put boldly, there is a real investment risk in throwing money at advantaged boys for whom school literacy practices reflect their home literacy practices and for whom the outcomes of schooling are still promising, if not privileged, while more deserving students experience the effects of a diluted national effort.

INTRODUCING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

What follows here may seem, at first, paradoxical. That is, while arguing that a “which boys?” – and, indeed, “which girls?” – approach has been legitimised in research, government funding in Australia is still largely available for projects on boys. In adopting different but often overlapping approaches, research has taken a range of directions including, for instance, adopting models based on effective and motivating pedagogy (Martin, 2002, 2003), promoting critically literate and transformative practices among boys, and girls, encouraging them to read and contest the texts through which their lives and identities are constructed (Martino et al., 2004), expanding repertoires of literate practice (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Alloway et al., 2006), and, more generally, focussing on “productive pedagogies” (Lingard et al., 2004).

Following substantial investments in boys' education over the decade, in 2005, as a particular example of investment in the agenda, the Australian government proposed a \$19.4 million professional learning exercise for teachers. The investment saw the development of a *Success for Boys* professional learning package (Alloway et al, 2006), its initial trialling in 40 schools in 2005, its implementation in 800 funded schools across Australia in 2006, and its further implementation in an additional 800 schools in 2007. The package includes a module on boys and literacy, boys and ICT, Indigenous boys, and mentoring for boys. These modules are woven together through a core module that introduces issues of

concern, a conceptual framework for working productively with boys, and a collaborative inquiry in action approach to improvement.

For those willing to work with paradoxical states, the challenge was one of accepting a government brief to develop professional learning materials, the title of which – *Success for Boys* – essentialises boys and excludes girls, while at the same time unravelling the complexities of the issues, highlighting the necessity for a multi-factored approach, and underscoring the absolute requisite of attending to girls who are struggling with the literacy practices of the school and failing to complete their studies along with boys. The *Success for Boys* program attempts to work with such intricacies in a range of ways, a sample of which are exemplified in the following points.

Adopting a Positive Approach

The *Success for Boys* program is premised on the assumption that gender gaps are transmutable. Australia, as indicative of other countries, can do more to improve its situation, even when dealing with blunt measures like average differences between groups. For example, although Australia nestled among the highest scoring nations for overall reading literacy in the PISA league tables, its gender gap was larger than that witnessed between boys and girls in other high scoring countries, for instance, Korea and the UK (OECD, 2003b). Canada, New Zealand, and Finland too might be troubled in sharing a situation wherein high overall performance as nations is dampened by acknowledgement of less favourable performance in relation to a gender gap.

Although the details of the metrics may be critiqued, the league tables, if taken at face value, provide direction and incentive for Australia to look more closely at how versions of masculinity, as lived and experienced within the national context, might be implicated in literacy learning at school. The variation among countries in the magnitude of gender differences points in the direction of Australia improving on this score rather than resting on the assumption that literacy is naturally a girls' domain.

Working with a Conceptual Framework

The professional learning program begins by integrating cognate research into a conceptual framework offering teachers insights as to where they might exert their energies in planning, enacting, and monitoring success for boys – however success is constituted in the particular context – in self-reflexive ways. In doing so, the program resists an ad hoc approach that is sometimes driven by teachers' understandable thirst for instant remedy, for lists of strategies that have been proven to work, and for litanies of tips in which they invest professional and personal hope of reform. Although the program documents lists and findings from other sources (e.g., Ofsted, 2005), it does so, partially at least, to encourage teachers to better understand the contextual specificity and contingency of the strategies they employ, taking into account the boys whom they teach, and the communities in which they work. In asking teachers to adopt a big picture frame from which they can draw and trial contextually-responsive strategies, the program rejects an approach that peddles a too-easy message implying that if teachers perform 'x', rather than 'y,' then boys' learning will improve irrespective of context (Rogers, 2003). Although teachers may wish otherwise, in the field of education, the certainty of litmus tests do not prevail with students in classrooms.

Acknowledging a Set of Caveats

Professional learning as mapped out in the *Success for Boys* program is governed by a number of caveats that, from the outset, make explicit the program's rejection of an essentialist standpoint. Given that the program parameters incorporate a multi-factor approach, boys are not positioned as a homogenous group. On the basis of such evidence, it is argued that a "which boys?" approach is appropriate to adopt because there appears to be no pure essence to being a boy. In further de-essentialising boys as a group, similar evidence is offered to argue the case that no one learning style characterises boys. The caveat warns that teachers who assume that boys are so characterised run the risk of responding to boys in restrictive ways, limiting what they can achieve, and failing to offer them opportunities to learn in other ways (Ofsted, 2003a; DEMOS, 2004).

Among other caveats, the program also cautions teachers to be vigilant, ensuring that a focus on boys does not translate into a zero sum game wherein success for boys is won at the expense of girls. Teachers are asked to be attentive in monitoring learning outcomes – anticipated and unanticipated – for boys and for girls. They are asked not to overlook those girls who, along with their brothers, are likely to achieve less than what they otherwise might from school.

Critiquing Common Explanations

Although the caveats govern the framework from which teachers are asked to work, the professional learning also leads teachers beyond common explanations about why boys, on average, may under-perform in school-based literacy tasks and assessment regimes. The program critiques the usual neurological and biochemical explanations, provides evidence that the under-representation of male teachers does not account for the phenomenon, and asks teacher to (re)consider the culture of blame that so often generates between teachers and parents in locating the source of concern (Alloway et al., 2006). And so, teachers are asked to abandon deficit thinking about boys – to move away from populist discourse about boys having too much testosterone to sit still and pay attention, too few male teachers who stand as surrogates for absent fathers, too little operational capacity on the left side of their brain, and so on. They are asked instead to understand how masculinity is implicated in boys' engagement with school-based learning, how curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices are deeply implicated in boys' responses to literacy learning, how literacy practices are transforming through the production of new technologies, and how wider school practices, including community engagement, might also be key to understanding how an agenda focussing on improving boys' literacy learning could be achieved.

There are other tasks too for teachers to perform. The agenda is complex and it certainly requires a more nuanced response than one premised on gender wars and battles, and on fears that a male stronghold on political, economic, and social processes has been dismantled. The Australian story, although not unified, can be read as one wherein teachers are currently being encouraged, through the

injection of professional learning materials and funds, to swim against the tide of populist discourse about boys, and about literacy, and to engage with the agenda in all of its complexity, acknowledging that the swim is a tough one to negotiate.

NOTES

¹ Results on reading and writing tests for years 3, 5 and 7 are collected nationally and fed back to State Education systems for information, review, and future tracking of each State's progress. The data that support this graph were supplied by Education Queensland for the purpose of another research project but were re-analysed in this form to illustrate this point here.

² It is acknowledged that the disadvantaged schools index is a crude measure of individual students' circumstances. The index does not take account of social mobility of students in transferring from one school to another. More refined analyses employing the socio-economic status of each student in relation to their individual results were not possible because that information was not readily available from the state department.

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