Leveling the Reading Gap: A Socio-Spatial Study of School Libraries and Reading in Singapore
Abstract

This article takes a comparative socio-spatial approach at the intersection of social class and reading politics to provide a fresh way of examining school reading policies and practices, unearthing previously hidden spaces of inequity for reading intervention. The juxtaposition of two nested case studies in Singapore, one of an elite all-boys’ school and another of a co-educational government school with students in different academic tracks, revealed inequitable practices, specifically in the designs and uses of school library spaces between schools serving different social classes. The study argues that attempts to design reading interventions should move away from the view of student-as-problem to structure-as-problem in order to discover new perspectives for reading intervention. Additionally, this study demonstrates how foregrounding social class in educational research is necessary for effective design of educational strategies that aim to transform education and society by narrowing the gap between students from different social classes.

Keywords: reading, social class, Singapore, socio-spatial, case study, school libraries
Although Singapore is lauded internationally for its excellent education system, particularly as a top scorer on the international Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) tests administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010a), official educational policies have been criticised for the tendency to sideline socioeconomic status (SES) as a factor for school success (Gopinathan & Abu Baker, 2013; J. Tan, 2010) – a real concern in Singapore where intergenerational income elasticity registered at a relatively high rate of 0.58% (Ho, 2011). This local concern mirrors international concerns with rising educational inequity exacerbated by the market-driven logic of neoliberalism driving educational policies and practices (Singh, Kenway, & Apple, 2005). In the current context of global and local disparities between the rich and poor where the flows of technology, media and migration may further serve to exclude some while including others (Bauman, 1998), there needs to be renewed sociological attention to social class and education (Weis & Dolby, 2012).

To understand the complex space of schooling and how inequity is worked out in practice, I turn to the space of the school library in two contrasting Singapore schools to examine how the organisation of space can contribute to or inhibit the kinds of learning desired. I argue in this paper that there is a need to address educational inequity through grounded and localised comparative analyses of reading policies and practices that aim towards genuine social change through “intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice” (Soja, 2009, p. 2). Using a comparative socio-spatial approach, I map the library spaces of an elite all-boys’ school and a co-educational government school in Singapore to understand how a space typically associated with the cultivation of reading habits and critical information literacy (McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2006; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005) may in practice serve as a space for differentiated education.
Socio-Spatial Perspectives on Reading and Social Class

Sociocultural studies of reading illustrate how differentiated upbringing and resources lead to different ways of using words that benefit middle-class children who learn from home practices that confirm to school preferred ways of reading, writing and talking (Heath, 1986; Lareau, 2003; Loh, 2013). Students, thus, come to school with particular predispositions towards reading, established as a factor for school success (Kirsch et al., 2002). For example, in Heath’s (1986) seminal study on the home and school literacies of working-class and middle-class children in Piedmont Carolina in the 1970s to 1980s, she illustrated how children from different social classes learn different ways of using words that prepare some better than others for learning in school. For the “Maintown” children from middle-class families, the children learnt how to read in school-accepted ways from their daily interaction with parents through home-literacy practices which could be as innocuous as bedtime reading. On the other hand, students from non-mainstream homes were socialised into different ways of “saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing” (Gee, 1996, p. 127) that may not be aligned to school literacies. These classed ways of relating to language at home and school intersect with gender and race (Moss, 2007; Solsken, 1993), and serve as a form of cultural capital that contributes to middle-class students’ increased likelihood of academic achievement (Lareau, 2003). Despite the increasing multimodalities and technological advances, “competence in traditional literacies is often a gateway to successful entry into the world of new literacies” (Warschauer, 2007, p. 43). Hence, children who acquire schooled ways of reading print text are guaranteed access to more knowledge through texts whereas students who have difficulty reading lag behind as they have often find reading too...
difficult and develop negative attitudes to reading (Kirsch et. al., 2002; Neuman & Celano, 2012).

This “ecology of inequality” (Neuman & Celano, 2012) is further differentiated in the use of public resources, when children’s qualitative access to rich literacy experiences is stratified by class. Observing adult and children behaviours at the two equally well-resourced public libraries in Philadelphia, Neuman and Celano noted that adults spent an average of 47 minutes reading to their children in the suburban library, whereas children were left to wander on their own in the urban library. Middle-class children, thus, had the advantage of being socialised into ways of reading or obtaining knowledge through the mentorship of significant others. This study clearly demonstrated that equitable access must include access to knowledgeable others who are able to help students learn how to acquire knowledge in meaningful ways. In another study of four public libraries using a geosemiotic approach, Nichols (2011) demonstrated through the comparison of the libraries how location, design and implicit participation rules may include or exclude poor families from accessing and fully utilising the resources of the library.

