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Author	Chin Ee, Loh
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Cultural Crossings and Tactical Readings: Singaporean Adolescent Boys Constructing Flexible Literate Identities in a Globalized World

Chin Ee, Loh

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University
chinee.loh@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

In this paper, I examine how a group of Singaporean adolescent boys in an elite all-boys school constructed their identities as flexible literate citizens through their reading practices both in and out of school in the context of a globalized world. These boys demonstrated their flexibility through their abilities to make cultural crossings across story worlds and social worlds in their readings in and out of school. In addition, they were competent readers who were familiar with popular as well as school-chosen texts. An important aspect of their flexible literacy was their ability to make tactical readings, that is, to resist dominant institutional mode of readings while conforming to institutional standards through their written and oral work in school. Tactical reading also includes the ability to read different texts for different purposes, a disposition that these boys exercised to their schooling advantage. Their flexibility was a form of power that allowed them to plug into global notions of literacy in their localized context and served as a form of cultural and intercultural capital for national and global markets. Their acquisition of dispositions as flexible literate citizens are in part influenced by class, which provided them with an invisible network of resources suitable for acquiring reading as an out-of-school and school habit. I conclude by suggesting that it is important to acknowledge class as a contributing factor in the teaching and learning of literature in order to formulate the role of literature as relevant to all students in the Singapore context.

Keywords: reading, literacies, globalization, cultural capital, identity, class.

Introduction

In a globalized world of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 2001) where mass migration and media movements are the norm, national and cultural boundaries are daily being blurred with transnational movements of media and people. Individuals move across borders, whether through transnational travels or networks of connectivity, so much so that the local is very much imbued with global flows. These structural changes have resulted in paradigmatic shifts in the nature of work towards knowledge-based economies. In this New Work Order (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996) where knowledge production, teamwork and constant adaptations are favored, it is one’s flexible relation to knowledge rather than one’s actual knowledge that matters for one’s work.

The notion of flexibility is central in Ong’s (1999) ethnographic study of the everyday practices of transnationality that focuses particularly on the practices of the Chinese diaspora. Ong draws our attention to “the processes whereby flexibility, whether in strategies of citizenship or in regimes of sovereignty, is a product and condition of late capitalism” (p. 240). For Ong, the term “flexible citizenship” refers:

...especially to the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to circumvent *and* benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation.” (p. 112)

Flexible individuals are thus selective and opportunistic, moving across borders where necessary to best position themselves to acquire economic benefit. The ability to move across borders also assumes the possession of certain capital, be it cultural, social or economic, where individuals manipulate what they have in order to better their status and prospects for the future. Contrary to predictions of a flattening out of individual choices with globalization (e.g., Giddens, 1994), such practices of inserting oneself into relevant global flows and nation-state regimes continue to be somewhat limited to particular individuals with existing economic, social and cultural capital. This unequal access to choice is visible when the flexible transnationals of Ong’s study are contrasted with her later study of Cambodian refugees at the bottom end of American society (Ong, 2003). Exercising flexible practices that allow for movement across borders is complicated practice that is tied up with social class and privilege within and across different contexts.

This study engages with the idea of flexibility as it is played out in the reading practices of six Singaporean adolescent boys studying in an elite all-boys’ school at the intersection of the global and the local, and seeks to contribute to a growing pool of studies complicating literacy in the context of globalization and education (e.g., Dolby & Rizvi, 2008). Singapore, a small Southeast Asian city-state very much dependent on global flows is a suitable location for capturing reading practices at the intersection of the global and the local. Its people are “its own prime asset” (Olds & Thrift, 2005, p. 272), and the government actively seeks to “[fashion] citizens who can become an actively seeking factor of production, rather like a mineral resource with an attitude” (p. 275). Educational decisions in Singapore are affected by the official preoccupation of what it means to be Singaporean, which paradoxically includes the deliberate crafting of a global identity or cosmopolitan identity suitable for global markets (Velayutham, 2007).

I choose to focus on a group of boys in an elite all-boys school in Singapore for a variety of reasons. From gender perspectives, there have been few detailed case studies on boys’ reading and identity practices despite what Weaver-Hightower (2003) has termed the “boy turn” in research regarding boys’ literacy and underachievement. Researchers have called for more complex understandings of boys’ literacy practices (e.g., Moss, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), and detailed case studies such as this study can capture the nuances and complexities of how one group of boys read both in and out of school to illuminate our understanding of boys’ literacy as situated in social, national and global contexts. However, I focus less on gender issues in my study because

constructions of school success in the Singapore context have less to do with issues of masculinity than with issues of meritocracy (see Tan, 2010 on changing conceptions and practices of meritocracy in Singapore), an indicator that literacy practices may in fact be more of a class than gender issue for the Singaporean adolescent boys in this study.

From class perspectives, the decision to study a group of boys who are privileged in their home and schooling practices is in line with a growing group of studies that recognize the need to understand how privilege is constructed (e.g., Ball, 2003; Demerath, 2009; Lareau, 2003). I believe that deconstructing how students become successful can make visible structures that contribute to learning differences, and may provide insight into how to improve literacy learning practices for *all* learners. In addition, it is necessary to examine both school and out-of-school literacies to gain a holistic and complex understanding of these boys' reading and identity practices, and to understand how home and school reading practices are related (Moje, 2002).

I choose to focus on the boys' reading of print, even though they do read (view) different media and genres. While much recent research on literacy has engaged with the issue of multiple literacies and multimodalities or what is termed "new literacies" (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), the emphasis of current research on new semiotic forms belie the fact that print literacy remains an important form of literacy learning, albeit interacting with other new media forms (Collins & Blot, 2003; Wallace, 2003). Warschauer (2007), who has studied digital literacy extensively, points out that new literacies rely on competence in traditional literacies in order to hold value in the New Economy: "New literacies seldom sweep out old ones, but instead new and old are woven together in a complex web reflecting evolving social, economic, and political relationships" (p. 47-48), and I suggest in this article that the ability to read print, and particular kinds of print, both in and out of school, serves as a form of cultural capital (Guillory, 1993) and "intercultural capital" (Luke, 2004) that intersects with other forms of new literacies to translate into potential economic gain for some.

