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## **The differential recognition of children's cultural practices in middle primary literacy classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that teachers' recognition of children's cultural practices is an important positive step in helping socio-economically disadvantaged children engage with school literacies. Based on twenty-one longitudinal case studies of children's literacy development over a three-year period, the authors demonstrate that when children's knowledges and practices assembled in home and community spheres are treated as valuable material for school learning, children are more likely to invest in the work of acquiring school literacies. However they show also that whilst some children benefit greatly from being allowed to draw on their knowledge of popular culture, sports and the outdoors, other children's interests may be ignored or excluded. Some differences in teachers' valuing of home and community cultures appeared to relate to gender dimensions.

### **Keywords**

Literacy; middle primary; low socio-economic; longitudinal case studies; gender; cultural practices.

## **The differential recognition of children's cultural practices in middle primary literacy classrooms**

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on a three year longitudinal study of children's literacy development in the middle years of primary school. The study considered how particular children acquired literacies at school over time – children who were growing up and going to school in three different low socio-economic communities.<sup>1</sup> The one rural and two suburban schools in the study each had strong reputations for their work in literacy and social justice, attempted to set and meet high expectations for their students' learning, and actively worked against deficit assessments of student potential and the associated "pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman 1991). The original cohort of twenty-one children (ten boys and eleven girls aged eight years of age in school Year Three) were selected in consultation with teachers and chosen on the basis of membership in categories of students statistically known to underachieve: students in poverty, students using English as their second language, and students living in isolated areas. Using ethnographic methods, the research team conducted twenty-one case studies of these children's literacy development across Years Three, Four and Five as the children aged from eight to ten years old.

We understand literacy as socially constructed in and through everyday institutional and discursive practices. Thus it is in day-to-day living that student differences (such as socio-economic status, race, bilingualism, gender, location) can impact on how literacy is learned, taught and assessed. From this perspective, literacy is seen not as a unitary skill on a single developmental scale, but as repertoires of practice which are learnt in use over time with assistance from teachers, parents and peers. Our object in this research was to explore what each particular case study child was offered and took up from their literacy curricula and to describe the literacies they were acquiring and being rewarded for. Thus, our goal was not to compare children on a pre-developed grid of competencies, but rather to inductively analyze the kinds of literacies they were learning; the factors shaping their uptake of the literacy curriculum; and each child's way of doing literacy in school over a period of time. On this basis, we hoped to be able to draw some conclusions about children's pathways to literacy in and for the middle years of primary school.

Case studies were based upon researchers' and teachers' observations, students' classroom products, report cards, standardised assessment data, and student and teacher interviews. The data comprised the ordinary, everyday practices of teachers and students, including (a) units of work extending over several weeks, (b) individual student activity, and (c) whole class assessment practices. The different data sets produced a rich picture of the curriculum that was offered, how students engaged with it, what they produced through it, and how teachers assessed students' performances.

The study's overall findings (reported in Comber & Barnett 2003; Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon & Pitt 2002) are relevant to contemporary debates about the supposed fourth grade slump in children's literacy development (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin 1990; Gee 2000; Luke, Matters, Herschell, Grace, Barrett & Land 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). Originally reported by Chall and her colleagues, Snow et al. summarise the phenomenon in the following way: 'When looking at the test scores or

other performance indicators, there is sometimes a decline in the rate of progress and a decrease in the number of children achieving at good levels reported for fourth graders' (Snow et al 1998, p. 78). They offer three explanations, the first of which they immediately discard as least likely:

- 1) some children simply stop growing at reading at fourth grade
- 2) the slump is an artefact; that is the tasks in school and the tasks in assessment instruments may change so much between third and fourth grade that it is not sensible to compare
- 3) previously 'unimportant' reading difficulties may appear for the first time in the fourth grade when children are dealing with nonfiction materials.

