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**What about the parents and the teachers of the boys?
Contemporary challenges for academic work on literacy, masculinity and
educational innovation.**

Abstract

The past ten years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of educational ‘innovations’ designed to respond to the contemporary literacy needs of boys in schools. Intense public anxiety about the apparent under-achievements of boys in literacy can make it difficult for those at the heart of these innovations—teachers, parents, boys themselves—to identify the extent to which the solutions they are offered actually *are* able to make a sustainable, long-term difference to the literacy achievements of the specific boys they are concerned about. Acknowledging the contested nature of the masculinity and literacy terrains this paper explores contemporary responsibilities for academics engaged in gender based, literacy interventions in the 21st century.

Introduction

The fields of ‘Boys and Education’ and ‘Boys and Literacy’ have both developed into enormous industries over the past ten years. This is signalled by such things as the plethora of popular culture and media articles focused on the ‘plight of the boys’; the substantial investments that governments throughout the world have made in boys’ education taskforces; the allocation of large amounts of money to research projects designed to ‘understand the ‘problem with boys’ education’; and the growth of academic literature (influenced by many different theoretical frameworks) focused on the diverse issues associated with masculinity and schooling.

At the same time we have seen the emergence of hundreds of educational ‘innovations’ designed to respond to the ‘real needs’ of ‘real boys’ in new and transformative ways and a parallel—almost symbiotic—academic industry aiming to encourage critical analysis of all so-called innovations. Much of this critical, reflective academic work draws attention to the seemingly essentialist nature of many boys’ based programs. A common argument is that initiatives seeking to identify and respond to some essential boy-ness, run the risk of reinforcing the very understandings of masculinity that produce boys and books in an oppositional relationship to each other in the first place.

Whilst the critical and essentialist strands of ‘boys and education’ and ‘boys and literacy’ have both become significant (if not equally profitable) industries, I would like to suggest that for the people often working/living with the kids at the centre of the debates—the teachers and care givers of actual boys in actual schools—it is no easier now than it was ten or twenty years ago to conceptualise, implement or evaluate projects that aim to make a difference to educational achievements of at risk or marginalised boys.

This raises significant questions about the role of academics working in this area. At a time when the significance, impact and quality of academic work is under increasingly public

scrutiny, it is as important as it has ever been for academics to take up some of the challenges associated with the tradition of the ‘public intellectual’ and to put forward—and sell—to a diverse public audience some ways of making sense of the contested boys’ education terrain in order to facilitate actual responses to the education of boys. There are, however, a number of key factors which have a significant impact upon the extent to which academics are able to take up the role of responding to the immediate and on-going concerns of parents and teachers seeking to provide best possible educational outcomes for the boys in their care. My aim in this paper is to outline the key challenges facing academics from broadly post-structural and feminist points of view wishing to continue to engage with this particular field of enquiry. Issues to do with boys’ education have been at the forefront of popular and political consciousness for more than ten years. As such it is particularly timely for us¹ to consider the extent to which the challenges we now face have changed or evolved, and the extent to which the theoretical resources which have informed our inquiries to this point continue to offer us ways forward.

As an opening move—and to illustrate the nuanced nature of the challenges we now face—I would like to recount a brief story.

Tales from the field: competing perspectives on literacy

Sometime last year I was asked—along with a number of other academics, literacy educators, paediatricians and high profile literacy commentators—to contribute to a forum focused on reading aloud in the early years. One of the goals of this forum was to bring together folk from a range of discipline and professional areas—education, health, local government and so on—to discuss research which indicates the value of early literacy experiences (particularly the value of reading aloud as a means for developing important emergent literacy skills) and to look at a number of programs which aimed to improve, firstly, kids and parents’ access to books, and from this basis, the incidence, ‘quality’ and enjoyment of reading aloud within diverse family groups. Throughout the course of this event a number of participants raised significant points. These included the need for educators to recognise that some groups are more at risk of literacy failure than others; that members of these at risk groups are also diverse and that not all kids experience risk in the same ways; that any literacy ‘intervention’ would need to recognise the specific factors impacting upon the lives of diverse families; and that literacy itself is a contested term (associated with much more than the encoding and decoding of print based texts).

