Brief Research ReportPROFESSIONAL RUGBY LEAGUE PLAYERS AS
READING MENTORS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL BOYS

This paper reports on case studies spanning four consecutive years (2005-2008) focused on addressing and challenging Australian primary school boys' disengagement with English, particularly reading, using an action research process informed by both quantitative and qualitative data. Primary participants were all male and ranged from 8 to 11 years of age. Boys were identified and selected for each case study based on the questionnaire and interview results from whole grade surveys of both males and females. The data results identified the boys with negative views of literacy and boys who identified reading as being a feminine activity, thereby narrowing their perceptions of masculinity. These boys were involved in a reading/mentoring program with high profile professional Rugby League players. The celebrity rugby league players were involved in ten weekly mentoring and reading sessions with male participants each year. These sessions focused on building positive male identity, shifting negative attitudes to reading and challenging negative stereotypes of both professional sportsmen and boys as readers. After each of the case studies, quantitative and qualitative data indicated a positive change in the participants' attitudes towards reading as well as their perceived stereotypes of males as readers and increased involvement in voluntary reading.

Keywords: boys, reading, mentoring, male identity, relationships, Rugby League

Ensuring boys reach their full academic, emotional, and social potential has been a strong priority for the Australian Federal Government over the last two decades. A National Inquiry into Educating Boys was conducted in 2002. The report on this inquiry highlighted underachievement of boys, particularly in literacy; the need to adapt curriculum and pedagogy for boys; and the need to involve role models and

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THYMOS: *Journal of Boyhood Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2011, 52-60.

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thy0501.52/\$15.00 • DOI: 10.3149/thy.0501.52 • ISSN/1931-9045 • eISSN/1872-4329

fathers in schools. Following the confrontational findings of the report, the Australian Government funded both the Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools (BELS) Project and the Success for Boys Project, focusing on teacher professional development.

Research specifically on literacy presented in *Boys: Getting it Right* (House of Representatives, 2002) shows that nationally, in line with international data, girls are outperforming boys in literacy from primary through to secondary schooling. Rowe and Rowe suggest that this underachievement by boys and the inability to "cope" with the operational literacy demands of school curricular and assessment, "are frequently manifested in boys' 'acting-out' behaviors, low self-esteem and disengagement or withdrawal from willing participation in schooling" (2000, p. 8). The authors state that among the reasons for higher incidence of problem behaviors among boys in schooling is that boys "frequently express feelings of alienation from a school curriculum that has become increasingly 'contextualised', and (in their words) 'feminised'" (p. 8). They suggest that throughout the entire duration of their schooling for a large proportion of boys, the verbal reasoning requirements and general literacy demands of school curricula and assessment are beyond both their developmental capacity and normative socialization experiences to cope successfully. Bray, Gardner and Parsons (1997) propose that a key socialization factor impacting on boys' literacy underachievement compared to girls is boys' relative reluctance to read (cited in Rowe & Rowe, 2000).

Traditional conceptions of literacy and associated teaching and learning programs have not fully met the literacy needs of boys. Many boys are failing to develop critical literacy skills (Rowe & Rowe, 2000). Browne (2000) identified three key components in the development of critical literacy, namely (1) valuing a diverse range of community texts; (2) valuing texts that are familiar and reflect the interests of the reader; and (3) drawing on a wide range of text types and presentations. These key components cannot be met within a traditional conception of literacy. If a teacher was to incorporate such components into literacy development by identifying and using literacy resources and opportunities that are grounded in the experiences and interests of the students, that is, find out what motivates and captures a boy's interests, it may be argued that literacy levels would improve (Clay & Hartman, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This was a key concept considered in this research.

Many boys learn masculinity from the media, from peer groups and through rejection of anything construed as feminine. A particular danger is that learning masculinity in this way can be accompanied by learning to be anti-feminine (Stoessiger, 2004). To a boy, being literate and proficient at schoolwork and showing emotions are often signs of femininity. If boys do not have male role models to learn masculinity from, they often begin to develop an anti-feminine culture in which anything labelled female is degraded and to be avoided at all cost. Masculine role models revolve around a culture of activity and physical achievement. Boys tend to be judged by their peers by what they can do through informal competition or through organised sport; reading is, therefore, seen as not needed. Hence the the

challenge is to highlight that reading does not threaten masculinity (Moloney, 2000).