Gee's explanation, which is more in line with what our study indicated, is that these children 'never learned to read in the sense of being able to actively recruit distinctive oral and written social languages for learning within socioculturally recognizable and meaningful academic Discourses' (Gee 2000, p. 413). As we will show it may also be the case that some children's repertoires of practice may not be recognised in school literacy contexts. In other words some of the cultural practices that children bring to school may remain invisible to teachers and therefore unrecognised and unable to be put into service as a bridge to the academic Discourses required by schooling. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms, some children's knowledges, habitus and cultural practices do not count as cultural or linguistic capital in literacy lessons, whilst other children's do. Indeed in the microcosm of everyday classroom life teachers may unwittingly confer different values on the cultural resources of different children, even as they attempt to be more inclusive. As we go on to argue, the extent to which different children can make use of their everyday community knowledges or their interests in popular culture in literacy lessons is contingent on what teachers recognise as valuable. Further, it may be the case that teachers give more credence to boys' rather than girls' 'outside interests' in their attempts to engage them in the curriculum.

In referring to Gee's discussion of the fourth grade slump, Luke and his colleagues rephrase the argument to state that Gee 'attributes ... the "slump" in reading achievement that occurs in later primary years to unchallenging and irrelevant curriculum' (Luke et al 2000, p. 11). The fourth grade slump phenomenon supposedly operates across populations and, along with other attempts to standardise and normalise student performance, runs the risk of bracketing out what is actually experienced by different learners. We certainly did not assume the existence of such a phenomenon, but we did set out to explore what seemed to us the largely uncharted waters of the middle primary years, to see what counted as literacy and literacy development beyond the early years. In addition we sought to treat school literacy as the object of study – as an anthropological phenomenon in its own right in the way that others have studied literate practices in communities (Barton & Hamilton 1998; Prinsloo & Breier 1996; Street 1995). It seemed to us that it was important to make 'school literacy' strange, rather than a given (see also Omerod & Ivanic 2000). The study indicated not only significant differences in the literacy development of different children at this stage of schooling, but also suggested that different children were actually assembling different literacy repertoires from each other (Comber et al 2002). The point here is not only that this under-studied period of schooling is key in children's literacy development, but that at this point children do not simply develop

along a normal continuum at different rates, but that they are acquiring distinctive repertoires of literate practices which may vary significantly from their peers.

Based on a meta-analysis of the case studies, we identified key at-school factors that made a difference to the children's literacy learning in the middle primary years (Comber & Barnett 2003). These included:

- the recognition factor (the extent to which what children know and can do is 'visible' to teachers and counts in the classroom, and children can see that it counts)
- the resources factor (the extent to which schools have the human and material resources they need)
- the curriculum factor (the quality, scope and depth of what is made available)
- the pedagogical factor (the quality of teacher instructional talk, teacher-student relationships and assessment practices)
- the take-up factor (the extent to which children appropriate literate practices and school authorised discourses)
- the translation factor (the extent to which children can make use of and assemble repertoires of practice which they can use in new situations).

In this paper we draw on four case studies and focus only on the first of these factors, the recognition factor - the extent to which what children know and can do is 'visible' to teachers and counts in the classroom, and children can see that it counts. We problematise standardised and normative notions of 'ideal literacy development' and show that, for the children we studied, literacy learning was contingent upon whether they were able to make use of existing repertoires of practice at the same time as they assembled unfamiliar discourses and practices valued in school. We highlight the term 'visibility' to indicate that children's mobilising of their cultural practices for school literacy is contingent upon their teachers' *recognition* that these are meaningful resources for academic work.

Thomson (2002, p. 2) has recently argued that all children come to school with 'virtual school bags' full of different knowledges, narratives, interests and understandings. However as Thomson points out, only some children get to open their school bags and take out various home and community based knowledges and make use of them in school. Indeed our research suggests that on occasion teachers may not always recognise such cultural resources as useful for school (Comber et al 2002; Comber & Kamler 2004). When children move into the school their different dispositions, cultural capital and indeed their very habitus are likely to be valued unequally by the institution. Some children will appear as 'fish in water', as already having 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990), while others will not.

