Boys, reading and constructions of masculinities

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September 2017

Dissertation submitted to Flinders University for the degree of
Master of Education: Education Research, Evaluation & Assessment

Abstract

Over the past two decades, boys have been continually positioned as marginalised participants in the schooling system, where categorical notions of boys as failing and girls as achieving persist. These ideas have played out strongly in western societies in the areas of literacy and reading, with a convergence of boys and literacy 'crises'. The result of this has been a demand for more 'boy-friendly' literacy practices. While some boys underachieve in reading ability when compared to some girls, essentialist notions of gender fail to take into account the way that variations in capital and identity means achievement is not simply based on sex. Using Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities and Lesko's (2001, 2005) research on the construction of adolescence, I analyse three websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys to examine whether they contribute to and perpetuate constructions of hegemonic masculinities. The theoretical grounding for this study also draws on the key theories of Bourdieu (1984) and Bakhtin (1981) to underpin explorations of the construction of identity. I employ Critical Discourse Analysis as outlined by Gee (1999, 2014, 2015) and Fairclough (2015) to examine how websites created to promote reading in middle-years boys construct boys' masculinity.

Declaration

I certify that this dissertation does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Sarah McDonald

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisors, Kerrie Anne Mackey-Smith and Kay Whitehead, for your support and guidance during the writing of this dissertation. I have appreciated your belief in me, your kind corrections, and the fact that we always end up laughing in our meetings. Thank you especially for your patience with me during what has been a difficult time in my personal life after the loss of my brother. I am so grateful to you both.

I would like to express my gratitude to David Curtis for being a support and guide during my Master's degree, and for having so much faith in my abilities.

Thank you to my sister and my best friend, Rachael, for often telling me I am the smartest person she knows, and also for truly believing it.

Thank you to my parents, Chris and Terrie-Anne, for always being proud of me. Dad, it was hard to finish our time as colleagues to pursue further study, but I always feel close to you at 'our' university. Mum, I will always be indebted to you for not only talking to me for hours on end about the things I am learning and thinking about, but also for the way you are so excited by our conversations that *you* thank *me*.

Thank you, Tessa and Sophia, for being wonderful and funny daughters who always brighten my day. Ben, thank you for your unwavering support of me and for always being there when things have felt too hard. I can't imagine a better team than ours.

And finally, thank you to my son, Dante, for inspiring me to think about how our society harms boys too. Never stop questioning and challenging. This is for you.

Introduction

Political shaping of the 'Boys' Literacy Crisis'

In 1973, the Karmel report, commissioned by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, suggested "education was to be the engine for a more socially just Australia" (Lingard, 2000, p. 26). This report argued for a federally funded school system across both private and public schools, with a view that every student would receive equal educational opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic status or where they lived. Discussions about inequalities faced by girls within the education system arose during this period, and by the early 1980s, all states and territories had policies related to the promotion of equal opportunities for girls in education (Gilbert, 1996). In 1987 *The National Policy for the Education of Girls* became the first federal policy on schooling in Australia's history (Lingard, 2000). Yearly reports between 1987 and 1993 documented the advances being made in equitable education for girls, with a 1991 review suggesting the original policy remained relevant (Gilbert, 1996). This review led to the creation of a five-year plan, *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97*, which prioritised an examination into the social construction of gender, while also attending to other social differences among girls who were most at risk of not having their needs met.

In 1993, the *Gender and Violence Project* linked social constructions of gender with violence against women. This project argued that there needed to be a move toward 'gender' as a term in the education system in order to recognise the particular needs of girls *and* boys as different. This was to take place within a "framework that understands the way in which social constructions of femininity and masculinity impact upon girls and boys and affect school environments, and schooling outcomes" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 7). At the same time, the national *Equity in Senior School Assessment* report published data showing girls were ahead of boys in achievement across most subject areas, but particularly in literacy and subject English (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). During this period, successive governments were moving away from the Karmel Report's view of education as a site for equality toward a neoconservative view of education as economically significant within globalisation (Lingard, 2000), foreshadowing the beginning of the 'boy-crisis' (Gilbert, 1996). The media began to ask, 'what about the boys?'. Ways of speaking around notions of gender and social construction were subordinated in favour of categorical determinants of boys and girls (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). As a result, there were moves to refocus

the education system on the needs of boys (Gilbert, 1996). Alloway & Gilbert (1997) suggest the media-driven 'boy-crisis' has focused most strongly on literacy and reading as a marker for the underachievement of boys.

Personal context

My interest in the way some discourses contribute to problematic constructions of masculinity have emerged from my practice as an English teacher. The 'boy-crisis' was receiving much media and public attention during my undergraduate degree in the mid-2000s, and at a time where I was exploring where I fit within gender debates. I was frustrated by articles from media commentators such as Michael Carr-Gregg (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004) and Kevin Donnelly (2003) who blamed women for an apparent feminisation of the classroom, and suggested boys were being left out. In my first year as an English teacher, I taught solely in the middle-school. I remember noticing the top students in my mark book, and they were more often boys. I felt this illustrated that the boy/literacy-crisis was a myth, and that even if there was an element of truth, it was not present in my classroom. However, Thomson (2002) suggests that teachers "play their part in the production of social inequalities through the institutional mediation of policy and the broader social context, and the distribution of the cultural capital that counts" (p. 81). Thomson (2002) argues that some boys and girls do fall behind when it comes to literacy and reading, but that to focus solely on class or solely on gender is simplistic. She suggests instead "more nuanced, gender- and class-aware, situated interventions might be more productive" (p. 176).

Literacy and identity formation

Carrington and Luke (1997) argue that literacy is a social construction, which cannot be separated from the power it holds in specific contexts. A mastery of particular literacies places some boys and girls 'in' and 'outside of' those social contexts. Carrington and Luke (1997) contend that literate practices are particularly powerful within habitus. The forming of habitus is a process which begins at birth and can be described as the way of seeing the world, being in the world and participating in the history of the world (Hanks 2005). Habitus is not independent of field - the semi-autonomous, structured social spaces characterised by discourse and social activity - instead, habitus informs the fields, or social spaces, we participate in, while these social spaces inform the way we live and be in the world. For example, a lawyer will have a developed habitus that is informed by participating in the social spaces of law-school, and later, court proceedings. While a lawyer will feel comfortable with

the language and social acts within a court room, a visiting 'outsider' will feel unease with a discourse that is foreign to their own life-experience. These socially constructed dispositions differ as we move from social arena to social arena, such as the movement between a sports game, a workplace meeting and home.

Human becoming takes place within in the tension between the habitus and social space, what Hanks (2005) terms the 'dialectical confrontation'. Using Bourdieu's sociological framework, Carrington and Luke (1997) suggest that as individuals move through various socially constructed spaces, multiple literate practices are required. Accordingly, these practices appropriate to the social space become incorporated into the habitus, where they are further enacted across life trajectories as they are needed. What is viewed as 'normal' structures our perception of the world as well as our action within the world, but also constitutes the social spaces we move through as meaningful and worth investing in, or not. The extent to which literate practices are used will depend on their value within social spaces. Literate practices are afforded power in specific contexts when they are recognised and accepted as 'capital' by those who hold authority within social spaces.

The research problem, which has come out of the political context of the boys' literacy crisis and furthered through understandings of identity formation as informed by Bourdieu (1984) and Bahktin (1981), will be discussed in the following section.

The research problem

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the way websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys (11-14 years old) contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. This interest arises out of the historical and more recent gendered arguments of the 'literacy wars' being played out across education. Across my undergraduate studies, I explored and paid attention to the social constructionist aspects of education, particularly gender, as a marker in the way we learn and teach. When I went into classrooms as a teacher, I was involved in "constructing a world of gender relations" (Connell 1995, p. 86). For example, choosing texts for students or recommending texts to colleagues sometimes centred around what would engage 'the boys'. In using search engines to discover new class novels or novels for individual students, and later to search for information on the boys' literacy crisis, I became aware of the various websites that had been created to provide information on engaging boys in reading, specifically, the reading of novels. I was concerned with the assumptions about boys and masculinities which

underpinned the creation of these sites, and the understandings this may generate and perpetuate. In this context, the research questions aim to explore whether websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys contribute to constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. In particular:

- Who is the intended audience of the websites?
- How do the authors of the websites constitute middle-school boys' masculinities?
- How do recommended strategies on the websites for reading engagement construct the boy as reader?
- What are the implications for middle-school boys and their teachers?

Purpose

This qualitative study will draw on key theoretical insights from the works of Bourdieu (1984) and Bahktin (1981) to examine how websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. In dialogue with the relevant literature that provides tools for understanding from the fields of New Literacy Studies, literacy, adolescence and masculinities, this study will discuss the implications for middle-school boys.

Structure

Following this introduction, Chapter One serves a dual purpose of mapping the relevant literature, and elaborating the ideas that have formed the theoretical framework for the research problem. It discusses the reasons why this study has a particular focus on middle-school boys and reading, before outlining the understanding of literacy being used in this study, as informed by the literature. Chapter One also examines social construction as it relates to adolescence and masculinities. Following this, it moves on to theories of identity formation.

Chapter Two introduces the methodology and research methods that are used to examine whether the websites contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. This chapter begins with explanations of the data collection and procedures, particularly focussing on the way the websites were chosen. The second part of this chapter outlines the theories that have informed the research design and analysis.

Chapter Three examines the contexts in which the websites have been produced. It begins by describing the way the websites were selected, before situating them within a social context. The second part of the chapter introduces the authors of the websites and identifies the intended audiences of each website in turn.

Chapter Four comprises three sections. Each section focusses on an individual website. Within these sections, there is some fluidity between description and analysis, where the descriptions are used as examples of the views and ideas being enacted across the websites. The descriptions are linked with the theoretical framework in order to inform the analysis.

Chapter Five highlights themes that arise from the descriptions and analysis of the websites. These themes are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework to examine the narrative created by the authors of the websites about middle-school boys.

Lastly, Chapter Six reflects on the intent of the research, and discusses the way particular constructions of masculinities enacted on the websites may be problematic for middle-school boys. This chapter concludes by considering a different path forward in relation to the boys' literacy crisis.

Chapter One: Literature Review

This chapter begins by outlining the reasons for focussing on middle-school boys and reading. Through mapping the relevant literature, the middle-school years are located as a time where boys are developing an understanding of their place in the world. Following this, the theory of adolescence as historically constructed is outlined in relation to the way ideas about middle-school boys are normalised, which leads to specific understanding being perpetuated through common interventions into boys' literacy. The second part of this chapter examines theories of identity formation as outlined by Bourdieu (1984) and Bahktin (1981) in order to create a lens through which to examine the ways literacy may be enacted relationally to understandings of masculinities.

1.1 Why middle-school boys and why reading?

Concerns about the achievements of boys have been no more obvious than in the area of literacy, and more specifically, in reading (Gilbert, 1996). Research, including data from the OECD, suggests that girls outrank boys in reading achievement. The suggested causality is that girls report a greater enjoyment of reading (Mikk & Lynn 2009; Broughten & Manuel 2012; Brozo et al., 2014), indicating that if we could raise the levels of reading enjoyment in boys, their reading achievement scores would similarly increase. However, while data from the 2009 PISA tests (2011) shows boys are underachieving in comparison to girls, this does not give insight into *which* boys are falling below average, nor does it take into account those girls who are also falling behind. In fact, socioeconomic status is a greater indicator of reading achievement (PISA, 2011), suggesting that girls from low-socioeconomic areas may be further disadvantaged when education policies focus on boys (Gill & Tranter, 2014), while boys may be disadvantaged if their achievement is impacted by factors other than gender.