Definitions and Perspectives

Work from sociocultural perspectives assume that reading is a "socially framed activity" (Long, 1993), situated in social contexts. Reading as part of a set of literacy practices is viewed as a constructed practice shaped in large part by sociocultural factors. Specifically, the New Literacy Study (NLS) tradition has been instrumental in shifting the view of literacy as a single "autonomous" or universal literacy to the view of literacies as plural and varied, to be understood in their social and historical contexts of use (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984). I draw specifically on Street's (1984) notion of literacy practices that emphasizes the need to understand the social context that give acts of reading and writing meaning within specific communities. As such, it is essential to situate our understanding of the boys' reading within the socioeconomic and historical context of Singapore, of their schooling and home backgrounds to discover how particular literacies are valued in the Singapore context as it is situated in global flows and local politics and policies.

One problem with NLS work is the tendency to neglect the power relations between those who possess different forms of literacies (Collins & Blot, 2003). Models of literacy acquisition such as Gee's (2004) notion of shape-shifting portfolio people tend to gloss over power differences in their celebration of individual agency and creativity. However, the fact is that the acquisition of some kinds of literacy skills can be more valuable than the acquisition of other kinds of literacy skills when it comes to economic gain. As Brandt (2001) has demonstrated in her study of the literacy practices of Americans in the twentieth century, the speed of change has resulted in the need for different literacy skills in the later part of the twentieth century, and individuals who begin with more literacy skills and resources for literacy acquisition tend to be in better positions to acquire economically valued literacy skills for the twenty-first century. The ability to read certain kinds of texts may place individuals in positions of power that can translate to economic gain.

Tactical Readings

I draw on de Certeau's (1984) concept of "tactics" and "strategies" to illuminate the notion of *tactical reading* as a form of flexibility, of power play. For de Certeau, many everyday practices (including reading) are tactical in character. Strategies are moves that are situated in "proper" places and can be linked to institutional (political, economic, and scientific) relations. On the other hand, tactics are disassociated from institutions and describe the improvisational aspect of practice. Writing is strategic in nature whereas the act of reading is tactical in nature, where a reader "insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation" (p. xxi). Reading is thus an active process whereby the reader chooses to read the text when he pleases and as he pleases, perhaps seizing opportunities to read into the text what the author did not mean. Tactical reading, in summary, is the ability to read against the grain of dominant and/or institutional ways of reading. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this article, it also includes the ability to read different kinds of texts in appropriate ways for different purposes, and for these boys, it also means the ability to conform to institutional standards where necessary.

Power structures are embedded in the acquisition of literacy skills as forms of cultural or intercultural capital that translate into school and consequently, economic advantage. Cultural capital is non-economic capital which may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1984) whereas intercultural capital is "the capacity to engage in acts of knowledge, power and exchange across time/space divides and social geographies, across diverse communities, populations and epistemic stances" (Luke, 2004, p. 1429). In other words, intercultural capital is the ability to plug into knowledge systems beyond parochial boundaries, and to have the capacity to access them appropriately. While the notion of cultural capital encapsulates the idea of non-economic goods that hold value in potential societies, the notion of intercultural capital captures the relational aspect between the global and the local in an increasingly interconnected world.

Although Guillory (1993) expresses uncertainty about the value of reading canonical texts as a form of cultural capital in a "technocratic society", Graff's suggests that this is not so with corporate executives expressing preferences for "hiring humanity majors over MBAs because of their superior writing, critical-thinking and interpretative skills" (2007, p. xi). Moreover, it is important to note that the value of cultural capital is situated (Lucero, 2010), and in the context of Singapore where English is the official language of education and business, the ability to speak well and to talk about literary texts may be seen as a form of cultural capital, an indication of one's social standing as someone knowledgeable and cosmopolitan, possessing "decontextualized cultural capital" (Hannerz, 1990) relevant for global markets.

Cultural Crossings

While the boys in the study were agents who actively shaped their reading practices and identity, and constructed themselves as particular kinds of readers, and as particular kinds of persons through their readings, I emphasize in this article on their commonalities. I will demonstrate how they resisted particular modes of reading in their school and out-of-school practices, but also conformed to school ideals of the literate student through demonstration of their literate competencies. For these boys, their ability to make cultural crossings emerged from the data as a mark of their flexibility. Cultural crossings refer to their ability to move between borders in their every practices of reading and I argue that their ability to make these crossings is part of their repertoire of literacy practices that contributed to their identities as flexible literate citizens. Their exercise of such crossings were forms of tactical readings as they read and demonstrated their competencies in ways that complied with dominant ideologies while resisting in some ways particular institutional (that is, school) practices of literacy. The ability to accommodate dominant ideologies while forming their own identities as readers is a form of

power play, invisible as a practice to the boys, but an essential part of their construction of their identities as flexible literate citizens for a global world.

Methodology and Methods

The qualitative study was particularly influenced by what has been termed “ethnographies of reading” (Boyarin, 1992; Radway, 1991), studies focusing on reading as a social practice and on readers as active participants in the event of reading. The individual reader is understood as an active agent but situated in cultural contexts of community, nation, and world. The individual improvises (Bourdieu, 1984; Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998), not in a vacuum, but within the sociohistorical contexts in which he or she is situated. Thus, while the boys were clearly active readers with their own personalities and preferences, I choose to focus in this article on class as an analytic lens to make visible the structure within which they operated as readers and schooled individuals.

