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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Boys, Literacy and Schooling: Expanding the Repertoires of Practice describes an inquiry into the bases of the common finding that boys indicate lower literacy scores than girls on literacy tests and assessments. It explores the possible bases for that finding and offers the beginnings of an educational response. The following general questions guided the design of this inquiry:

- Which boys are underachieving with respect to literacy learning and why?
- What is known about underachieving boys and their literacy development, including:
 - What factors influence underachievement in boys' literacy performance and development?
 - Which existing practices in teaching educationally underachieving boys are consistent with current research on good literacy teaching?
 - What strategies have proven effective in improving the literacy outcomes of boys?

The report attempts to provide reasonable and educationally productive answers to these questions, through:

- using a repertoire of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analytic techniques;
- employing a method of establishing practices that benefit boys' learning;
- considering the hypothesis that a range of effective and focused pedagogies assists boys and girls in their literacy learning;
- interrelating and cross-referencing professional and research-based knowledge on the matter of boys and literacy; and
- implementing and evaluating a variety of brief interventions aimed at improving boys' literacy learning.

METHODS

In *Phase 1* of the study, three surveys were conducted of the views of primary-school teachers and parents of primary-school students:

- 1 An electronically managed survey of primary-school teachers' beliefs about the issue of boys and literacy, including their views of appropriate and effective programs, strategies and classroom organisation;
- 2 A pencil-and-paper survey of the perceptions of parents of primary-school students of how literacy performance can be enhanced at school and at home; and

- 3 An electronic discussion list where matters relating to the literacy education of boys were canvassed.

As well, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a year 2/3 teacher and a year 6/7 teacher in each of 24 schools. In most cases, a senior member of the school's administration was also interviewed. The 24 primary schools in Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania represented a wide variety of social, economic and geographic contexts, and a range of student first-language backgrounds.

Phase 2 focused on developing and trialling classroom interventions, and evaluating and documenting their effectiveness. From the 24 schools (48 teachers) of Phase 1 of the study, 12 schools (24 teachers) were selected to continue participating in Phase 2. The schools were selected to represent a range of educational settings across the three participating States, especially in regard to:

- a range of socio-economic settings;
- schools and communities with varying levels of students whose first language background is not English;
- a mix of inner-suburban, fringe-suburban and rural-provincial schools; and
- a mix of approaches from mixed-gender classrooms, single-gender schools and classrooms in which boys and girls were separated for some literacy-related activities.

Phase 2 commenced with a training day aimed at enabling the participating teachers to:

- extend their understandings of links between gender and literacy;
- re/search and reformulate their current programs and practices;
- develop a program of action and a method of monitoring, evaluating and reporting that program of action.

The teachers then carried out their planned classroom strategies in consultation with the research team.

CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

During the intervention phase the 24 teachers designed and trialled a variety of intervention strategies. Rather than describe these interventions as a set of 24 mini-case studies, for the purposes of reporting and of meaning making, we have clustered the interventions into common themes drawing on an interpretative framework based on three kinds of repertoires of practice, expansions of which were, in one way or another, the aims of all the interventions. These three repertoires we have termed:

- *a repertoire for (re)presenting the self*. This deals with the ways in which students, with a focus on the boys, can experiment with a range of possibilities for (re)presenting themselves in the classroom, and with acceptable ways of conducting their presence and activity within the school. An understanding of the ways in which

masculinity is ‘performed’ and ‘enacted’ through the body is essential here if boys are to extend their repertoires of the self.

As detailed in Chapter 6, teachers attempted to expand repertoires for presenting the self by, for example:

- reconfiguring classroom literacy as active and embodied;
- capitalising on choice and personal experience; and
- focusing on boys’ sense of self.

- *a repertoire for relating*. This covers the social relations of school work, including the extent to which students are allowed to adopt various positions of power, authority and agency in the classroom, including greater latitude in the selection of materials, the forms of tasks, the organisation of the work, and the means of assessment. It means addressing the ways that masculinity endorses and authorises particular relationship modes, and how these modes can be extended and broadened. Inevitably, this repertoire has close links with the expansion of repertoires of culture for boys and with repertoires for (re)presenting the self.

As detailed in Chapter 6, teachers attempted to expand repertoires for relating by positioning boys as:

- ‘learners’ in literacy classrooms; and
- ‘class participants’ in literacy classrooms.