Gee (2015) contends that within a 'literacy crisis', a common understanding of reading is that it is about an ability to decode words, rather than comprehend them, pointing to traditional views of literacy as "the ability to read and (sometimes) write" (p. 51). He highlights the way societies place importance on reading because of historical assumptions that "literacy gives rise to high-order cognitive abilities, to more analytic and logical thoughts than is typical of oral cultures" (Gee, 2015, p. 58). Similarly, Carrington and Luke (1997) suggest that particular literacy practices are an index of social power, where all forms of capital are *valid*, but not all forms are *valued*. The traditional academic curriculum places high value on

reading as a literacy practice (Carrington & Luke, 1997), with reading having become equated with the "advancement and overall well-being of individuals, communities and entire societies" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 97). Connell (2003) contends that the result of a privatised and marketed user-pays policy on education, which emphasises 'consumer choice' and redefines parents as customers, means that privileged social groups see education systems serve their specific interests. Street (2003) suggests this understanding is part of what he terms an 'autonomous' view of literacy, which is underpinned by an assumption that being sufficiently literate has effects on social practices such as employment prospects and the making of 'good citizens'. This view of literacy is presented as neutral and universal, while disguising the "cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it" (Street, 2003, p. 2). Street (2003) problematises this view by highlighting the way gaining literacy is seen as 'autonomous' of social practices and structures, rather than a social practice in itself, up until the point it is sufficiently 'learned', where it then becomes a necessary social practice needed to sufficiently participate in society. Street (2003) proposes that the ideological model of literacy is more culturally sensitive, where literacy is accepted as a social practice rather than a technical skill. Within this model, the reading and writing of *any* text type is important in participating in the social world. For example, understanding the both obvious and subtle differences in the discursive practices of text messaging a friend or sending a formal email to a superior in the workplace may be seen as fundamental in participating in a neoliberal society if subscribing to an autonomous model of literacy, but can clearly be seen as an example of social practice within an ideological model. Street (2003) argues that within an ideological model of literacy, reading and writing are socially situated practices, and therefore, are continually contested in the sense that "particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate" (p. 2). An example of this is in the way that the reading of novels remains a fundamental literacy practice in schools, particularly in the English classroom during the middle and senior years. The teaching and reading of novels as texts within the English classroom, as well as the reading of novels for pleasure outside the social structure of education, are of themselves social practices (Street, 2003).

In taking a balanced approach, 'autonomous' or traditional skills give access to some fields of practice, such as scientific reading and writing, while ideological perspectives account for the discourses within a field where other markers of habitus may signal one as belonging in that field. In Western society, reading - specifically encoding and decoding the alphabet with

fluency - is an essential skill within a repertoire. However, Freire and Slover (1983) argue that reading is not *only* about "decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extended into knowledge of the world" (p. 5). Freire and Slover (1983) go on to suggest that learning to read the world, or field, always precedes learning to read the written word, supporting a case for incorporating both traditional and ideological models of literacy. In this sense, the suggestion that reading words is both 'anticipated by' and 'extended into' an understanding of the world shows the intertwining nature of the word and the world, much as habitus and field inform and are informed by the other.

The middle-years of schooling is located as a time when people are developing an understanding of their place in the world. Freebody, Morgan, Comber & Nixon (2014) suggest that when it comes to literacy practices, the middle years is under researched. They argue that this is problematic because it is a period where the types of literacy practices required by middle years children, such as the use of literacy skills in reading and writing across multiple discipline areas, is a significant change from that required in the primary years. They suggest it is during these years, as teachers begin to "look for evidence of conceptual understanding, content details, appropriate genres and discourse" (Freebody et al., 2014, pp. 8-9), that already visible gaps in literacy achievement increase. McLeod and Yates (2006) situate these middle years within a historical and social context, where adult anxieties about children are viewed through a dominant lens for interpreting and constructing adolescence. They argue that the middle years typically "evokes a time of dislocation and transformation, and a forging of adult identities" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 76), where 'common-sense' ideologies construct "gendered and normative truths" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 77). Increased parental anxiety stems from a neoliberal view of education as important for the future economy, and a sense of a "more difficult and more fragile" social life, where middle class consternation "about work and future opportunity is projected onto concerns about the outcomes of their children's education" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 71). McLeod and Yates (2006) argue that it is also during these middle years that "gender differences became particularly pronounced" (p. 31). Mills and Keddie (2010) add that the "dominance of neo-liberal discourses in education has also impacted upon the ways in which boys are often now viewed as a problem for schools" (p. 407), and that while there is a diversity of boys, "all such boys are liable to be subject to homogenising discourses which construct all such boys as the same" (p. 407). The narrative around boys' underachievement places blame on a 'feminised' education system (McLeod & Yates, 2006; Warrington & Younger, 2000). These arguments purport a lack of male role models (Booth, 2002;

Biddulph, 2010) and a lack of engagement (Brozo et al., 2014). Mills and Keddie (2010) suggest this gender 'backlash' "served to generate an assumption that feminism was a completed project and that boys were the new disadvantaged in schools" (p. 408).

1.2 A historical and normalised social construction of adolescence

Normalised societal understandings of adolescence are viewed through a lens based on sex-role and essentialist theories. This lens can be partly traced back to G. Stanley Hall, a pre-eminent psychologist of the early twentieth century, whose contributions to the constructions of adolescence were born out of a concern for men experiencing 'neurasthenia' (Lesko, 2001). Hall upheld adolescence as a crucial period of human evolution in which "the individual's development replayed the development of the human species from primitive savage early humans to civilised White Europeans" (Saltman, 2005, p. 16). He describes middle-years boys as "father of the man" based on 'savage' qualities that are older than the more "distinctly human attributes" of men (Hall, 1904, p. x), and in this there is a sense of awe about the 'primal' nature of adolescent boys. Hall positions this 'boyhood savagery' as a reliving of the violence of primitive man, and suggests that not doing so amounts to emasculation (Bederman, 2005), pointing toward a normalised version of masculinity.

In order to avoid creating what he referred to as 'weak-willed' and 'effeminate' men, Hall challenged educators to "follow boys' lead and utilise their 'naturally occurring' interests in sports, camping, and physical activities" (Lesko, 2001, p. 59). Hall's descriptions of the adolescent boy are of something primal and savage:

> The child revels in savagery, and if its tribal, predatory, hunting, fishing, roving, idle, playing proclivities could be indulged in the country and under conditions that now, alas! seem hopelessly ideal, they could conceivably be so organised and directed as to be far more truly humanistic and liberal than all that the best modern school can provide (Hall, 1904, p. x).

Hall conceptualised bad behaviour not as moral weakness but as moral development and he associated this theory with boys, claiming they were closer to the "primitive man" while girls were "governed by adult motives" (Bederman, 2005, p. 66). More specifically, Hall believed only white middle-class boys were "capable of fully reaching individual development necessary to bear the burden of carrying civilisation forward" (Saltman, 2005, p. 16). Within these constructions of adolescence, there is an emphasis on the need for adult guidance and authority in helping to transform 'primitive' boys into powerful and manly

men (Lesko, 2005; Bederman, 2005). Lesko (2005) notes that Hall in particular believed that if "the species, and individual young men, were not to be arrested at the gang stage (boys from the ages of 8-11 years), then adolescents must be helped to develop" (Lesko, 2005, p. 92). Hall described the way male teachers could guide boys whereby boys would be allowed to fully experience their natural savagery through violence, and oneness with nature. This savagery would be carried in their blood into adulthood, inoculating strong men against effeminacy and neurasthenia (Bederman, 2005). As such, the growth of Boy Scouts and the YMCA were a "conscious movements to get boys out of the hands of mothers and female teachers into comradeship with men" (Lesko, 2005, p. 91). Lesko (2001) argues that Hall's theories have largely contributed to social constructions of adolescence, so that his ideas remain pervasive in modern understandings of the adolescent boy and education.

1.3 Problematic interventions

Gill and Tranter (2014) contend that interventions within schools are underpinned by essentialist ideas and theories of categorical sex differences. Mills and Keddie (2010) state:

> Projects have tended to homogenise boys' interests and learning styles along stereotypical gender binary lines reflecting more broadly what Lingard (2003) has referred to as a 'recuperative masculinity politics' where there is a focus on recapturing a sense of masculinity lost in the now 'overly' feminised spaces of the school and beyond (p. 408).

However, these theories are problematic in that they are based on a premise that gender is fixed and irrevocably tied to sex (Gill & Tranter, 2014), with masculinity discussed as a single state of being, rather than acknowledging the existence of a diversity of masculinities which can be performed by both males and females (Connell, 1995). The approach, then, becomes a change to schooling and literacy practices to meet the needs of boys.

Contemporary approaches to promoting reading in middle-school boys have often focussed on presenting literacy as more masculine (Martino, 2008). These approaches are commonly underpinned by sex role socialisation and recuperative masculinity theories informed by men's rights groups and theories of the personal aspects of masculinity (Skelton, 2001; Foster, Kimmel, Skelton, 2001), with interventions based on perceived common and constructed interests and learning styles. Booth (2002) and Millard (1997) suggest boys learn to associate literacy with females from a young age, resulting in either rejection as "a feminised activity" (Booth, 2002, p. 20), or a reticence to admit to an enjoyment of reading if they believe it will affect their ability to fit in with their peers. Similarly, the gender of teachers

is commonly discussed in terms of how best to support male students and create positive relationships. This has seen a shift of "blame for boys' schooling underperformance away from boys" (Mills & Keddie, 2010, p. 410) and onto female teachers and feminine ways of teaching, with parenting experts such as Steve Biddulph (2010) suggesting male students fare better with male teachers (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001). Skelton and Francis (2009) usefully remind us that sex-role socialisation theories are problematic as they suggest children are not participants themselves in gender construction. They contend that these theories are based on "essentialised conceptions of identity as fixed" (Skelton & Francis, 2009, p.119), raising questions about *which* masculinity is supposed to be represented. These arguments about boys' underachievement (Skelton & Francis, 2009) are based on the "idea that boys' physiology explains the difference in their abilities and performance" (p. 11). Commonly underpinning assertions of boy-friendly literacy practices is the notion that boys are victims of feminism and the feminisation of schooling (Skelton, 2001; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001). The argument has overwhelmingly focussed on change in order to meet the needs of boys rather than on disrupting "the harmful impacts of constructions of masculinity, … which in many contexts cause some boys to be a problem to others, to develop negative attitudes towards learning, and literacy in particular" (Mills & Keddie, 2010, p. 409). Bourdieu's (1984) sociological framework offers a lens through which to view this type of gender construction as constituting of a particular kind of habitus.

1.4 Habitus and socially determined structures

Bourdieu (1984) describes habitus as embodied, "a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world - a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in the world" (p. 81). Habitus can be thought of as the way we are socialised with others to view the world, be in the world and participate in the world (Hanks, 2005). Bourdieu recognises that choices can be restricted by socio-economic positioning and wider social structures (Carrington & Luke, 1997), in other words, by the lived experience of, and movement through, various and particular fields. The way that individuals move through these fields or social arenas throughout their life trajectory will depend on accumulations of 'capital', and crucially, what Bourdieu describes as 'authoritative' *recognition* of capital within particular social arenas. For example, a university lecturer may have multiple degrees which are recognised as capital within the 'field' of a university. However, their degrees and knowledge may not be recognised as such in the field of a car mechanic. Similarly, a mechanic who holds authority in the workplace for

skills and knowledge may feel out of place in a university where what 'counts' as capital is different. This suggests constraints within fields on who can engage in which positions, where "access is always differential and selective" (Hanks, 2005, p. 74).

Connell (1995) suggests gender is one such socially determined structure, more specifically as a structure of social practice and order. She argues that gender is the *main* determinant of our collective fate, intersecting with both class and race. Bourdieu (1984) would further contend culture plays a central role. Gender as a social construct presupposes that gender in our society is based on reproduction and bodies, but *not* on our biological being (Connell, 1995). In this way, gender is a determining social structure, where humans are categorised into parts, with gender as a starting point. Gender determinants form our identity, discourse and culture, and state, community, workplace and school. It is how we understand ourselves as beings, and as performers in the world, or as Gee (2015) would contend, as more or less 'right'. It begins at birth and is pervasive across all fields. Connell (1995) argues for the existence of hegemony within this social structure, where "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (p. 76). Therefore, hegemonic masculinities and marginalised masculinities are not fixed character types, but are "configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships" (Connell, 1995, p. 81). Based on this argument, it becomes clear how the idea of the authoritative is crucial to narrative formations, and why it is difficult to contest the way education has taken up masculinity relationally to reading.

1.5 Heteroglossia and identity formation

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia (1981) offers another conceptual tool for thinking about the discursive formations of 'field' (Bourdieu, 1984). The intersection between language, discourse and social world assimilate with Bakhtin's theory (1981) of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia is the multitude of discourses that impact on an individual as they are forming their identity in a given social arena. As individuals, we are subject to these narratives throughout the various fields we travel through, and as the fields change, so too do the narratives we 'hear'. These narratives are described by Bahktin as 'dialogic' (1981), where they can be categorised into authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. Internally persuasive discourse is made up of the everyday narratives we hear throughout our life trajectory, the narratives of everyday people. Authoritative discourse is made up of regimes of apparent 'truth', as constructed and accepted by society. These regimes of 'truth'

can take the form of religion, literature and social systems, such as education. Following from this, Gee (1999) differentiates between 'little d' discourse, in relation to language use, and 'big D' Discourse, as communication which uses more than simply utterances, but also bodies, clothes, gestures, and other communications which are identity based. Gee (1999) suggests that this view of D/discourse is "about seeing interactive communication through the lens of socially meaningful identities" (p. 25). Gee (2015) asserts that each Discourse is a form of ideology made up of theories "about what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' ways to think, feel and behave" (p. 5). The narratives, or language, which is part of every Discourse is "inextricably bound up with ideology and cannot be analysed or understood apart from it" (Gee, 2015, p. 5). Bahktin (1981) theorises that in forming the 'ideological self', individuals attempt to assimilate authoritative and internally persuasive discourse (Masutov, 2007), showing how the self can be shaped by "the invisible authority of social traditions" (Masutov, 2007, p. 218).