In other words, much of this conference illustrated what I would personally regard as the best of anti-essentialist and post-structuralist thinking around contemporary issues to do with boys, literacy and schooling: it recognised ‘boys’ as a diverse group (with diverse experiences/expectations/challenges); it acknowledged ‘literacy’ as a terrain with multiple, competing, definitions; and it recognised that any attempt to improve boys’ engagement with literacy in early childhood would need to recognise a wider cultural context which makes the association between boys and books seem unusual, at best, and unnatural at worst.

But this wasn’t the only work that went on at this conference. Sitting above all of these critical and self-reflective reflections were some very powerful sessions involving very

¹ Throughout this paper I will regularly use the terms “we” and “us” to gesture towards academics working in a similar field to myself with similar kinds of intellectual and theoretical inclinations. The key point of these references is not to suggest that ‘we’ are all the same, or that ‘us’ is a united, homogenous category. The goal, rather, is to acknowledge that I am far from the only person confronting the issues referred to in the paper and, by extension, not the only person in a position to take up the challenges I identify.

specific declarations about the ‘real’ problems of literacy education in the early years and the best ways to solve them. These solutions involved identification of the best books to read (these are the ‘classics’: not popular culture texts and certainly not texts other than books); the correct way to read (the things to do with our voices; when and where to read); and the amount of time needed to do the job properly (ie: if we can’t spare 15 minutes a day to read to our kids then we should get a goldfish instead). Underpinning each of these claim was an unmistakably paternalistic, middle class attitude that if ‘we’ gave ‘disadvantaged kids’ the benefit of our ideas then they would learn to love books and be saved—through our good works—from an impoverished literacy future.

At the end of the day (fortunately at conferences there really IS an end to a day!) it was the sentiments attached to this final set of claims that captured audience attention. It wasn’t that other ideas were actually critiqued, or that more post-structural perspectives on disadvantage, class, gender, literacy were explicitly rejected, it was rather a case where the authoritative statements made by folk with high media profiles were able to connect to (and draw power from) widespread beliefs held throughout the community about gender, class, literacy and so on, in order to make a particular framing of ‘the problem’ and thus a particular set of ‘solutions’ or innovations appear logical, natural, and responsible.

In this way the conference illustrated beautifully the way in which any educational artefact—a conference, a book, a curriculum document—can operate on one level to offer critical commentary on particular aspects of education and society whilst also working at another level to ultimately leave the same social context fundamentally unchallenged. This is a point well made by Roland Barthes in his discussion of the diverse ways through which conservative political positions are able to draw attention to the existence of inequities/injustices and significant social problems, and then use the very moment of critique as a platform for re-inscribing the inequities of the existing order. Barthes writes:

To instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it. Here is the pattern of this new-style demonstration: take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; than, at the last moment, save it *in spite of itself*, or rather *by* the heavy curse of its blemishes. (Barthes, 1983/2001: 121)

Barthes gives a particular example:

One can trace in advertising a narrative pattern which clearly shows the working of this new vaccine. It is found in the publicity for Astra margarine. The episode always begins with a cry of indignation against margarine: ‘a mousse? Made with margarine? Unthinkable!’ “Margarine? Your uncle will be furious!” and then one’s eyes are opened, one’s conscience becomes more pliable, and margarine is a delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances. The moral at the end is well known: “Here you are, rid of a prejudice which cost you dearly!’ it is in the same way that the Established Order relives you of your progressive prejudices...what does it matter, after all, if margarine is just fat, when it goes further than butter, and costs less? What does it matter, after all, if Order is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows us to live cheaply? Here we are, in our turn, rid of a prejudice which cost us dearly, too dearly, which cost us too much in scruples, in revolt, in fights and in solitude.” (Barthes, 1983/2001: 122)

