

# Disrupting the 'boys don't read' discourse: Primary school boys who *love* reading fiction

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This article disrupts dominant discourses around boys and reading that often homogenise young males as reluctant, disengaged and, at times, adversarial readers. Rather than essentialising boys, we argue there is a need for a more sophisticated knowledge base about the influences, constraints and diverse experiences of boys as readers in society today. Drawing on interviews ( $n = 30$ ) with Year 4 (8 to 9-year-old) boys at six schools, we consider their personal recounts of their enjoyment in reading, their preferred reading choices and narratives related to their experiences as readers at school. Analysis highlights boys' emerging reading interests, sophisticated and specific reading preferences, and changes in reading identities over time. Boys' preferences for particular fiction authors, novel series and genres dispute the common assumption in educational contexts that boys prefer to engage with non-fiction books. This finding is significant, as negative gendered stereotypes can impact on boys' reading self-concepts. It is also critical given Jerrim and Moss's recent research highlighting the importance of fiction in the development of reading skills. We consider implications for pedagogical practices that broaden reading experiences for the diversity of emerging masculine reading identities in nations such as Australia, where there is an absence of reading for pleasure in education policies.

**Keywords:** boys and reading; fiction; reading enjoyment; schooling

*Two of my best friends love reading, Matthew loves, Alex loves reading, Johnny loves reading. Jason loves reading. Most of my friends that are friends love reading.* (Jack, Year 4, low socio-economic school community)

Jack is in Year 4 at a primary school in an economically marginalised town in Australia, where he reports that he *loves* reading, as do his friends. Comments by Jack were in response to questions about whether the boys he knew enjoyed reading. His insistent repetition of his friends' 'love' of reading is indicative of his enthusiastic response. International comparisons, however, simplify complex data about boys' and girls' achievements and attitudes towards reading (Logan & Johnston, 2009; McKenna *et al.*, 2012; OECD, 2015; Mullis *et al.*, 2017), homogenising boys such as Jack and his friends as disengaged and reluctant readers (cf. Frater, 1997; Hoff Sommers, 2000; Whitmire, 2010). This reductive discourse filters into educational

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contexts. Some teachers subsequently assume gendered stereotypical beliefs about boys and reading that can have negative effects on boys' self-concept as readers (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2015). In addition, normative conceptions frame boys as predominantly consumers of non-fiction—as averse to fiction—potentially reinscribing narrow cultural norms in classrooms and limiting opportunities for authentic engagement and sustained reading (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Greig & Hughes, 2009). While schools increasingly encourage book choice, literature circles and book clubs, too few teachers have knowledge of contemporary children's literature and the range of texts to suit and engage the diverse profiles of the young people they teach (Cremin *et al.*, 2009; National Literacy Trust, 2012).

Adding complexity, the high value placed on testing within the international community has shifted the focus to developing reading skills over supporting emerging identities and the associated will to read (Comber & Nixon, 2009, 2011; Moss, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2018), thereby dictating what reading looks like in schools. As we discuss below, this is highly problematic for boys who would rather not read in class if they do not have access to their preferred choices and the books they *love* to read. Issues of access to desired reading materials are also complicated by economic disadvantage when family and school resources are more limited (Scholes, 2020).

This article challenges the deficit discourse around boys and reading (e.g. Whitmire, 2010) and builds on past studies illustrating the need to move beyond narrow boundaries around sanctioned 'boys' stuff' and using hyper-masculine non-fiction 'boy baits' in schools (Connell, 1989; Alloway *et al.*, 2002; Dutro, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Greig & Hughes, 2009). Given recent findings related to the 'fiction effect' (Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Jerrim *et al.*, 2020) and young people's academic achievement, we explore a group of primary school boys' reading interests and the diverse experiences of these boys as readers in contemporary society. This article disrupts the dominant discourse circulating in schools around boys and reading that homogenises young males as reluctant, disengaged and—at times—adversarial readers. Rather than essentialising boys, we argue there is a need for a more sophisticated knowledge base about their reading interests, how they position fiction in their emerging reading identities, and the diverse experiences of boys as readers in society today. We take this stance in response to Moss's (2018) call for education researchers to reconsider how they approach knowledge and assumptions underpinning lines of research.