Bourdieu (1984) and Bakhtin (1981) both hold theories on identity formation. Bourdieu contends that identity is formed within the balance between habitus and field, while Bakhtin asserts that identity formation takes place at a point of tension, between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Matusov (2007) describes identity formation as an 'ideological becoming', where we accept or reject, and attempt to assimilate, whether consciously or unconsciously, the narratives and ideas we are subjected to. While we simultaneously impact, and are impacted *by*, the fields we move through, so too do we become part of the multitude of narratives which impact on another's ideological becoming. McLeod and Yates (2006) state:

> Their 'habitus' is not simply that people copy 'role models', or are rewarded or
> punished for   doing certain things, but that in quite subtle ways, through discourse,
> practices, and institutions, and through interactions with others in their
> environment, principles are set up for the individual about what matters, what is
> noticed, how one comports oneself physically, socially, emotionally, and much
> more (p. 90).

This leads to the concept of capital, the dispositions to perform in particular arenas (Hanks, 2005). Within identity formation, capital will affect both the narratives that we hear, and the narratives we accept as part of our being. It is through narrative that we both understand our place in the world and are shaped as beings.

1.6 The literate habitus

Ideas around habitus, field and capital "provide a powerful model for understanding the functions and consequences of literacies in the life paths of students" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 97). Literacy practices take on multiple forms of 'cultural capital' depending on authoritative recognition within particular fields, where literacy takes on a 'symbolic significance' within wider society, acting as an indicator of status. Carrington & Luke (1997) state:

> In the public gaze, literacy is frequently defined as a neutral, identifiable package of skills, or alternatively, as a set of moral traits or features, the acquisition of which are seen to ensure social access and success (p. 97)

Carrington and Luke (1997) further argue that there is danger in unproblematically equating certain types of literacy practice, such as reading and school-acquired literacy, with cultural capital. They speak to the 'literacy myth', suggesting common linkages of early knowledge and understanding of reading to increased self-esteem and school achievement as causal (Carrington & Luke, 1997). These assumptions - Carrington and Luke (1997) refer to them as 'folk-theories' - work towards defining access and participation to social and institutional fields. This speaks to the idea of literacy and the literate individual as a social construct, which is formed within social fields, where only certain types of literacies are valued. This idea is referred to as the 'literate habitus', a form of embodied habitus where individual literate practices reflect cultural and social capital, and contribute to the further development of habitus and subsequent life trajectory across fields. Similary, Rowsell and Pahl (2007) speak of the ways literacy, particularly the creation of texts, is a form of meaning making, where individuals sediment their identity:

> The text, then, becomes an artefact of identities as much informed by social practice, habitus, and context as it is by the material choices made during its creation (p. 392).

This offers a lens through which to see literacy and the literate individual not only as a social construct, but also as capable of socially *constructing* when individuals make choices about which Discourses to draw on in different literate practices (Rowsell & Pahl,2007).

1.7 The habitus and constructions of masculinity

Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002) assert that the consequences for some boys of "narrative and restrictive" (p. 4) understandings of hegemonic masculinities is an alienation from traditional literacy classrooms and practices. Brozo (2005) suggests that

thinking about boys as if "there is only one way to be masculine" (p. 18) is problematic in that it contributes to "the problem of reinforcing stereotypical masculinity" (p. 18). Martino (2008) suggests a framework for understanding masculinity should involve "challenging social expectations about what it means to be male and understanding how these expectations impact on boys' participation in schooling". As individuals move through various fields, one of which is literacy in school, multiple literate practices are required (Carrington & Luke, 1997). These practices are incorporated into habitus, and enacted in their life path within the specific fields where they are needed, depending on their value within various fields. Within this lens, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (1995) can be used to explain how individuals and groups will discard practices which are not valued within the context of the construction of hegemonic masculinity, when they are not deemed to create access to social power. Because there is no one form of hegemonic masculinity, all may draw upon these aspects, and modify, exaggerate and distort them. Carrington and Luke (1997) suggest that within a Bourdieuan analysis, it is important to tease out which masculinity is hegemonic within any one site.

In summary, this chapter has highlighted the relevant literature from the fields of New Literacy Studies, literacy, adolescence and masculinities. Theories of identity formation, as informed by Bourdieu (1984) and Bahktin (1981), has been examined as a lens through which to view the way middle-school boys are developing an understanding of self relationally to social practice and order. Normalised ideas about middle-school boys has been highlighted through mapping the theory of adolescence as historically constructed and socially accepted. A connection has been drawn between the theories of adolescence and identity formation and understandings of socially-constructed hegemonic and marginalised masculinities in order to create an understanding around the way masculinity is linked with reading within the field of education. The way the literature will be used to inform the research is to be examined further in the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Methodology

First of all, the procedures used to collect data will be discussed in this chapter, with explanations of how choices were made about which websites to examine. The second section outlines the theoretical framework while the third section describes the specific ways in which the data will be analysed. The final section looks at the ethical considerations of the research, specifying the ethical research practices which underpin this study.

2.1 Data Collection

Data in this project is taken from websites that have been created for the purpose of promoting reading among middle-school boys. Smith's (2007) approach to the selection of appropriate websites has been used as a guide in this study. Firstly, the texts for analysis are in the form of websites available in the public domain, and are able to be highly accessed using Google search engine. Secondly, the websites will have been created, or feature pages within the site, with the primary aim of promoting reading in middle-school boys.

The websites for analysis have been chosen because their content is predominantly about boys and reading. Their location on the first pages of search results using key phrases on Google search engine suggests significant traffic and inbound links. Searches have been conducted using the following key phrases: boys and books, books for middle school boys, boys and reading, getting boys to read, middle school boys and reading. The websites to be examined repeatedly appeared across these terms.

The following websites are examined:

www.guysread.com

www.boysread.org

www.jamesmaloney.com.au/ideas_for_getting_boys_into_reading.htm

2.2 Research Design

The purpose for focussing on the websites is to firstly examine how masculinities are constituted, and secondly to discuss the way the constructions may reinforce or challenge particular aspects of reader identity. Theoretical frameworks for the analysis are informed by the theories of Bourdieu (1984) and Bakhtin (1981). Bourdieu (1984) offers a lens for

viewing normalised social structures that work to maintain the status-quo within and across social arenas. Bakhtin's ideas for heteroglossia (1981) provides a lens for understanding the language within these social structures, while also offering a sense of hope and a site for change through the possibility of dialogue as something which can be *co*-constructed. Bourdieu and Bakhtin's work is reconceptualised contemporarily by Gee (2015) to provide tools of inquiry. In seeking out a feminist theoretical lens, Connell (1995) offers conceptual understandings of masculinities, while Lesko's (2005) work foregrounds understandings of normalised ideas around adolescence. Together these theorists provide a way to view the websites as sites to be examined for how they shape identity, particularly with regard to the masculine 'adolescent'. In using this approach, emerging themes are identified with an emphasis on language while also describing, interpreting and explaining how the websites created to promote reading in middle-school boys are constructed within a specific political time and context. By using multiple lens as a tool for understanding, I will offer alternative renderings of boys relationally to literate practice in the discussion.

2.3 Data Analysis

Analysis takes place using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Gee, 2015; Fairclough, 2015). Firstly, the websites are situated within a social context, including purpose, intended audience and the assumptions the authors of the texts bring with them. Secondly, by placing the websites within a context of 'common-sense theories' and 'shared knowledge' (Gee, 2014), analysis of the specific language used shows how the consumers of the websites are positioned to respond. By exploring whether the websites created to promote reading in middle-school boys place value on certain types of literacy, I examine whether or not the types of novels recommended to encourage boys to read signal what is valued within this field. Finally, I explore the potential ways that the websites illustrate understandings of masculinities, as well as the way they invite consumers to take up particular positions.

To undertake an examination of the websites requires a plan. The management of the websites as data begins with building an understanding of the narrative around middle-school boys which is being constructed by the authors of the websites. This is initially undertaken by searching for content words (Gee, 2014), specifically adjectives, used in descriptions of middle-school boys in order to begin to assemble possible common themes across the three websites. These common adjectives begin to highlight the themes present within a discourse on middle-school boys and reading. These ideas are then approached

using Gee's 'building tasks' (2014) in order to deconstruct the language used on the websites to produce meaning, highlighting the ways the language attributes masculine identities to middle-school boys, as well as the way the authors of the websites use this language to enact their own identities (Gee, 2014). After placing the websites within the context of 'common-sense theories' and 'shared knowledge', CDA (Gee, 2014) is used explore the dominant understandings of masculinities.

Following an examination of adjectival language is a move onto discursive lenses. As websites take on a multimodal form, analysis also takes up theories of social semiotics informed by Hodge and Kress (1988). Hodge and Kress (1988) argue that all signs are texts to be analysed, where "…everything in a culture can be seen as a form of communication, organised in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 1). In using this approach, websites can be viewed as a dialogue where both the message itself is analysed for producing meaning, as well as the common understandings of the reader which the producer of the message relies upon. As well as this, the websites have been developed by authors, who hold an understanding of the way language can be used to connect with an audience, and so literary analysis has also been taken up in order to deconstruct their strategies used to persuade their audience.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The material used for data collection are available in the public sphere, therefore formal ethics approval is unnecessary. However, it remains important as an interpretivist researcher to take ethical considerations into account. Texts can have a variety of meanings depending on the historical and political life experiences, and ways of knowing, of both author and reader. It is important, therefore, to also be mindful of the way authors position readers to make meaning through a particular lens. I come to this research understanding my own interpretation is "partial and governed by the discourse of my time and place" (Britzman, 2000, p. 32). In light of this, it is important to be aware of the way that I position the reader to view the findings I present through my own particular lens. Fairclough (2015) suggests the researcher must acknowledge the way reproduction of social inequalities is "a generally unintended and unconscious side-effect … of production and interpretation" (p. 172). Research will rely on active engagement in self-reflection and disclosure of contingent knowledge, with an understanding that "one's historical realities, identities, and experiences

shape what one sees and doesn't see" (Brisola, 2014, p. 24). Through reflexivity and an understanding of positionality, I intend to be faithful to what I see represented in the data.

As an ethical practitioner of research, I will maintain a sensitivity toward highlighting bias within the study. This will take the form of praxis-orientated research as outlined by Lazar (2007), through a feminist lens. Central to this method is a critique of discourses which pay attention to patriarchal and matriarchal social orders (Lazar, 2007). In taking on this form of critique, it is important to uncover the ways that the discursive is not always obvious to the participants within a social practice, because it appears 'normalised'. Lather and Lather (1991) suggest this is an example of internal ideology, which is viewed in feminist research "as something most people *inhabit* in very daily, material ways and which speaks to both progressive and determinant aspects of culture" (p. 2). This means that an 'open-ideological' approach to inquiry needs to include self-reflexivity or an awareness of one's own internalised understandings of personals ideals and values. Feminist praxis-orientated research asks that I hold a critical distance on gender and on myself as researcher, as well as make explicit my own positionality as a middle-class woman.

Chapter Three: Introducing the websites

In this chapter, an understanding of the intended audience is produced through examination of the contexts in which the websites have been created. The first section situates the websites as part of neoconservative, middle-class concerns around education (McLeod & Yates, 2006), while also taking into account the way it is women who make links between home and schooling (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009) as well as who make up the majority of middle-school teaching staff (Whitehead, 2009). Following this are brief biographies of the authors as portrayed on their websites, along with descriptions of the websites in terms of the way the authors make connections with their intended audiences.

3.1 Websites in context

Like many text types, the websites can be viewed as a dialogue which relies upon both an author and an audience to produce meaning. The audience act as active participants in navigating the websites, in that they make choices about various pages and links to visit as part of their experience. The key words used to arrive at the sites - boys, books, middle-school, reading - signal assumptions being made by the audience of the websites where beliefs about the reading abilities of boys, as well as the types of books boys enjoy, are homogenised and underpinned by categorical differences between middle school girls and boys (Gill & Tranter, 2014). This also suggests that in conducting the searches in the first place, the audience is expecting information that will support their views rather than challenge them, rendering the understandings underpinning the websites, along with the understandings brought to the sites by the audience, as a shared knowledge (Gee, 2014) and discourse. In this context, 'shared knowledge' speaks to the idea that the authors of the websites produce meaning while at the same time relying on the common understandings of the audience (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The authors expect their audience to draw upon and make "intertextual and historical links with prior texts or text types within their experience" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 78).