At the conference I am discussing it was early childhood literacy that was held up to public scrutiny and then saved from itself by some ‘ordinary’ but popular (ie popularised and familiar) literacy experts with popular and familiar points of view. We were given proof that literacy education was failing large sections of the population; we were shown evidence that this failure has long term impact on the lives of disadvantaged kids; we were reminded of the dangers of clinging to our prejudices (about such things as the value of popular culture) advised that all of us can play a part in making a difference: and then we were given a very specific framework for intervention that was almost exactly the same—in ideology, in politics, in practices—as the context apparently being critiqued: a framework based on very specific understandings of what good books look like (and the stories they contain) and equally specific understandings of how good parents spend their time and their money. It was a framework that encouraged the white, middle class audience to go about their white, middle class business in the belief that improved literacy achievement would follow our good intentions.

With this story—and the politics it signifies—at the front of my mind, it seems that there are a number of key challenges those of us wishing to continue to work in areas associated with literacy, masculinity and educational risk, some ten years since “what about the boys” became a regular media headline. I shall look at each of these issues—and their associated implications for academic practice—in the next sections of the paper.

Challenge one: what’s the matter?...

In the ‘vaccination’ process outlined by Barthes, the first step for the reinscription of conservative politics is a clear naming of a problem or a crisis so that it can be solved on the terms set by those with conservative agendas. Similarly, academics wishing to arrive at a *different* resolution to the debate must also find ways to name the particular ‘boys and literacy’ problem. This is harder than it might be. Since the rise of the ‘what about the boys’ crisis, opinions about the real issues to do with boys’ education have routinely polarised around two key, easily recognised, positions. On the one hand there are those who argue that claims about the existence of any crisis are melodramatic and overblown, that the data cited to prove the contemporary educational disadvantage of boys is either exaggerated or misleading; that most boys are doing as well as they have always done; that some girls are doing as poorly as they have always done, and that it is important to continue to ask ‘which boys’ and ‘which girls’ before making any sweeping judgements about the problems facing boys and girls in schools today. Thanks to this work educators have increasingly detailed understandings that not all boys experience formal literacy education the same way and that factors such as cultural background, socio-economics, sexuality, rurality and family form can all impact on the extent to which any individual child succeeds or fails within school based literacy tests.

On the other hand we find those who insist that boys are consistently and routinely devalued within school based literacy classrooms and are in dramatic need of attention. Associated with these kinds of arguments is data to demonstrate that boys are more likely than girls to be involved in problematic behaviour; less likely to be the ‘star’ performers in any discipline area, and increasingly likely to display high risk behaviour outside of school (Rowan et al., 2002). Some of these claims are undoubtedly fuelled by the kind of back-lash politics that calls for a return to educational and social times when very specific versions of masculinity were routinely celebrated within and across cultural contexts. Others, however, are fuelled not by anxiety about the evils of feminism and the loss of essential masculinity but by simple concerns about the particular experiences of particular boys at a particular time.

In this context, therefore, there is an expectation that anyone wishing to speak about boys and literacy (at least to academic audiences) must first align themselves with either the critical or essentialist camps. Because of the either/or nature of this field it can be quite difficult to actually step up and say “well, although I recognise that masculinity is a contested category, that all representations of educational risk need to be interrogated, and that it is important not to fall back on essentialist understandings of what it means to be a man in contemporary western culture, I actually *do believe* that in this school/town/country, boys ARE at greater risk than girls of under performing in literacy tests”. It is just as difficult for the teacher or a parent of a boy (or a couple of boys) to be given an immediate, accessible answer by some within the post-structural camp when they say “what can I do to help this boy read?”