With the above issues in mind, we first consider normative views about boys and reading and educational policy responses that position boys as reluctant readers who engage with a limited range of text types. Second, we report on interviews with 30 Year 4 boys and explore their emerging reading interests, and the specificity of their reading preferences that change over time, to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions of being a boy and a reader. Finally, we explore implications for pedagogical practices that broaden reading experiences, with consideration of the diversity of emerging masculine reading identities. This analysis illustrates the need to challenge assumptions about negative gendered reading identities (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2015). These findings are significant as expanding boys' repertoire of reading experiences is particularly important in Year 4, since time spent reading is the best predictor of progress in school reading achievement (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Fisher & Frey, 2018),

with a significant reading attitude–comprehension relationship obtained by Year 5 (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995). Reading for enjoyment subsequently puts children ahead in the classroom at this age (Mol & Bus, 2011; Sullivan & Brown, 2015).

### Normative views about boys and reading

Generalisations about boys' lack of engagement and underachievement in reading are not representative of diverse boys (Alloway *et al.*, 2002; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Skelton & Francis, 2011; Scholes, 2013, 2017, 2018a,b), rendering invisible the differences in attitudes and performance that interplay with factors such as geographical location, ethnicity/race, sexual identity, religion, culture and socio-economic background. Social class interacts and plays an important part in masculinities and experiences with literacy, as middle-class boys are more likely to be successfully literate than working-class boys (Skelton & Francis, 2011). This disparity is often attributed to a lack of books at home (Evans *et al.*, 2010) and related experiences (Mol & Bus, 2011), along with impoverished pedagogical approaches and limiting teacher beliefs related to boys from low-income homes (Hempel-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2018). Negative stereotypes about boys and reading have been particularly visible in economically marginalised schools, where resistance to anything coded as feminine (reading) has provided working-class boys with a means of affirming their place in society (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connolly, 2004).

In this way, boys have been constrained as readers through the historical influence of gender relations related to economic disadvantage (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), the cultural legacy of reading as a feminine pursuit (Alloway *et al.*, 2002), along with the influence of peer groups that potentially narrow normative ways of being a boy at school (Martino, 2001; Connolly, 2004; Scholes, 2018a,b). Being successfully literate has been easier for high-achieving, middle-class boys who wish to do well in examinations and secure a good career. For instance, Skelton and Francis (2011) found hegemonic 'real boy' constructions of masculinity were reworked by some groups of academically successful middle-class boys such that 'feminine' attributes which offer social and financial merit in an economic neoliberal society are incorporated and rendered 'non-gendered' (Skelton & Francis, 2011, p. 473).

Stereotypical views in educational policies that filter into the classroom (National Literacy Trust, 2012) may work against opportunities in the classroom to expand boys'—particularly working-class boys'—repertoires of experience as readers and to engage in reading fiction for pleasure (Cremin *et al.*, 2009; Scholes, 2018b, 2020). Jerrim and Moss's (2019) analysis of the 'fiction effect' is relevant here, as limiting ideas about boys as readers may have a compounding effect on boys' engagement and achievement in reading. Educational practices, and literacy practices in particular, produce constraints through which students 'improvise' themselves as gendered subjects (Davies, 2003; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). Students, then, negotiate gendered subjectivities in relation to the positions made available to them in particular historic and discursive contexts (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Davies, 2003; Moss, 2012). The positions available to boys in the literacy classroom are often reflected in the prevailing pedagogical responses of the day. Pedagogical responses to the so-called 'boy problem' rarely reflect nuanced understandings of differentiated issues but for a 'moral

panic' around boys and literacy practices that fails to engage with research-based literature regarding the limits and possibilities of purportedly 'boy-friendly' initiatives (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Lingard *et al.*, 2009).

### **Policy responses to the failing boys' agenda**

Some essentialist pedagogical approaches towards closing gender achievement gaps in reading have drawn on dominant masculine stereotypes of boys (Lingard *et al.*, 2009). The 2000s saw an emergence of inquiries and policies that positioned boys as an undifferentiated group in need of help. This was visible in several investigations into the education of boys in Australia, including the highly critiqued (Mills, 2007) 'Boys Getting it Right' by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, 2002). At the same time, 'Boys, Literacy and Schooling' was funded to remedy boys' lower literacy achievement (Alloway *et al.*, 2002), along with funding for the 'Boys Education Lighthouse Schools Program' in 2003–2004 and 'Success for Boys' from 2006–2007. These investigations served to affirm gender stereotypes, such as boys 'talk more about sport and politics. . . and will read more nonfiction' than girls' (DETYA, 2002, p. 78).