Campbell, Proctor & Sherington (2009) argue that "women's work, especially that of mothers, regardless of their personal relationship to the paid labour force, is crucial in the educational field and in class-making activity" (p. 17). Their study suggests that providing a link between home and school is seen middle-class mothers' work, who "expect to influence the school's practices in the perceived interests of their children" (p. 28). Whitehead (2009)

similarly argues that it is women make up the majority of teaching staff in middle-schools, whereas men are more often found in leadership. Following this, it can be surmised that the intended audience of the websites are middle-class mothers and women teachers.

The websites can be situated within a social context where adult anxieties around middle-school boys and reading are underpinned by a dominant and historical lens for constructing and interpreting adolescence (McLeod & Yates, 2006). This lens can be traced back to Stanley Hall, who believed boys needed to be made "strong, courageous, honest, and disciplined" and that this could only be achieved by "getting them away from women, both mothers and teachers, and their soft, feminising, emotional influences" (Lesko, 2001, p. 57). In order to avoid creating 'weak-willed' and 'effeminate' boys, Hall advised educators to "follow boys' lead and utilise their 'naturally occurring' interests in sports, camping, and physical activities" (Lesko, 2001, p. 59). Lesko (2001) argues that Hall's ideas continue to influence normalised societal understandings of adolescence and education, and in fact, remain so embedded in modern education that they are difficult to question. These discourses are evident in the creation of the websites as well as in the reasons for visits to the sites. McLeod and Yates (2006) situate modern parental concerns as neoliberal and middle-class trepidation about education and future work-lives, which is in turn suggestive of the potential audience of the websites.

3.2 Jon Scieszka

The first website author, Jon Scieszka, is an American children's author. His website, *Guys Read*, is presented to the audience as a "web-based literacy program for boys" (Scieszka, 2016). Features such as clear links to the other pages of his website across the top of the screen make the website easy to navigate. The consistent use of the word 'guys' clearly refers to middle-school (and some high-school) aged boys. This is clear through multiple references on the website, as well as on Scieszka's personal site, where 'boys' and 'guys' is used interchangeably. For example,

> Welcome to Guys Read, a web-based literacy program for boys founded by author and First National Ambassador of Young People's Literature Jon Scieszka;

> Our mission is to help boys become self-motivated, lifelong readers;

> And please help guys out by recommending more of your guy-favorites;

The denotive language use of the word 'guys' in this instance suggests the term is understood as a casual reference to boys, and is typical of the conversational style used on the website. There is a casual familiarity and aim to connect with the audience on a particular level, and while initially it may suggest that the intended audience is middle-school boys, there are clues to suggest the audience is parents and teachers of middle-school boys. The use of the words "our mission is to help boys" speaks to adults who will guide boys, positioning the boys as passive and adults as the active audience, while also drawing upon historical links to normalised ideas around adolescence (Lesko, 2001; Lesko, 2005).

3.3 James Maloney

The second website author, James Maloney, is an Australian author who has written a large number of books "mostly for young people from seven to seventeen years old" (Maloney, 2016). The specific page for analysis within his website has been constructed for the purpose of sharing his thoughts on how to get boys to read more. This page is titled, *Ideas for Getting Boys into Reading,* and is based on his book *Boys and Books: Building a Culture of Reading Around Our Boys (2002).* Maloney states that the page has been created as a result of his book being out of print*.* The page, addressed at www.jamesmaloney.com.au/ideas_for_getting_boys_into_reading.htm is accessible through his website via a link accessed under the heading 'Adult Books' which immediately sign-posts that the intended audience is adults. Upon arriving at the page, there is a quote which further signals who Maloney views as the intended audience - parents and teachers: "The following extracts give some ideas that parents and teacher might find helpful". The intended audience is further cemented in sentences further down the page such as "when the day comes for him to say, 'Mum (or Dad), I don't want you to read to me any more,' the reason will be because he is already reading books of similar calibre for himself." The situating of the words 'or Dad' within parenthesis, and the use of the word 'Mum', suggests consumers of the site are primarily mothers of middle-school boys. While some of Maloney's audience may come to the website aware of his status as a children's book author, others may not, particularly if consumers follow an inbound link directly to this page rather than through links on his website. However, Maloney positions himself as an authority on boys and reading in his introduction. He takes an 'authorial' (Bahktin, 1981) stance, instilling his authority to speak on matters of reading and middle-school boys through highlighting his career as both a children's author and teacher librarian in an all-boys school: "By way of introducing this section, I will blaze ahead regardless with a few point (sic) distilled from my

years as a librarian in an all boys school." Specifying that the school is an all-boys school also points to the school as being elite and middle-class, as there are few single sex public schools in Australia, further highlighting the intended audience as a middle-class elite. Connell (2003) suggests engaged, middle-class parents tend to be focussed on post-schooling options, which "moves strategic choice of subjects, and maximising marks, to the centre of attention" (p. 240).

3.4 John Martin

The final website author, John Martin, is an American author who writes novels for middle school children, and who "works with educators and parents to motivate reluctant readers" (Betterley, 2012). Like the other websites, this one is also intended for teachers and parents which is clear through the introduction: "We are an organisation of parents, educators, librarians, mentors, authors, and booksellers". Martin initially signals his authority to speak by positioning his audience to view him as having an understanding of middle-school boys and what they enjoy through the overall appearance of the page.
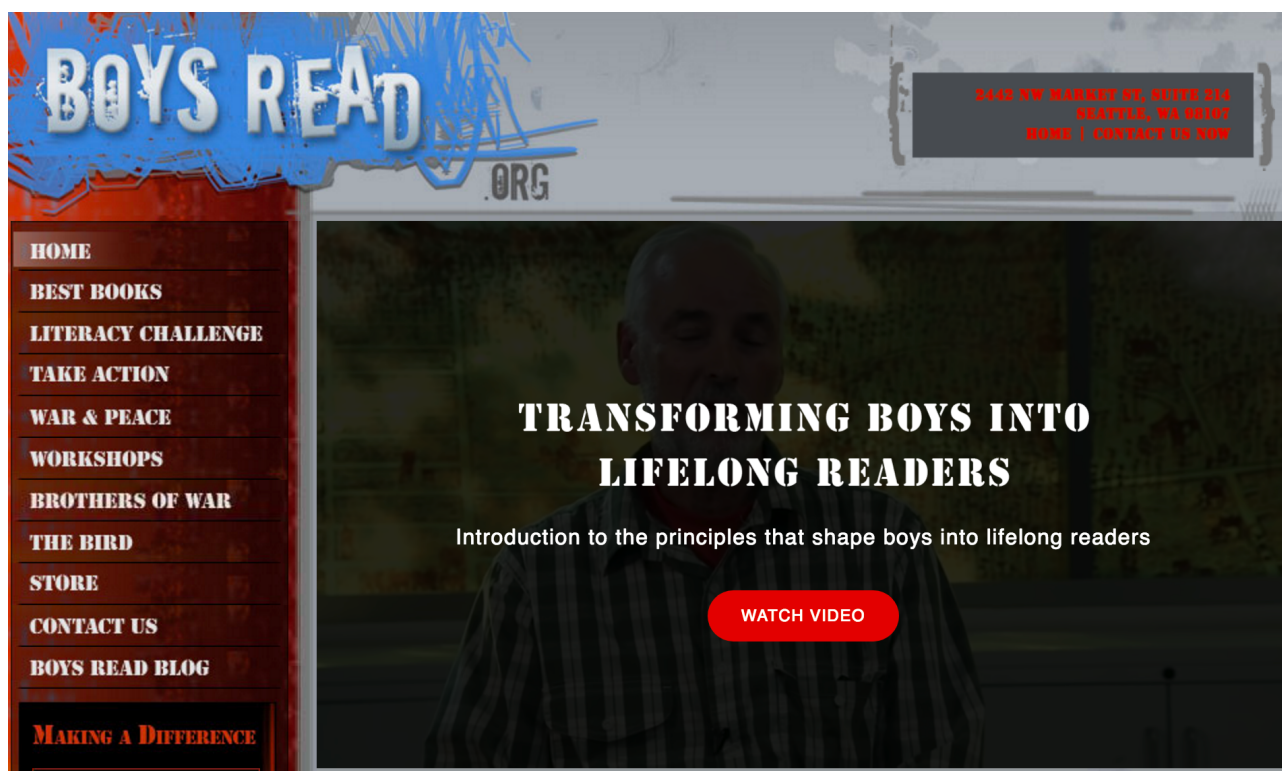

Figure 1. **Martin, J. (2016). Home page of *Boys Read.* Retrieved from boysread.org**

Callow (1999) states that reading an internet screen is "not linear" (p. 104) but rather "our eye tends to bounce around the screen and be attracted to the elements that have visual weight, that is the images demand our attention by being marked in some way e.g. bold,

large font, colour, icons and placement" (Callow, 1999, p. 104), where all the parts together form an overall understanding of what the website is about. In this case, the eye is drawn to the right-hand corner where there is a heading 'Boys Read' over a graffiti style image. The graffiti image is blue, while the background is a deep red and concrete grey. Caldas-Coulthard & Van Leeuwen (2002) highlight the way colour can be "an important signifier of gender" (p. 101), where "colours like blue for boys or dark colours for men, attach values to the idea of 'masculinity'" (p. 101). Their study of the colours used in children's toys suggests that while the values attached to colours are not "*explicitly* coded" (Caldas-Coulthard & Van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 101) in popular culture, darker and more intense colours commonly understood as masculine tend to be associated with mystery or danger. By using masculine colours in the heading, as well as in the larger background of the website, Martin asks the audience to draw on understandings of normalised and hegemonic masculinity in order to signal his own authority as having an understanding of middle school boys.

There are commonalities between the authors of the three websites. All three authors are male and they are experienced writers. This is reinforced by the language used by the authors to connect with their audience, particularly in the ways they claim authority over middle-school boys because they are male and therefore understand boys. The authors all conceptualise their audiences as women, namely mothers and women teachers. In the following chapter, in-depth descriptions and analysis of each website in turn will move toward thinking about what is understood when looking at masculinities and reading from a socio-political context.

Chapter Four: Boys, masculinities, adolescence and reading

In the previous chapter, the authors of the three websites were introduced and their commonalities outlined. The way the audience is conceptualised as female was discussed in terms of the strategies used by the authors to create both a connection with the audience and an authority around middle-school boys. In this chapter, the websites will be further analysed in order to describe how the authors of the websites constitute middle-school boys' masculinities through critically analysing the websites for dominant messages around adolescence, middle-school boys and reading. The following sections offer in-depth descriptions of each website, with a fluidity between the descriptions and the analysis.

4.1 Guys Read - John Scieszka

Although Jon Scieszka is an American children's author, it is not obvious on the *Guys Read* website. This information can be found on Scieska's separate personal website.

Welcome to Guys Read

Welcome to Guys Read, a web-based literacy program for boys founded by author and First National Ambassador of Young People's Literature Jon Scieszka. Our mission is to help boys become self-motivated, lifelong readers.

Research shows that boys are having trouble reading, and that boys are getting worse at reading. No one is quite sure why. Some of the reasons are biological. Some of the reasons are sociological. The good news is that research also shows that boys will read — if they are given reading that interests them.

MR. JON SCIESZKA

BOOK OF THE MONTH

DECEMBER 2016

I Am Drums

Mike Grosso

I Am Drums is a perfect Middle Grade novel for any kid who has been told or felt that they're dumb for dreaming. (Check out our full review here.) We were thrilled to chat with the author, Mike Grosso, about how being a teacher and musician inform his writing.

Figure 2. Scieszka, J. (2016). Home page of *Guys Read.* Retrieved from guysread.com

The background of Jon Scieszka's website is white, while the colours used are bright red and blue; the use of stars, between the links across the top of the webpage, means the overall look is patriotically American. The audience is positioned to draw on normalised understandings of the American Stars and Stripes, perhaps evoking an image of an 'all-American boy'. The main image on the top of the page changes each time the page is reloaded. The majority of the images feature sports or urban settings with trucks and machinery, and strangely, a rubbish bin. Two images feature books, but boys are noticeably absent. The only images featuring males are the sports images, where the boys are actively involved. The image featured in Figure 2 is of men doing tricks on skateboards. This image reinforces essentialist ideas linking traditional masculinity with sport and risk-taking behaviour (Wadham, Pudsey & Boyd, 2007). None of the rotating images feature 'guys read'-ing.