The overarching research question that guided this study was: How did six adolescent boys who are highly capable readers construct their identities as local/global citizens through their reading practices in and out of school? The first stage of study involved the collection of official data, informal interviews with former and current students, informal and formal interviews with school administration and teachers in 2008. The aim of this first stage was to understand the school culture in which these boys were situated. The second stage involved the close case study of six boys in one class. I observed the class three times in 2008 and based on results from a preliminary survey of the reading practices of the boys in this class, I selected six boys who were self-professed readers and who varied widely in their reading choices as focal students. Data collection for the second stage included the survey data, classroom observations, informal and formal interviews with the focal students, collection of written artifacts, and the collection of email reading logs. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed within the week. I wrote a reading biography of each boy halfway through the data collection period and the boys read the biographies as a form of member checking. Pseudonyms are used in this article for the school and the students.

Data was generated from the constant comparative method, which involved making comparisons at each stage of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006), and coding was done using Nvivo, a qualitative research software. In the first phase of data analysis, I noted down my general impressions and wrote memorandums about my general impressions from my analysis of the data. Thereafter, I coded the interviews and email reading log data line by line. During the next stage of my data analysis, I created categories and sub-categories to make sense of my data. Many of the categories corresponded with existing research and consisted of general observations of students’ reading and identity practices. From the codes, I created categories that captured concepts and activities across the data of all six focal students (See Appendix for coding protocol). The categories were confirmed, expanded or narrowed as I revisited the data. For example, under “criteria for book selection,” I was able to narrow it down from a list to two key elements: mass consumption criteria (entertainment value) and literary criteria (aesthetic value).

Thereafter, I worked through the data of each boy individually with these categories and concepts in mind, and the key theoretical concept of crossings emerged as a concept that would illuminate the data I had collected. I revisited the data working with the key concept of crossings, and further explored the kinds of crossings that these boys made as they constructed their identities as global and local citizens. Comparative and multiple within-case and cross-case studies resulted from the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this article, I will focus chiefly on Sanjeev as a telling case” (Mitchell, 1983).

Setting the Context

Official Narratives of Education

In the Singapore context, the need to rein in global flows for economic benefit is a key concern of the government. In the race to keep on top of the economic game, the government seeks to construct citizens who are able to plug into the knowledge economy and into global market flows. The education sector is one major node in the construction of viable citizens able to contribute productively to the State's aims for economic growth. In a speech at the case study school, a top school in Singapore, then Minister for Education, Tharman Shanmugaratnam (2004)'s rhetoric emphasized the need to prepare the young in Singapore for their future in an increasingly interconnected world by preparing them to be "players" who will themselves be responsible for creating their own value (by acquiring suitable skills and attitudes of lifelong learning) to compete in the global economy.

The need for a group of globally mobile citizens who would contribute to the economic growth of Singapore was marked out in official rhetoric that distinguished Singaporeans into cosmopolitans and heartlanders in a National Day rally speech by then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong (1999), that sparked much furor with its bipolar division of Singaporeans. In short, cosmopolitans were Singaporeans who had international outlooks and the ability to generate income by extending their economic reach beyond Singapore, and heartlanders were those who made their living within Singapore and formed the core of Singapore society. In terms of education, this mentality was what led to a controlled decentralization and marketization of education, where certain high-achieving schools were given the opportunity to become Integrated Program schools (Tan, 2008). These Integrated Program or IP schools could opt to skip the high-stakes O level examinations in order to construct curricula for academically-oriented, university-bound students. These schools were to be the leaders in customizing curricula and assessment to construct highly-mobile knowledge workers. Ace Independent, the site of this study, is one such IP school where the business of constructing globally literate citizens is part and parcel of everyday curriculum, instructional and co-curricular practices.

School Narratives of Literacy

Ace Independent, an elite all-boys school in Singapore, has had a long history of educational excellence, and has been at the forefront of educational innovation in Singapore. It was one of the first schools in Singapore to be chosen to become an IP school. In 2007, the school adopted the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) as the selected route for students who qualified to skip the GCE 'O' levels and opted to do so. Ace Independent prided itself on having a global outlook, evident in the school's IBDP's motto - "Scholar, Leader and Global Citizen". The adoption of the internationalist curriculum of the IBDP was seen as affirming rather than adding on to the global vision of the school.

In line with the decision to adopt the IBDP for Years Five to Six (usually between 17 to 18 years of age), the entire secondary school curriculum or the International Baccalaureate (Pre-IB) program (Years 1 to 4, usually between 13 to 16 years of age) was revamped to align with the aims of the IBDP. Particular attention was paid to the goal to "broaden students' global perspective by introducing them to works from other cultures/languages" (van Loo & Morley, n.d., p. 213). This meant including literary texts by writers from different parts of the world such as Salman Rushdie's (1999) *Haarun and the Sea of Stories* and Chinua Achebe's (2008) *No Longer at Ease*, beyond the usual Eurocentric school classics such as George Orwell's (1993) *Animal Farm* and Harper Lee's (2007) *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Shakespearean plays. Teaching classic texts alongside literature from other parts of the world was not a complete departure from previous school practice. Rather, it meant that the principle of exposing students to texts from a greater variety of places and perspectives was given increased prominence during the curriculum planning process.

Curriculum choice and instructional methods contribute to the construction of citizen subjectivities (Collins & Blot, 2003), and it was clear from my conversations with teachers and students

that the ideal Ace Independent student was someone who was articulate and well-versed in the literary arts. They learnt to be suitably literate through their acquisition of knowledge of classic literary texts from different parts of the world. Moreover, examinations that focused on written and oral presentation emphasized the importance of both verbal and written communication. School-organized events such as inter-class debates and drama performances also contributed to the sense that Ace Independent boys should be confidently articulate.