Many educational theorists and researchers have tackled the question about how to best capitalise on the different cultural resources and knowledges that children bring to school. This is contingent upon what educators recognise as knowledge. For instance a child's bilingualism can be seen as a plus or as a deficit; a child's expertise in looking after younger siblings can be thought of as a strength or as a drawback; a child who knows their way around the local neighbourhood may be judged as 'street-wise' or as independent. Educators bring a combination of professional and moral judgements to evaluating children's performances and potential. Indeed teachers do

not operate in a vacuum and what comes to be set as an acceptable standard, though arbitrary, fundamentally affects teachers' judgements. If standardised English alone is measured, then it is more difficult for teachers to see bi- or multi-lingualism as a resource. However teachers still have some room to move in terms of how they respond to individual students in the context of everyday classroom life. How teachers understand and value what children bring to school relates to what counts as valued knowledge.

During the course of the research we began to realise that gender had an impact on what teachers recognised as relevant material for school literacy learning. Recent research in literacy and gender has suggested possible reasons for the differential literacy achievements of boys and girls and potential strategies for alleviating these differences. For example, researchers have suggested that boys' literacy development may benefit from them being given more 'room to move' (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt 2002; Comber 2004; Newkirk 2002). Approaches which allow boys to be active, to make reference to popular culture, and to draw on their personal interests have been advocated, as well as incorporating multi-modal and multi-media as avenues of expression and communication. In other research, even young children have been found to use the media as resources on which to draw in an active construction of gendered identities (e.g. Buckingham 1993; Buckingham & Bragg 2004; Kelley, Buckingham & Davies 1999), with some media providing resources that provide some children with "a place to speak from" about gender, with confidence and pleasure' (Buckingham & Bragg 2004, p. 73). Our study provided some support for these findings.

In addition to gender, age and stage of development were in the forefront of teachers' thinking about literacy curriculum. In particular, teachers in our study believed that it was important for middle primary children to learn to produce longer and more complex pieces of writing and to produce writing related to 'research' and resource-based learning. Being able to build pieces of writing from ideas and notes was important for success, as was the organisational capacity required to maintain books and folders in good order, so that worksheets, notes and successive drafts were all easily accessible over extended periods of time. Successful achievement required mastery of the report genre in the production of 'projects', but it also required quite complex 'research' skills of reading, assessing, sorting and synthesising resources as well as reassembling and translating them into successive drafts which demonstrated cumulative understandings and attention to detail. Some children brought these dispositions with them into the middle primary years' classrooms where they were recognised and rewarded. Others in the same classrooms found it more difficult to understand what was required and to build on what they brought with them to meet these new expectations. We illustrate our argument with reference to the South Australian cases of classmates Jayita and Jeffrey (students at a rural/regional school) and Craig and Michelle (students at a poor highly culturally diverse school in a western suburb of Adelaide). Even though these pairs of students appeared to experience the 'same curriculum', as we will show, the extent to which their different repertoires of practices were recognised and therefore mobilised as capital for classroom literate labour varied considerably.

### **Jayita: school diaries and schooled literacies**

Of Indian ethnicity, Jayita's family had recently emigrated from New Zealand and settled in a regional community of the Riverland of South Australia. Jayita spoke Punjabi at home with her family but was not literate in that language. She was enthusiastic about her schooling and had a high level of family support for her endeavours at school. At the time of the Year Three standardised literacy test, Jayita had been learning English for only two years. Not surprisingly she was ranked lower on the scale than many of her peers. Her test results in Year Five indicate a relative gain in relation to expectations. They suggest that she was making significant improvements in her literacy learning, but was more able in tests of formal language and of reading than she was in writing - as might be expected for someone in only their fifth year of learning English.

Regardless of her test results, Jayita was considered to be a successful student right from the beginning of the study. More importantly for our purposes in this paper, her teachers saw her as a child who understood what it meant to *be* a student. Teacher comments in successive report cards over three years of schooling support this:

- Jayita has been a conscientious student who has a strong desire to learn (Year Three)
- Jayita is an enthusiastic and conscientious student who has achieved a high standard in all areas due to her consistent hard work (Year Four)
- Jayita has been a quiet, conscientious and capable class member, who has achieved excellent results in all areas (Year Five).