An immediate challenge facing academics wishing to work with teachers and parents in the ‘boys area’, then, is to find ways to acknowledge the existence of a problem. This problem relates to the fact that some boys **do not** come to school with the same kinds of emergent literacy skills as comparable groups of girls, and that as a result they struggle to perform ‘literacy’ as it is understood in school contexts. It relates also to the fact that the amount of public discourse about boys’ disinterest in readings can function as the archetypal self-fulfilling prophecy; even if there were no problems to do with boys and literacy ten years ago, the perception that has been created that boys don’t read means there definitely is a problem now. If we wish to interrupt the kind of reinscription that Barthes’ writes of above, we need to participate in naming the problem, and not leave it up to other folk to set the terms of engagement.

Challenge Two: Look at me! Look at me!

Once academics have taken the decision to name a problem (Yes, some boys *will* struggle with literacy more than some girls and that even though school based measures of literacy tell only part of the whole literacy story it is, nevertheless, an important part), the next challenge, of course, is to draw attention to what we have to say about it. In the conservative context outlined by Barthes this, too, is a daunting task. Indeed, Michael Goldhaber (1998) makes the important point that contrary to popular rhetoric we aren’t living in an information economy so much as an *attention* economy where the resource that is at its most scarce is that of individual and public attention to a particular person, product or idea. When applied to any political or educational debate—what should we think/do/act upon in regards to boys and literacy for example—this means that all various/competing speaking positions are also and always competing for a finite amount of audience attention. If we are to interrupt the pattern outlined by Barthes, we must disrupt the traditional flow of this attention back to the conservative, the reactionary, disguised—as it so often is—as the ‘natural’, the ‘common sense’, the ‘logical’ position.

Again, this is harder than one might wish. Those of us coming to the discussion with backgrounds in anti-essentialist, broadly post-structural feminist research have been skilled to resist the lure of the absolute. It is easy to find within much of our work cautious statements of possible realities rather than definitive declarations of certainties or truths. The problem here is that endlessly qualified pieces of analysis don’t grab that much attention. For instance, the claim “academic suggests that dominant discourses about masculinity combine with factors such as socio-economics, sexuality, cultural background first language to produce some children in a more marginal relationship with the traditions of formal school versions of literacy” is unlikely to be the lead story in any popular text.

Nor do these kinds of cautious (responsible?) discussions of any crisis maximise our ability to engage with the parents and teachers working and living with boys in diverse educational and social settings. I remember vividly the experience of being asked by a parent of one teenage “non-reading” child what they could do with their youngest child to try and ensure that this child had a better relationship than his brother with books. The parent wondered if perhaps a text I had co-authored focused on boys and literacy (Rowan, et al, 2002) would be useful for them. Now in many ways I think that this is a worthy text which conforms very well to the conventions of a feminist post-structural reading of boys, literacy and educational reform. I also believe that for many parents and teachers seeking actual support in dealing with the real under achievements of the boys in their care that it would offer them little or no support. It is not that I am in anyway denying the capacity of ‘typical parents’ (whoever they may be) to make sense of texts that draw on post-structural perspectives. What I was conscious of, however, was the bigger question “why would they bother?”

Here I speak as a parent as much as an academic. I have a reasonable amount of cultural capital. I am well versed in the critique of cultural norms. I am perfectly capable of interrogating anything presented to me a solution to my children’s educational needs. But at the end of the proverbial day, when I am tired and dejected and worried in that up-close and personal parental way about the health and wellbeing of my own four year olds, I don’t particularly want a lengthy treatise about the strengths and weaknesses of every possible product: indeed at the end of some days, I want to hear what a particular person, having weighed up all the arguments, taken into account all the variables, acknowledged the realities of my current complex life would regard as the kinds of things that I should **actually do** in response to a particular child’s problem.

So. We need to participate in the naming of the problem; and to capture audience attention **and not to be embarrassed about this**. A key, third, challenge facing contemporary academics, then, here is to be as pro-active in putting forward solutions as the conservative voices themselves are. This leads me to consideration of one of the biggest challenges facing those working in the fields of boys’ literacy achievement: the question of hope.