Scieszka positions himself as having an authority to speak on boys and literacy. One way in which he does this is through the use of portraits. His own childhood photo is featured on the front page as part of an introduction, while another page features an adult Scieszka pulling a face. In the childhood photo, Scieszka is presented as well-groomed and compliant, and perhaps as the all-American boy being evoked by the colours of the website.

ABOUT JON SCIESZKA

Jon Scieszka is a guy. He grew up with five other guys — his brothers. This certainly influenced his worldview, and helped inspire him to start Guys Read. For more details about Jon, check this out.

MR. JON SCIESZKA

Figures 3 & 4. **Scieszka, J. (2016). Photos of Scieszka. Retrieved from guysread.com**

He is wearing a suit and tie, signalling both authority and a middle-class masculinity. This is a boy who expects to one day work in a profession, and not a trade. The photo is intended to gain the trust of the audience, speaking to their middle-class anxieties about education. In the second photo, Scieszka is an adult, and so gains the trust of the audience instead through pulling a playful face. The face is important here, as he is telling the audience that he is a 'fun guy' and has not lost touch with the 'silliness' of being a boy. The photo is also accompanied by the words "Jon Scieszka is a guy. He grew up with five other guys — his brothers". Here, Scieszka positions himself as part of a particular arena and authority by virtue of having 'guys' as brothers. He is telling the audience that he *knows* guys. The photos on each page are intended to signal Scieszka's boy-ness.

Along with the photo of Scieszka as a child is the title "First National Ambassador of Young People's Literature". This title is awarded by the US Library of Congress, and is intended to "raise national awareness of the importance of young people's literature as it relates to lifelong literacy, education and the development and betterment of the lives of young people" (Library of Congress, 2017). Through these strategies, Scieszka asks the audience to identify with the social markers of being a literate male, positioning them to support his view. Here, Scieszka illustrates his authority by sign-posting the capital he is afforded by being born male, as well as the capital he has accumulated (Bourdieu, 1984) by being a 'guy' who 'reads' and writes. He has also *been* a middle-class boy. In other words, he positions himself as an authority in the field of 'boys' education' by virtue of being a boy, therefore enacting his own boy-ness as capital. By highlighting his title as National Ambassador of Young People's Literature, the audience is made aware that he has what Bourdieu (1984) describes as an 'authoritative' recognition of capital. The strategies enacted by Scieszka to promote a certain image of himself acts to make that image incontestable.

The predominant message on Scieszka's website is that all boys are 'naturally' inclined away from reading, speaking to Mills and Keddie's (2010) suggestions that homogenising discourses construct all boys as problematic. This narrative is 'thickened' (Wortham, 2004) relationally to identity when Scieszka uses research showing "that boys are having trouble reading, and that boys are getting worse at reading. Some of the reasons are biological. Some of the reasons are sociological." The effect of the short sentences in this quote are powerful. They are presented as statements of fact and signal completion. This is further reinforced when there are no immediate links to the research Scieszka is referencing. His statements are presented as 'common-sense' claims that are not open for questioning.

Scieszka furthers these claims with a discussion on a separate page of his site of why boys might be "having trouble", with ideas that are sex-role orientated and 'common sense' notions presented as fact. On these pages, the term "biologically" denotes a narrative supported by biological essentialism (Wadham, Pudsy & Boyd, 2007) where all boys are portrayed as having been born with particular attributes in relation to reading. Wadham, Pudsey and Boyd (2007) assert an essentialist view of gender and education as dominant and socially normalised, making it difficult to contest in the context of Scieszka's website. As part of this narrative, teachers, and particularly women teachers, are blamed for privileging the learning styles of girls over that of boys. Scieszka claims that "boys are slower to develop than girls and often struggle with reading and writing skills early on" while the "action-oriented, competitive learning style of many boys works against them learning to read and write".

GUYS AND READING

A lot of boys are having trouble reading.

- The U.S. Department of Education reading tests for the last 30 years show boys scoring worse than girls in every age group, every year.

- Eighth grade boys are 50 percent more likely to be held back than girls.

- Two-thirds of Special Education Students in high school are boys.

- Overall college enrollment is higher for girls than boys.

Why might boys be having trouble

- Biologically, boys are slower to develop than girls and often struggle with reading and writing skills early on.

- The action-oriented, competitive learning style of many boys works against them learning to read and write

- Many books boys are asked to read don't appeal to them. They aren't motivated to want to read.

- As a society, we teach boys to suppress feelings. Boys aren't practiced and often don't feel comfortable exploring the emotions and feelings found in fiction.

- Boys don't have enough positive male role models for literacy. Because the majority of adults involved in kids' reading are women, boys might not see reading as a masculine activity.

RESOURCES

Nation's Report Card
National scores on tests, tests, and more tests.

Maine.gov Gender Task Force
An examination of gender equity in schools acknowledging that boys and girls may need different supports to achieve the same level of achievement. Solid, practical recommendations.

BOOKS FOR ANYONE WHO CARES ABOUT GUYS

Figures 5. **Scieszka, J. (2016). Guys and Reading. Retrieved from guysread.com/about**

This suggests that Scieszka's initial assertion that "some reasons are sociological" underlines his own beliefs that boys are biologically born with a particular deficit when it comes to literacy, while also pointing to sex-role socialisation as a strategy. This speaks to Skelton and Francis' (2009) suggestion that contemporary and pervading ideas about boys and reading are based on theories of physiology and the already-fixed identity of boys. When viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's sociological framework (1984), we can see how a

particular type of gender construction is taking place (Connell, 1995) which is underpinned by a socially normalised idea that boys struggle with—and do not enjoy— reading because they are physically born that way. This serves to constitute a particular kind of habitus, where incorporating an embedded view of the world into ways of being and participating in the world renders specific actions necessary in order to signal membership (Bourdieu, 1995; Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001). In other words, if boys believe they are born with a biological resistance to reading, then a rejection of reading becomes necessary in order to signals one's identity and membership as a boy.

Carrington and Luke (1997) suggest that literate practices are afforded power in specific contexts when they are recognised and accepted as 'capital' by those who hold authority within social fields. When Scieszka suggests that boys need male role models, he is affording power to men by signalling their literate practices as capital, while at the same time, positioning the literate practices of women as less meaningful. Scieszka states:

> Boys don't have enough positive role models for literacy. Because the majority of adults involved in kids' reading are women, boys might not see reading as a masculine activity.

The use of the word 'positive' to describe the type of 'role models' boys need is juxtaposed against a description of women as taking up too much space within the school literacy field. It follows then that if a particular masculinity is situated as hegemonic, and therefore authoritative for some middle-school boys within the education field, then the literate practices being taught by a majority female teaching staff may not be recognised as worth investing in (McLeod & Yates, 2006). For the audience of the website, this signals female modelling of literacy as disadvantageous, and constitutes reading as a feminine activity. And yet, it can be argued that it is within this authorial positioning of women as 'less than' that middle-school boys become aware of the way women are not afforded power for their literate practices. It follows then that because these literate practices do not differ to the literate practices that 'male role models' may hold, they are not incorporated into the habitus of middle-school boys. Of course, there is more than role modelling taking place, as stated by McLeod & Yates (2006):

> Their habitus is not simply that people copy 'role models', or are rewarded or punished for doing certain things, but that in quite subtle ways, through discourse, practices, and institutions, and through interactions with others in their environment, principles are set up for the individual about what matters, what is noticed, how one comports oneself physically, socially, emotionally, and much more (p. 90).

Here we see how using Bourdieu's (1984) ideas for paying attention to the discourses present within social arenas provides a powerful lens for seeing the way particular types of masculinities such as 'boyishness' are normalised, while alternative masculinities and femininities are discarded or 'othered'. This is also problematic when we consider the social outcomes of middle-school boys incorporating ideas around who changes, in terms of teachers, and who is accommodated into the habitus.

Scieszka refers to the need to "make some noise for boys" within a field where he believes there are many options for adults and families, but where boys are overlooked. Scieszka suggests middle-school boys are not motivated to read because the books offered are not appealing, stating that part of his intention is to "help boys become readers by helping them find texts they want to read". The insinuation here is that finding a book a middle-school boy would want to read is a hard task, further instilled by Scieszka's "good news" that "research also shows that boys will read - if they are given reading that interests them." The idea that middle-school boys' reading is tied to the books on offer serves a narrative where boys are being marginalised by not having access to books that will appeal to them. And yet, one only needs to look at the Western canon[1] to know that males are more likely to find themselves represented in literature than women. Scieszka further positions adults, coded as women teachers, as restricting boys' choices when it comes to books through his statement: "Give boys choice". Scieszka's suggestion for giving boys the agency to 'choose' is through 'Guys Read' branded bookmarks, book plates, and book and spine labels which can be downloaded and printed from his site.

The labels are to be used to give middle-school boys the opportunity to physically mark books in the school library they enjoy reading, signposting this information for other boys. This suggests the book is appropriate for boys because it is endorsed by another boy. These labels further illustrate renderings of male role-models, with Scieszka indicating that boys will pick up and read a certain book if they are positioned to view that book as having been granted access by virtue of its acceptance by another boy. Further, drawing on Bahktin's (1981) theory of heteroglossia as a lens for understanding the multitude of discourses an individual is subject to, we see how the book labels carry a message which aids to both

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[1] The Western literary canon is generally accepted as the body of books that have had an influence on the shaping of Western culture. The canon is commonly criticised for featuring mostly male writers. Snyder (2008) suggests that many educators continue to ascribe "great value to the literature of the Western canon" (p.74).

'thicken' the discourse while narrowing the narrative. The presence of the label gives middle-school boys the authority to read the book through a cycle of acknowledging and accepting some books as being specifically intended for boys. This 'authorial voice' is difficult to destabilise and is continually reinforced because someone in authority, another middle-school boy, reinforces it.

Figure 6. **Scieszka, J. (2016).** *Guys Read* **book labels. Retrieved from guysread.com/more/**

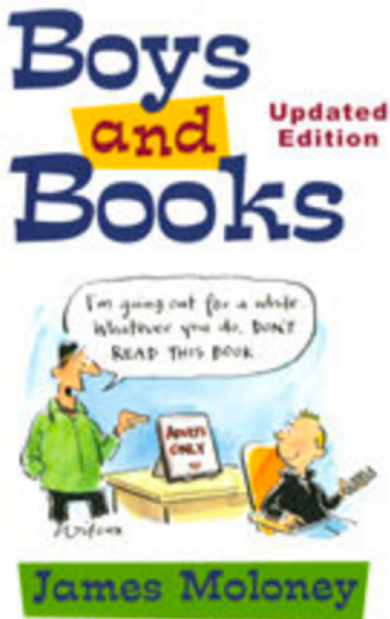## 4.2 Ideas for Getting Boys into Reading - James Maloney

James Maloney's page on getting boys to read is uncluttered. It has a white background, navy blue text and a single image. While the overall presentation of the website may be described as dated due to the large chunks of text, few images and lack of links to other pages, the texts listed in a bibliography on a separate page include Maloney's most recent publications, suggesting the website is up to date.

Ideas for Getting Boys into Reading

Unfortunately, this book is effective

The following extracts give some id
teacher might find helpful.

What boys DO like - a brave appraisal

To answer a question such as "What DO boys like to read?"
conflicting generalisations get in the way. For example, are
readers. Are we looking for books a boy will read by himse

By way of **introducing** this section, I will blaze ahead regar
as a librarian in an all boys school. More detailed considera
parents (and teacher) can do will follow.

Figure 7. Maloney, J. (2016). *Ideas for getting boys into reading* title. **Retrieved from www.jamesmoloney.com.au/Ideas_for_Getting_Boys_into_Reading.htm**

The image on the page is the front cover of Maloney's book. It features a cartoon of a boy sitting on a couch with a remote control, suggesting he is watching television. Behind him is a book with the words 'Adults Only' emblazoned on the cover. A male stands behind the book and there is a speech bubble attributed to him which says, "I'm going out for a while. Whatever you do, DON'T READ THIS BOOK". This highlights the emerging theme of subversion - in this case it is on the part of both father and child, where the boy is being 'tricked' into reading by a male role model. The page is broken up into three main sections, with the following headings:

What boys DO like - a brave appraisal;

Two Kinds of Book;

Boyishness, Good Books and a Little Heresy;

Maloney's use of the word 'brave' to describe his appraisal is significant because it works to position the audience to see him as courageous for verbalising particular ideas, while also indicating his masculinity.