What *counted* for teachers as being a successful student was the way that Jayita focussed on set tasks, was quiet in her classroom demeanour, and was meticulous in her presentation of work. Jayita was well aware of this and we saw evidence of her progressive focussing on these things that she saw counted in her teachers' eyes. As we will see, Jeffrey's situation was quite different. He was talkative, did not focus on set tasks and was disorganised and untidy when it came to his school materials.

On one occasion Jayita was seated in a position where we were unable to get closer than several desks away and we were concerned that we would hear very little of what she said to her peers or to the teacher. However as her teacher had predicted, Jayita said little at all. In this lesson we saw two main activities. The first was based on Hilary Janks' (1993) work on identity and power; the second was a visit to the library to return and select books.

During both activities Jayita was on task and attentive, but rarely showed visible signs of investment in the task. That is, she was not animated or verbal. She simply did as she was instructed. She rarely offered answers. The most interest we saw on Jayita's part was in her management of her stationery and school diary. When a fellow student repeatedly asked to borrow a stationery item from Jayita she was extremely reluctant and declined. Stationery seemed to play a very important role in Jayita's school day. She had a very large pencil case with *Looney Tunes* (Warner Bros.) pens; she had white-out, rubber and sharpener and many coloured pencils including the more expensive metallic colours. She was continually erasing or whitening out work she considered incorrect or not neat enough. The look of her work was clearly important to her. When asked to note homework in her diary, we witnessed an efficiency and

devotion we had not seen in other times during the lesson. Her diary was meticulous; homework was written in neatly; marks for previous maths and spelling tests were entered; details of reminders were recorded; books borrowed and due dates were entered in her reading diary; there was some kind of colour-coding done with fluorescent highlighters. On the cover were a cut-out picture of Cathy Freeman (an Aboriginal Australian Olympic gold medallist) and a list of public holidays. Clearly Jayita was an assiduous diary keeper.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

Figure 1: Entries in Jayita's diary

Here was evidence of Jayita's conscientiousness as a student, but more than that, here was evidence also of learning a schooled literacy upon which she clearly placed some value and in fact to which she added value with her own embellishments. In the process she appeared to be learning a number of allied skills (for example, record-keeping and note-taking) and at the same time produced an impressive artefact. Omerod and Ivanic (2000, p. 91) argue for the need for literacy researchers to consider texts as material objects with 'distinct physical features', whose very materiality might have particular significance for children. However while we were fascinated in what Jayita was doing, we did not immediately think of the diary event as important data, nor of the diary as an artefact that had much to teach us about Jayita's acquisition of literacies at school. School diaries are so much a part of the everyday textual practices of schooling in middle primary grades that we barely saw the complex literate work in which Jayita was engaged. And yet this keeping of a diary was of course a 'new literacy' as far as the children were concerned, one of many that they encountered for the first time in fourth grade.

For middle primary students, by no means only Jayita, it seems likely that the objects of their literacy labours assume some significance. At this point in primary school children become very much aware of differences which may be visible to others. Indeed differences in literacy abilities are often quite public through the public results in spelling tests, the length, neatness and presentation of assignments, the kinds of books borrowed from the library and so on. In addition, children's material resources for producing school texts are often visibly different. Compared with her immediate peers, Jayita was unusually well-resourced in terms of stationery. The positive effects of these resources were evident in her diary keeping and in some of her other written products. Jayita's project work, for example, was kept tidily in her folder and the final copies were brightly coloured and richly textured objects that she had obviously laboured over. Her access to and care of these resources were integrally connected to her teacher's 'recognition' of her meticulous attention to detail in her school work. Importantly from Jayita's perspective, there was no dissonance between her building of a gendered identity and a literate disposition. She was clearly assembling what might be described as secretarial or organisational literacies that were of considerable value at that time in her school trajectory as she grappled with the more complex literacies of middle primary. The same could not usually be said for the project work produced by her classmate Jeffrey. That is, the dispositions, as well as the material and other resources that Jayita brought with her from home, were more visible and more highly valued than those of Jeffrey.