During this time in the UK, booklets were produced for schools to directly target the attitudes, behaviours and learning styles of boys. For instance, 'Yes He Can: Schools where boys write well' (OFSTED, 2003a), 'Boys' Achievement in Secondary Schools' (OFSTED, 2003b) and 'National Healthy School Standard to Raise Boys' Achievement' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) were created with the assumption that boy-friendly reading materials and strategies, such as sitting boys next to girls during literacy sessions, could remedy the boy problem (Noble & Bradford, 2000).

In 2004, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) in Canada published 'Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy', which was critiqued for erasing race and class (Martino & Kehler, 2007). The title of the guide for teachers itself sends a powerful message about boys. The guide appealed to educators' focus on boys' learning styles (as distinct from girls'), and pointed to the way 'boys in particular benefit from tightly structured, well focused lessons that have an obvious purpose and that are tied to the achievement of clear goals' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 15). In this way, there has been a history of promoting particular pedagogies for boys based on their gender alone, access to more of what they presumably like, and stereotypical beliefs about their preference for non-fiction (Moss, 2018).

There are still issues today. For instance, in the UK, the Boys Reading Commission (National Literacy Trust, 2012) found that three-quarters of schools are still concerned about boys and reading, however, teachers are relying on outdated approaches such as gender segregation and male role models, along with the myth that all boys prefer non-fiction. In this way, policy and literacy agendas are based around the belief that boys are deficient in terms of achievement and attitude, with policies responding to moral panic (Martino & Kehler, 2007) having tenuous links to educational research (Moss, 2011).

Moss (2011) argues that policy responses which suggest teachers adopt strategies such as 'understanding boys' learning styles' and that they should 'be in [the] boys'

corner' are a 'curious choice of proposition by which to steer professional practice and one which it would be difficult to ground in a credible research literature' (p. 114). Similarly, Martino and Kehler (2007) point out that government responses are reflective of the 'moral panic' around boys and literacy. These responses fail to engage with research-based literature regarding the limits and possibilities of boy-friendly initiatives related to single-sex classes, boy-friendly curricula and so on (see Martino et al., 2004; Martino & Kehler, 2007). Stahl (2018) argues that many programmes are based around boys' attitudes in such a way that boys are inscribed as deficient both in terms of achievement and attitude. In this sense, such policy responses cast an inverted gaze on an undifferentiated group of boys who have become victims in narratives of gender, literacy and schooling.

Performative policy-led literacy reforms have also shaped the space in which reading at school is understood, with interest in students' reading outcomes voiced in terms of efficacy, levels of skill and the most efficient teaching method to secure the best results (Comber, 2012; Moss, 2012). In this discursive landscape, education policy tends to prioritise curriculum choices and pedagogies that have a strong focus on achieving accountabilities, such as benchmarks on standardised tests (Comber, 2013; Scholes, 2020). The result is a thinning out of pedagogies, curricula and experiences of education, with a focus on reading abilities that can be segmented, taught and tested (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Comber, 2012; Moss, 2012; Cormack & Comber, 2013; Scholes, 2020). As students are sorted and categorised as (non)readers through classroom practices, providing limited positions, particularly for economically marginalised boys (Moss, 2012), the significance of different attitudes towards reading and preferences is often overlooked. The perverse effects of such accountability regimes are more likely to have an adverse impact on the experiences of boys and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Lupton, 2006; Hempel-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2018; Jerrim & Moss, 2019).

The combination of factors described above create tensions in boys' experiences of 'school reading' and their emerging 'personal reading' identities. In expanding and supporting boys' reading identities in primary classrooms, teachers are well positioned to identify and challenge constraining practices (Scholes, 2018b) that may be limiting, particularly when entangled with reading for pleasure. However, many teachers, constrained by performative agendas (Comber, 2012, 2013) and lack of knowledge of children's literature (National Literacy Trust, 2012; Cremin *et al.*, 2014), draw upon ingrained stereotypical beliefs (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2015) and narrow reading experiences for boys in the classroom (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Greig & Hughes, 2009; Scholes, 2020).