The construction of the English curriculum with its focus on literature (literary study) contrasted with the functional approach towards language acquisition prevalent in most Singapore secondary schools. The adoption of a literature as the main focus of the Language Arts curriculum seems to suggest that the school authorities thought the boys to be competent in their grasp of the English language and expected students to be well-versed in classic literary texts. In line with the general perception that literary study is for linguistically competent students, often from elite schools (Poon, 2007), the decision for all Ace Independent students to primarily study literature as part of the Language Arts syllabus seemed to distinguish them as high-ability students who were able to handle the English language at a sophisticated level.

Constructing Flexible Literate Identities for a Globalized World

The boys in this study are well-traveled and well-read. All of them had visited countries on at least three different continents, mostly with family and sometimes as part of a school program. Yet, while they were geographically mobile, they were socially unaware in some ways (Friedman, 1994). As members of the middle-class, they saw meritocracy as the key factor for equal opportunities for success and did not question social factors that may have contributed to the success of some and not of others. In a group interview with all six boys, some of the boys suggested that students who could not or did not do well and “aim to be globally competitive... just did not care”. They saw their own aspirations and abilities as the result of hard work and motivation rather than something that their family and class situations in part contributed to, and attributed others’ inability solely to apathy rather than lack of resources. In the same way that they minimized their family resources and emphasized individual hard work when it came to school success, they saw their reading practices as a natural part of their identity, part of who they were as unique individuals.

In my analysis of the data, it became clear that the flexibility exercised by these boys in their reading practices could be captured by the notion of cultural crossings. Cultural crossings refers to their ability to move between borders in their every practices of reading, and the boys crossed borders in their story worlds (linguistic/ cultural borders), social worlds (popular versus high culture), and across different media and genres in their school and out-of-school reading practices. The ability to make these crossings was part of the boys’ repertoire of everyday reading practices that constituted their flexible literacy. In this article, I focus on the boys’ crossing of story and social worlds through their reading practices.

Crossing Story Worlds: Expanding Linguistic and Cultural Borders

The ability to read texts does not just include the ability to decode words on the page but also includes the ability to make sense of the linguistic and cultural codes embedded in language. Texts are dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981), and worldviews are encoded in the stories created and the language used to create these stories. An example of the non-neutrality of literature is clearly elucidated in Viswanthan’s study of the beginnings of British literary study in colonial India where she demonstrated how the kinds of texts studied served as a form of colonial conquest - Indian subjects were taught English values “in the guise of a humanistic program of enlightenment” (1987, p. 23) for what was in effect a way of creating a middle-class of Indian natives who accepted without question British values and superiority. While the role of English in the twenty-first century is far more complicated than that of the “empire”

speaking back (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2001), it is certainly true that texts remain carriers of values and of cultural norms. To understand particular storyworlds and to understand the meaning of particular texts, students need to be able to access the language as well as the culture(s) embedded in the language and stories. To paraphrase Freire (1991), readers must learn to read both the world and the word.

For these boys who have grown up in homes where English is the home language and where reading stories written in English (almost always inadvertently including classic children staples such as Enid Blyton, C. S. Lewis and Roald Dahl) formed part of their childhood experience, learning to read and reading has been very much a taken-for-granted part of their identity. Like the middle-class children in Heath's (1986) study, the boys were familiar with books and with reading in schooled ways as a result of home practices towards literacy. Reading for leisure was legitimate activity that they witnessed parents, siblings and other influential adults engaging in as everyday practice, and their early immersion in an environment of reading seems well-suited to success in school reading (Agee & Altarriba, 2009), as I will discuss later.

In terms of the curriculum, the Dean of the English Department pointed out that in Years One and Two, the students were exposed to "western texts that they are more familiar with" and it was only from Year Three onwards that they were deemed to be matured enough to cross these cultural boundaries into more diverse literature from other parts of the world. Ironically, literary texts that were closer to home geographically such as *Malgudi Days* (Narayan, 2006) were seen as culturally distant, and to be attempted at a later stage of their secondary education. In an insightful comment during an interview, Joshua, one of the focal students suggested that he preferred fantasy by writers like J. R. R. Tolkien in comparison to the realistic postcolonial fiction studied in class "simply because the fantasy worlds are more like western society, which we're familiar with". Geographical distance in this case was no indicator of cultural distance. Rather, it was access to particular kinds of texts in childhood that predisposed Joshua's ease of access to certain kinds of books.

The boys' ability to access particular kinds of linguistic and cultural codes was a form of literacy for the boys. Their early access to popular British and American children's classics helped these boys to gain access to forms of English culture in these inner-circle countries (Kachru, 1986). As a result of their exposure to such texts, they were familiar with the language and cultures of writers from the United States and Britain. Their familiarity with these linguistic and cultural norms was visible when juxtaposed against my previous experiences of teaching in a government school where students who did not have the same resources were unable to understand certain texts such as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (2010) because of the British cultural setting and language used. In contrast, all six case study students had read *Sherlock Holmes* stories before they turned 12, and had no difficulty accessing the stories, which they read for entertainment.

This familiarity with certain kinds of books and with reading as a habit was supported by an *invisible network of resources* that shaped the boys' conceptions and practices towards books and readings (see Figure 1 for diagrammatic representation).

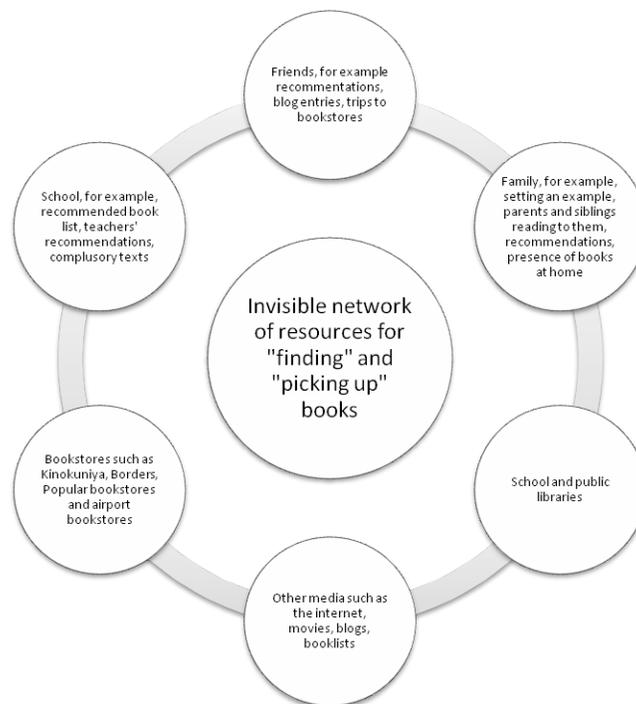


Figure 1. Network of Invisible Resources

I use the term “network” to highlight the combination of overlapping resources that taught these boys to “find” books and “pick up” books as everyday occurrences, as the following discussion by Sanjeev, Michael and Roger about *Life of Pi* (2001) demonstrates.