### **Jeffrey: infrequent recognition of cultural resources**

Jeffrey, classmate to Jayita in Years Three and Four, lived with his two employed parents and three older brothers. Their home language was English and their culture was Anglo-Australian. Jeffrey was an active boy who loved the outdoors. In his writing and talk he referred to playing football, being good at soccer, and going fishing and camping. He was also physically active in class: moving around the room, leaving the room to check his locker or go to the toilet, swinging backwards and forwards on his chair, and occasionally falling off and causing a commotion in class.

Although his teachers spoke of Jeffrey with affection, there were many times when he failed to live up to their expectations in relation to classroom norms. What was made particularly visible both in the classroom and in his reports was Jeffrey's apparent disorganisation and inability to stay 'on task'. He was regularly chastised for not knowing what he should be doing, not having his worksheets or his books, not completing enough work during class time, and not having done his homework. In contrast to Jayita, Jeffrey appeared unconcerned about his possessions, including his school materials. Teachers noticed this and tried to get Jeffrey to understand that what they perceived as lack of application to the task and lack of organisation of materials was likely to affect his chances of academic success. The ways in which he was developing his masculinity were taking Jeffrey in a different direction than the literate dispositions required by middle primary schooling. The disciplined, sedentary nature of classroom lessons was in contrast to Jeffrey's lively, physical and mobile habitus.

The results of the Year Three standardised literacy test suggested that Jeffrey experienced difficulties with literacy tasks in the classroom and his end-of-year report cards indicated that his inability to stay 'on task' was related to his low level of achievement in a number of learning areas: 'easily distracted from the task at hand' (Maths); 'must stay on task to do his best work in the given time' (Music); 'has been easily distracted' (Society and Environment); and 'needs to become more focussed on the tasks associated with the work' (Health and Physical Education). Despite a relatively high level of one-on-one support from adults other than the teacher, Jeffrey was not developing the skills required to be an 'independent' learner and therefore did not demonstrate what counted as success in the eyes of his middle primary teachers.

Research was a key feature of the enacted literacy curriculum in the middle primary classrooms we observed. Unfortunately, however, in his 'research projects' Jeffrey did not always seem to be able to present teachers with the standard of work they were looking for. In Year Five, for example, his teacher Steve wrote that Jeffrey's presentation of his project on chimpanzees was 'rather scrappy, untidy and incomplete.' Overall his work on this project was considered to be 'below standard', was noted as being late, and was summarised by the teacher in his comment that 'I can't see 5 weeks work'. A similar assessment was made of a project on pharaohs carried out in Year Six on which the teacher made comments indicating that Jeffrey had not understood the requirements of the task. The content of his writing showed that rather than staying with the topic of pharaohs, Jeffrey had unwittingly wandered off to the topic of scribes. The teacher's summative comments on this work were that 'I found your project very confusing. It did not follow a clear plan about Pharaohs'. In sum, by Year Six Jeffrey was still not successfully producing the kinds of reports based on independent research that were required for success.

Nonetheless, there were occasions when Jeffrey achieved better results. His interest in camping and the outdoors, along with his prowess in sporting activities, provided material for some of his most sustained and successful writing. Examples include his writing about a local football hero; his script of a fictional interview with Chinese martial arts expert and film star Jet Lee; his ‘imaginative text involving related ideas in a sequence’ for which he drew on his experiences of going fishing with his father; and his recount of a class excursion to a regional research facility run by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

Of particular interest here is the fact that Jeffrey performed very well on some writing tasks which, although not labelled by his teachers as research, nonetheless required him to collect, collate and synthesise knowledge – the very skills that teachers nominated as being crucial for children to develop in the middle years. For example, the script of the Jet Lee interview was produced as part of a unit of work on conversation and dialogue and therefore was not officially recognised as research. However, Jeffrey’s writing about Lee included the successful and seamless integration of facts about Lee’s life and career that might, in other contexts, count as research. In this piece his handwriting was also uncharacteristically neat and well controlled, suggesting that here Jeffrey had a commitment to the production of what counted as good quality work according to middle primary classroom norms.