Recent educational studies using spatial analysis contribute productively to our understanding of learning from social perspectives, particularly in terms of illuminating our knowledge of the uneven terrain of access to educational opportunities and resources (Jocson & Thorne-Wallington, 2013; Leander & Taylor, 2010). Drawing chiefly from the work of critical geographers such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (2009) and Edward Soja (1989, 2009), these studies argued for a spatialising practice that is aware of the interconnection between space and social relations. Lefebvre (1991) pointed to the importance of understanding the relation between spatial practices and the reproduction or transformation of social relations. Using a triad of spatial practice (lived), representations of space (conceived) and representational
Deconstructing the spatial practice of a particular time and place provides insight into the dominant ideologies and narratives that shape how that space is produced and lived, and allow for re-appropriation of space for more equitable distribution of resources and access to these resources. The concept of space and equity is elaborated in Social Justice and the City where Harvey (2009) explained how managing access and proximity to resources is a way to manage equitable distribution within the population of a city. By deliberately attending to how equity or inequity is built into the social experiences of individuals, we gain insight into how to re-imagine and re-organise space for more equitable distribution (Soja, 2009).

Official perceptions of space may differ from students’ perceptions and actual use of space. In Schmidt’s (2015) study of school space, she demonstrated that the universally regarded “safe” place of school may serve as a place of inclusion and exclusion. For minority youth in her study who were identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ), there were limited safe spaces within school where they could mingle and be seen. In another study on the space of school libraries, Shilling and Cousin (1990) demonstrated how understanding the (mis-)alignment between students’ and authorities’ perceptions and uses of space can provide insight into why students associate themselves with or disassociate themselves from using the school library. They show how students may use the library in ways unintended by official authorities, and show how official regulation and unofficial colonisation of the social space may exclude certain student population from using the library.

The importance placed on the school library as a key node in raising the reading and academic achievement of students is well-support by research documenting the role of school libraries in supporting academic achievement (Barratt, 2010; Lance, 2002; Todd & Kuhlthau,
Extensive reading is correlated to academic achievement (Krashen, 2004), and effective school libraries can do much to support a reading culture. In a series of studies replicated in several states in the United States, including Colorado, Alaska and Iowa, Lance (2002) concluded that better funded, stocked and staffed school libraries correlate to greater academic achievement. Trained teacher-librarians who are able to implement sustained reading programmes and programmes designed to foster information literacy contribute to effective school libraries (Barratt, 2010, Lance, 2002; Smalley, 2004). However, despite mounting evidence that effective school libraries contribute to learning and academic achievement, school libraries continue to be neglected as potential spaces for learning. The statement by the United Kingdom’s School Library Commission (National Literacy Trust, 2010) that “in many schools the library is wasted resource because it is poorly embedded in the infrastructure of the school and absent from school development plans” highlights the need to make central the library’s role in educational institutions. Using a socio-spatial perspective to understand how school libraries are placed and used provides insight into how the design and use of school libraries may contribute to or detract from perceived learning objectives and desired usage.

In this study, I focus on the school library as a microcosm of interconnected practices and ideologies. Just as political, cultural and economic forces shape school practices and school practices are connected to networks of practices outside schools (Nespor, 1997), the organisation of the physical, social and affective space of the school library has much to say about the organisation of the school and of knowledge. By physical mapping, I refer to the layout and organisation of the school library, which include materials and artefacts such as books and displays. The two-dimensional physical map does not completely capture the three-dimensional lived space, but captures the resources and organisation of resources and is a starting point to
engage in an understanding the use of space in a particular context. Mapping the social and affective spaces, on the other hand, captures the lived social life on the ground that constitutes our social interaction, affective memories and responses to physical space (Lefebvre, 1991). Our emotional responses to particular spaces drive our choice to stay in those places, and, as such, there is a need to attend to what students feel (the affective) in relation to what students do (the social) within a space. The attention to the physical, social and affective spaces of practice in this study is, thus, an attempt to describe, breakdown and examine taken-for-granted practices that may reveal a misalignment between official discourses and situated everyday practices of literacies. By examining the different dimensions of space in detail, the political dimension of space that underlies and shapes lived space is brought to the fore, and we can begin to understand and possibly transform the dominant discourses that shape particular spaces and the social relations and literacy practices contained within these spaces of practice.