- *a repertoire for engaging with and negotiating the culture*. This entails looking beyond standard school to literacy-related materials from other cultural sites and formations, including contemporary commercial youth culture, integrating a wide range of modes of expression (oral, written, electronic, musical, visual, and so on), and cross-cultural or imagined (for example, fantasy) settings. For boys it also entails negotiating the hyper-masculine world, along with what it means to be male in such a world, and the meanings and ways of being constructed through such a world.

As detailed in Chapter 6, teachers attempted to expand repertoires for engaging cultures by focusing on, for example:

- the ‘real’ and everyday;
- popular culture materials;
- electronic technologies; and
- multimedia and multimodal work.

Most of the teachers appreciated and worked on the inter-relatedness of these repertoires. The general understanding was that, as the classroom broadens one or other of these repertoires, it has consequences for the others.

KEY FINDINGS

From interviews with teachers and school principals

As detailed in Chapter 5, interview materials generated from the 24 schools of Phase 1 of the study produced multi-layered data about the observations and explanations offered by teachers for boys' poor engagement and achievement in literacy.

Teachers observed that:

- boys were less successful than girls in their ways of negotiating and participating in conventional literacy classrooms and conventional literacy activities;
- boys showed a general lack of interest in print-based reading and writing activities;
- boys demonstrated a perceived lack of purpose and relevance in school work;
- boys made 'minimalistic' efforts to complete and present school literacy tasks;
- boys were disruptive, easily distracted and difficult to motivate within the classroom; and that
- boys lacked self-esteem and confidence as learners.

However teachers also observed several features of boys' classroom behaviour which made boys far more successful in terms of engaging with the multimodal literacies and literacy contexts of the future. Teachers observed that:

- boys had a strong interest in electronic and graphic forms of literate practice;
- boys were willing to 'do' literacy in active, public ways (such as debating, drama, public speaking); and that
- boys were eager to engage with 'real-life' literacy contexts and 'real-life' literacy practices.

Explanations that teachers offered about boys' lack of engagement and achievement in conventional literacy work drew from a variety of popular discourses and positions, most commonly:

- biology;
- the influence of families and close personal networks;
- cultural differences in orientation to schools and the valuing of school learning;
- the interactive effects of ability and home environment;
- the availability of male role-models in young boys' lives inside and outside school;
- popular social constructions of gender and the influence of the media; and
- the influence of teachers and of schools themselves.

From survey data

Findings from the surveys of teachers and parents reflected the kinds of discourses that are commonly available for teachers and parents to draw upon. Our approach has not been to critique those views by some consideration of their empirical status; rather, we take these expressions to be a representation of the discourses widely available in the subculture of teaching and in the community at large.

As detailed in Chapter 4, we draw two major findings from the explorations of teachers' and parents' views on literacy performance in school and its association with the particular problems of boys:

- Literacy performance, learning and development are widely seen to relate to pre-conditions at home and to conditions out of school.
- Boys are ascribed specific attributes that distinguish them from girls and that are related to literacy learning and development for school. These included:
 - higher activity levels;
 - competitiveness;
 - reactions to criticism, related to self-esteem problems; and
 - greater susceptibility to a variety of psychological, perceptual, linguistic and social 'weaknesses'.

It seems that these ways of thinking are powerful and prevalent among teachers and parents. They are compatible as well with discourses and presumptions widely available in the culture and readily evident in the popular media and in many folk and professional accounts of boys, schooling and literacy. While the accuracy and productivity of these ways of thinking has long been debated, they appear strongly in the rationales developed by the teachers who took part in the classroom interventions of Phase 2 of the study, and thus they form a significant context for any understanding or evaluation of those interventions.

From data related to the four-roles model

Before and after their classroom interventions, teachers were asked to estimate the number of students in their class whom they considered would struggle with the literacy demands of the school year ahead. The format for these estimates was the 'four-roles model' of literacy, which posits four central domains of competence that interact in the development of appropriate and accurate literacy capability: breaking the codes of the graphic message, participating in the explicit and implicit meaning systems within the text, using textual forms in ways appropriate to a range of purposeful settings, and critically analysing the contexts of texts from a range of positions. Teachers provided separate estimates for reading and for writing. The findings below are presented as indicative of the teachers' perceptions of students' progress within the limited time-frame (6–9 weeks) of the classroom intervention:

- Teachers saw their interventions as lowering the number of students whose literacy abilities would cause them to experience difficulties relating to literacy in the coming school year.
- While several teachers registered that no evident gains had been made on some of the criteria, and two teachers noted negative gains

on one each of the criteria, most of the teachers reported positive effects for the intervention.