*Insert about here Figure 2*

Figure 2: Jeffrey’s ‘interview’ with Jet Lee

A second example of writing for which Jeffrey achieved academic success was produced as a result of an ‘Ecowatch Field Trip’ to a local CSIRO research station. On this excursion students were shown how to set up insect traps to assist the CSIRO researchers in their collection of data about the insect species of the region. On subsequent occasions students classified the insects that were caught in the traps. On the day of the excursion, the preparatory work that led to the eventual piece of writing – a ‘recount’ of the trip - included an invitation to students to ‘have a closer look at two of the most common plants in the habitat’. To do this they were asked to use their senses to consider the plants’ colour, shape and height and to describe their stems, leaves and so on. Students were also asked to provide landform descriptions, not by using words, but rather by drawing pictures and looking for signs of animals and humans. Later, in response to the teacher’s request that students use their notes to ‘tell me what the River Red Gum or the Lignum looks like’, Jeffrey produced the kind of detailed writing that teachers commonly found lacking in his research reports. He wrote: ‘they were greyish green on the trunk and the height was tall and some wer short and the stems were very tough’ (original spelling). Similarly, when invited to draw one of the traps they had set, Jeffrey produced what his teacher assessed to be a piece of work that showed ‘great detail’. Finally, when asked to write a recount of the excursion Jeffrey produced an extended piece of detailed prose that compared well with other students of his age.

It was this excursion during Year Four that elicited Jeffrey’s most enthusiastic response to school tasks, and the highest proportion of ‘very good’ assessments from his teacher. Of course this learning activity took place outdoors and was a hands-on task that not only drew on his own experience and observations in the field, but also

had real consequences in a scientific project, factors that have been noted as key in building boys' repertoires of literate practices (Alloway et al 2002). From our observations, this was one of very few occasions on which the cultural resources that Jeffrey brought to school were recognised and valued and this seemed to make a significant difference to the quality of his writing. There was at least a match between what he produced and what had been required. Unfortunately for Jeffrey, however, this was a rare case in his middle primary years; a time when his resources, interests and dispositions were recognised and made visible, and valued according to classroom norms.

### **Craig: video-narratives as cultural resources for writing**

Most teachers who make time for 'free writing' or 'story writing' in their literacy programs have at one time or another despaired about children's tendencies to retell sequences from movies, cartoons and TV programs. Many of those have worried about what to do with children's propensity, particularly, but not exclusively boys', to focus on violence and horror (see Hicks & Dolan 2003 for a discussion of primary girls' engagement with horror fiction). It is as though as teachers wish that children would intuit that the narrative models they expect them to appropriate are those from children's literature, not from popular culture. However for some time now many educators have begun to see that children's knowledge of popular culture can form an important bridge for children learning to represent meaning through school literacies (Dyson 1997; Marsh 2005; Pahl & Rowsell 2005). Indeed we take this position ourselves and actively support teachers to recognise children's knowledge of TV, film, cartoons, computer games and so on as valuable material for learning about textual practices, language and power and how different media work culturally (Comber 2001; Nixon 1999, 2002; Nixon & Comber 2005). Craig was a primary school boy who benefited significantly from this approach as we will see.

Craig was the youngest of four brothers in a single parent family where the father had custody, Craig's mother having moved interstate several years earlier. Craig's family received a low income. The school, Forestview, was a recognised disadvantaged school and indeed was located in one of the poorest suburbs in Australia. When originally observed Craig was reluctant to engage in school reading and writing. He was known amongst his peers and by his teachers as having a 'tough persona' (Badger 2003). When he did write it was very often about violent videos and films which had watched or heard about. Over the period of the study we witnessed Craig's make significant literacy development, in part because he had been able to make use of his cultural resources, even violent narratives, in learning to write.