What boys DO like - a brave appraisal

To answer a question such as "What DO boys like to read?" is almost impossible. All manner of conflicting generalisations get in the way. For example, are we talking about willing readers or reluctant readers. Are we looking for books a boy will read by himself or books to read to a boy.

By way of introducing this section, I will blaze ahead regardless with a few point distilled from my years as a librarian in an all boys school. More detailed consideration and practical assessments of what we parents (and teacher) can do will follow.

* It is a mistake to believe that boys in general and reluctant readers in particular, do not like fiction. It is often the type of fiction presented to them that is the source of their rejection. On the whole, boys enjoy books which place action ahead of emotion and where what the characters do is more important that what the characters think or feel. Hence, the apparent preference for the action novel. These are the equivalent of thrillers and detective stories in adult reading matter. They often come in series to help marketing

Figure 8. Maloney, J. (2016). Screen shot: A brave appraisal. Retrieved from www.jamesmoloney.com.au/Ideas_for_Getting_Boys_into_Reading.htm

Maloney privileges the reading of novels above other literacies, where reading is only discussed in terms of fiction novels throughout the website. Maloney uses sets of rhetorical questions which highlight that in his discussions of boys and reading, the reading of fiction novels is given prominence. Further, Maloney refers to reading as the decoding of words on a page: "A story is words on a page. Reading it involves decoding those words to make meaning. Perceptions of quality are judgements applied arbitrarily on top of this." The ideas underpinning Maloney's website align with Gee's (2015) assertion that the ability to decode words is the pervading traditional view of success prevalent in literacy crisis discourse.

Maloney's builds a picture of a specific type of middle-school boy using persuasive literary techniques. To begin with, he acknowledges differences between the reading habits of middle-school boys, differentiating between boys who are "willing readers" and those who are "reluctant readers". Following this, boys are essentialised as one group, who Maloney insists need to see themselves represented in the books they read. Maloney suggests that often boys "are lost when the story does not go where they want it to go which is in a direction close to their own personal experience". Multiple references on the website to representation, personal experience and phrases like "want it to go" form a narrative where boys need to feel in control of and represented by a text if it is to engage them. This narrative speaks to the emerging hegemonic masculinity of Maloney's site, which he refers to as "boyishness".

Maloney describes boyishness as an understanding by middle-school boys of what it is that makes up the "quintessential boy". Underpinning this is Maloney's belief about middle-school boys' self-image, where they see themselves as, or strive to be, a quintessential boy. Boyishness is presented as fun, messy, boisterous, and entailing a kind of harmless naughtiness and "madcap mayhem".

> * A significant part of the mayhem that boys love is poking fun at others, especially adults. Boys continually find themselves told to behave, to be tidier and less boisterous so books where the characters triumphantly break out of these restrictions are greatly prized.
>
> * Boys have an image of themselves as anarchic beings bringing chaos to stultifying order, even when they are the gentlest and most amenable lambs you would hope to have in the house. Used cynically, this can serve to re-enforce the most destructive and dehumanising aspects of masculine stereotypes. Yet such cynicism badly misreads what boys are about. Yes, they love tales of subversion but this subversion is oddly true to a sense of justice and right. Boys will grin and cheer when the villain comes to a sticky or humiliating end but only when it is clear that such a fate is richly deserved.

Figure 9. Maloney, J. (2016). Screenshot: A description of 'boyishness'. Retrieved from www.jamesmoloney.com.au/Ideas_for_Getting_Boys_into_Reading.htm

Use of the word 'mayhem' takes on significance in further descriptions of boys as subversive of authority, where "boys love poking fun at others, especially adults". In this way, it appears that subversive forms of harassment constitute 'fun' within the narrative of boyishness. There are long descriptions of boys as naturally wanting to subvert authority, as well as descriptions of the way society continually attempts to control boys:

> Boys continually find themselves told to behave, to be tidier and less boisterous so books where the characters triumphantly break out of these restrictions are greatly prized.

> Boys have an image of themselves as anarchic beings bringing chaos to stultifying order, even when they are the gentlest and more amenable lambs you would hope to have in the house.

Maloney juxtaposes this image with the claim that boys have a strong sense of right and wrong, describing them as "oddly true to a sense of justice and right". Maloney contends that he may appear to be "defending oafish behaviour" in the way he describes boys, but tempers this by explaining how in describing boyishness, he is referring to "that innocuous immaturity best described by the old expression, 'frogs and snails and puppy dog tails'". Here, Maloney is referencing the traditional 'boys will be boys' understanding of gender as fixed. However, there are also clear links to normalised understandings of adolescence, where bad behaviours are not viewed as immoral, but rather as an important part of moral

development (Lesko, 2005). For example, referring to middle-school boys as "oafish", suggesting they are rough, clumsy and unintelligent conveys common and constructed understandings of working class boys. Boys might experiment with these alternative masculinities (such as that of the working class), but within theories of adolescence, will discard them as they are guided toward becoming powerful middle-class men (Lesko, 2005).

Intertwined with this rendering of boyishness is a 'subversive', normalised narrative blaming women and a feminised education system for middle-school boys' reluctance to read. Maloney asserts that boys are "wary of books and reading" because they are both *feminine* and *school-issued*—school-issued being code for women-issued—and are therefore rejected. Maloney suggests this issue is also reversed, arguing that "some women and no small number of men in the roles of teacher, librarian and parent can be suspicious and uncomfortable with boyishness". While Maloney does implicate men in an apparent wariness of a 'boyish' masculinity, the intimation is that it is women who are the problem. Through words such as 'suspicious' and 'uncomfortable', Maloney positions mothers and female teachers as antithetical to a boyish masculinity.

Maloney suggests middle-school boys will preference an action novel because "boys enjoy books which place action ahead of emotion and where what the characters do is more important than what the characters think or feel". Maloney goes on to compare this preference with some adults' preferences for detective or thriller genres, making the point that if we can accept that adults may have preferences for particular genres, then we should accept the same for middle-school boys. This is problematic in that Maloney is putting forward *all* boys as having a preference for action novels, rather than a suggestion that this is what some boys may prefer to read. He sets up a dichotomy, contrasting boys who may enjoy different types of books, particularly where emotion might come *before* action, as other, setting up and contributing to a particular type of masculinity. Maloney goes on to lament that "few writers are able to capture that 'boyishness' in print".

Further, Maloney suggests books about sport are a gateway into reading for middle-school boys:

* Boys tend to like books which match their image of themselves. They want to be able to identify themselves and what they would like to be and do. This is why books about characters engaged in sport have always held at least an initial attraction for boys.

Figure 10. Maloney, J. (2016). Screenshot: Books about sport. Retrieved from www.jamesmoloney.com.au/Ideas_for_Getting_Boys_into_Reading.htm

The assumption here is that middle-school boys play and therefore want to read about sport, positioning those who do not as on the outside of a boyish masculinity. It speaks to normalised ideas of adolescence where sport is presented as a 'naturally occurring' interest for boys (Lesko, 2005). It also supports Maloney's suggestion that boys need to see themselves represented in fiction in order to accept it. However, Maloney further reasons that novels about sport fail boys "because they do not deliver what the boy is expecting" which is an "unrealistic hope" that reading a novel about sport will be like playing the sport itself. Further contributing to the boyishness narrative, there is a repetition on Maloney's site of words such as 'gross', 'dirty' and 'creepy' to describe books middle-school boys *do* enjoy that are not related to sport. Maloney suggests that suitable books middle-school boys will include colloquial language and humour, and will encourage them to think about the world and challenge stereotypes. He goes on to recommend the authors Paul Jennings, Roald Dahl and Raymond Briggs, describing their books as "filthy" and containing toilet jokes, as well as the "ghastly, gory" *Goosebumps* series. Maloney suggests that boys love "the ghoulish, the gross and the disgusting", before suggesting these types of books do not often appear in school libraries or at home because of what he calls "adult sensitivities". Maloney states that "when it comes to the content of a book, there is an unconscious understanding between adults and boys about what is expected and acceptable". Maloney adds that middle-school boys enjoy "swearing like bullock drivers"—situating this behaviour as working class—but would not do the same in front of adults and "so it is with books". Here, Maloney paints a picture of middle-school boys as also 'gross' and 'disgusting' when adults are not around, furthering his renderings of middle-school boys as subversive. This brings to mind normalised ideas of adolescence and masculinity, where to not allow middle-school boys to experience a version of Hall's 'boyhood savagery' of swearing and the 'gross' and 'disgusting', amounts to an emasculation (Lesko, 2005). Yet in society we see a variety of boys with different interests. There is a mismatch here between suggestions about boys naturally wanting to subvert authority, and the idea that boys need to see themselves represented in order to engage in reading. Here we see how 'authority' is presented as being adults—female teachers and mothers—rather than the authorial being rendered as truth.

Maloney differentiates between the books he recommends by referring to them as "books for reading" and "books for reading, by reluctant boys", and suggests this difference is "real and vital in developing a connection to books". Maloney presents this idea as simple, specifically noting that for middle-school boys, these books can be classified further as "books a boy will enjoy reading and books a boy will enjoy only when an adult reads them

to him". He states that adults who have never struggled with reading will not be able to understand this difference. In this way, Maloney is positioning those who may question his ideas as not having the necessary authority to speak on the subject. Maloney suggests numerous factors are involved in the types of books boys may enjoy having read to them, but particularly places emphasis on the length and difficulty of a book. He suggests that if the reading of a book is the job of another, then the length and difficulty of that book poses less problems for a middle-school boy, although the caveat here is that the book must be a 'great story'.

Maloney speaks to those who may disagree with his ideas by positioning them as radicalised. In one paragraph, titled "What boys DO like - a brave appraisal", Maloney acknowledges the way generalisations serve to reinforce stereotypes, particularly when discussing the types of books middle-school boys may like to read. On the one hand, Maloney positions middle-school boys as "the gentlest and most amenable lambs you would hope to have in the house" while rendering all as naturally subversive, claiming "Boys have an image of themselves as anarchic beings bringing chaos to stultifying order". Through this dual-positioning of middle-school boys, Maloney conceptualises the *real* boy, who underneath the subversiveness is gentle and kind. However, this boy is revealed in the home, where he has a male role model in his father—as seen in the image in Figure 7—rather than at school. He goes on to say that these ideas may be read 'cynically':

> Used cynically, this can serve to re-enforce the most destructive and dehumanising aspects of masculine stereotypes.

> Yet such cynicism badly misreads what boys are about.

By using this type of language, Maloney is enacting an authority by positioning himself as brave and his words as 'common sense', while situating those who disagree as 'cynical' and 'destructive'. And yet, throughout the websites studied, including Maloney's own, specific masculinities such as 'boyishness' are continually reinforced. In this instance, Maloney pre-empts concerns around hegemonic masculinities, and attempts to fend them off two-fold by suggesting any subversion is deeply rooted in justice, and also by problematising others who may still have questions as damaging.

Maloney's descriptions of 'boyishness' and his suggestions of boys' need for representation in the books they read speaks to an emerging theme where the authors of the three websites

use language to construct particular identities (Gee, 2014). Within this, Maloney is also enacting his own identity (Gee, 2014) - while identifying as an authority on the subject, he uses words such as 'brave appraisal' and 'heretic' to describe the way his ideas may questioned. These words are significant in that through them, Maloney is aligning his own masculinity with a construction of boyishness. In this way, Maloney situates himself alongside the boys he writes about as teacher, librarian and male, and in opposition to female teachers, further rendering himself as an authority on middle-school boys. This speaks to Bakhtin's notion of the authorial (1981), where Maloney simultaneously impacts, and is impacted *by*, the field of boys and reading in which he participates. In assimilating a boyish masculinity as part of his identity, Maloney becomes part of a multitude of narratives which render particular masculinities as 'right' (Connell, 1995; Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001), which in turn impact on the ideological becoming of others (Matusov, 2007).

Maloney's main recommendation for a novel that is longer and more difficult for middle-school boys is the text, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck (1972). It is a coming of age novel set on an impoverished farm where the main character, Rob, must butcher his pet pig in order to feed his family. The story has links to adolescence as a transformative stage (Lesko, 2005). Rob has a male role model in his father, and by the conclusion of the book, he has been guided and safely transformed into the 'man of the house'. Maloney makes the following statement about the suitability of the text for parents and middle-school boys to read together:

> You and he will be immersed in the day to day struggle of a family you will come to care deeply about. At the end, you may well weep together for the sadness and the joy the book gives you. What a human experience to share with your son. What a literary experience to encourage his interest in books and deepen his concept of what a story can do.