Two distinct trends are evident in the teachers' estimates:

- First, students were generally rated as changing less on their code-breaking skills as a result of the intervention than on the other domains. The students in these classes would be expected to have received many learning experiences related to cracking the codes of written English. This probably means that a higher entry baseline is established for this aspect of literacy functioning than for the other domains. In general, highest gains were noted for the text-user and text-analyst categories. Several teachers indicated that they had been concerned about the students' limited exposure to a range of genres and text-types, and had perceived the urgent need to enhance their students' critical reading and writing capabilities.
- Secondly, boys' gains were generally reported to have been more substantial than those of girls. Indeed, there is only one instance of the reverse – text-analysis skills in year 2/3 writing. Since the interventions were aimed specifically at improving boys' literacy performance, this is not surprising. It is worth noting, however, that there was a decrease in the number of girls estimated to be facing difficulties after the intervention, on all measures and areas and year levels, with the exception of code-breaking in reading for year 2/3 girls (zero change estimated).

While there is a need for caution in the interpretation of these findings, the results are nonetheless supportive of the proposition that even these short interventions appeared to the teachers to have had some positive effects.

From teachers' comments on the efficacy of the classroom interventions

When asked to list the learning outcomes associated with their interventions, overwhelmingly, teachers reported increased engagement in literacy learning among boys and improved confidence in their uptake of literate practices. Engagement and confidence were the two most frequently cited outcomes distilled from teachers' written reports (and also from the interview data collected at the end of the study).

Teachers also reported improvements in students':

- vocabulary;
- overall quality of literacy work;
- behaviour and attitude; and
- capacity to operate as critically literate text analysts.

On occasions, teachers expressed surprise at unanticipated improvements – ripple effects – that appeared to spring from strategies that they had trialled. Most teachers did not hesitate when asked to document observed changes in individual boys in their class.

Importantly, no teacher reported that the intervention strategies that they trialled had jeopardised girls' opportunities to learn or to participate in the literate practices of the classroom. Those who thought that their interventions had worked for boys, also thought that they had worked for girls. In teachers' observations, it simply was not the case that girls were excluded through the processes they employed to engage more boys. The improved pedagogy seemed to enfranchise both boys and girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our experiences on this project of working together with teachers and school principals in schools across the three States leads us to make the following recommendations:

Boys are not all the same and cannot be treated as an homogeneous group. They bring different social and cultural backgrounds to the literacy classroom and these need to be given serious consideration. However many boys share some common experiences of 'being a boy' in Australian society, and are likely to be influenced by dominant discourses of masculinity. The ways in which these discourses affect the life and learning of a particular boy in a particular classroom and community are always matters for empirical inquiry, calling for ongoing observation and analysis by teachers and researchers.

Recommendation 1:

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.

We have taken a practice- and futures-oriented approach to literacy that attempts to take balanced and realistic consideration of the communicative tasks that learners face. To become functional and independent members of literacy-saturated information societies, students must master a variety of forms of communication. The following definition of literacy is compatible with our approach in this study:

Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print, and multimedia.

(Luke, Freebody & Land 2000, p. 20)

'Literacy' is thus seen as referring to particular forms of communication that themselves entail particular valued repertoires of physical, psychological, social and cultural practice, demeanour and disposition. Effective literacy education therefore

involves practice in these valued repertoires, in the context of accessing the powerful curricular ways of knowing and finding out about the world, and in the knowledge that the communicational environment in which young Australians live is undergoing a process of rapid cultural and technological change.

For policy-makers, this revisiting of literacy means a realistic interrogation of currently held definitions of literacy, explicit or otherwise, about whether those definitions can do the work of addressing the genuine literacy demands that young people do and will face. Assessment regimes and professional development need explicitly to incorporate but expand on the ‘old literacy basics’ if they are to have anything other than short-term, test-based consequences for students and school-leavers.

For teachers, this means developing and sharing a vocabulary for debating and working up school- and teacher-based pedagogies and assessment and monitoring programs. It means as well an urgent need to consider, debate and research the relationships between, on the one hand, teaching strategies and assessment routines and, on the other, students’ systematic apprenticeship in the forms of curricular knowledge.

Recommendation 2

That schools, teachers, researchers and policy-makers adopt a practice- and futures-oriented approach to literacy in their work to improve boys’ literacy outcomes.

When working to improve boys’ literacy outcomes, teachers need to employ a range of effective pedagogical strategies that will engage students actively, purposefully and democratically in an effort to position them as successful literacy learners.