Sax (2009) states that we must provide boys with role models to showcase the transition from boyhood to adulthood. Although Sax states that male teachers and female teachers are equally important in the schooling of both boys and girls, he states that there is no substitute for having a male role model. "That's where boys can benefit most, in my judgement, from seeing a man, perhaps a teacher or coach, who loves to read in his spare time" (Sax, 2009, p. 169).

Many boys blame extracurricular activities such as computer games, sport and television for their reluctance to read in leisure time (Sanderson, 1995). Moloney (2000) does not agree with this reasoning; he believes that societal expectations of masculinity are the cause of reading reluctance rather than extracurricular activities. Expectations are that "a sporting boy will not be interested in books and", conversely, that "a boy who reads a lot must automatically be the non-sporting type" (Moloney). Unfortunately this assumption seems to be common among boys in Australian schools.

We must tap into our boys' interests and provide positive literacy experiences for our boys to allow them to enjoy reading without the fear of jeopardising their masculinity or encouraging ridicule by their peers. We need to "counteract the effects of male-bashing in our culture by affirming a boy's masculinity and his value as a person" (Carr-Gregg, 2004, p. 3). As well as a need to acknowledge school and home partnerships in literacy learning, the community plays an important role. Clay and Hartman (2006) state that "schools are only just acknowledging the impact that their local communities and the contexts of boys' lives have on literacy development, and consequently are only beginning to look towards the community for assistance in finding solutions to the complex issues that impact on boys' literacy" (p. 21). The community link was key in all four case studies as was the need for a community-based mentor. The challenge was choosing the best suited, yet willing person for the task. Learning is an essential element of mentoring relationships, whether pertaining to a formally recognized skill or ability or simply learning how to engage in a respectful and productive relationship.

If involvement in a mentoring program is not by choice or the mentee does not admire or respect the mentor involvement in programs narrowly targeted on 'problem boys' can carry a self-defeating stigma (Gilbert, 2006). In order to improve school outcomes it has been suggested that the role of adult males, particularly fathers and father figures, role models, and mentors, is important (Biddulph, 1998, Fletcher, 2000) and dominant views of masculinity need to be explored (Connell, 2000). Men and women interact with children around literacy in different ways. Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert and Muspratt (2002, p. 7) recommend that, "as part of their ongoing community analyses, schools and teachers acknowledge and explore the varied social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that boys bring with them to the literacy classroom, paying particular attention to the ways that constructions of masculinity influence boys' behaviour and learning in literacy." Alloway et al. state that research in twenty-four Australian schools present the explanations that teachers offered about boys' lack of engagement and achievement in conventional liter-

acy 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.

THE STUDY

Thus, as can be seen in this brief contextual overview, there are a number of significant concerns in relation to boys' achievement and engagement in reading. The present article provides a review of the findings of a four-year preliminary investigation on the impact on boys' attitudes, engagement, and participation in reading as well as boys' perceptions of reading and masculine identities when participating in a reading mentoring program using elite sports stars. In Australia various sporting codes such as the National Rugby League (NRL) involve players in "one off school visits" as part of their community engagement programs. These short term visits often attract media attention and hype, but the validity and impact these "one off" visits have on Primary School boys' construction and perception of male identities, efficacy and learning have not been explored in great detail. This research focused on the effects of long term mentoring by the NRL players; this was the first NRL reading program that involved more than the "one off" publicity visit. Rugby League was introduced to Australia in 1907 as a rejection of the player conditions of Rugby Union. The game's popularity on the east coast of Australia and New Zealand ensures players of the sixteen National teams are placed on a pedestal in the Australian community, hence attracting media attention and community admiration.

However in recent times media coverage of the Rugby League players has focused on examples of players' negative off field behavior resulting in community disgust and concern. This shift in media attention made it particularly important to showcase the "positive role models of Rugby League" to counteract the negative media stories, ensuring that the children's icons and heroes of Rugby League were not permanently tarnished.

Following the analysis of current literature in boys and literacy in Australia, four case studies, over four sequential years, 2005 to 2008 were conducted in a Catholic co-educational primary school in metropolitan Sydney, Australia. Each case study used an action research process informed and shaped by both quantitative and qualitative data. The participants involved in each of the case studies were the male students as well as the professional Rugby League Player mentors. The sample groups in Case Studies A (2005), B (2006), and C (2007) involved the boys in Year 5 in the year of the study, aged ten to eleven. Case Study D (2008) involved Year 3 boys between the ages of eight and nine in the year of the study. Sample sizes in each case study ranged from five to forty six (2005: $N = 43$; 2006: $N = 40$; 2007: $N = 5$; 2008: $N = 46$).