Michael: Cliff recommended it to me... I wrote some freaking long commentary on my blog on it and everyone read it.

Roger: Really? I *picked* mine up in a bookshop.

Michael: I was like a freaking pioneer of *Life of Pi*.

Roger: I *found* it at the airport.

Sanjeev: I *found* it at home. My sister brought it home.

Books could be found at home, at the library, at bookstores and in schools, and it was very much part of their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) to see reading as potential entertainment. For example, Sanjeev’s parents did not approve of television and playing with video games but bought him books to read instead, and Robert told me he could not remember “when [I] did not read”. His aunt used to read to him as a child and he recently discovered that his grandfather “had this huge collection of Gerald Durrell books”. The boys talked about their readings with each other and recommended readings to each other, even though they mostly saw reading as a lone activity. It was approved social practice that was valued both in their home and school contexts.

The network of resources is invisible because these boys were completely unaware of the resources that have made reading a potential habit for them. As Delpit (1988) has pointed out, those who are immersed in cultures of power are the ones who are least likely to recognize the rules that govern their competence; in the same way they did not recognize the rules, the boys did not recognize the resources that advantaged their acquisition of their identities as readers. Yet, the exposure to Eurocentric children’s classics both at home and in their primary school years have made it easy for them to access the cultural contexts in the stories read both in and out of school, to be familiar with the language and the culture embedded in these texts.

The ability to cross borders in their readings was encouraged in school with the emphasis on gradual exposure to texts from different parts of the world, ranging from ancient Greece to contemporary Japanese and Singaporean works. Although it is difficult to compartmentalize writers and texts by geographical location, a review of the texts studied from Years 1 to 6 did show a geographical expansion from more Eurocentric school classics to a more eclectic mix of European, postcolonial, and regional literatures, written originally in English or translated.

Year	Key Texts and Authors (and Geographical Location)
1	Salman Rushdie's <i>Haroun and the Sea of Stories</i> (India?) John Stevens' (ed) <i>Sense of Belonging</i> (UK/USA)
2	Harper Lee's <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> (USA) Shakespeare's <i>A Mid-Summer Night's Dream</i> (UK)
3	R K Narayan's <i>Collection of Short Stories</i> (India) R.C Sherriff's <i>Journey's End</i> (UK) Phillips Jo's (ed) <i>Poems Deep & Dangerous</i> (various)
4	Chinua Achebe's <i>No Longer at Ease</i> (Africa) Phillips Jo's (ed) <i>Poems Deep & Dangerous</i> (various) Nadine Gordimer's (ed) <i>Four Continents</i> (various) Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i> (UK)
5 and 6	Strindberg's <i>Miss Julie</i> (Sweden) Ibsen's <i>Hedda Gabbler</i> (Norway) Lorca's <i>House of Bernada Alba</i> (Spain) Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> * (England) Wole Soyinka's poems (Nigeria) Maya Angelou's <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> (USA) War Poetry (United Kingdom) Hesse's <i>Siddhartha</i> (Germany) Twain's <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (USA) Doyle's <i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i> (Ireland) Lee & Pang's <i>No Other City</i> (Singapore) Lu Xun's short stories (China) Rushdie's <i>East-West</i> (India?)

Table 1. Texts studied from Years 1 to 6

While it is difficult to ascertain if the boys internalized the value of understanding other cultures through textual engagement, it was clear that they at least learnt to read these texts as cultural artifacts and to use these texts as springboards for discussion of human concerns in class. During an interview, when I asked Sanjeev about the stories he had been reading for Language Arts, he was able to give me a brief analysis of three of the stories he had studied, capturing in his succinct summary some key ideas about cultural differences.

I think both of them [the short stories] are to do with the Western side against the traditional side. So I think in *The Only American in our Village*, the Americans are portrayed slightly negatively, like they are caught up in their own little world that they tend to ignore the others. It's portrayed such that the traditional view is more important. Whereas in *No Longer at Ease* and *The Sacrificial Egg*, the debate is still open. Like the writer feels that both sides are equally important in a sense. But in *The Only American in Our Village*, it's like Them against Us.

Learning to read the texts with culture in mind was not that easy for Sanjeev who found the postcolonial stories in the anthology, *Four Continents* (Gordimer, et al., 1998), more difficult to understand than the texts he had been exposed to in lower secondary, because they were "culturally different". However, by the time he was in Year Five, he felt that he had more control over how to access culturally distant texts, and was ready for the greater variety taught in Year Five.

The movement from Eurocentric to more varied texts from different cultures in school was not limited to Sanjeev's school readings. At the beginning of the year, he had realized that "[I'm] just reading American literature" and rationalized his reading choices as driven by his perception of what was entertaining even though he also read prize-winning literature such as Lionel Shriver's (2003) *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. However, by the end of the year, he reported that he had discovered other writers such as Haruki Murakami and that "Japanese literature seemed quite interesting". He was a school runner and had picked up a prominently displayed Murakami book entitled *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running* (Murakami, 2009) at a major bookstore, Kinokuniya. Thereafter, he started reading other books by Murakami and other Japanese writers.