Recommendation 3

That teachers adopt a range of pedagogical strategies in the literacy classroom that are designed to promote an active, purposeful and democratic learning environment.

In conceptualising an approach to boys’ literacy learning, teachers should consider the potential of expanding the repertoires of practice available to boys in literacy classrooms. This will mean focusing on expanding the range of practices available for (re)presenting the self, for relating to others, and for engaging with cultures. It means therefore developing and sharing a vocabulary for understanding, debating and acting on sets of ideas that relate directly to the social dynamics of classrooms. These ideas

also need to inform policy and research initiatives in the area of literacy, rather than being seen as important but separate, disconnected considerations.

Classrooms must accommodate a broader range of (re)presentation modes of ‘the self’ if boys are to engage and achieve in literacy classrooms. Teachers will need to provide for more active and dynamic expression, to provide for more hands-on opportunities to learn, to be responsive to choice and personal experience, and to focus on maintaining a positive sense of self. The ways in which masculinity is ‘performed’ and ‘enacted’ through the body need also to be considered as part of these modes of (re)presentation of the self.

Recommendation 4

That teachers construct literacy classrooms as active environments for learning by maximising ‘hands-on’ learning through multiple textual modes; by providing opportunities for students to take control of their own learning; by taking account of students’ backgrounds and experiences; and by focusing on maintaining a productive sense of self among students as literacy learners.

Classrooms must accommodate a broader range of relationship modes if boys are to engage and achieve in literacy classrooms. The social relations of school work need to be reconfigured so that students are allowed to adopt different positions of power, authority and agency in the classroom. For boys, in particular, this may mean supporting them to learn how to operate both as learners and as participants in the literacy classroom and constructing a classroom environment where students’ knowledges and skills are valued and respected.

Recommendation 5

That teachers construct literacy classrooms as democratic spaces where authority and agency are shared; where students are treated with dignity and respect; where students’ knowledges, opinions and contributions are valued; and where students learn to work collaboratively and cooperatively.

Classrooms must accommodate a broader repertoire for engaging and negotiating cultural knowledges and meanings if students are to achieve in literacy classrooms. This will involve working with literacy-related materials from a range of cultural sites and formations, including contemporary commercial youth cultures and a wider range of modes of expression including oral, written, electronic and visual. For boys in

particular a focus on multimodal texts and technologies may be beneficial in improving literacy outcomes. With the importation of contemporary commercial youth culture into the classroom come both the opportunity and responsibility to engage its powerful discourses – about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and so on – in ways that make those discourses objects of critical study. Within the particular terms of this study, this means explicit considerations of how both popular and curricular texts may, whatever else they may do, reinforce the already heavily patrolled gender borders of daily social experience.

Recommendation 6

That teachers engage and work with cultural knowledges and meanings by focusing on the cultures of the ‘real’ and the everyday, popular culture, electronic technologies and multimediated texts. In doing this, teachers need to consider systematically the ways in which such activities can connect productively with curricular learning, and ways in which critical, analytic work can be developed in the use of potentially misogynistic and institutionally hostile materials.

Teachers cannot pursue a boys and literacy agenda by themselves. They must have systems support in terms of staffing, professional development, technology support and resources.

Recommendation 7

That, to improve literacy outcomes for boys, schools need school systems’ cooperation to provide increased levels of learning support, professional development and technology infrastructure and support.

Further research in the boys and literacy field should address the potential of the theoretical framework proposed in this study of expanding repertoires of practice and its association with improved literacy outcomes for boys. Exploring the potential for a framework such as the one developed for this study brings with it a number of associated research design requirements, among them:

- the systematic construction of samples to reflect a range of social, cultural and demographic factors that may be associated with the development of different forms of masculinity;
- the construction of epidemiology-styled, longitudinal studies that allow:

- the literacy-learning consequences of a variety of school and classroom differences to be documented;
- different ways in which curricular literacies are engaged and mastered to become evident over time; and
- a view of just how significant traditional ‘target’ groupings are in their ‘fully aggregated’, interactive, natural environments as predictors of the literacy learning progress of various categories of students that are not well served by current conventional classroom experience; and
- the explicit interplay of quantitative and qualitative analyses of data collected in different sites of cultural and literacy learning for boys (schools, homes, popular media experiences, and so on).

Recommendation 8

That future research address the effectiveness of the three repertoires model – repertoires for (re)presenting the self; repertoires for relating; repertoires for engaging with and negotiating cultural knowledges and meanings – for improving literacy outcomes for boys.