Marnie, Craig's Year Two/Three teacher, explains her understanding of Craig.

Craig is a very complicated student to understand and teach. To him image is everything. I have seen him refuse to participate, have an attempt or conform in any way and go through the behaviour management steps if he thought his position, image, power, relationship, was being challenged. To motivate and involve him in learning, his interests needed to be included and valued in the classroom and he needed to know you liked him. He did not relate to school literacies. He also had a low self-esteem and was very reluctant to get involved, take risks or show his 'real' self. I got to know Craig as a learner but I never

really knew him. He was always playing a role or covering up. He would always put up a front, saying and doing what he thought you wanted him to do or doing the outrageous to shock and to draw attention to himself. His bluff and attention seeking comments were another sign of his insecurity and a way of keeping you distracted so that you did not notice his weaknesses.

Marnie had done a lot of thinking about Craig and his particular needs. She, along with his Year Four/Five teacher Bette, intended to wean him off violence as a topic by gradually introducing other material that would engage his interest. Yet over time they negotiated a deal that allowed his tough persona to merge with his school literate identity. They did not deny him the opportunities to express his interest; indeed they indulged his fascination because they believed it was having significant academic pay-offs. He was writing more and writing more willingly. Craig went from being a non-writer at the beginning of year three to producing long and detailed narratives. Despite his toughness, Craig was not seen as a 'violent boy' and his desire to write about violence was accommodated because 'at least he's writing'. He had, with the help of his teachers and his cultural resources, gone from a refusing reader and writer to an enthusiastic participant. This 'allowance' gave Craig room to move within the classroom environment and assisted him to gradually build a literate disposition.

While Craig's teachers bent over backwards to engage him in schooling through his investments in popular culture, as we go on to show in considering Michelle's case, this option was not equally available to all. We now realise that teachers need to be sure that when it comes to incorporating popular culture there are not differential requirements and allowances made for boys and girls.

### **Michelle: producer of boring stories**

Michelle was Craig's classmate in Years Three and Five. Her school records indicated significant problems with irregular attendance (ie 19.5 days away and 25 days late in the first half of year five). In her report cards teachers stated that she was 'very pleasant', 'lovely', and 'cooperative', yet they noted that she was often off-task, easily distracted and struggled academically.

She really does have a good work ethos. She's a hard worker. She's a trier but she needs everything in concrete and that was really demonstrated this morning and that was really shown this morning when we were converting centimetres to metres.

While Michelle is recognised for her positive work attitude, her lack of mastery of abstract concepts is flagged as a problem. Like Craig, Michelle's interests included popular culture, including vampire movies, the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, the school disco, as well as her family's social world and she exhibited these interests in her free writing. However, her Year Five teacher complained that while there was some development in her ideas, her stories were still limited:

But she's still ... it's a very immature presentation. It's still around the family, it's still around animals, but it's not very abstract.

Michelle's stories it seems were lacking in her teacher's eyes. However, Michelle's corpus of writing did show evidence of attempts to appropriate from story books, movies and her social world. A fellow researcher noted that Michelle was able to incorporate storybook language, to include the essential plot element of the vampire movie genre and to invent fictitious characters who progress the complication. What Michelle achieved in this and other texts 'was a complex weaving of elements appropriated from different sources into the tapestry of her own written products' (Badger 2001, p. 153). This story went on to detail the interactions between the characters as they run to each other's houses to describe the effects of the vampire bites on their friends, again indicating Michelle's pre-occupation with social relations. Michelle's teacher found this a problematic characteristic that was evident across her writing. She commented that one of Michelle's other stories 'was just a repeat of an outing, a family outing, and it was such a factual report that I think it was the most boring story I have ever read'. Her teacher noted her failure to take risks. Michelle it seemed failed to be fascinating. Michelle also seemed to irritate her peers at times with her frequent requests about how to spell words when searching on the Internet.