Sanjeev's progress towards more difficult texts (both culturally and in terms of content) fits in with Appleyard's (1990) description of the progress of readers from the undifferentiated readings of childhood towards more thought-provoking readings in adolescence. From another perspective, as Sanjeev grew older and was exposed to more texts, he learned to cross cultural boundaries both in his school readings and out-of-school readings. This ability became part of his identity and was expressed as individual competence in the school context and as personal preferences in out-of-school contexts. Sanjeev's flexibility in crossing linguistic and cultural borders in his storyworlds expanded as he matured and felt more equipped to deal with culturally different as well as more difficult texts both in his school and out-of-school readings.

Crossing Social Worlds: Between Popular and High Culture

Another form of crossing that the boys demonstrated was in their reading and evaluating of both high and popular culture literature. Popular culture books are best understood as mass market commodities for a large and undifferentiated mass whereas high culture, often national literature, can be seen as works worthy of regard within particular social contexts, even if canons and categories are hotly contested (Corse, 1997). I have included prizewinning literature or "middlebrow literature" (Radway, 1997) as high culture with the potential for eventual canonization.

The boys talked about books and reading as part of daily everyday practice, and as a result of their constant exposure to books, formed a familiarity with books and reading. This familiarity was demonstrated in the ease with which they were able to critically evaluate different kinds of books both in and out of school (Bourdieu, 1984). They seemed to agree that they could value the kinds of books they read, even if they chose to read books that they considered less valuable in terms of its literary worth. Analysis of the data showed that they constantly evaluated their readings with two opposing criteria that sometimes overlapped: mass consumption criteria (entertainment value) and literary criteria (aesthetic value). Entertainment was associated with reading for pleasure and often linked to but not limited to popular culture texts whereas aesthetic value was about the quality of the writing. In Corse's terms, it could be said that the boys evaluated popular novels by their "narrative engagement,

their excitement level, and the ability to "grab" the reader" and high-culture literature by "the author's language and stylistic skills" (1997, p. 133).

The following extract from Sanjeev's reading log shows his implicit awareness of the two different kinds of criteria:

I did manage to read *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai in November. My aunt recommended it to me. I found that it was quite a struggle to read although at times I did appreciate the use of language and other literary devices. It did seem more like a book that I would do for literature though, and I read it bit by bit rather than devouring it in a few sessions. I suppose I could tell the difference between her work and Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*, which I read not too long after that. It was a page turner in every sense of the word and I finished it much faster than *The Inheritance of Loss*. At the end of it though I could tell it wasn't exactly a great book, but the point was that it kept me hooked until I was finished.

Sanjeev had read *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006) at the recommendation of his aunt but thought it was a literary book that he would more likely study in his literature classes than pick up on his own. Literary books were read to be appreciated and admired ("I did appreciate the use of language and other literary devices") whereas popular-culture books were read for entertainment ("it was a page turner in every sense of the word"). Reading *The Inheritance of Loss* was hard work that took a few sittings whereas reading *The Lost Symbol* (Brown, 2009) took no effort at all as Sanjeev completed the book in one sitting. While *The Lost Symbol* was enjoyable in the sense that it kept him entertained as he read the novel from beginning to end, it was not "exactly a great book" and lacking in aesthetic value unlike *The Inheritance of Loss*, which he perceived as being more high-brow.

In the following extract from a group interview, Sanjeev made the distinction between different kinds of "good" books and made reference to his own development as a more aware reader.

Chin: Why do you like Dan Brown?

Michael: Damn nice. The mystery is very cool.

Sanjeev: (interjecting) I read in Primary 6, and I thought it was damn good. Then, after that, a few months later, I realized it's –

Michael: (adamantly) It's damn GOOD!

Sanjeev: No, as in, it's damn entertaining but it's not good.

Sanjeev remarked that Dan Brown novels were "entertaining" but "not good". He appealed to the dual criteria of entertainment value and aesthetic value to judge Dan Brown's novels, but ultimately seemed to indicate that the worth of one's reading should be judged by aesthetic value rather than entertainment value, even though he did at times choose to read books for their entertainment rather than for their aesthetic value. Like the ironic viewers in Len Ang's (1982) study of soap opera viewers, Sanjeev distanced himself as a critic even while he sometimes chose to "indulge" in "trashy novels" for light entertainment. Sanjeev's response provided an interesting contrast to Michael's determined response to ignore these dual elements of "good", especially because Michael himself was an adept reader who read widely and variedly. This excerpt is one of many that showed the individuality of each boy as a reader and person although that will not be the focus of this article.

Unlike Sanjeev's out-of-school readings, school readings served a different purpose. School readings were compulsory whereas out-of-school readings were chosen by Sanjeev. School readings were read for work (even if he occasionally derived some pleasure out of the experience) whereas out-of-school readings were for enjoyment. Sanjeev remarked during one interview that "that's why all the books I read for fun, I don't remember them. But I remember the plots of all the school books I read". Because the purpose of school readings was to analyze literary texts and because Sanjeev was assessed on his ability to critique these texts, he made an effort to remember these texts. Leisure readings, on the other hand, did not need to be remembered, even though he did remember the plots of the stories he really liked.

Sanjeev also applied this “double view” of evaluating texts to his school readings. For example, in the following evaluation of *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 2008), a school-assigned text, Sanjeev evaluated the book according to his own preference for a story to have a “decent conclusion” (entertainment value).

No Longer at Ease started out quite promisingly at first and was quite enjoyable throughout. However, when I realized that I was on my final few pages without a decent conclusion in sight, I was quite disappointed – there were so many loose plotlines (like what happens to his wife) that aren’t filled up.

The lack of a perceived closed ending made a potentially good read (in terms of entertainment value) unfulfilling. Thus, while he may defer to expert opinions of cultural value in and out of the classroom, he often appropriated the same readings differently for himself (Long, 1986), such as evaluating school readings for its entertainment rather than aesthetic value.

