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Singaporean Boys Constructing Global Literate Selves through their Reading Practices in and Out of School

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Abstract

This article examines how three Singaporean boys constructed their identities as global literate citizens through their reading practices in and out of school. An invisible network of resources contributed to their construction of a global literate identity relevant for local/global markets. The acquisition of a global literate identity as a form of intercultural capital is an unequal game in a neoliberal education system and social networks must be recognized as key nodes for literacy re-vision.

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

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Introduction

In a globalized world 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, et al. 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 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". 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. (1999:240)

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 1991), 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 (Ong 2003). Exercising flexible practices that allow for

movement across borders is a complicated practice that is tied up with social class, gender, race and ethnicity, within and across different contexts.

In this article, I engage with the idea of flexibility as it is played out in the reading and identity practices of six Singaporean boys studying in an elite all-boys' school. I describe how these boys acquire "intercultural capital" (Luke 2004) in terms of their reading and identity practices. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concept of *habitus*, I demonstrate how a combination of home and school circumstances or what I term *an invisible network of resources* work together to encourage the boys towards this *global literate identity* that was at the same time very much grounded in local contexts. Their literate identities were global in that they possessed literacy knowledge and skills that were relevant beyond local (Singapore) markets. The construction of a global literate identity, while not the only identity available to the boys, was a valued identity in their school context and in the national context where the ability to "go global" is in part marked by fluent immersion in English as one of the global languages of business and trade. Contrary to official versions of meritocracy, equality and literacy in the Singapore context, I suggest that the acquisition of such intercultural capital is an unequal game in a neoliberal education system driven by market dynamics.

By focussing on the reading practices of a group of privileged boys, I highlight how the micropolitics of power in the form of their reading and identity practices are embedded in global and local flows of knowledge and ways of valuing literacy. The attention to privilege is also in line with a growing number of international studies that recognize the need to understand how privilege is constructed (Ball 2003; Lareau 2003). Moreover, I seek to complicate the issue of gender and literacy by bringing social class into the equation (Moss 2007; Reay 2006), particularly when the recent "boy turn" in education rests on simple binaries and dualities between boys and girls regardless of class positions (Weaver-Hightower 2003). Finally, the study's focus on print recognizes print's importance as a form

of literacy learning, albeit interacting with other new media forms. New literacies rely on competence in traditional literacies to hold value in the New Economy (Warshauer 2007), and although there may be transformation in the way print is used there is little change in the way particular kinds of literacies (what is read and ways of reading) seem to hold value as markers of intelligence and knowledge, and to serve as marks of distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

Reading and Identity Practices in Local Contexts of Globalization

The study draws on studies of reading and identity from sociocultural perspectives, specifically from the New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition. Reading as part of a set of literacy practices is viewed as constructed practice shaped in large part by sociocultural factors, and the value accorded to different reading practices, whether in the classroom or at home or in society, only makes sense when understood as situated practices, located in particular times, places and spaces (Heath 1986; Street 1984).

Heath's (1986) seminal work on the home and school literacies of working class and middle-class children in the Piedmont Carolina in the 1970s to 1980s demonstrated that children learn particular "ways with words" at home that may facilitate or hinder their learning in school contexts. In other words, children learn different ways of "saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing" (Gee 1996:127) relevant to different communities of home, peer and school networks, and this includes learning gendered and classed attitudes towards reading (Cherland 1994; Hicks 2002; Moss 2007). Practices of reading and writing are thus "acts of self-making" (Collins and Blot 2003:97) as individuals identify themselves and are identified by others through their literacy practices. Possession of particular forms of literacies are infused with power significance in that they serve as status markers and provide for different educational and economic opportunities (Brandt 2001). In a globalized world where knowledge, funds and people are daily shifting on a global scale, definitions of literacy and ways of doing literacy are even more intensely informed by global and local flows of

doing literacy (e.g., Freebody and Freiberg 2008; Nichols 2006). Global flows of books, curriculum and literacy practices are valued, used and transformed at local levels of community and nation, and what holds value locally may depend on global marketability.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* illuminates our understanding of issues of reading and identity as practices that are infused with the micropolitics of power play. The *habitus* is the durably installed generative principle of *regular improvisations*... a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions. (1977:80/95)