Challenge Three: hopeful and proud of it

There is a real and on going tension between discussions of ‘the boys issue’ that are viewed as overly theoretical and out of touch and others which are viewed as grounded in the real world and meaningful to ‘real people’. Whilst clearly recognising that this dichotomy between the theoretical and the practical does not exist in educational practice in the same way it appears to exist in the minds of newspaper editors and conservative politicians, the perception of the binary alone provides a challenging context for it sets up some academics as abstract and others as ‘grounded’. When this logic is followed through we end up with those working in ‘the abstract’ being seen as caught up in endless discussions and debates about key issues while those more grounded are actually out there doing something.

This image is particularly apparent in contemporary Australia which is in the grip of a long standing, highly public argument between academics, literacy educators, teachers and politicians about the inadequacies of current practices for teaching reading and writing in schools, and the relative strengths and merits of phonic and whole language approaches. Particularly loud within this debate have been the voices of various politicians and media commentators who lambast what they regard as the irresponsible drift towards critical literacy education within teacher education faculties that are functioning as “quasi-sociology departments” (Nelson, 2005, np) staffed by left wing radicals peddling “wacky, New-Age

curriculum ideas” (Donnelly, 2005: np). The implication in much of this criticism is that this left wing lunacy is okay for coffee room debate, but unlikely to solve the real challenges associated with literacy education today.

In this context, post-structural researchers are challenged to recognise that whilst on-going critique of problematic educational interventions or policies is obviously a vital part of our work, this work will be stronger if we are able to point to workable, sustainable, do-able, popularly understandable alternatives. In order to do this, however, we need to be able to articulate a vision for the future: no matter how much our theoretical backgrounds might cause us to look sceptically at any claim to educational transformation. Central here is the capacity to articulate hope in and for the future of boys’ and their literacy education.

Here I believe the concept of educated hope has something to offer. Educated hope has been described by Ruth Levitas as “the desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life.” (cited in Giroux 2003: np) and by Giroux (2003) as a language: that attempts “to make a difference by being able to imagine otherwise in order to act in other ways”. He goes on to make the point that:

Educated hope also demands a certain amount of courage on the part of intellectuals in that it demands from them the necessity to articulate social possibilities, mediate the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to contest the workings of oppressive power, undermine various forms of domination, and fight for alternative ways to imagine the future. (Giroux, 2003: np)

The important point here is that we do not undermine our critical, reflective work by seeking to articulate alternatives to the way concepts of literacy, masculinity and schooling are understood. The key challenge is to distinguish between critical reflections on claims to educational interventions that seek to highlight the limits and possibilities of any attempt to ‘make a difference’ and dogmatic insistences that the concept of transformation or intervention must lead, inevitably, towards projects that claim too much authority, and exercise too much power.

The difficulties of sustaining an educational vision within an academic environment that has cynicism, skepticism as some its key features leads me to the last challenge which I believe faces researchers concerned with literacy and masculinity in the 21st century: the capacity to look critically not only at the processes we see around us, but at our own theoretical frameworks as well.

Challenge Four: questioning ourselves as well as our work

All of the issues I have reviewed to this point of the paper suggest to me that at this particular historical moment, the key responsibility for those of us working in the area of boys and literacy education, is to find ways to foster in ourselves, in teachers, in parents and in boys themselves the kind of educated hope that does not shy away from acknowledging the scope and complexity of the boys/literacy challenge, but which nevertheless seeks to contribute to the construction, circulation, and legitimation of alternative images of the future.