The idea that adult and guided reading can act as a gate-way into more reading difficult literature holds promise, and yet it is the positioning of the advice as being particularly for middle-school boys that renders it problematic. Here we see an example of Mills and Keddie's (2010) suggestion that interventions into literacy problems tend to "homogenise boys' interests and learning styles along stereotypical gender binary lines" (p. 408). While Maloney concedes that "good readers" will tackle these types of novels, he goes on to suggest all boys should have access to these types of books, stating that they "do love them" but may be unable to say so. By doing little to differentiate between those boys who may struggle with literature and those who do not, it serves to remove the 'action' of reading out

of accepted hegemonic masculinities within the middle-school classroom. It locates those boys who do read literature as existing outside the authorial discourse.

4.3 Boys Read - John Martin

John Martin is the author of the *Boys Read* website. He is an American who writes novels for middle school children. There is no clear link on the *boysread.org* website to alert the intended audience to the creator of the page, but this can be found through a domain name search, which highlights John Martin as the owner.

As previously discussed, the colours of the heading and graffiti style background are used to signal Martin's authority through highlighting his own understandings of middle-school boys. Here I want to explore the way such features of the website can also offer an understanding of the ideas portrayed about boys and their 'masculinity'.
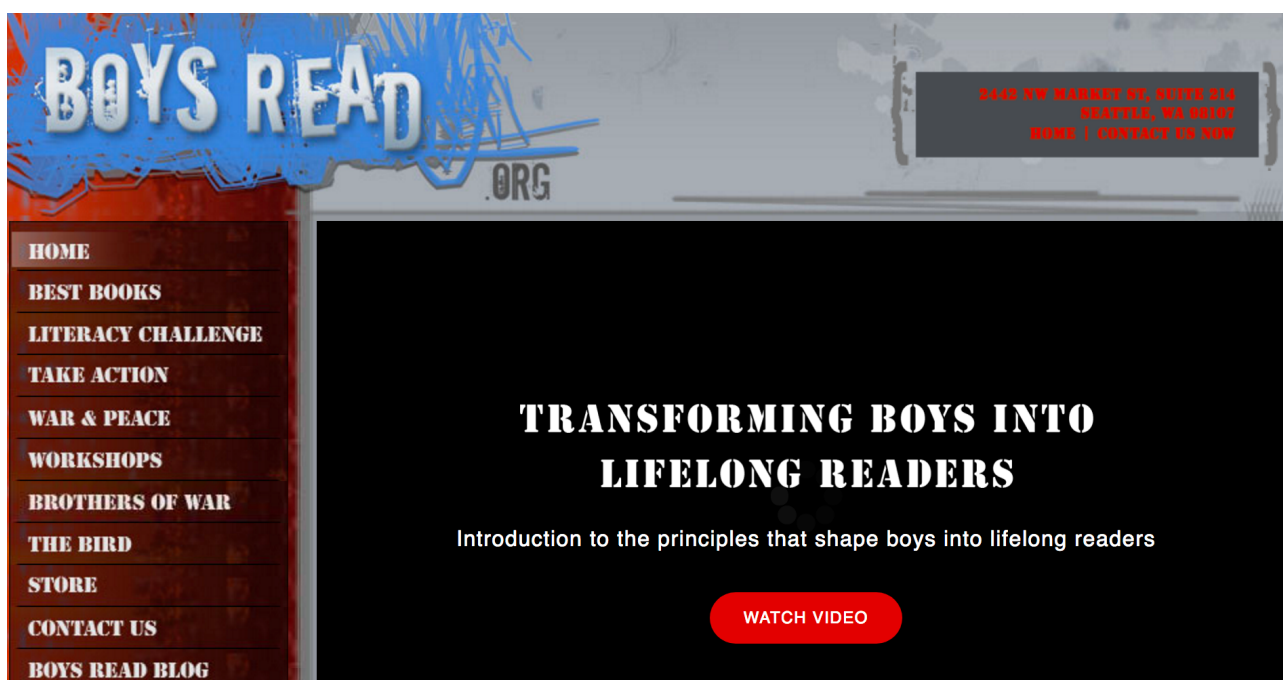

Figure 11. **Martin, J. (2016). Home page of *Boys Read*. Retrieved from boysread.org**

The 'masculine' colours of blue, deep red and grey can elicit a sense of mystery and danger (Caldas-Coulthard & Van Leeuwen, 2002, p. 101). Similarly, this is reinforced by the presence of the graffiti image, as well as the concrete grey 'urban' look of the grey background. The image evoked is of Hall's savage boys (Lesko, 2001), suggesting the website is underpinned by socially normalised ideas around adolescence. This, coupled with the title of the video on the first page, "Transforming Boys into Lifelong Readers: introduction into the principles that shape boys into lifelong readers" featuring interviews with multiple

authors about boys and reading, the emerging image of middle-school boys is one where they are in need of the wise guidance of adults to "transform" them into men (Lesko, 2001).

Martin makes repeated references to a 'transformation' of middle-school boys into 'life-long readers'. This serves to create and uphold an unspoken dichotomy, which becomes part of the narrative formations of an authoritative discourse (Bahktin, 1981) around boys and reading. Martin uses the words 'mission' and 'life-long readers' in the introduction to his site, as well as on other pages, and in a statement form, a strategy that encourages the audience to see the mission statement as 'normal':

Our mission: Transform boys into lifelong readers.

The short sentence stating the website's mission serves to give emphasis but is also a literary technique used to persuade, by making a statement of apparent 'truth' that is difficult to contest. The sentence holds multiple meanings. Firstly, the use of the inclusive pronoun 'our' at the beginning of the sentence is an appeal to the audience; it calls to them to be part of the solution through their visit to the website. The idea that boys will be 'transformed' into lifelong readers introduces a narrative in which middle-school boys are *not* 'naturally' life-long readers, and nor are they self-motivated to become so. Further, it also points toward the 'life-long' reading of literature, rather than the 'life-long' and "self-motivated" reading of emails, text messages, bank statements, letters, news and magazine articles, recipes, reports, instruction manuals and so on. We see here that these ideas are firmly situated within Street's (2003) autonomous model of literacy where the reading of fiction novels is positioned and accepted as 'cultural capital' within the social arena of literacy. Following from this, Martin's use of persuasive phrases such as "new generation of literate men" positioned along with his statement that "It's not that boys can't read; it's that boys won't read" renders the words 'reading' and 'literate' as specifically being related to the reading of fiction novels. This highlights a theme throughout the website which suggests that middle-school boys are intelligent and *would* read if they were given the 'right' kinds of books. Secondly, the use of the word 'transform' is also associated with adolescence (Lesko, 2005), indicating a double transformation from boys into men, and from disengaged middle-school boys into life-long readers.

The boysread.com page includes a page with links presented as further reading. The language used conveys a sense of hopelessness around boys and reading. Coupled with Martin's suggestions that it is "not that boys can't read; they won't read", the language

constitutes boys as both intelligent but disengaged due to the lack role models in the female audience.

Figure 12. Martin, J. (2016). Screen shot: literacy challenge. Retrieved from boysread.org

The heading and subheading set the tone for the reference list, which overall serve a 'boys failing' narrative. The subheading, which uses emotive language like "most intractable", positions the audience's interpretation of the subsequent recommendations for further reading. It serves as an appeal to reason, which when coupled with the reference list, is an attempt to persuade and makes it hard to dispute. Some of the recommended texts also use emotive language in their titles, such as *The Trouble with Boys in School* and *Boys and*

Reading: Is There Any Hope? Coupling 'boys' with 'trouble' in the former title, and the use of a rhetorical question around hope and hopelessness in the latter, aligns with Martin's rendering of a particular type of middle-school boy as in 'trouble' and in need of adult guidance. The word 'boys' is unproblematically used in a way that conveys *all* boys as 'in trouble'. Martin particularly encourages the audience to read the article, *Why Johnny Won't Read* (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005), referring to it as a "solid article that establishes a basic understanding of the issue". Starting the statement with the word 'why' positions the audience to accept that the fictional 'Johnny' *won't* read. This reinforces, and is reinforced by, the language used in the subheading and titles of other texts presented on the page. The article offers understanding of Martin's ideas about boys, in suggesting they do not want to read about 'cultural' issues:

> At the middle school level, the kind of quality literature that might appeal to boys has been replaced by Young Adult Literature, that is, easy-to-read, short novels about teenagers and problems such as drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, domestic violence, divorced parents and bullying. Older literary fare has also been replaced by something called "culturally relevant" literature -- texts that appeal to students' ethnic group identification on the assumption that sharing the leading character's ethnicity will motivate them to read. (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005)

In sharing this article, Martin is highlighting underlying assumptions about the types of books boys are motivated to read, suggesting they will avoid novels about teenagers facing difficult problems. However, this can also be viewed as an example of the enduring pervasiveness of Hall's ideas around adolescent boys (Lesko, 2001). Lesko (2001) suggests that while white middle class boys were the focus of Hall's efforts, they were made meaningful "against the shadows of uncivilised others: working class boys, girls, and primitives" (Lesko, 2001, p. 49). In linking this with themes of adolescent fiction such as drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and domestic violence, the suggestion is that these 'real-life' issues are problems that happen to somebody else—working-class boys and girls—and not to the particular renderings of middle-class, middle-school boys on Martin's website. The juxtaposition of these novels with "quality literature that might appeal to boys" (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005) becomes symbolic of white middle-class boys articulated against non-white (Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005) and working-class boys (Lesko, 2001). Further, this rendering of a specific type of middle-school boy constitutes what Stahl (2014) refers to as a "narrow view of success" (p. 110), where working-class boys are structured by and take up particular positions and understanding of self in relation to middle-class aspirations.

Martin's website includes a one hour video of interviews titled *Transforming boys into lifelong readers: introduction to the principles that shape boys into lifelong readers*, and the language use of the predominantly male authors adds to the narratives of hegemonic masculinities present on the website. The following are extracts from three authors:

> I'm a man and I have male fantasies. I wanna climb mountains. I wanna battle. I wanna break speed records. (Paul Owen Lewis)

> When a boy looks at a book and there's a football player on the front of that book then that boy's expecting to get some football. (Carl Dreker)

> You better be entertaining, you better be interesting and you better capture something they want to read about. (Stephen Manes)

These extracts contribute to 'common-sense' narratives of middle-school boys, and speak to historical beliefs about boys' 'natural' interests in sport and outdoor activities (Lesko, 2001). All three authors position themselves within a similar hegemonic masculinity underpinning the websites. In particular, Paul Owen Lewis's repeated use of the personal pronoun 'I' when discussing the types of books boys want to read creates a notion of the authorial (Bakhtin, 1981), where his language both situates himself within a particular masculinity while at the same time contributing to notions of what 'counts' within that masculinity. Carl Dreker claims boys are given books by female teachers they are not interested in reading, such as "family drama, maybe a little touchy feely more than mine might be" and suggests there should be "more classes in high school that take sports fiction seriously". While the interviews contribute to narratives shaped by 'common-sense' understandings of boys and masculinities, the first interview with author Stephen Manes does not quite so neatly align with ideas around the feminisation of education. Manes credits his female middle-school librarian for inspiring a passion for writing in him by involving him in the school newspaper. He also puts forward a variety of text types, besides novels, saying some middle-school boys may enjoy magazines. While Manes does make comments about middle-school boys being more likely to enjoy reading about sport, or about boys in recognisable situations, the interview holds promise because it offers an insight into alternative masculinities. This signals something other than a dominant narrative around role-modelling and hegemonic masculinities.

However, the website overall subscribes to notions of a feminised education system as the root of problems for middle-school boys. Martin suggests the "primarily female teaching staff" of schools need strategies for "interacting with boys". On his website, Martin advertises workshops for parents and educators on connecting with boys. The intimation here is that the parents are mothers and the educators are women teachers, which is made clear when the workshop is advertised as offering 'boy-friendly' strategies for interacting with boys. This suggests attendees might be lacking in their ability to connect with boys, which serves to undermine the work that mothers and female teachers do in the education system. This is furthered through underpinning notions of role-modelling. Martin suggests that we "must recognise that boys long for role models, and that their world is largely devoid of men". Martin suggests holding a 'Boys' Literacy Day' for celebrating boys and literacy, while also advocating for special boys' sections in bookshops and libraries. Evoking the books labels on Scieszka's website, the 'boys' sections' in libraries and bookshops orientate middle-school boys toward reading books that have been made acceptable by other boys. Again, the authorial 'voice' (Bakhtin, 1981) is in play through creating particular spaces and books as 'suitable'. However, this strategy may also act to render other spaces or books 'not so suitable' for boys. For example, a library's division of reading material based on gender serves to reinforce stereotypical interests of the sexes, which become 'naturalised' and incontestable. Martin's strategy highlights to the way socially constructed labelling of spaces and places reinforce dominant narratives.