## The study

This paper draws on a broad programme of study that explored boys' perceptions of reading at school (Australian Research Council, Grant DE170100990). Year 4 students were recruited as this is a time when students move from learning to read, to reading to learn. They need to be able to find information in a piece of text, make inferences based on what they have read, interpret and integrate ideas and information, and evaluate texts (Mullis *et al.*, 2017). Six schools across South East

Queensland, Australia were purposively selected to ensure a cross-section of economic contours. As noted in Table 1, schools were drawn from a range of geographic locations (inner city, metropolitan, regional), included both faith and non-faith schools, and represented educational institutions with a range of Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores. These scores indicate the socio-educational backgrounds of participating school communities, with an average score of 1,000. Schools above 1,000 represent above-average socio-economic advantage, and schools below 1,000 are considered to represent below-average socio-economic advantage.

After ethical clearance from the relevant university and educational departments, school principals were approached to participate in the study. Following principal approval, we obtained informed consent from teachers and the boys in their classes who volunteered to participate. 30 Year 4 boys (8 to 9 years old) across six schools volunteered and confirmed their consent. Prior to the interviews, each boy indicated his frequency of reading. Table 2 provides an overview of participants, their ethnicity, relevant school and self-reported reading frequency.

The semi-structured interviews explored the boys' personal recounts of their experiences as readers, reading preferences and developing reader identities. Researchers conducted 20-minute one-to-one interviews in a location close to the student's Year 4 classrooms. The interviews were audio-recorded and later fully transcribed.

Analysis of interviews was informed by constant comparative analysis methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open-ended coding of interviews was undertaken independently by the authors, with iterative intercoder discussions at multiple points to discuss analytic memos.

Both first and second-cycle coding methods (Huberman et al., 2014) were used to work towards the development of themes emerging from the interviews. One of the dominant themes that emerged was the specificity of the boys' reading preferences. Specific books and series, as well as genres, were coded (see Table 3).

A second dominant theme that emerged pointed to Year 4 student self-reported changes in reading patterns from Year 3. Table 4 reports the codes identified, while Table 5 illustrates an example of the coding.

First, this analysis revealed that boys, located in schools across a range of socio-economic areas, were able to articulate sophisticated and specific reading preferences,

Table 1. Overview of the schools in the study

School	Region	Sector	ICSEA	Indigenous %	Language other than English %
Gumtree	Inner City	Government	1,175	2	13
Ferntree	Metropolitan	Government	1,113	2	6
Appletree	Metropolitan	Government	1,174	1	14
Peppertree	Regional	Catholic	1,000	2	52
Beechtree	Regional	Government	960	12	2
Raintree	Regional	Government	970	1	12

Table 2. Participant self-reported reading frequency

Student	Ethnicity	Self-reported reading frequency	School
Ned	Anglo	Every day	Gumtree
Mason	Anglo	Few times a week	Gumtree
Sam	Anglo	Few times a week	Gumtree
Tom	Anglo	Few times a week	Gumtree
Victor	Anglo	Every day	Gumtree
James	Anglo	Every day	Ferntree
Zane	Anglo	Every day	Ferntree
Stephen	Anglo	Every day	Ferntree
Ben	Anglo	Every day	Ferntree
Callum	Anglo	Every day	Ferntree
Nathan	Anglo	Fortnightly	Appletree
Harry	African	Few times a week	Appletree
Stewart	Anglo	Every day	Appletree
Hughie	Anglo	Hardly ever	Appletree
Connor	Anglo	Every day	Appletree
Talum	Anglo	Every day	Appletree
Jason	Anglo	Few times a week	Appletree
Lachlan	Anglo	Every day	Peppertree
Michael	Anglo	Once a week	Peppertree
Riley	African	Hardly ever	Peppertree
Allan	Anglo	Every day	Peppertree
Levi	Anglo	Fortnightly	Beechtree
Toby	Anglo	Few times a week	Beechtree
Kieran	Indigenous	Few times a week	Beechtree
Oliver	Anglo	One a week	Beechtree
Tony	Anglo	Every day	Raintree
Jett	Anglo	Hardly ever	Raintree
Matthew	Anglo	Hardly ever	Raintree
Nate	Anglo	Every day	Raintree
Jack	Anglo	Every day	Raintree

including a strong desire to read fiction. Second, boys had changing interests and were able to articulate emerging preferences and practices.