A crucial step in this process is to the willingness to continually evaluate and critique the theory which has brought us to this point. Alan Luke has raised questions about the extent to which current theoretical resources actually enable educational change. He writes:

maybe we have reached an impasse in theory, policy formation and classroom work that is leading to passivity, paralysis and acquiescence to a neo-Tylerian curriculum agenda... The now dominant approach to curriculum-making in Australia is typified by lists of attributes and skills and outcomes of the new human subject. To offer a normative alternative requires an ethical and political metanarrative, however self-skeptical this must be. It requires a species of critical educational theory, hybrid and polyvocal itself, that both articulates visions of social and cultural utopias and heterotopias, while blending this with a continued skepticism towards totalisation and towards the kinds of essentialism that always seem to land grand narratives in deep trouble (Luke 2002: 49)

Relating this to specific challenges facing educational researchers working to understand the dimensions of the boys and literacy debate, it may be that we have excelled ourselves with our levels of scepticism (particularly towards the work of our colleagues which takes place in actual school/educational settings) and are now challenged to develop a new, ethical meta-narrative (albeit a partial, sceptical and modest one) if we are to move beyond a kind of post-critical paralysis that seems to characterise much debate in this field. I use the term post-critical paralysis to refer to a phenomenon whose chief characteristics are an active, vigorous commitment to various post-structural kinds of theoretical resources coupled with a disdain for other academics who attempt to ensure that the theories and frameworks they are working with also have traction in schools or early childhood settings. Suggestions that critical thinking academics might be aspiring towards educational transformation are regarded, from this perspective, as naïve, grandiose, ‘blue sky’, utopian, disconnected from broader social agendas or, in some instances, paternalistic, authoritarian, and redolent of claims to social engineering. In all of these cases critical *readings* of educational injustices or on-going patterns of gender based literacy achievement are accorded greater intellectual rigour and integrity than projects that might be seen as critically informed interventions.

A key point to be made is that within much anti-essentialist understandings of gender critique of existing practice is only one initial step in a bigger transformative project. That is to say, transformation begins with critique, but moves necessarily into the development of strategies designed to denaturalise that which is taken for granted, and to introduce and legitimate alternative educational performances. This process is captured well by Elizabeth Grosz who writes:

Strategy involves recognizing the situation and alignments of power within and against which it operates. It needs to know its adversary intimately in order to strike at its most vulnerable points. It must also seek certain (provisional) goals and future possibilities with which it may replace prevailing norms and ideals, demonstrating that they are not the only possibilities. They *can* be superseded. (1990: 59-60)

Superseding dominant norms and ideals, however, requires us to recognise that the critique of dominant practices must always be accompanied by frameworks to support alternative practices. The usefulness of any theoretical resource, in this context, relates not to what it enables us to think, but how it enables us to support parents and teachers and boys themselves to respond to the new times we engage with.

It seems to me, then, that at this particular historical moment, academics wishing to continue to pursue research agendas focused on boys, literacy and education are significantly challenged to be at the forefront of actual interventions: that is to say, we are challenged to take up the theoretical resources that allow us to conceptualise, trial, implement, evaluate, redesign and draw attention to actual interventions and these interventions will require us to innovate in our

use of theory, as much as we innovate in our contact with teachers, parents and kids themselves. Let me give a final example to illustrate the ways this can happen.

Getting it together: one literacy intervention

The first challenge for academics wishing to produce educational interventions focused on literacy that go beyond the reinscription of narrow understandings of gender, literacy, class and so on is to acknowledge that despite ten years of literacy reforms focused on boys there is still a significant problem. This has several dimensions. Popular beliefs (that is to say, wide spread, current-affairs-show type beliefs) about literacy continue to celebrate narrow versions of what it means to be a 'reader' particularly regarding the kinds of literacy practices that are most valued (ie there are books, and there are 'good books'). These beliefs are intertwined with dominant understandings of what it means to be a boy (and boys, in these discourses, are 'do-ers' not 'readers' and thus understandably alienated from traditional approaches to reading and writing). These understandings, in turn, are fuelled by diverse research projects which demonstrate that some boys do, indeed, continue to perform less well than some girls on school based literacy tests.