Research Methods

The article explores two case studies that were conducted over two different periods of time, but build recursively on each other as contrasting studies. Comparison provides a way of “seeing” (Eisner, 1998), and juxtaposition of another similar but differently organised space is a way to jolt the imagination, bringing to the surface previously unnoticed spaces of intervention. Juxtaposition demonstrates the relational nature of research – it is only through comparison that relative lack and abundance can be measured.

I adopted a geosemiotic approach sensitive to spatial arrangements and people’s social interactions within a space (Nichols, 2014). The research questions guiding this study were:

(1) What are the uses of the school libraries in two different schools?
How does the organisation of the space of the school library support the cultivation of desired reading practices within each school?

The first case study was conducted in an elite all-boys school, Ace Independent (pseudonyms are used for both schools and students), from September 2009 to September 2010. The second study was conducted in a co-educational secondary school, Tembusu Secondary School, from September 2013 to September 2014. Key research data for both schools included: visual maps of the library space and time maps of library usage, student interviews and artefacts, interviews with teachers and staff, school and classroom observations, and surveys.

Each case study was analysed independently and a cross-case comparison was conducted towards the end of the second study. Attentive to the need for comparison, I constantly juxtaposed data about the school libraries, and about the students’ backgrounds and practices alongside each other to identify both similarities and differences. Coding the survey and interview data highlighted the library as a problematic space, and I returned to the interview data to compare students’ social uses of and affective responses to their respective library. I also examined the school context, library spaces and students’ responses using the physical, social and affective framework when that emerged as a significant theme in the research study.

The Research Context: Singapore’s Educational Landscape

The Singapore educational landscape has become increasingly diversified since the 1980s, driven by market logic of competition. The establishment of independent schools in 1988 with more autonomy to design their own programmes, and the establishment of Integrated Programme (IP) schools in 2004 where academically excellent schools were allowed to skip the national high-
stakes examination (the O-level examinations), are some policies that have led to increased competition as students vie to get into top schools. This decentralisation of education, together with the emphasis on competition and ranking, has led to a culture of performativity where students may be further stratified by the kinds of schools they attend (J. Tan, 2010).

In Singapore’s culture of meritocracy where there is strong belief that hard work will lead to movement up the social ladder (K. P. Tan, 2010), there is a tendency to locate the individual as the source of social mobility. As such, there is little attempt to look beyond the school or classroom as the locus of change, much less through the lens of social class. While recent policy objectives are to ensure that every school is “a good school” (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2014), attempts to move away from an examination-oriented system will take time to filter down to actual practice. Using a socio-spatial approach to study reading practices and social classes is to move away from the dominant “best practices” paradigm in reading research to attempt to understand structural constraints on practice.

The School Context: Ace Independent and Tembusu Secondary School

Since information on SES is considered confidential by the Ministry of Education, I will provide a comparison of Ace’s and Tembusu’s students’ SES by providing a snapshot of the reading network of students, using six of the case study students’ profiles (see Table 1). What is clear from the table is that students from Ace Independent tend to come from middle-class and well-resourced families and, as such, have better access to print and reading since an early age. By comparison, Tembusu students come from a range of backgrounds, including working and low-income backgrounds, and a larger proportion of the students are likely to have less access to print and reading.
Discussion of the unequal access to print and information literacies of students from different social classes is beyond the scope of this paper but suffice to say, the patterns of differentiated access to prints and ways of reading observed in this context tally with much of existing research (Heath, 1986; Lareau, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2012). The map of the social background of the two schools provides a concrete backdrop against which comparison of the two schools occur.