### *Boys' articulation of sophisticated and specific reading preferences*

A dominant theme across the interviews was the specificity with which boys could describe their reading interests. A majority of boys described in detail the books, authors, series and genres that they enjoyed. The *Treehouse Series* by Australian author Andy Griffiths and Australian illustrator Terry Denton was the most popular, with 15 of the boys making reference to the series or authors. Students appeared to have an affinity with this comedic series set in a fantasy treehouse paradise. This Australian series was often readily available to the boys in classrooms, and appealed due to the often subtle humour in the subtext. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, by US author Jeff Kinney, the *Big Nate* series by US author Lincoln Peirce and the *Alex Rider* series of spy novels by British author Anthony Horowitz were also among the named favourites.

Table 3. Reading preference interview coding

Student	School	Reading preferences	Related narrative
Jack	Raintree School	<i>Treehouse</i> series and <i>Just!</i> series by Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton	Jack: And I love to read. Although, I prefer specific books—not any type. Researcher: Which specific books? Jack: Andy [Griffiths] and Terry [Denton] and <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> . Like the <i>Treehouse</i> books and <i>Just!</i> series. Researcher: What do you like about that? Jack: It's funny because it just, it says little ways of being, like doomed. Researcher: You said you only like reading specific things. What don't you like to read? Jack: Stuff I really haven't read before, stuff by different authors. Like I pretty much like the same authors.

Table 4. Changes in reading patterns

Changes in reading patterns codes	Number of boys
Emerging interests and different likes	17
Likes reading more	5
Reading more challenging books	7
Reads less	4

Table 5. Changes in reading patterns interview coding

Student	School	Changes in reading patterns	Related narrative
Connor	Appletree School	Likes reading more	Connor: I read every day now. I read every day. Researcher: Why has that changed do you think? Connor: Because there's new books that have come out and I just love them. They're new and they're way better than the ones that I used to have.

All but four boys—who were attending schools in a range of socio-economic locations—talked about reading voluntarily for pleasure and relaxation. These boys only read when asked to by their teacher or parent. The remaining participants, however, talked of voluntary daily reading rituals and the importance of family reading practices (Love & Hamston, 2004). Families provide important contexts for supporting boys' reading by facilitating access to desired reading resources (or not) (Cremin *et al.*, 2014; Scholes, 2020).



Preferences were explicitly described. Jack [Raintree School, ICSEA 970], noted in our opening vignette, summed up the dominant sentiment shared by the boys when he told us, 'I love to read. Although, I prefer specific books—not any type'.

Author: Oh, which specific books?

Jack: Andy [Griffiths] and Terry [Denton] and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Like the *Treehouse* books and *Just!* series.

Author: You were telling me that you were reading a book when I came to get you [for the interview]?

Jack: Yep, *Just Doomed*. It's funny because it just, it says little ways of being, like doomed.

Author: Where do you get your books from? From the library or do you have them at home?

Jack: I have most of them, I have a few of them at home.

Jack's narrative highlights the specificity of his preferences but also his practice of collecting his favourite books—exemplifying the importance of access to resources at home (Evans *et al.*, 2010; Scholes, 2020). While he expressed a *love* of reading, this was contingent upon being able to access the right resources at the right time. Like several of the other boys, Jack could not always find the books he craved at school—indicating the limitations in resourcing often prevalent in lower socio-economic school communities (Scholes, 2020)—and would bring favourite books from home for silent reading sessions. If he did not have his preferred reading materials, he would often not read. Teachers' limited understanding of children's literature and their interests (Cremin *et al.*, 2009) perhaps also contributed to the narrow range of books which are frequently on offer, according to the boys.

Like Jack, Toby [Beechtree School, ICSEA 960] expressed an affinity for particular reading materials and recounted his love of books by British novelist Roald Dahl (e.g. *James and the Giant Peach*) and he proudly told us he had some at home 'because they're good'. When he was asked if his parents directed him to read at home, he was adamant that 'No, I just choose to', explaining his autonomous home reading practices.

Toby: Sometimes I sit outside on the steps [to read]. Yeah, in the winter. In the winter when it's nice and cold.

Author: Do you read before you go to bed at night or any other times?

Toby: Not as much as I used to. Sometimes mum reads them to me but now I don't really do that anymore.

Both Jack and Toby were attending schools in lower socio-economic communities, making their professed love of reading in contrast to previous research that illustrates the many constraints on disadvantaged boys' reading identities (Skelton & Francis, 2011; Scholes, 2018b).

Many boys volunteered a wide range of texts that they enjoyed reading, providing intimate details of favourite books and authors with familiarity and passion. Talum [Appletree School, ICSEA 1174] had a passion for history fiction books by Australian author Jacki French and was currently reading *Shipwreck, Sailors & 60,000 Years*.