Along side this 'factual' data, sits emotional data; the continuous emphasis on the existence of a boys' education crisis generates not only heightened public/parental and in many cases boys' anxiety but also feeds calls for quick and immediate solutions. In order to be taken up, these solutions must speak to popular understandings about literacy and about masculinity. As a result, they are rarely as transformative as post-structural perspectives might desire. Indeed, some of the most popular literacy reforms focused on the special needs of boys invariably seem to re-assert very specific understandings of what boys are really like, and, by extension, how they learn, where they learn, who they learn best from (men), and the kinds of texts that they will most likely engage with (including action and factual texts). These reforms do not see these texts or practices as bridging to other, wider, literacy practices, but very much as the natural way to link boys to literacy (and there is an entire academic publication industry devoted to making this point).

If this is the problem, then seeking to challenge any one of these beliefs—or the practices they produce—requires us to recognise the lure of the 'quick fix' and to work to foreground alternative, anti-essentialist solutions that are packaged in accessible 'user friendly' ways. This, in turn, necessitates a willingness to 'hope' and to continue to introduce alternative understandings of masculinity and literacy into popular circulation.

This can be illustrated through a brief analysis of the difference between the overall tenor of the literacy conference discussed at the start of this paper and one specific model also discussed at the forum. In general terms, the 'solutions' put forward by 'The Conference' to the boys' literacy problem (articulated by the most powerful/endorsed/celebrated speakers) were based on the following: improved access to 'quality' books (ie books published by certain publishers and written by particular authors); parental education about 'quality reading' (perhaps through demonstrations by actors or successful authors of how their books 'should' be read) and regular reminders (via the media and public commentators) that reading aloud to children is vital for their future.

An alternative model, also discussed at this conference, takes quite a different approach. In this literacy project—based in the United States—paediatricians work in conjunction with paediatric nurses and community volunteers to provide all children with a free book during

their regular ‘wellness’ check ups²: in addition to this, the doctors take a small amount of time to assure parents that kids do, indeed, benefit from reading, and community volunteers read aloud to kids while they are in the waiting room (Needleman, 2005).

This simple model has a number of noteworthy features. First, it acknowledges the importance of providing kids with access to books, but the criteria used to determine the quality of the books is not their cost, their publisher or their author, but rather the extent to which they are accessible to children, contain images of ‘like’ children (that match up to the cultural background of the target group) and provide opportunities for kids to develop particular emergent literacy skills (ie through the use of rhythm and rhyme; repetition; clear narrative). Second, they acknowledge the importance of parental reading, but instead of emphasising precisely how (via voice coaching lessons) they recruit paediatricians (high status), and community volunteers (popular authority) to just talk to the parents about what kids often enjoy about read aloud time (physical contact; parental voice) and emphasise *relationships* as the most important factor. Following on from this, the involvement of the parents with reading is regularly celebrated and naturalised so that the link between child and book becomes accepted and normal.

This initiative provides a good example of the kinds of anti-essentialist approaches to theorising literacy, gender and transformation which I believe have the greatest chance of success in the contemporary context. It works, in post-structural terms, to problematise traditional opposition between working class parents and books, by firstly, making simple connections between diverse kids, parents and books, and secondly, providing diverse parents with opportunities to recognise that reading is a do-able activity—not something that requires a university education or an Academy Award to achieve. Second, by involving the community and paediatricians in the project (tapping into both popular and authorised speaking positions) considerable attention is drawn to the project which provides additional support to families seeking to change their understanding of what ‘being a reader’ involves. Ultimately, the involvement of diverse families and communities in this initiative works to disrupt narratives that link literacy with some kinds of families and not with others. In other words, this initiative illustrates the Deleuzian notion of deterritorialization (Deleuze, 1987) working as it does to foster and legitimate connections between people and practices routinely kept apart by other arboreal, molar, over-coded understandings of literacy, gender or class.

Working rhizomatically (Deleuze, 1987), this relatively simple initiative brings, if not new, then at least *multiple* understandings of all key terms—literacy, class and so on—into circulation. These understandings are evidenced not only in the high rates of parent/child participants but also significant improvements in such factors as the number of times that parents’ read aloud to children each week; the length of each reading session and the extent to which reading becomes a favourite activity of child and parent (Needleman, 2005). It is perhaps because of this kind of success that the ongoing work required to consistently circulate the core belief underpinning the initiative—that *all* people can learn to read—is easier to sustain.