The Field of Ace Independent

Founded by British missionaries in 1886, it could be said that Ace Independent had always had its eye on the (English) world with its emphasis on the English language and culture, an asset even after Singapore gained independence as English was perceived as the language of business, and eventually adopted as the language of education and business. Most boys in Ace Independent come from homes where English is the language of communication, and the emphasis on literary study in Ace Independent marks the elite school boy out from other schools where there may be more functional approaches towards English language learning. Most Ace students are expected to go to the university, and the school boasts a large number of Ivy League entrants and students who had been awarded prestigious scholarships. Ace Independent’s brand (Demerath, 2009) of education include being fluent in English (both spoken and written), being self-confident, and having a strong arts and sporting culture.
Tembusu Secondary School

Tembusu Secondary School, a co-educational Singapore secondary school, is a typical government school in that it captures most of its students from the district, and has a fair range of students from lower-SES to middle-SES families. Approximately 40% of the students come from English-speaking homes and the rest of the students come from homes where their Mother Tongue language such as Chinese or Malay is the dominant language used. The school has a dual-track programme for students aiming to sit for the national high-stakes examination, the O-level examinations, prior to their tertiary education. Students in the Express course take 4 years to prepare for the O-level examinations whereas students in the Normal Academic (NA) course take 5 years to prepare for the examinations. Another track, the Normal Technical (NT), prepares students for vocational training. The school consists of a range of high-achieving students who aspire to professional occupations and students who aim for vocational training after secondary school. Officially, the school has a strong bilingual reading programme instituted across different levels though teachers do share about their struggles to get students to read and write well.

Mapping Library Spaces

The decision to focus on the library in this analysis stemmed largely from a specific finding from the descriptive survey conducted in Tembusu Secondary which identified the school library as a problematic space, with only 40.9% of students stating that they had visited the school library. Only 21.1% stated that they visited the school library regularly (once a month or less).

[Insert Figure 1. Public and school library visits (Tembusu Secondary School).]
While a school-wide survey was not conducted at Ace Independent, initial observations of the Ace library showed far more traffic and use than the relatively under-utilised Tembusu library. Given that the organisation of school libraries can reveal much about the kinds of practices and habits that are preferred within each milieu and context, and can even reveal tensions between the ideal and practice (Dressman & Tettegah, 2006), a physical, social and affective mapping of the two libraries provided a way to see the contrasting values accorded to the libraries in both schools, and demonstrate how knowledge is perceived and enacted in the space of the school libraries.

Although the English department heads and teachers in both schools spoke of the importance of the school library, it was through the physical, social and affective mappings that I began to understand how organised and used space represented the ideological understandings accorded to literacy within the school context. The school library, while bounded, is permeated by official and unofficial discourses of what knowledge is, who accesses knowledge and how knowledge is to be used within the school and learning context.

Mapping Physical Spaces of Reading
Mapping the physical space of a school library was a way to compare what schools had and how they used their resources. Both Tembusu and Ace libraries possessed the physical signs of a school library: a librarian’s desk, fiction and non-fiction books in shelves, trolleys, magazines and newspapers, some multimedia resource, sofas and armchairs to lounge on, and tables and chairs for students to work. Yet, the Tembusu Media Resource Library gives an impression of being generally empty and under-utilised while the Ace Independent Library seems filled most of the time.
One notable distinction between the libraries is in the decoration of the library space. The representational space is important as it conveys a sense of what is valued at each school. At Ace Independent, the location of the panels depicting the school’s history is located within the library, and the walls of the library are decorated with various themed images or quotes that celebrate reading. For example, images of famous libraries, accompanied by quotes celebrating the libraries decorated the first floor walls. In comparison, the Tembusu library is decorated with generic functional teaching posters (e.g., “Metaphors”) or inspirational posters stuck onto the side of the bookshelves. Additionally, the Ace library book displays are curated by trained librarians to privilege current informational texts and some contemporary prize-winning novels. By contrast, the book display at Tembusu consists of Young Adult series, curated by the for-profit company managing the library rather than the librarian, and does not take into account the specific profile and programmes of specific schools. The Ace library is positioned as an archival space (of the school’s history and knowledge) as well as a space for discovery about books in comparison to Tembusu’s more functional focus.
A second difference between the two schools is the placement of computer resources in the school libraries. In Tembusu, students wishing to do online research use computers located near the school office rather than within the library. The laptops stored in the library can only be withdrawn by a teacher for classwork. At Ace, computers are located within the library near the entrance; students can be seen using the computers or seated at the nearby sofas working on their own laptops at any time of the day. The location of resources and organisation of space shapes the social uses of the space. The computers at the front of the library near the librarian’s desk draw students into the library and adding to the utility value of the library as a useful space for locating information while adding symbolic value to the library as a critical space for the acquisition and application of information literacy (Kapitzke, 2003). In comparison, there was little to draw students into the Tembusu library and students use computers only either under supervision of teachers when using the laptops or without assistance when using the computer stations located near the office.