Levi [Beechtree School, ICSEA 960] also talked about his intimate relationship with fiction authors and their books:

*I like R L Stine's books because they give you Goosebumps... And Terry [Denton] and Andy's [Griffiths] books, have—they built a treehouse and so the first one is a 13-storey treehouse, it's got different platforms and now it's going to 108 platforms.*

In this way several boys referred to fiction authors on a first-name basis, explaining that they loved reading anything by 'Andy and Terry' (Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton). Mason [Gumtree School, ICSEA 1175] provides another example of the appetite boys exhibited for reading specific books or genres, including fiction:

Mason: When I finished [reading *Captain Underpants* for the seventh time] I got started to get on the *X-Man* books. Not just *X-Man*, Marvel and stuff which I finished all of the superhero books too. Then I went onto the history books and I finished, not the *Horrible Histories*, just history and science books. Finished that. Then I read the art book and I finished that.

Author: What is it about the *Captain Underpants* book that you like, that's made you read it seven times?

Mason: Mostly just the humour. 'Cause I love humour and they also have mini cartoons in the middle and it's just funny, the two boys put pranks and *Captain Underpants* is sort of like, he's sometimes actually a bit serious but he looks nothing serious...

Mason's enthusiasm for reading based on the enjoyment of a range of texts, including fiction, was common across the dataset and in contrast to much of the literature positioning boys as non-readers (Frater, 1997; Whitmire, 2010). While these boys talked passionately about reading, the lack of access to desirable texts in class had a stultifying effect. Mason, the avid reader who talked enthusiastically about reading (see above), described his behaviour during classroom reading times:

Mason: When it's time for reading, usually I get a piece of paper out and draw... to be honest.

Author: Yeah well be honest, why do you do that?

Mason: Because I like reading but I've read all of the books that I like on the shelf... The rest of the books I've read the first couple of pages, or most of the books I've read the first couple of pages and they're a bit boring.

While Mason was attending the school with the highest economic demographic [Gumtree School, ICSEA 1175], access to desired reading materials in the classroom was also an issue for him. Lack of reading variety for children in Australian classrooms across demographics may reflect the current focus on performativity and assessment of skills (Scholes, 2020), along with teachers' suspected lack of knowledge of contemporary children's literature (Cremin *et al.*, 2009; National Literacy Trust, 2012).

Boys understood that their peers had a range of interests and that having a range of reading material available could sustain (or spark) an interest in reading. As Moss (2018) described, place and time are important, as are changing social relations and embodied experiences of schooling. Standardised curricula and pedagogical

programmes may fail to take these particularities into account. These nuances were not lost on Ned [Gumtree School, ICSEA 1175] who offered the following suggestion:

*Well it depends on what type of books they [students] don't like. Because if they don't like action novels [the school could offer] a calm animal book, like facts about animals. But if it's like a fact book and they don't like them, they could try and start reading action books.*

Fifteen of the boys indicated they still read at the same frequency (typically at least once per day) as they had the previous year, with an additional five saying they now read more than they did the previous year. Many of their responses indicated that fiction had sustained their ongoing interest in reading. Victor [Gumtree School, ICSEA 1175], for instance, described how, when he found a fiction book he liked, he kept reading because 'it never gets old'; and Zane [Ferntree School, ICSEA 1113] said that 'you can't get me out of a novel after I'm in it'.

Four boys indicated that they now read less than previously for a range of reasons (such as developing new interests in online gaming, spending time with friends, participating in sport). Michael [Peppertree School, ICSEA 1000] indicated that a lack of access to interesting books had played a significant part in this change. For instance, Michael told us he did not have 'a lot of books anymore'.

*Because we moved house and all my—and some of my books are from when I was younger, like four-year-old and two-year old.*

Finding texts that were personally relevant or engaging was critical for many of the boys, including Jack, who professed his love for reading fiction, albeit 'specific' books. Access to books of choice at school and at home had an impact on boys' reading practices. Constraints on access to desired reading resources were more pronounced in economically marginalised locations where library and parental resources were limited. However, we note that all boys were able to articulate their changing preferences, interests and reading practices.

### *Boys' emerging practices and interests*

The second dominant theme that emerged was the boys' descriptions of their emerging interests. They reflected on their new interests and described both changing and continuing preferences. Ned [Gumtree School, ICSEA 1175], for instance, noted that he had enjoyed reading books about facts last year but shared his personal recount about a change in his preferences:

Author: What's changed?