However, despite his disappointment with the ending, Sanjeev re-read the text and was able to read and talk about his readings in a “point-driven” (Vipond & Hunt, 1984) manner that focused on thematic readings for his school assessments. While he may question the entertainment value of the text, the fact that it was a school-directed reading that would be assessed meant that he would re-read the text in order to remember it well enough to talk and write about it in a manner approved by his teachers. This was what made him a tactical reader: he may resist school readings of texts but was able to read differently for different purposes, and utilized different reading tactics at different times in appropriate ways.

Tactical Readings: Home and School Literacies

In Moss’ study of working-class and middle-class students’ informal and formal media knowledge, she (2000) argues that knowledge in informal domains cannot transfer to the formal domains of schooling, and that while working-class and middle-class children acquire similar competences with regard to out-of-school literacies, middle-class children have different takes on the organization of school knowledge. The middle-class children in Moss’ study “saw the school curriculum as defining literacy in terms, which are hierarchical and progressive” and “represented themselves as at particular point on a ladder of expertise” (p. 60). The difference in attitudes towards school and school learning is also visible in Lareau’s (2003) study on middle-class children. Lareau demonstrated that middle-class children often felt a sense of “entitlement” about their rights that resulted in them being able to work the school system to their advantage. This entitlement was in part encouraged through home practices where parents treated their children like adults and allowed them the authority to speak as equals to adults at home. As such, the children were not afraid to talk to teachers as their peers, to question them and to navigate the rules of the system to what they saw as their right to benefit.

The boys in this study fit in with Moss’ (2000) description of middle-class children who saw a purpose in school readings and were able to identify themselves as readers both in school and out of school contexts. As a social practice, the boys recognized the value of reading and the value of reading certain kinds of books both in and out of school. In addition, they saw the value of school work and wanted to do well, even though they were sometimes critical of text choice and of instructional strategies used by their teachers. All six boys critiqued some element of school reading at one point in time over the course of the year, but also, at other points in time, mentioned the value of literature study. For example, Sanjeev thought that literature could help them to “understand other cultures” and “be more analytical”. While school reading was considered work, it was at least meaningful work sometimes.

Significant in this study was the fact that these boys complied with school-defined forms of literacy despite occasional resistance. The practice of reading and the practice of valuing their readings were normalized through their home and school practices. They did not question the need to read and

the need for evaluation of their reading practices through formal assessment, and in fact sought to do well on these tests. School-based literacies were rationalized as having intangible benefits in that it helped them learn humanistic values and to understand other cultures and to become more critical and analytical. Additionally, doing well on these tests had functional value that was tangible as it helped them move on to higher education through the grades achieved.

The boys' criticality of both school and out-of-school readings was a form of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) that marked them as literate and intelligent. As tactical readers, they conformed to institutionalized requirements of literacy by demonstrating competence in their written work and classroom discussions even though they may not always agree with text or instructional choices. Like Willis' (1975) working-class lads, they resisted particular forms of schooling, but unlike the lads, they retained their place in the social and economic hierarchy by conforming where it mattered to dominant ideals of being literate. This was because conforming to institutionalized literate identities of being global literate citizens well-versed in classics and contemporary literature, being articulate both in speaking and writing, did not clash with their understanding of their identities as literate citizens (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). In fact, being able to demonstrate their competence by doing well in class work and assessment affirmed their competence as superior readers who were superior and competitive in an increasingly global world.

Conclusion

What is clear from the discussion is that it is not only the boys' acquisition of knowledge (of specific texts) but also their relation to knowledge (how to access texts) that are a mark of flexibility. Their possession of a wide repertoire of reading practices and their ability to read tactically placed them in positions of power with regard to their insertions into dominant modes of literacy. Through their grasp of both strategic and tactical moves in their everyday reading practices, these boys were able to demonstrate flexible literate selves. They knew when to use these moves, and to shift between modes of reading for school purpose and for their own purpose. Their very flexibility was a form of power that allowed them to plug into global notions of literacy in their local context. When viewed in this manner, it becomes clear that literature teaching and instruction is really a form of constructing dispositions (Luke & Carrington, 2004), where students are being taught to relate to texts and to relate to the world through their study of texts.

The boys' possession of knowledge in the form of English school classics and more recent postcolonial works were cultural capital (Guillory, 1993), a form of social power marked by their access to practices of reading and writing. More importantly, their ability to use these texts appropriately was a form of intercultural capital, as they were able to access knowledge that was relevant for different contexts. Their ability to access texts both local and global through book consumption and school readings contributed to the sense of them being well-read and cosmopolitan. In the Singapore context, where going global is seen as economic necessity, the construction of a global literate self is in line with national demands and desires to be a world city. Literacy that is valuable consists of the projection of self as knowledgeable, flexible and worldly, and as part of their global flexible literate identities, these boys have adopted "a global literate English" (Wallace, 2003) in the way they were able to access cultural codes in classic and contemporary stories read and shared both in and out of school.

Through literacy instruction, these boys gained differential access "to aspects of a total selective tradition, one composed of a range of literary forms and functional genres, ideological content, and sanctioned ways of reading and writing" (Luke, 1988, p. 24) that privileged their "ways with words" (Heath, 1986) as superior and suitable for world-class markets. In the Singapore context at least, recognizing this may help educators understand why literature study is perceived as a subject for the elite. Class-based resources and practices do have an impact on the ability and preferences of students when it comes to reading choices and practices, and what seems a "natural" affinity for language and

literature consists of the “funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) acquired from home and early schooling practices.