The three websites differ in the way they are presented, and in the specific language used to discuss middle-school boys. However, the websites create an overarching narrative around middle-school boys and reading which is underpinned by normalised theories of gender structures. Scieszka discusses middle-school boys as biologically determined by birth and socialised into fixed roles, speaking to essentialist ideas of masculinity. Maloney's website presents characteristics of adolescent boys and masculinities, while Martin speaks to normalised ideas around adolescence by discussing middle-school boys' ability to be transformed into men. The following chapter is a discussion of the similar themes and ideas that have arisen from the descriptions and analysis, which works toward teasing out the hegemonic masculinity that is enacted within and across the websites (Carrington & Luke, 1997).

Chapter Five: Discussion

The aim of this dissertation was to examine how websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. Analysis of the websites was concerned with uncovering the assumptions about boys and masculinities which underpinned the creation of the sites, and the understandings they may further generate and perpetuate. Connell (1995) speaks of the way masculinities are not fixed, but are "configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships" (p. 81). The way the narrative across the websites is constituted and reinforced in multiple and layered ways is crucial to these "configurations of practice" (Connell, 1995, p. 81) and is seen in the way hegemonic masculinities are presented on each of the websites. The previous chapter presented evidence from the websites to demonstrate how middle-school boys are constituted in particular ways. This chapter will focus on the common themes that have arisen from the previous descriptions and analysis to illustrate the way a particular and shared hegemonic masculinity is present across the websites.

The recommended strategies suggested by the authors to engage boys in reading contribute to essentialised understandings of masculinities. All three authors suggest middle-school boys need male role models, which are constituted as fathers and male teachers. They also advocate for a clear division of reading material based on gender. This ranges from recommendations of books which represent the interests of white, middle-class boys to book labelling and special sections in libraries, denoting the books middle-school boys will enjoy. These strategies support Mills and Keddie's (2010) notion that interventions into boys and reading tend to revolve around stereotypical and homogenising understandings of gender as fixed and binary. This is seen in the way the authors of the websites analysed discuss boys, and the renderings of masculinity that arise, where middle-school boys are discussed as a single group. Scieszka and Martin present a deficit model of middle-school boys as troubled, unmotivated and in need of adult intervention and guidance in order to transform into men who read. While Maloney presents masculinity on his website as a harmless 'boyishness', he also discusses books that boys enjoy as disdained by mothers and female teachers who "fear them". Maloney claims that "almost every title that has ever attempted to make story out of the messy, the uncouth and the horrible that so fascinates boys has attracted criticism or outright bans". Presenting these books as disdained and feared by

adults - especially women - while at the same time referring to the books using similar language used to discuss boys, positions boys as misunderstood and feared, while adults are situated in opposition as marginalising and misunderstanding. Similarly, Scieszka and Martin use language which contributes to a 'failing' and 'troubled' boys narrative. Having established this as a real concern, the authors are able to assert their authority, because they can position themselves as having an understanding of middle-school boys.

Normalised ideas around adolescence (Lesko, 2001) are also visible when middle-school boys are discussed in terms that could be described as 'savages' who must be "helped to develop" (Lesko, 2005, p. 92). Hall positions this 'savagery' as an important and necessary reliving of violent aspects of male evolution in order to avoid emasculation (Bederman, 2005). There are similar markers of a normalised hegemonic masculinity present in the websites. All three authors discuss the importance of boys having access to the books that appeal to them and where they see themselves represented. Common recommendations are for adventure or sports fiction. For example, while Maloney concedes that reading a book about sport is not the same as *doing* sport, he still recommends them, as well as books where boys see themselves represented as in control and having adventures. These recommendations are normalising of a particular masculinity because they are presented as something *all* boys need, positioning those boys who do not enjoy or need these books as 'other'. The types of fiction recommended also represent, and in some instances, perpetuate a specific masculinity. For instance, Lesko (2001) asserts that male privilege is inherent in competitive sport, discussing it as a "hierarchal system in which men dominate women and a minority of men dominate other men" (p159). When we consider the 'dialectical confrontation' (Hanks, 2005) that happens within the tension between habitus and the field of education, we see how some masculinities are being constructed as normal and 'common-sense' on the websites. Lesko (2001) argues that "these values and the practices in which they are embedded are difficult to question" (p. 169), speaking to the way dominant understandings of masculinity and adolescence have become entrenched so as to become normalised.

The authors of the websites enact a particular view of *self*, aligning with the hegemonic masculinity presented, in order to influence the audience. Maloney enacts a version of a 'boyish' masculinity, where he positions himself as subversive, using persuasive language such as "here is my heresy" and a "greater heresy" before suggesting that the books that should be offered to middle-school boys do not need to be literature, but could be the

"uncouth and horrible" texts he recommends. Maloney's use of "our boys" positions him as having an authority to speak on the topic, because he is 'of' the boys. Martin is less present as an individual on his website, but uses the plural 'we' in place of Scieszka's third person introduction and the singular 'I' used by Maloney. Martin aligns himself alongside boys by drawing upon the audience's understandings of a normalised masculinity, but also by way of the use of categories implicit in the text (Fairclough, 1995) where the use of 'we' and 'our' is placed in opposition to the 'you' of mothers and female teachers that make up the audience. In enacting these particular views of self, the authors make choices about what type of middle-school boy to illustrate, by drawing on particular Discourses of boy-ness (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). These illustrations reinforce and perpetuate social constructions of boy-ness and masculinity. By aligning with a hegemonic masculinity in order to influence the audience, women are positioned by the authors of the websites as problematic. The equating of a small proportion of men with women further serves to marginalise some masculinities (Connell, 2005), further situating a hegemonic masculinity as authoritative.

The actions and dispositions of women are positioned by the authors of the websites as problematic, which is in keeping with Mills & Keddie's (2010) assertion that female teachers and feminine ways of teaching are commonly blamed for boys' underperformance in school. Whitehead (2009) argues that female teachers are regularly presented as controlling and 'smothering', and are linked to "ownership and restraint of young adolescent students" (Whitehead 2009, p. 3). This is certainly seen in the way Maloney discusses the disposition of women in relation to particular 'gross' and 'disgusting' books, and in Martin's request for women teachers and mothers to attend courses to learn how to interact with boys. It is also seen in the theories of sex-role socialisation and biological essentialism which underpin the understandings of gender presented on the websites. The suggestion that boys will fare better with male teachers and 'literary' role models, such as fathers and other boys, positions women as part of the problem. There is an irony here is that the intended audience of the websites *is* those 'problematic women'. Theories around role-modelling and biological determinism work on the idea that gender is learned through socialisation (Wadham, Pudsey & Boyd, 2007), and there are particular 'right' ways to perform gender based on sex (Skelton & Francis, 2009). Of course, these understandings lend themselves to implicit and overt policing of gender performance (Connell, 1995).

The overwhelming and explicit assertion of the websites is that *all* boys are marginalised participants in the field of reading. They are constructed by the authors as an essentialised

group who are intelligent and have the potential to read, but are not motivated because they are overlooked by their female teachers. This creates a restrictive narrative (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002) around middle-school boys, which they will use to understand, and carve out, their place in reading discourse (Bahktin, 1981). Rowan et al (2002) argue that for some boys, these narrow understandings of hegemonic masculinities in relation to reading create an alienation from traditional literacy classrooms and practices. It sets up some boys as 'other', if their reading practices do not fit within the narrative. Assumptions about boys and masculinities are problematic in the way they perpetuate a particular masculinity as being 'right' (Connell, 1995). Determinist theories, and an implicit 'shared knowledge' about masculinity, underpin the three websites, where Maloney, Scieszka and Martin contribute to, and render notions of, a particular hegemonic masculinity within a discourse of boys and reading. And while they purport to turn boys into "life-long readers", by attributing these masculine identities to middle-school boys as 'right' within the field, they contribute to what Zipin (2009) refers to as "culturally inherited ways of knowing" (p. 317). While the audience of the websites is not middle-school boys, the authors contribute to the multitude of narratives (Bahktin, 1981) middle-school boys are subjected to through an authoritative discourse around masculinity which has been constructed and accepted by society. In contributing to a discourse in which hegemonic masculinity is rendered fundamentally opposed to reading, an opposition to reading signals a belonging to particular gender configurations.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how websites created to promote reading for middle-school boys contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. This intent requires a discussion on the ways particular constructions of masculinity represented may be problematic for boys. My examination of the websites, constructed by Maloney, Scieszka and Martin, reveal that a hegemonic masculinity *is* present. All three websites have similar thematic elements, contributing to a particular kind of narrative around middle-school boys and their reading skills. This narrative is underpinned by normalised and historical understandings of male adolescence, which presents boys as savage and primal. The dominant masculinity illustrated across the websites follows a naturalised and often incontestable understanding of middle-school boys as messy, adventurous, courageous and harmlessly naughty. Middle-school boys are essentialised, and rendered dominant, controlling, competitive and subversive. They are also positioned as needing to experience this normalised adolescent and experimental stage in order to transform into proper men. They are situated as being unwilling to engage with texts that do not present middle-school boys with an image of themselves. In the context of the websites, this image is mythically white, middle-class boys who enact the specific hegemonic masculinity constructed and perpetuated by Maloney, Scieszka and Martin.

The websites essentialise boys, and do not differentiate or ask specifically which boys are struggling. The authors ignore the many reasons why reading is problematic for some middle-school boys, such as socioeconomic status, which remains the greatest indicator of reading achievement (PISA, 2011). It could be that middle-school boys from low socio-economic areas are disadvantaged precisely *by* reading interventions which focuses on a single version of masculinity as a starting point. In thinking about the ways in which middle-school boys construct their identities, we can see how being repeatedly presented with an image of a white, middle-class boy who performs a 'boy-ish' hegemonic masculinity further perpetuates this image as 'right'. An authority is created within the field of reading, and middle-school boys are positioned to either accept or reject this narrative, or parts of it. This presents an obstacle for middle-school boys who may be inclined *away* from reading in order to signal their membership within particular gender constructions. Hegemonic masculinities necessitate marginalised masculinities, and in this case, middle-school boys who do not fit within the 'boy-ish' masculinity presented on the websites are discarded.

In illustrating their boyish narrative, the authors of the websites find their antagonist in the form of women teachers and mothers. In doing this, they create an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy, which relies on an understanding of gender as irrevocably tied to sex. Maloney speaks of the books middle-school boys will enjoy as those where "characters break out of…restrictions" and "the villain comes to a sticky or humiliating end…when it is clear that such a fate is richly deserved". The authors of the websites follow this narrative closely, presenting middle-school boys as marginalised victims of villainous women, who long to "break out" of a restrictive and feminised education system. The authors cleverly create an obstacle for those who may question their claims through this victim and villain narrative. By rendering women as lacking in their ability to interact with and understand middle-school boys, as well as outright harmful to boys in their controlling ways, the authors create a narrative that is difficult for women to contest. The current political backlash in regard to feminism and gender works in the authors' favour, where those who question the usefulness of current social norms around gender are disparaged as purposefully attempting to harm children, and as 'political correctness gone mad'.

This research argues that these websites created for the purposes of promoting reading for middle-school boys contribute to and perpetuate constructions of a hegemonic masculinity. This is problematic, because it holds fast to a social myth created within the boys' crisis discourse. In this context, middle-school boys will both consciously and unconsciously make decisions about which parts of the myth to accept and contest. For some boys, this may take the form of a rejection of reading in order to perform the 'right' masculinity, while other boys are 'othered' and discarded by a particular reading discourse. For example, middle-school boys from low socio-economic areas may be further disadvantaged by reading interventions which do not acknowledge their class position and cultural capital. In light of this, it is difficult to see how promoting reading based on the gender of students is helpful. The evidence supports an argument that this type of gender construction is harmful to *all* students, as well as their women teachers who are similarly marginalised by language which blames them for the struggles some middle-school boys face. The needs of all students should be at the centre of discussions about educational provisions - not only the needs of those who fit within very specific and dominant gender ideologies.

The evidence suggests a rethinking of the boys' literacy crisis is needed. We need to see the intersectionality of the problem, where education is far more complex than gender binaries but rather is bound up in combinations of class, race and gender. Currently this

seems far away given the way authoritative discourses are bound up in gender structure as a regime of truth. Instead, the path forward necessitates an illumination of the harm of dominant gender structures, in order to begin deconstructing gender relationally to reading.

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