Quantitative data was collected through pre- and post-questionnaires and the qualitative data was collected through a series of in-depth interviews which were transcribed and analyzed. The questionnaires were designed using a combination of open and closed questions with the premise that responses could be categorized based on common criteria, including the respondents' reluctance to read voluntarily, negative views towards literacy, in particular reading, as well as their belief in the notion that literacy is a feminine activity or incompatible with their sense of masculinity. Each year, once initial data was collected the case study's sample group of male participants was selected. This selection process ensures participants had similar responses and a shared view on reading and masculinity. The sample participants were involved in further quantitative and qualitative data collection, including survey style questionnaires and in-depth interviews, to discover the male respondents self-identified "male heroes" and role models—males that they admired in society. Interestingly in all four case studies the majority of male respondents listed sports stars, in particular Rugby League players, as their male hero or male they most admired. This was evident in both the questionnaires and interviews.

Based on initial findings, the sample students in each case study were mentored in the classroom by first grade Rugby League players through a weekly program during a ten-week school term. The focus was on challenging stereotypes and attitudes towards reading. The aim of the mentoring program was to shift the boys' negative attitudes toward and perceptions of reading, increase their voluntary reading at home and school as well as beginning to breakdown the stereotypes that reading was a feminized activity. Gilbert (2006) states that matching mentors and mentees on interests ensures successful relationships are formed and successful mentoring takes place. Therefore it was critical that the questionnaires and interviews allowed the participants to identify their "male heroes" before an appropriate mentoring program was established. Selecting player mentors with an interest in reading and in children's education was also critical to the success of the program, as was providing the mentor training, including providing a clear focus and reason for their involvement. The need for male mentors to model reading to boys is critical (Sax, 2009).

Consistent and regular contact between the mentor and mentee is critical to the success of a mentoring program with boys (Gilbert, 2006). The weekly visits in this program were critical as they allowed the mentor and mentee to build rapport, set goals for the students to work towards between visits, and reiterate positive messages about reading weekly. The regular and consistent visits also allowed students to track the players' personal history including reading habits, and witness reading for enjoyment by an admired and respected "male hero." Opportunities for the male students to read sport based articles, narratives, and biographies with the players in small groups of six to eight were provided by the teachers. Therefore participants were reading interest-based texts with their identified male "heroes" as their mentor, shifting from reading with their female teachers and teacher-chosen texts.

An aspect of the mentors training was the “Pause, Prompt, Praise” reading strategy, considered central as it gave the players a framework for their responses to the participants’ reading attempts and allowed the male students to receive praise from a respected male for reading something participants felt was feminine. Each mentoring session involved two professional Rugby League players, one player was the “Reading Captain” participating in weekly sessions, and the second player alternated within the Rugby League team each week. This strategy focused on allowing the boys to build rapport with the weekly player but also provided the same participants with another ten examples of men (professional Rugby League players) that read and enjoy reading. The teachers of the participants did not change their literacy teaching and learning strategies nor did they replace the teaching of explicit reading with the mentoring program; the mentoring program ran alongside the existing mandatory two hour literacy block. The participants’ teachers did refer to the mentor program between mentor sessions to ensure momentum was not lost.

FINDINGS

The four case studies indicated that the participants’ views toward Literacy as a subject at school- particularly reading, positively shifted after the mentoring reading program, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentages of Boys Listing Literacy, Particularly Reading, As Their Least Favourite Subject, Before versus After the Rugby League Reading Mentoring Program

Case Study	2005	2006	2007	2008
Before program	98	96	90	82
After program	5	2	0	0

Interestingly, not only did the participants not list literacy as their least favourite subject but their attitudes made a remarkable change with 88% of the participants listing literacy as their favourite subject in 2006. In 2007, all participants listed literacy as their favourite subject and in 2008 sixty five per cent of boys listed literacy as their favourite subject.

Similarly, positive results were sustained when analyzing boys’ voluntary reading both at home and at school. Library borrowing records, reading logs, and parent and teacher interviews all indicated that voluntary reading for enjoyment increased after the mentoring program. This increase in voluntary reading was maintained twelve months following the program, as shown in Table 2.

Consistently in all four case studies, every participant responded to highly recommend the program for other education institutions. Similarly, all teachers involved in the case studies recommended the program to other teachers and school leadership teams.