Conclusion

There are two crucial final points to be made here: the specific intervention described here appears simple and has modest aims. Despite this it is able to connect with diverse parents,

² These visits are similar to visits to maternal and child health nurses; patients do not require referrals to pediatricians and parents often use a pediatrician as primary health care provider for the child.

from diverse language and economic backgrounds. It is this ability to make connections—to imagine and work towards new relationships—that gives the intervention its greatest power. In this context, the second significant point to acknowledge is that this intervention—and many others currently being put in place throughout Australia—is driven by people outside universities, beyond education faculties. At a time when all academics are under increasing pressure to demonstrate not only the quality but also the impact of our work for ‘end users’ the recognition—and acknowledgement—that some of the most transformative work in our fields may be operating with little input from ourselves (or people with similar theoretical backgrounds) draws attention to the ongoing importance of revisiting, always, the trajectory of our own work, and the role that our theoretical resources play in setting agendas, and imagining futures for education, educational research and the subjects of so much of our enquiry.

Bruno Latour (2004: np) makes the following point about the role of theory in contemporary society:

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorists. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? ...

To remain in the metaphorical atmosphere of the time, military experts constantly revise their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, technology of their projectiles, of their smart bombs, of their missiles: I wonder why we, we alone, would be saved from those sort of revisions. It does not seem to me that we have been as quick, in academe, to prepare ourselves for new threats, new dangers, new tasks, new targets. (Latour, 2004: np)

When this perspective is brought to bear on the field of boys’ literacy education, the new threats and dangers may be that in a conservative climate which pits academic theory against academic practice, producing defensive reactions from many academics towards attempts to measure the impact of our work, it may well be that the process of critique (which is clearly central to any educational intervention) may start to be seen as an end in itself.

Moving beyond this impasse requires, then, a willingness to use our theoretical resources not only to make sense of ‘gender’ or ‘literacy’ but also to interrogate our own practices in these fields³. Specifically, we are challenged to ensure that the theoretical devices which structure our work enable us to name the problems (old and new) now confronted by parents and teachers of boys; to recognise the need for post-structural resources to inform the design and management of actual interventions in this space; to draw public attention to these interventions and to reflect continually on the way our work can sustain hope in the communities they are focused on.

³ I have argued elsewhere (Rowan, 2002 et al.) that the most useful theoretical resources for enabling this kind of work are those of a broadly anti-essentialist nature which emphasise: first that traditional or limited understandings of gender are not natural, but rather produced and regulated by dominant and popular discourses; as such they cannot be simply wished away, but need, rather, to be ‘consumed’ or deterritorialized through on going processes of critique; second, deterritorialization of gender norms rest upon processes of repetition whereby the limits of dominant understandings of gender are highlighted through the introduction and celebration of alternative understandings of masculinity and femininity; third, that it is through a process of repetition of these alternative understandings of masculinity or femininity acquire status and ‘normality’.

This leads me to my final point. Audre Lorde reminds us that traditionally:
it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. (Lorde 1990: 281)

For the parents and teachers of boys ‘at risk’, some versions of academic practice—both those that produce interventions and those that work to discourage them—may be functioning as a new form of oppression: an oppression associated in many instances with a failure to acknowledge the realities of living as a parent and a teacher and a boy at times where the literacy achievement of boys simply cannot be taken for granted.

To this end, the most important question facing academics working in the fields of boys’ education may be this: are we, ourselves, courageous enough to articulate a vision (based on educated hope) not just for boys, or literacy, or diverse educational sites but for our own future as well. And, if so, are we able to find, in pursuit of that vision, the skills necessary to capture the attention of the parents and teachers and boys in our community who are, perhaps, at greatest risk of literacy failure and, perhaps, most vulnerable to the kinds of quick fix solutions that promise so much but deliver so little?

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