The *habitus*, or an individual's life position, is a set of predispositions acquired by individuals through early upbringing. In the area of taste, it is manifested in "the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products" (Bourdieu 1984:170). In other words, a person's predispositions towards particular lifestyles are so ingrained as to be seen as a part of the person's personality and 'natural' preferences. These lifestyle choices serve as cultural capital, in the form of knowledge and habits with the potential to convert from non-economic to economic capital.

The acquisition of this cultural capital can be viewed as an internalization of social advantage, where middle-class children unconsciously learn how to behave in ways that put them in advantageous positions in school. In Lareau's (2003) ethnographic study of middle-class and working class families' home and school practices, she shows US middle-class parents' "concerted effort" to provide their children with linguistic and cultural capital that put them at an advantage when it came to getting ahead in school and out of school. More specifically, in the area of literacy, Heath (1986) has demonstrated that middle-class children are immersed in print-rich environments and are taught to participate actively in storytelling and book-reading activities that better prepare them for school ways of reading and writing.

Expanding on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Luke suggests teachers and students in the new contexts of globalization must know how and where to deploy relevant capital. This "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. (2004:1429)

Acquiring intercultural capital thus means the acquisition of a flexible relation to different forms of knowledge and skills that hold value across different cultures and markets. In terms of literacy acquisition, this means that particular forms of literacies may hold more value in some contexts, and that awareness of and ability to plug into different forms of literacies are valued skills in both local and global contexts.

Research Methods

The study was particularly influenced by what has been termed "ethnographies of reading" (Boyarin 1992), studies focusing on reading as a social practice and on readers as active participants in the event of reading. Since the norms, values, and practices of individuals and society are not static but constantly shifting, there is a need to situate studies of everyday practices of reading and identity in specific contexts, paying attention to both continuity and change (Heath and Street 2008). I focused on the case studies of six boys in one school, Ace Independent, to examine in greater depth their everyday reading and identity processes and practices (Yin 2003).

I had previously taught at Ace Independent (pseudonym used) and the Principal and Dean of English were open to my research proposal. I was assigned to conduct my research in a Year Three (15 year-old students) Gifted Education class where the teachers were comfortable with my presence. A preliminary survey on the reading practices of the students in the class provided me with an overview as well as the specific reading practices and habits

of the 30 boys in the class. From the survey and discussions with the teachers, I selected six boys who had very different reading interests and who were willing to work with me as focal students. Of the six participants, there were five Chinese boys and one Indian boy, representative of the ethnic distribution in class. In terms of family background, they come from middle to upper middle-class families and were widely travelled.

Observations of different classes and interviews with Deans, teachers, current students at different grade levels, and alumni gave me a sense of the school culture. Official documents such as the school website and curriculum documents helped me to understand the school context and official curriculum. I observed the class three times towards the end of the school term in 2008 when the boys were in Year Three, and on a regular basis in 2009 when they were in Year Four. I took fieldnotes and conducted informal interviews with teachers and other students in the classroom. I interviewed the participants once every two months, and they wrote email reading logs in response to prompts until January 2010. In total, I made 49 classroom observations, conducted four group interviews, conducted three individual interviews with each boy and collected between four to five email reading logs each.

Data was generated from the constant comparative method, which involved making comparisons at each stage of the analysis (Charmaz 2006). I constructed reading biographies of individual students to articulate my observations about the reading and identity practices of the students. Open coding was followed by the creation of categories with which to further explore the data. Themes that appeared most robust were explored in individual case studies and extended to the cross-case analysis.