Physical comparison tells us what is obvious – elite schools have more (Koh & Kenway, 2012), whether in terms of actual space, the kinds of books available, or the nature of the staffing that contributes to making the library space work. Yet, beyond the availability of books and resources, it is the deliberate and thoughtful construction of the Ace library as a central space of knowledge and information literacy that distinguishes it from Tembusu’s more functional approach towards reading and acquisition of critical information literacy in the space of the library.

Mapping the Social and Affective Space of the Library
When examining the social, it is important to note that the social is very much interrelated to affective responses to space. Desire motivates and drives actions and, at the same time, space can motivate desire and action, as research on reading and motivation from both sociocultural (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) and educational psychology (Gambrell, 2013) perspectives have demonstrated. The attention to the social is a deliberate attempt to observe overt behaviour that points to the spatial significance of particular organisations of space and, in this case, explains why one library is used and the other under-utilised. While none of the Tembusu case study students reported visiting the library and I observed very few Tembusu students using the library, the Ace library was often filled with students, especially during recess and after school.

At Tembusu, I saw many lessons being conducted in the library but seldom observed students borrowing books or using the library for research. The library was often used for some other purpose such as conducting a test or meeting after school, making it unavailable to other students for reading or studying. In the one week when I observed the use of the library after school, the library was unavailable three out of five days because of meetings or class tests being conducted in the library. In fact, the layout of the library with desks set in a large circle or in rows, as well as the way it was actually used as extra classroom space, marked the library as additional classroom space rather than a central space for independent knowledge acquisition and learning about the acquisition of knowledge. The physical space implies that the library is not so much a social space for interacting with and about books as it is a space for enforced work. This perception of the library as a space for enforced work is reinforced by the fact that the library is the place where students are sent to for detention.

In comparison, though students were also brought to the Ace library for work, the nature of the work differed. While students were sent to the library to complete written work at times,
including the completion of late work, I observed that teachers mostly brought their teachers to the library for research-based work such as Project Work, where students had to come up with their own research question for independent research. Samples of exemplary student work were kept in a back shelf in the library, and I observed the older students coming in to reference these works in preparation for their own research. The use of the library was modelled by some teachers who taught their students to use the resources in the library and online to find necessary information.

Mapping the social life of the library with a comparative lens brought up the fact that both libraries were often utilised by teachers for classroom work, but that the differing nature of classroom work set the tone for the students’ perception of the utility value of the libraries. At Tembusu, students were often brought to the library to complete written work on the laptops that were kept away unless requested by a teacher for class work. In comparison, the perceived work of the library at Ace Independent included group work and research. The nature of classwork completed in the library affirmed for Ace students the need to independently search for information whereas there was a more functional approach towards knowledge with the focus on completion of written work.

The affective responses of students to a space explained why the libraries were used as they were. Tembusu students, especially the low-achieving and low-SES students, were not motivated to use the library because of their perception of the library as being unattractive and lacking in social value. In my interviews with 12 students, the word “boring” recurs at least six times, among other descriptions, when asked to describe the Tembusu library.
No one goes in and out of the library. There’s nothing there. It’s boring. (Edward, Tembusu Secondary, avid reader)

You only go to the library if you have detention! I never go to the library! (Cass, Tembusu Secondary, non-reader)

Even Edward, an avid reader who visits the public library on a weekly basis, feels that his school library is unattractive, dead space. What was striking in the interviews was that students saw the amount of activity and the type of activity in a library as indication that it was a place worth going to. The fact that “no one goes in and out of the library” (a sentiment echoed a few times by other students) reinforced the students’ perception that there was nothing attractive there. Moreover, the fact that the school library is used for detention contributes to students negative emotional responses. Kate, another student, suggested that “a complete revamp, with bean bags and all” might draw her into the library, thus pointing to the affective as a necessary component for engagement (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Unlike the Tembusu students, the Ace Independent case study students liked their library, even though there were varying degrees of use. “Like” was a word often used to describe library.