Table 2
Boys' Readings Practices and Attitudes, Before versus After the Rugby League Reading Mentoring Program

Case Study	2005	2006	2007	2008
Before program, % with no voluntary reading	95	95	100	18
After program, % increasing voluntary reading	85	95	100	90
1 year after program, % indicating they read for pleasure	82	89	80	95

The view that reading was a feminine activity was altered through the course of this study with 86% of boys claiming that they no longer viewed reading as a feminine activity after the program in 2005. Likewise, 2006 pre-data indicated that 65 per cent of boys felt reading was a feminine activity prior to the program, yet 95% of the boys felt that reading was not a feminine activity following the program. Similar trends were achieved in the following two case studies.

Analysis of interview transcripts indicated that the male students had changed significantly in the way that they now viewed reading for males and females in society, and were able to articulate why adult men and Rugby League players needed reading in their lives.

The professional Rugby League players were supportive of the program and also identified the program as a priority in their community engagement program. One player who was the reading captain for three of the four case studies, states:

This reading program shows kids that reading is for everyone and an important part of life. I myself was not the best at reading and struggled with confidence at a young age. Through practice and persistence I turned myself into a confident reader in any situation.

The most important part of this program, from my point of view, is that it isn't just a one visit, the children see me every week and build a good rapport and this helps their confidence when reading. I know that the Sea Eagles will continue to support this program and I think it would be a great program for all NRL clubs to get behind.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that over the four-year pilot study significant shifts in boys' views of reading and on being a male reader were not only accomplished but often sustained beyond the program completion. The male students' attitudes towards literacy and reading as a subject positively shifted as a result of the ten-week program in each of the four years. These new attitudes influenced boys' behavior evidenced

through increased library borrowing and voluntary reading at both school and home. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that the participants' classroom engagement and motivation increased, enabling teachers to focus on the teaching of reading skills rather than battling behavioural issues stemming from disengagement and perceived boredom.

The results of the four case studies has prompted the Rugby League club involved in the trial to incorporate the program involvement into the players weekly timetable, ensuring every professional player on the squad is attached to a school as a reading captain.

Much remains to be discovered about the effects of this program in new school contexts such as Government and independent schools as well as differing socio-economic areas. Despite the positive result seen in the present pilot study, implementing a similar program in all schools needs to be considered with care. Exploring the relationships between teachers, students, and Rugby League player mentors seems key in future research as well as a thorough investigation as to whether these relationships contribute to the success of the mentoring program needs to be considered. The characteristics needed for effective mentoring programs involving NRL players in school reading programs are currently being investigated in a wider study. School, teacher, and cultural factors require further investigation. Some of these include the teachers', parents', and students' own perceptions of Rugby League Players; different school cultures; the philosophical beliefs of each teacher; follow-up activities between mentoring sessions; specific Boys' Education initiatives employed at school or classroom level; boys' existing views and attitudes to reading; exposure to reading materials both in the school and home environment; and exposure to males as readers in the home. Alongside research on relationships and the characteristics of an effective mentoring program utilising sporting figures, possible links between Primary School boys' reading motivation and engagement as well as their participation in voluntary reading at school and at home needs to be investigated in the continuing study.

The construction of masculinity and male identities, exploring the stereotyped identities that are constructed about boys and reading as well as the various stereotypes of footballers in Australian society, are also areas of contention. Possible links between boys' male identities, mentors, curriculum efficacy, learning, and perceptions of literacy will need to be examined in the continuous analysis. The research will explore whether involving celebrity male sporting heroes in the classroom impacts boys' constructions of their masculine identities and on their learning outcomes. Examining the role of teachers needs to be a further key component of research. MacDonald (1999, as cited in Rowe & Rowe 2000) states that the role of the teacher is particularly significant in influencing boys' propensity to read as well as their choice of reading. The role of the teacher is crucial in helping pupils develop a positive attitude to learning. In the present case studies the school teachers involved were willing, open-minded, and did not hold prejudices about professional Rugby League players despite frequent media negative portrayals.

Whilst adopting principles of ethnography, ongoing research aims to develop a robust conceptual framework/model which could be used to enhance partnership

between various sporting codes in the sporting community and schools. The specific context for this framework/model will be Primary English, particularly reading, and the relational, attitudinal, and motivational shifts of the boys as well as construction of male identities will be highlighted.

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