The Setting: Macro-Discourses of Literacy in the Singapore Context

Discourses of the Nation: Education and English Language Policies

Previously a British colony, Singapore is a multiracial state with a Chinese majority (74.1%) and a substantial percentage of Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%) and other ethnicities

(3.3%) (Department of Statistics 2010). Given the lack of hinterland and resources, the Singapore's government emphasis has been on people as "its own prime asset" (Olds and Thrift 2005) in its drive to maintain its competitiveness as a world-class city in a global economy. 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).

Singapore's English language policy is driven by pragmatics and economics, and the English language is generally perceived as a vehicle for Singapore to plug into global markets and for interethnic communication (Gopinathan 1980). In 1987, English became the sole medium of instruction in Singapore, and a national bilingual policy required students to learn a "Mother Tongue" (more commonly, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) as a second language (Purushotam 1989). These policies have been "so successful that English is undoubtedly the dominant language and common tongue nationally" and is "sometimes even regarded as the *de facto* National Language of Singaporeans" (Koh 2010:537). Given the language policy in Singapore and the historical association of English with the elite educated in British schools (Silver 2005), the ability to use the English language fluently has prestige value in the Singapore context as a global language for access to global markets. English language fluency is a form of situated cultural capital (Lucero 2010), relevant and valued in the Singapore context.

I myself was personally a product of a system where my command of the English language was valued over my command of Mandarin: I was sent to a mission school associated with fluent English speakers, and my father, who was himself educated in a Chinese stream school, told me that as long as I aced my English, I only needed to aim to pass my Mandarin. It was in this education context that many young people grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, and as a result, a large majority of the population under fifty years today

are “English-knowing bilinguals” who are familiar with both English as their first language and another second language such as Mandarin or Malay (Koh 2010). However, there remain different degrees of English-language fluency among the population, and certain elite and mission schools continue to be associated with fluent English speakers. Although the emphasis on effective bilingualism has intensified in recent years in Singapore, English continues to be a dominant language and command of the language is valued as an avenue to better educational and work opportunities.

The study of English in Singapore is influenced by its British colonial legacy. Students study English Language and English Literature separately, with English Language focusing on the functional aspects of English and English Literature on aesthetic aspects. Until 1992, English Literature was compulsory for all four years of secondary education. Presently, the subject is compulsory up to Secondary Two schools and continuation beyond Secondary Two is optional. The study of literature is generally perceived as a subject for elite students who are already fluent in the English language (Poon 2007).

Another educational debate relevant to this discussion is the issue of class and education in the Singapore context. Meritocracy is often described as a key guiding principle for internal public policy formulation within Singapore, with the official version being that everyone has an equal chance at success since pure merit is the sole deciding factor for advancement. However, the government’s shift towards neoliberal policies has left individuals uncertain about the merits of a pure meritocracy, particularly with widening income disparities in a market-driven economy (Tan 2010b), a real concern in Singapore where intergenerational income elasticity¹ registered at a relatively high rate of 0.58% (Ho

¹ Intergenerational income mobility refers to the extent to which income levels are able to change across generations. Where there is complete intergenerational mobility (intergenerational mobility is equal to zero), there is no relationship between family background and the adult income outcomes of children. Intergenerational income elasticity is equal to 1 if there is no intergenerational mobility at all. (The Conference Board of Canada 2012)

2011). In the educational context, there have been increasing concerns with how market-driven policies may be leading to further stratification in the education system (Tan 2010a), and official educational policies have been criticized for the tendency to sideline socioeconomic status as a factor for school success (Gopinathan 2007). There is concern that more often than not, it is the materially-advantaged students, the perceived cosmopolitans-to-be with income-generating potential, who will move on to the academic tracks and be better situated for entry into global markets, and correspondingly, economic advantage.