Sometimes, during recess, I sit at the sofa, and browse through the magazines, usually The Runner. I don’t subscribe to that at home so it’s useful that it’s in school. (Sanjeev, Ace Independent, reader)
For example, Sanjeev, a school runner and prefect, does not need to go to the library to borrow fiction as his parents allow him to purchase books but he still saw the library as a space to relax and read *The Runner*, a magazine he does not subscribe to at home. Joel, a school librarian, talked about “hanging out” in the library after school and borrowing recommended books for his leisure reading. In fact, he had picked up Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, a difficult philosophical read and one of his favourite books during library duty. Others such as Mark and Robert reported using the library less for reading as they had easy access to more books via bookstores or the public library, but talked about using it after school more to do their work or for research. The positive affective responses of Ace Independent students generally meant that they saw value in using the library and were motivated to use it.

The affective was recognised as an important element in the design and management of the Ace library, unlike Tembusu’s more functional library. Although there were attempts to cultivate a reading culture at Tembusu, the attempts were aimed to remediate the reader and failed to acknowledge that students may not buy into dominant strategies to improve themselves because of their own reader histories and non-existent or negative relationships with books, reading and schooling (Hicks, 2002). The different reader histories and relationships with books, reading and schooling are particularly striking when comparing the practices and responses of the high-achieving boys from Ace Independent and the low-achieving boys from Tembusu. For the high-achieving boys who fall into the category of “can read, do read freely”, termed by Moss (2007), they had acquired identities as readers and willingly engaged in texts, without the need for prompting. They were independent, self-sufficient readers who could flexibly access different kinds of texts for different purposes (Loh, 2013). On the other hand, for the low-achieving boys
who “can’t yet, don’t read” (Moss, 2007), more effort was required to engage them in books and reading that would contribute to their academic learning. In interviews with three low-achieving boys from working-class backgrounds, they confirmed that they only read books that interested them (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). As such, out of the eight books allocated for reading as part of their reading programme, they only completed Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* because it was sufficiently interesting for them to sustain reading.

The design and use of the school libraries in both schools reflected the symbolic and actual value accorded to the library as a space for the cultivation of reading habits and fostering critical information literacy. By attending to social and affective spaces of learning, we may realise the need to reconceptualise the role of the library in order for effective change. In the context of Tembusu, the dominant discourse driving reading practices is an emphasis on the functional-pragmatic value of reading, which distances low-achieving readers from the culture of reading. Instead, it might be more fruitful to re-conceptualise reading as a “media experience” (Fuller & Sedo, 2013) where “entertainment and spectacle, social connection, intimacy, and, perhaps, a sense of belonging” (p. 249) can engage unmotivated readers. Re-visioning the library as a central space for making reading fun may serve to draw low-achieving readers into the library and encourage reading.

**Discussion: School Libraries, Literacy and Equitable Access**

As this is only a study of two secondary school libraries in Singapore, I would hesitate to suggest that this is representative of all school libraries in Singapore. However, what becomes clear from the comparison, as well as my knowledge of other school libraries in Singapore from 15 years as an educator and a teacher educator, is that a library is a problematic space of possible inequities
that requires further research. Inequities can be embedded in spaces that we least expect, in this
case, in the way library resources are distributed and managed within the structure of schooling
in Singapore. The socio-spatial mapping also reveals the nature of knowledge that is prioritised
in the design and structuring of the libraries, one more inquiry-based and the other more
functional – it is also perhaps reflective of the school’s philosophy towards literacy education.

Given the important role that libraries have in supporting literacy and improving
academic achievement (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005), it is surprising that many secondary schools do
not pay more attention to how school libraries are designed and used. Just as rugby fields and
specialised rooms signify what is important to schools, the location, design and management of
school libraries send important messages about the importance of reading in schools (Dressman
&Tettegah, 2006). What is required for effective reading intervention is an ideological shift in
the way many secondary school libraries are perceived in most schools the Singapore context:
from being peripheral homework and classroom spaces to being central spaces for reading and
acquisition of critical information practices. The conception of library as archive rather than a
space for teaching students about critical information literacy (Kapitzke, 2003) or for engaging
students in a love of reading (McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2006) has perhaps meant that for most
secondary schools, simply labelling a space as “library” is deemed sufficient for attracting
students to the space or engaging them in reading. Yet, as this study shows, students need to be
drawn into the space of the library in order to engage with the kinds of reading practices
associated with it. It is also important to note that without trained teacher-librarians, it is
extremely difficult for overworked teachers, who are without the proper knowledge and
resources, to design and implement reading programmes alone. The presence of teacher-
librarians, who can actively work with non-readers or disadvantaged students to cultivate the
love and the skill of reading that lead to meaningful knowledge acquisition, go a long way towards closing the gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Conclusion