Recognizing resources and power play in everyday practices of literacy may be the first step to questioning what counts as knowledge, how it counts as knowledge and how this knowledge relates to what we understand of education in the 21st century. In the Singapore context at least, a clearer articulation of the aims of literature education may make more relevant the aims of literature education as a subject not limited to elite students with a good command of the English language. While I do not want to suggest that one’s place in society is the sole determinant of ability to achieve success in acquiring particular forms of literary knowledge, I do want to highlight that the dominant folk wisdom of literature pedagogy in Singapore that students who are good in language will do well in literature rests in part upon the implicit belief that the main goal of literature education is to help students become amateur literary critics, a notion driven by the high-stakes examination’s focus on the unseen paper, which requires students to apply their literary reading skills to a self-contained poem or prose passage. Rethinking the significance of literature as subject that counts for all students requires educators to engage with the following questions: What counts as literary study? Where is literature study situated in the context of changing landscapes of literacy education? What should be the aims of literature instruction? How should and how can the study of literature benefit students from different population groups? How can instructional aims and assessment design be changed to align with the perceived goals of literature study?

One way to revision literature education in the Singapore context may be to emphasize literary texts as dialogic spaces for engaging in culturally relevant conversations (Applebee, 1996) that matter in one’s community; and in this globalized context, conversations that matter must include conversations about both nation and world so that our students can think critically about what matter in the past, what matters in the present for what matters in the future. Literature study would in fact complement the National Education initiative (see Tan, 2008) in Singapore by encouraging students to cultivate dispositions that are aware of cultural diversity both within nation and world. The aims of the IBDP curriculum towards broadening students’ cultural horizons may be seen as a goal suitable for all students rather than elite students.

On a more micro level, viewing texts as embedded with culture, and seeing the literature instruction as a form of cultural crossing may allow for better selection of texts that are relevant to specific student populations and instructional goals of getting students involved in culturally relevant conversations through their textual encounters. The cultures that we should be attentive to as educators need not be just linguistic or geographical, but should encompass different kinds of diversity, especially those that are pertinent to each schooling context, given the student population and the global as well as local issues pertinent to the community (Loh, 2009). Understanding the out-of-school readings of students could provide a better sense of their abilities to cross cultures, and be useful input in text selection and the design of instructional practices. Recognition that some students can better access certain kinds of texts than others allow for scaffolding in terms of text choice as well as instructional methods to help students read the word and the world better. In addition, regardless of text choice, students should be taught to read critically, to understand their positions as readers and how that affects their reading. Aiming for a critical literacy curriculum assumes that all students are able to think and read critically, provided teachers select materials that are relevant and best suited for learning.

While this study has highlighted the processes by which some boys construct their identities through their literacy practices in a globalized world, it raises more questions about the nature of flexibility and its application to different student populations. These boys were highly privileged in their access to literacy through their home and school backgrounds, and for them, flexibility meant the awareness of when and how to access different kinds of texts in different contexts. We need to

complicate our understanding of flexibility to ask what kinds of flexibility matter for different contexts, and acknowledge that the possession of different repertoires may equip students differently for the 21st century. Only when we do that can we better help all students to prepare themselves to be flexible literate citizens for a globalized world.

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APPENDIX: Coding Protocol

Codes	Sub-Codes	Examples
Reading Resources Resources for books and reading.	1. Family	1. Joshua: Of course, it started with my parents and siblings reading to me.
	2. Recommendations	2. Robert: It [<i>Four Loves</i>] was recommended to me by my brother.
	3. School	3. Roger: I remember quiet reading in school.
	4. Bookstores	4. Michael: I was at Borders...
	5. Libraries	5. Joel: I mostly borrow books from the library.
	6. Other media	6. Joel: I watch anime and read manga.
Reading different genres Different genres read.	1. Adventures and thrillers	1. Roger: He [Matthew Reilly] uses a bit of Dan Brown, and Michael Crichton, and a lot of adventure stuff.
	2. Romance	2. Michael: I read so many chick lit books I can't remember.
	3. Science fiction and fantasy	3. Robert: I like science fiction and fantasy.
	4. Mystery	4. Joshua: I like Agatha Christie's mysteries...
	5. Non-fiction	5. Sanjeev: I read Roald Dahl's biography.
	6. Comics	6. Joshua: <i>Asterix</i> is a sell-out now.
	7. Others	7. Joel: I read Ayn Rand's <i>Fountainhead</i> when I was in Secondary Two. (philosophical fiction)
Cross media readings Examples of reading the same story or genre across media (e.g. reading and watching <i>Lord of the Rings</i>)		Sanjeev: Again, <i>Fight Club</i> [the movie]... the twist is good. Because it's about him and he misses this guy. In the end, it turns out this guy is in his imagination. Michael: Everything started from <i>Gossip Girl</i> I think. Robert: The musical is more or less based around the friendship as opposed to whole underlying story of Elphaba in the book.

Criteria for evaluation of readings	1. Entertainment value	1. Roger: Yah, but his books [Matthew Reilly] are quite interesting. Entertaining.
What makes a “good” book.	2. Aesthetic value	2. Sanjeev: ...I did appreciate her [Kiran Desai] use of language and other literary devices.
Criteria for book selection	1. Interest	1. Sanjeev: The title [<i>What I Talk about when I Talk about Running</i>] caught my eye because I too am an avid runner.
How the boys selected books for out-of-school consumption.	2. Recommendation	2. Michael: Cliff recommended the book [<i>Life of Pi</i>].
	3. Series	3. Joshua: Of course, if I have favorite writers, I keep looking for their books.
	4. Random	4. Roger: I found it [<i>Life of Pi</i>] at the airport.
Reading from different geographical locations	1. Singapore literature	1. Michael: Maybe that’s why I think Singapore books are very relevant, because I think I can relate to them.
Location of boys’ school and out-of-school readings, determined by location of author and/or setting.	2. Literature from monolingual English-speaking countries (United States, England, Australia and Canada)	2. Robert: I’ve actually come to quite like British authors.
	3. Postcolonial/ World literature	3. Sanjeev: Yeah, when I read Narayan and Achebe, I like know more about India or Nigeria.