The contrasts between Craig and Michelle in terms of teacher recognition are disturbing. While Craig also had considerable difficulties with literacy and a strong interest in popular culture, he appeared to elicit more helpful responses and feedback from teachers and peers than did Michelle. Michelle's interests were considered lacking, her difficulties a nuisance, her storytelling boring and immature. While Craig was given a great deal of positive attention and encouragement, despite teachers' concerns about his choice of topics and his struggles with writing, Michelle it seems was judged somewhat differently. Her interests in Britney Spears, vampires and family relations received little recognition and she wasn't given the same leeway as Craig had been afforded for her fixation on the social world. It concerns us that while Craig's fascination with violence is tolerated and even accepted as an unsurprising phase through which he would emerge unscathed, Michelle's interests in family, social relations and female pop stars were seen as boring and unimaginative.

Feminist researcher, Valerie Walkerdine (1989) observed a number of years ago that boys are often given the benefit of the doubt and invested with cognitive capacity even when their actual performance does not live up to their assumed potential. Perhaps this is part of what occurs here. Michelle's cultural knowledge is seen as everyday, family based, immature and insufficiently abstract. Craig on the other hand is 'understood' by his female teachers as needing to assert his masculinity and to overtly maintain his 'tough persona'. Craig's home situation – growing up in an all male father-headed household – was considered to be of psychological import and the teachers were aware that he was inexperienced with and mistrustful of adult women and manoeuvred around him adroitly keeping him on-side. In contrast Michelle's home life was considered to be uninteresting and indeed a problem for the way it intruded on her time and concentration. While we applaud the considerable efforts his teachers went to in order to make a space for Craig to 'be himself', it makes it all the more remarkable and troubling that Michelle's illnesses, lateness, and passion for family matters were considered less relevant for school literacy learning.

While Craig was encouraged to read books of particular interest to boys including humour and sports and was able to engage in dramatic role-plays around the characters, Michelle it seems often had to make do. It was not that she was neglected, but her

cultural pursuits, knowledges and pre-occupations were ignored and eschewed as irrelevant resources for the development of school literacies.

### **Conclusion**

In our research we tried to look with ‘new eyes’ at school literacies in the middle primary years. Here we have explored what teachers considered to be of value in terms of school literacies and how that made different student knowledges and cultural practices more or less visible at different times with different consequences for children’s literacy trajectories. We have suggested that students were acquiring different repertoires of literate practices even within the same classroom, and that those repertoires were contingent upon the resources that students had access to out-of-school as well as those they had access to within school. Whether students were able to mobilise their cultural resources was dependent on the extent to which their teachers recognised the potential for children to connect their diverse knowledges with the authorised school curriculum.

What we did not anticipate was the differential valuing of children’s interests and the ways in which gender was implicated in this process. Whereas Craig was able to capitalise on his obsession with violent narratives in becoming a student writer, the same was not true for Michelle. Her interests in popular music, the family and the social world were not considered to be significant cultural capital on which she could draw in her literacy development. Jayita on the other hand, who presented as well-behaved, well-organised, ‘good girl’, was always recognised as a successful student, even though she faced the significant challenges of becoming literate in a second language. In Jeffrey’s case, his normatively masculine interests in sports and the outdoors, along with his easy-going nature and laconic humour, deflected attention from the urgency of his academic struggles. At the same time, his out-of-school cultural resources were rarely given space in the school curriculum in ways that might have made a significant difference to his literate identity.

This study does highlight the importance of teachers recognising children’s cultural resources. However, it sounds a warning that what is made visible, and what comes to count, requires continual scrutiny. There is nothing necessarily democratic about allowing children’s cultural resources into the classroom. Educators need to keep interrogating whose cultural resources count, in which contexts, for which purposes and to what effect. We need to be alert to the dangers of affording some cultural practices and interests more status than others. It is not simply enough to allow for permeability of popular culture and everyday knowledges in children’s classroom textual practices; we need to ensure that all children get to make use of their different investments and expertise. Recognising children’s cultural resources means taking into account different gendered investments. Boys’ and girls’ interests – sometimes but not always widely divergent - need to be afforded the same respect and at the same time subjected to critical analysis.

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