Ned: Probably because story books would have [sic] more action packed, but fact books aren't that exciting [anymore].

Author: You said last year you only liked reading story books a little bit.

Ned: Now I like it a lot.

Author: What happened to change your mind?

Ned: I'm not sure I know. I think it would be because I used to like knowing facts about different types of animals.

Author: But now you like the story books. So how do you feel when you're reading a story?

Ned: Excited and wondering what's going to happen next!

Boys articulated a range of reasons for their emerging interests, from access to interesting new books and series, to finding texts that related to their current interests (such as sports, favourite movies, etc.). Year 4 is a time when many students have mastered the skills to read with proficiency (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mullis *et al.*, 2017), potentially impacting their available reading choices and ability for sustained reading. Connor [Appletree School, ICSEA 1174] talked about his increased reading frequency, compared to last year.

Author: So how often would you read now?

Connor: I read every day now. I read every day.

Author: Why has that changed do you think?

Connor: Because there's new books that have come out and I just *love* them. They're new and they're way better than the ones that I used to have.

Author: What are they called?

Connor: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and I got a new horror facts book on Christmas. So, I've been reading that one a lot too.

In numerous cases, boys' shifting preferences related to improved reading proficiency (Sullivan & Brown, 2015; Mullis *et al.*, 2017), which enabled them to read longer and more complex books, in particular fiction: '*I don't like comics [anymore], but I like chapter books*' [Harry, Appletree School, ICSEA 1174]. The repeated interest in higher-level books is an interesting finding and resonates with Topping's (2015) conclusion that books preferred and most enjoyed by children are at a higher level of difficulty than other books. In the first years of primary school, children read very difficult books of interest to them with a high degree of success (Topping, 2015). Lachlan also described how he had moved on from short picture books and begun to enjoy reading more challenging chapter books now he was in Year 4:

*It's just [that they are] kind of short. . . and I like reading long books that have chapters and stuff [now].*

Like many of his counterparts, Hughie [Appletree School, ICSEA 1174] added that the reason he no longer enjoyed comics and magazines in comparison to longer chapter books was '*because they're not that interesting*'. This pattern may require further investigation. Nevertheless, the boys in this study became more aware of wider choices of reading material as they gained confidence and competence as readers (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). The transition from short illustrated books (whether fact or fiction) may well be key in terms of boys' emerging identities as readers. Many pre-teen boys wanted to position themselves as no longer interested in what might be considered as simple, beginning books for young children. Boys continuously reported reading 'longer', 'big', 'thicker' books and book series—illustrating their developing sophistication and increased abilities as reader. Some also reported reading books intended for adults.

Toby, who was attending a school in an economically marginalised town [Beechtree School, ICSEA 960], and a high reading achiever, reported he did not enjoy non-fiction 'as they can get really boring'—in contrast to much stereotyping about working-class boys and their reading preferences (Smith & Wilhem, 2002). He had appropriated his teacher's discourse about the fiction genre to explain his new preference:

Author: So, you prefer story books? What is it about them that you like?

Toby: Because there's a problem and a resolution but in fact books it's just telling you facts about the world.

Author: What is it about the story books that keeps you reading do you think?

Toby: Probably how quick the problems can get bad and how good the resolution can get in different ways.

This affinity with fiction was equally evident in students attending schools in the lower socio-economic regional towns, in contrast to traditional normative understandings about boys and reading from economically marginalised communities and the associated narrow boundaries around sanctioned 'boys' stuff' in schools (Martino, 2001; Dutro, 2003; Connolly, 2004). Jett, who was doing well in reading, was also attending one of the lower socio-economic regional schools [Raintree School, ICSEA 970]. He talked about his lack of interest in traditional boyhood pastimes such as skateboarding and explained: 'I actually like reading storybooks, but I'm not a big fan of information books'. He went on to talk of his 'love of reading' and some of the books he enjoyed. Like other boys across the schools, he expressed the view that access to books that stimulated a love of reading was often unavailable in the classroom context. He remarked that to encourage reading, teachers would need to attend to the various preferences held by students:

*Well, I don't really think that they should buy books just for me. ... I think that they should get something that everyone would like. Like, some people like fact books and another person likes story books, maybe get both the books for lots of people.*

Of the boys who were interviewed, many of the self-proclaimed keen and good readers appeared to have appropriated advice about reading from teachers and family members (Love & Hamston, 2004) as central to their rationale for reading. Ned, for instance, who was passionate about both fiction and non-fiction reading, stated that reading 'can make you smarter and smarter by the minute'.