Discourses of the School: Excellence and Confidence

One of a group of Methodist schools founded in 1886, Ace Independent has had a long history of educational excellence. It was one of the first schools in Singapore chosen to become an Integrated Program (IP) school, where academically-able, university-bound students are allowed to skip a national high stakes examination, the GCE ‘O’ level examinations, and move on directly from secondary school to pre-tertiary education. In 2007, the school adopted the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) as the selected route for students who qualified to skip the GCE ‘O’ levels and opted to do so. In line with the decision to adopt the IBDP for Years Five to Six (17-18 years of age), the secondary school curriculum (Years One to Four, 13 to 16 years of age) was revamped to align with the aims of the IBDP. Girls were admitted from Years Five to Six but the school remained an elite all-boys school from Years One to Four.

Ace Independent positioned itself as a school that prepared its students to be suitably literate in a fast-globalizing world, and its aim towards internationalism was evident in the school’s IBDP’s motto - “Scholar, Leader and Global Citizen”. School curricular, school-organized activities and overseas exposure trips were all geared towards providing the environment for students to learn to become global citizens. In the hypercompetitive

educational climate of Singapore (Kewk 2010), Ace Independent students were given many opportunities to perform academically and in their extracurricular activities.

The school's academic strength is illustrated by the fact that 28 students achieved the maximum score of 45 marks for the 2009 IBDP examinations, out of 57 students worldwide who achieved the maximum score (Ng 2011). Trophies for sporting, artistic and uniformed groups lined the main foyer and the principal's office and contributed to a sense of history and excellence. The alumni boasted of successful professionals, businessmen, politicians, thespians, and a large number of the students were proud to admit that they were second or third generation "Ace-sians". Michael, one of the participants, told me that he chose Ace Independent out of the many options he had available to him because Ace Independent boys were confident and did not just focus on the academics. In my interviews and informal conversations with school staff, alumni, recent graduates and students, there was a strong sense of loyalty to the school's superior "brand" of education. Ace Independent's brand included being fluent in English, both spoken and written and having a strong arts and sporting culture and a certain confidence in carrying oneself. A long-time teacher at the school described the Ace Independent boy to me as "confident, sometimes to the extent of being cocky" and suggests that "part of the confidence comes from speaking and writing well".

School Discourses of Reading: Perceptions of a Global Literate Citizen

The vision of an individual who was acquainted with literary texts as part and parcel of what it was to be literate was nothing new to Ace Independent, with its roots as a mission school founded by missionaries from the UK. The strong emphasis on literature was a factor that led to the adoption of the IBDP where the compulsory English A1 subject essentially meant literary study. The Dean of English explained the importance of literature:

The school has always had an emphasis on literature, and one reason we adopted the IBDP was because we felt that our boys were able to deal with literature at a higher level. We also like the focus on world literature and felt that it would expand their vision of the world. Also, the testing is not just pen and paper. There's the oral component and the research paper component as well... I do feel that my students are able to present and write better at the end of Year Six. [Interview, February 16, 2009]

The ability to read and write well serve as decontextualized skills relevant for English-speaking markets, and the acquisition of the knowledge of literary texts was a form of cultural capital (Guillory 1993) to position Ace-sians as well-read and cultured. Beyond the original British influence, continued government emphasis on English as a global language of business meant that the school's focus on English continued to be valued and relevant. In a national context where literature was perceived as difficult and limited to the elite fluent in English, the study of literature had symbolic value in marking the boys as belonging to an elite class where self-confidence and English fluency were their birthright.

While the emphasis on knowledge of literary texts and ability to read literature has continued to be relevant to the school's definition of a literate individual, what has shifted over the course of time are definitions of what makes for literature worth studying and knowing about in a global context. Conversations with long-serving teachers in the school traced changes in the school English Literature curriculum from emphasis on Eurocentric texts to the inclusion of postcolonial texts in the 1990s, when the national curriculum became more inclusive of texts by postcolonial and Commonwealth writers, and to translated texts under the umbrella of World Literature when the school adopted the IB programme.

