Introduction

Theorizing Boys' Literacies and Boys' Literatures in Contemporary Times

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Boyhood Studies*, entitled “Contemporary Boys’ Literacies and Boys’ Literatures,” is composed of international cutting-edge research focused on boys’ formal and informal literacy practices, boys’ engagements with a variety of texts, as well as gender-focused/gender-critical teaching practices in the literacy classroom. The articles interrogate how boys *are positioned* and *how they position themselves* within their acquisition of literacy skills. The research presented highlights the diversity and complexity of boys’ literacy practices. The scholars contend that how we define literacy is undergoing change alongside significant alterations to traditional cultural practices associated with boyhood. We see attention drawn to how these literacy practices operate in relation to the formation of boys’ masculinities in terms of how they *do boyhood* in contemporary times.

KEYWORDS

boyhood, formal/informal literacies, literacy practices, masculinity

Neoliberal Policies, Constituting Literacy, and “Failing Boy” Discourses

International educational policy has seen a noticeable emphasis on literacy over the last two decades, particularly among countries participating in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Grek 2010; Hamilton 2014a, 2014b; Hamilton and Pitt 2011; Walker 2009). Such policy manifestations often evidence a conception of literacy based on functional skills (Sellar and Lingard 2013). This neoliberal approach to literacy rests on the assumption that through the acquisition of functional literacy, individuals will become more productive and competitive in the global economy. The dominance of this human capital approach leads us away from understanding new literacies—what James Gee and colleagues (1996: xiii) associate with “new social identities or new kinds of people” whereby identities are inextricably linked to how literacies are acquired and consti-

tuted. Policies focused on skills attainment often ignore the richness of literacy practices—as well as how certain cultural and linguistic capitals are valued and others are devalued—depending on social contexts.

A key consequence of literacy constructed and evaluated through high-stakes standardized testing (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) is the rise of the “deficit boys discourse” (Hayes and Lingard 2003) or “failing boys” discourse (Epstein et al. 1998; Keddie 2007; Watson 2011). In their studies of boyhood, Rob Gilbert and Pam Gilbert (1998), Pam Gilbert (1998), and Wayne Martino (2001) highlight how the acquisition of formal school literacies can be problematic for boys. This persistent international problem requires nuanced investigation. The boys who have been studied by researchers in the present special issue have all—to varying degrees—experienced forms of schooling where literacy is defined in terms of student performance standards on high-stakes tests. We know that high-stakes assessments of literacy “enable a range of authorities (inside and outside of schools) to audit, evaluate, rank, reward and punish” (Brass 2015a: 11; cf. Brass 2015b); however, these assessments remain both *limited* and *limiting* (Martino 2003). Simply put, statistics from high-stakes assessments are based on narrow print-based literacy practices (Alloway and Gilbert 1997). Furthermore, Martino (2003) highlights how overemphasis on these narrowly focused assessments disregards important factors in boys’ lives such as class, ethnicity, and location. We know that boys engage with a vast array of literacy practices; broader definitions of what constitutes effective literacy practices could shift perceptions of boys as literate individuals (Nichols and Cormack 2009). The present special issue seeks to investigate boys’ lifeworlds regarding literacy practices, as well as the gender identity constructions integral to such practices.

Boys and Schooling: Researching Masculinities in Context

In sociological studies of boys in schooling, Paul Willis (1977), Máirtín Mac an Ghaill (1994), and Wayne Martino (1999), among many others, have shown how social class, sexuality, peer pressure, and teachers influence the values and practices of particular groups of adolescent male. There is little doubt that conceptions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) can be dominant and oppressive (Swain 2006), influencing boys’ behaviors, perceptions of self, and academic engagement (Martino 1999). These identity factors have significant implications for how boys engage with, and construct, formal and informal literacies. Some scholars have claimed that boys

reject certain literacy practices, perceiving them to be oppositional to the gender norms to which they subscribe (Murphy and Elwood 1998). As boys construct their masculinities through a variety of “literacy events” (Guzzetti and Bean 2013), their literacy acquisition in a variety of contexts shapes how they *do boyhood*. We have much to learn about boys’ active engagement in different literacy practices (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007; Erstad et al. 2009; Stahl and Dale 2013, 2015), and the articles in this special issue move us, as a field, toward these important understandings.

The authors of this collection of articles explore the nexus of gender and identity in researching boyhood literacies. Across this set of articles, we see the influence of the New London Group (1996), critical literacy (Comber et al. 2001), and a “funds of knowledge” approach (Moll et al. 1992). Taken together, the authors of this special issue view literacy as purposeful and “embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (Barton et al. 2000: 8). Furthermore, through theorizing literacy as historically situated—where literacy practices *can* and *do* change through processes of learning—we see how literacy practices are tied to the enactment of masculinities. The different conceptual approaches that frame the work in these articles illustrate how literacy practices are shaped by powerful societal agendas, while offering insight into how young men lead their lives.

Whereas research has continually called for understanding boys’ identities and masculinities in schooling (Martino 2001) specifically how they relate to literacy practices (Mills 2004; Nichols and Cormack 2009; Watson et al. 2010), the best approaches for exploring these complex issues have remained elusive. Becky Francis and Christine Skelton (2005) contend that various sociological theories are needed when investigating boys’ literacies and disengagement from school. Clearly boys “are not all the same and cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Boys bring different social and cultural backgrounds to the literacy classroom and these need to be given serious consideration” (Alloway et al. 2002: 7). At the very least, an overemphasis on gendered analysis of boys’ literacy practices may mean that other crucial forms of inequities—such as race and social class—are ignored (Martino and Rezaei-Rashti 2012). After all, Cherry Collins and colleagues (2000) suggest the socioeconomic status of students is a more accurate indicator of literacy capability than gender. Therefore, a more nuanced analysis (rather than standardized test performance data, for instance) should be used to understand the development of boys’ literacies.