A socio-spatial perspective that attends to space as key in structuring social relations and the actions that take place within the specific space point to the structure rather than the student as problem. In this comparison of two school libraries, the uneven structuring of space, although unintentional, may lead to a situation where elite students with home resources to literacy get even more opportunities at school, whereas students who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may be already disinclined to read, may be disadvantaged further by the lack of resources within their own schools, specifically in space of school libraries. The OECD (2010b) report on the PISA 2009 results suggests that the provision of books and educational opportunities can make up for a child’s socioeconomic background. If this is the case, the provision of better resources in the form of better funded, stocked and staffed school libraries can do much to help disadvantaged students cultivate the reading competencies and habits necessary for learning and academic success.

This attention to detail through the mapping of the social, affective, material and political spaces of practice in this study provides a way of seeing, a detailed reading that results in discernment of possible spaces for transformation. Adopting a comparative socio-spatial analysis with attention to practice provides a framework for schools to locate specific areas for intervention. While this particular close analysis of two schools in the Singapore context reveal that school libraries are a hidden space of practice of in/equity in Singapore schools, applying the
framework of spaces of practice to other contexts may reveal other in/equities for action and transformation.

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RUNNING HEAD: A Socio-Spatial Study of School Libraries


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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School/Track</th>
<th>Gender/Ethnicity/SES*</th>
<th>Family as Resource</th>
<th>Friends as Resource</th>
<th>Schools (Primary) as Resource</th>
<th>Libraries as Resource</th>
<th>Bookstores as Resource</th>
<th>Other Media as Resource</th>
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<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Ace, Gifted</td>
<td>Male/Chinese/Upper Middle</td>
<td>★★★</td>
<td>Discusses books with good friend, Robert.</td>
<td>★ Reading programme in primary school. Reading list provided.</td>
<td>★ Mother used to bring him to library with siblings; still visits regularly.</td>
<td>★★ Purchases books from Kinokuniya bookstore.</td>
<td>★★ Plays, movies, Youtube broadcast of Broadway plays s.a. Wicked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanjeev</td>
<td>Ace, Gifted</td>
<td>Male/Indian/Upper Middle</td>
<td>★★★</td>
<td>Sometimes gets recommendations from friends.</td>
<td>★ Reading programme in primary school. Reading list provided.</td>
<td>★ Read magazines in school library. Did not need to visit library since he is allowed to buy books.</td>
<td>★★ Always allowed to buy books. Picked up books from airport bookstore when travelling, including Life of Pi and books by Haruki Marakumi.</td>
<td>★★ Movies s.a. Fight Club.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Tembusu, Express</td>
<td>Male/Chinese/Middle</td>
<td>★★</td>
<td>Has books at home, sees parents reading, mostly newspapers</td>
<td>★ Reading programme in primary school.</td>
<td>★ Visits the public library every week before Math tuition to read or borrow books.</td>
<td>★★ Visits bookstore, usually buys magazines and some fiction.</td>
<td>★★ Watched and read The Hunger Games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Tembusu, Normal Academic</td>
<td>Female/Eurasian/Middle</td>
<td>★★★</td>
<td>Recommends and lends books to Maira and reads books recommended by other friends.</td>
<td>★★ Comes from all-girls’ primary school with strong reading culture.</td>
<td>★ Seldom borrows books as parents allow her to buy books.</td>
<td>★★ Spends more than $50 each month on books.</td>
<td>★★ Watches book-related movies e.g., The Perks of Being a Wallflower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi Han</td>
<td>Tembusu, Normal Academic</td>
<td>Male/Chinese/Working</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>Has four books bought in primary school. Does not see parents reading. Home language is Mandarin.</td>
<td>★★ Reading programme in primary school. Bought some books to read.</td>
<td>★ Has visited the public library but more as a once-off excursion.</td>
<td>★★ Visits neighbourhood bookstore to buy textbooks.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maira</td>
<td>Tembusu, Normal Academic</td>
<td>Female/Malay/Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Borrow books from Katherine.</td>
<td>★ Reading programme in primary school but did not read much.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>★★ Visits neighbourhood bookstore to buy textbooks.</td>
<td>★ Has watched Narnia and watched the movie on free-to-air TV.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Since student SES is considered confidential by the Ministry of Education, I was unable to obtain official information. The SES of each student is computed from survey and interview data. Student SES is computed based on housing, parent’s educational qualification and/or profession. Students receiving financial aid from school were marked as low SES. Ten of 18 case study students are represented in this table.