## Conclusions

The perception that girls read fiction and boys read non-fiction is a commonly held belief and gender stereotype in schools (Simpson, 1996; Sims, 2012) that this study, along with others (Coles & Hall 2002; Merga, 2017; Moss, 2018), challenges. When teachers make stereotypical assumptions about reading preferences (Simpson, 1996; Sims, 2012), they potentially constrain students' reading self-concept (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2015) reading choice and reader volition (Cremin *et al.*, 2014). Limiting choices may lead to long-term consequences, as reading fiction more closely aligns with improvement across literacy indicators than reading other text types (OECD,

2010; Mar & Rain, 2015; Jerrima & Moss, 2019; Jerrim *et al.*, 2020). This finding is especially important given the literature that shows when students read fiction they have selected themselves, this is typically of a higher level of difficulty (Topping, 2015). In line with the literature, the boys who participated in this research discussed their enjoyment of more complex fiction books. The key point to note here is that we may well have underestimated the range of boys' preferences for reading and the changing nature of those preferences as they develop as readers. Attempting to match boys with books that underestimate the range and complexity of texts may inadvertently curtail their reading confidence, competence and practices. Extending this study to include a larger sample of boys with broader racial profiles could advance this line of research to consider the intersection of boys' fiction preferences and their situated practices related to ethnicity, religion and class.

There are limitations to this study due to the size of the cohort and student self-reporting (e.g. reading frequency now vs. previous year), however our aim was to explore student perceptions, and participant recall can be valuable in obtaining subjects' perspectives, views and opinions (Huberman *et al.*, 2014). Taken together, the findings from our study challenge essentialist literature that homogenises all boys, portraying them as disengaged readers of fiction, and contributes to the work of others who have argued for more nuanced understandings of boys and reading (Allo-way *et al.*, 2002; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Skelton & Francis, 2011). The boys' accounts provide a more nuanced and less homogenised view of boys' reading habits and preferences. Their accounts also call into question some of the pedagogical approaches adopted around boys' reading (e.g. presumed non-fiction interests related to sports, war and world records) (Greig & Hughes, 2009).

Moving towards literacy practices that question normative discourses (Dutro, 2003; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007), narratives by boys such as Jack and his peers who express a *love* of reading (as featured in our opening excerpt) are contingent upon being able to access the right resources at the right time (Scholes, 2020). This shift ignites questions about student volition within contemporary classrooms. We are interested in the possibilities and potentials of Reading for Pleasure (RfP) pedagogies in Australia for engaging boys (and girls) in reading to develop student volition and social interaction as readers (Cremin *et al.*, 2014), elements that can be constrained by pedagogy, particularly in economically marginalised schools (Hayes *et al.*, 2017; Hempel-Jorgenson *et al.*, 2018). While the UK is currently attempting to remedy the lack of student volition by mandating RfP pedagogies in schools (OFSTED, 2012), a focus on reading enjoyment is currently absent in the Australian educational policy context.

Students need time, space and a literacy-rich environment to make their own reading choices, along with support by teachers who have an interest in them as readers (Cremin *et al.*, 2014). As students tend to avoid school-related reading as they progress through the school years (McKenna *et al.*, 2012; van Steensel *et al.*, 2019), addressing undermining motivations is critical for addressing the variance in reading achievement (Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2017). Developing student repertoires as readers of fiction through an approach such as RfP (Cremin *et al.*, 2014) may enhance outcomes associated with variations in reading outcomes related to reading attitudes (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; OECD, 2010; McKenna *et al.*, 2012; Schaffner

*et al.*, 2016). We argue for educational policies that value reading enjoyment and for funding of equitable reading resources in classrooms. Now is the time to overturn taken-for-granted gendered educational practices associated with reading and make visible the ruptures from normative understanding, represented by the desires of the boys in our study, to afford new and exciting opportunities for developing lifelong readers—including being readers of fiction.

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### **Ethical guidelines**

This research was approved by the Australian Catholic University through the University Research Ethics Committee. It was also approved through the Queensland Department of Education, Australia.

### **Conflict of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

### **Data availability statement**

Research data are not shared.

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