In considering the value of social theory in exploring boyhood literacy practices, this special issue offers many compelling insights. As “new litera-

cies” are becoming increasingly prevalent and integral to our lives, young people are arguably more autonomous using these new literacies in a wide range of settings. It is clear that we are living in a world where many current literacy practices “contrast markedly with how they [students] learn and ‘do’ literacy in school” (Knobel and Lankshear 2014: 99). Therefore, the present special issue draws attention to ways that literacies are grounded in a wide variety of “contexts” beyond typical school-based literacies that are often not synonymous with the literacies boys engage in, or value, outside of school.

Contemporary Boys’ Literacies and Boys’ Literatures

Across this collection of articles, we see boys committed to literacy practices they consider valuable and embedded within their lifeworlds and how—through their investment of time and energy—this influences their identities as adolescent male learners (Cervetti et al. 2006). Furthermore, the contributors to this special issue critically explore how literacies are affected by place, and subsequently affect those places where they are used. The first article in the collection, by David Caldwell, Nayia Cominos, and Katie Gloede, presents a research initiative—“Real Language in Real Time”—that examines boys’ on-field language practices in sport, specifically Australian rules football, and the potential to integrate the language of athletes into the school classroom. In considering the literacy practices of boys in spaces largely considered devoid of literacy, this research works across a range of intersecting areas: Aboriginal boys and sport, Aboriginal literacy more generally, and linguistics, specifically sociometrics. Caldwell and colleagues present a fascinating multilayered project in which a set of English language and literacy practices are constructed from the on-field tracking in sport. These practices are then developed into resources that are used to structure classroom pedagogy around different text types.

This article is followed by the work of Michael Kehler and Jacob Cassidy, who present a qualitative study of multimodal text use in a secondary school, whereby the teacher uses comics and superhero fiction to actively and meaningfully engage boys in literacy. This research offers evidence of a counternarrative to a prevailing discourse grounded in essentialist notions of *all* boys as struggling readers and instead illustrates the rich potential between students’ lifeworld connections and comics. Similar to Caldwell and colleagues’ research, Kehler and Cassidy argue that a pedagogy capitalizing on critical literacy and employing compelling texts has the capacity to

reveal the gendered nature of social space and student positionality within these spaces, but also students' capacity to speak back to gender norms.

In the next article, Stiles X. Simmons and Karen M. Feathers illustrate how two strategies (e.g., disconnections and problem posing) can accelerate African American boys' critical thinking skills in the classroom. The operationalization of these strategies draws directly on the life experiences of the boys and helps them to critically consider relationships between characters and the potential influence of the authors' gender on the stories they write. In documenting the value of critical literacy, Simmons and Feathers show how critical literacy serves in sharp contrast to the functional skills agenda present in policy agendas, particularly those agendas aimed at low-income students of color.

The next two articles explore boys' engagement strategies with literacy that have framed debates concerning why boys struggle with school-based literacy. Laura Scholes' research focuses on eight boys in Year 5 and Year 6 who attend schools in a range of socioeconomic communities in Queensland, Australia. She documents how the boys offer polarized perspectives on reading, with some reporting positive attitudes toward reading and describing reading books as "fun" and some describing reading books as "boring." Moving beyond broad generalizations, Scholes considers the complexities inherent in notions of masculinity and how different groups of boys internalize their positioning of reading in ways that influence their attitudes, engagement, and academic outcomes. This research is highly relevant because it draws attention to *which boys* are at risk of failure and problematizes the way governmental policies have responded to boys' perceived underachievement in reading by presenting males as one undifferentiated group.

Continuing an examination of the heterogeneity of boys' experiences with literacies, Deborah Vriend Van Duinen's study documents boys' informal engagements with religious literacy practices and *literacy sponsorship* (Brandt 1998). In this underresearched area, the researcher explores the texts, participants, contexts, functions, and motivations surrounding boys' religious literacy practices. Van Duinen presents three emergent themes: separate and different/part of the family, seeking authority/interpreting their own experiences, and focusing on the future/focusing on the present. This scholarship critiques how adolescent boys learn particular ways of thinking, being, and doing from religious literacy sponsors as well as the influences of this learning on the boys' literate lives.

The final article in the present issue focuses on children's literature as an industry. Adrian Solomon considers the extent to which children's literature published during the Communist regime in Romania may have influenced

the minds of readers and constructions of boyhood. Solomon draws attention to the historical-cultural considerations, demonstrating how the publishing industry—operating within certain restrictions—inadvertently shaped discourses and perceptions around boyhood. He then capitalizes on research in child psychology to address the development of the roles of boys within the context of major themes prevalent in Romanian children's literature.

In conclusion, the scholars in this special issue present compelling research that shows how our definitions of literacy and literature are subject to change, alongside a reimagining of traditional cultural practices of boyhood. The international scholarship in this special issue highlights the diversity and complexity of boys' literacy practices. Furthermore, the scholars in this special issue draw attention to how these practices operate in relation to the formation of boys' masculinities in terms of how they *do boyhood* in contemporary times.

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