Table 1. Comparison of students’ network of resources
Figure 1. Public and school library visits (Tembusu Secondary School).

Q26. Do you visit the public library?
- Yes: 68.4%
- No: 40.9%
- Skipped: 2.8%

Q29. Do you visit the school library?
- Yes: 56.3%
- No: 28.8%
- Skipped: 2.8%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Location</strong></th>
<th>Tembusu Library</th>
<th>Ace Library</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First floor corner, on way to cafeteria.</td>
<td>Central block, Second floor, close to staff room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Layout and Organisation</strong></td>
<td>To the left of the library were about 10 low shelves of fiction, which included both classics and contemporary Young Adult Literature. At the back of the library were 12 shelves of non-fiction, and 8 shelves of books in Chinese, Tamil and Malay. To the right was a display shelf with copies of magazines such as Reader’s Digest, Newsweek, National Geographic and Present Perfect, a locally-produced current affairs magazine for students. A small set of sofas, seldom utilized, is beside the magazines. In the far right, there is a little room that could be used for small classes. Beside the room are two large shelves of the books allocated for the reading programme, to be managed and sorted by the librarian at the end of reading cycle. Desks are organized as study desks and library is often used as a classroom or for staff meetings, making it difficult for students to access.</td>
<td>On the left, there are about 40 tall shelves of fiction and non-fiction. While the books were not as well-stocked as the libraries of some other elite schools in Singapore, there were more books and a much better selection than Tembusu Secondary. They were displayed in such a way as to attract the attention of students, with constantly rotating displays, including themed displays about war or female writers. Further in, the wall on the right is lined with many magazines including the Straits Times, National Geographic, Runner’s World, and The Economist. There are more specialized magazines compared to Tembusu Secondary, and unlike Tembusu Secondary, students come in to browse the magazine titles and spend time reading them. Display of school history at the end of the library. Space is utilized primarily as library space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laptops are locked, drawn out by teachers for classwork.</td>
<td>Computers at entrance of library, constantly used by students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Display</strong></td>
<td>Rotating display that changes every two months. Have included books by Geronimo Stilton, Jodi Picoult and J. K. Rowling.</td>
<td>Monthly rotating display, with feedback from teachers. Includes displays that are linked to special occasions or study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Support</strong></td>
<td>1 librarian to manage library, role is clerical. Library teacher-in-charge manages library with recommendations from colleagues, and also manages library committee consisting of students.</td>
<td>1 trained teacher-librarian and 2 assistants. 4 teachers- in-charge manages the student committee who work with librarians to stock up and maintain library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations of social life of library</strong></td>
<td>Case study students do not go to the library to borrow books, described by Kate as “absolutely deserted” and Edward notes that “no one goes in and out of the library”. During recess, typically 3 to 5 students are seen going to the library to read or chat, and less than 10 students are observed using the library on any typical day after school. Two days out of five, the library is being used as classroom or detention space after school. Students typically do written work in the library.</td>
<td>Case study students all go to the library, to varying degrees. Sanjeev browses the magazines, and the others tend to borrow books or use the library for work. At any time, especially during recess or after school, the library is filled with boys reading or doing their work, and feels full rather than empty compared to Tembusu. Unlike Tembusu, I see more students checking books out of the library. Students do more research work than written work in the library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affective responses</strong></td>
<td>Cass mentions that the library is associated with detention and homework, and none of the case study students think the library is a pleasant place to be in. Not seeing anyone go in or out indicates that the library is perceived as “not happening and hip”. Students are not drawn into the library though they may escape into the air-conditioned comfort of the library.</td>
<td>Students use the word “like” to describe their impressions of the library. It is a place they like to go to, for some to read magazines, for others to read books and for others to do work or chat. Overall, mention of the library generates positive rather than negative feelings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Physical, Social and Affective Comparison of Tembusu Library and Ace Library