Year	Key Texts and Authors
1	Salman Rushdie's <i>Haroun and the Sea of Stories</i> John Stevens' (ed) <i>Sense of Belonging</i>
2	Harper Lee's <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> Shakespeare's <i>A Mid-Summer Night's Dream</i>
3	R K Narayan's <i>Collection of Short Stories</i>

	R.C Sherriff's <i>Journey's End</i> Phillips Jo's (ed) <i>Poems Deep & Dangerous</i>
4	Chinua Achebe's <i>No Longer at Ease</i> Phillips Jo's (ed) <i>Poems Deep & Dangerous</i> Nadine Gordimer's (ed) <i>Four Continents</i> Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>
5 and 6	Strindberg's <i>Miss Julie</i> Ibsen's <i>Hedda Gabler</i> Lorca's <i>House of Bernada Alba</i> Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> Wole Soyinka's poems Maya Angelou's <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> War Poetry from World War I Hesse's <i>Siddhartha</i> Twain's <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> Doyle's <i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i> Lee & Pang's <i>No Other City</i> Lu Xun's short stories Rushdie's <i>East-West</i>

Table 1. Literary texts studied at Ace Independent from Years 1 to 6 (2009)

Coming from primary (elementary) schools where reading was very much part of the school culture, the adolescent boys were expected to be able to plug into Salman Rushdie's (1999) fantastical *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and the relatively dense short stories in the anthology, *A Sense of Belonging* (Stevens 1989) and move toward culturally more distant and conceptually more difficult texts as they progressed through postcolonial and commonwealth to World Literature over the course of six years. The curriculum can be viewed as a deliberate attempt on the part of the school to prime students to be knowledgeable about different forms of literature from different parts of the world as part of their acquisition of a global literacy in an English-speaking world.

Singaporean Adolescent Boys Constructing Global Literate Identities

It is against this broader socio-political and schooling context that I situate the study of these Singaporean adolescent boys' reading and identity practices. In this section, I describe the attitudes, values and beliefs that underscored these boys' reading identities and show how they acquired intercultural capital in the form of flexible reading practices.

“Finding Books” as Everyday Practice

Reading has come naturally to me since I was a kid. I read when I’m not doing something else. [Michael, Survey, October 13, 2008]

For the boys, reading was a taken-for-granted everyday activity. The general ease with reading as a leisure activity and habit is reflected in the survey and in my interviews with the boys. The following group interview excerpt showed how reading was so habitualized that “finding” and “picking up” books was regular practice for these boys.

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.

[Group Interview, February 6, 2009]

In the above excerpt, the boys explained to me how they all came to have read *Life of Pi* (Martel 2001) when they were in Year 2. Although Michael had presumed that his blog entry had influenced other students to read the book, it was not the case. Roger explained that he bought the book for reading on the airplane on a family trip and Sanjeev discovered the book at home. Books could be found at home because his family members were avid readers and often bought books that could be left for the picking at home.

This habit and practice of looking to books as entertainment was naturalized and seen as part of the boys’ personality and preferences. However, as Bourdieu points out, “the ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature”

(1984:68). Thus, Michael declared himself to be someone for whom reading came “naturally” and for whom the practice of reading during his spare time was a default leisure activity and Robert saw himself as “more of the stay-at-home type rather than go-out-cycling type” for whom reading was legitimate entertainment. Sanjeev “enjoyed reading” and could “devour two to three books in a week” during school vacations when he was less busy with school.

In my interaction with the boys, it was clear that they had absorbed official versions of meritocracy and education, and did not see how their home background contributed to their achievements and their identities as reading persons. During a group interview, Sanjeev remarked that students from neighbourhood (public) schools “just did not try hard enough to be excellent” and Robert remarked that “anyone who had a modicum of intelligence and studied hard could get into a good university”. Their reading preferences and habits that may have contributed to their academic achievement were seen as “natural” rather than encouraged by an *invisible network of resources* (see Figure 1), of social networks and resources, that made reading a probability rather than just a possibility.

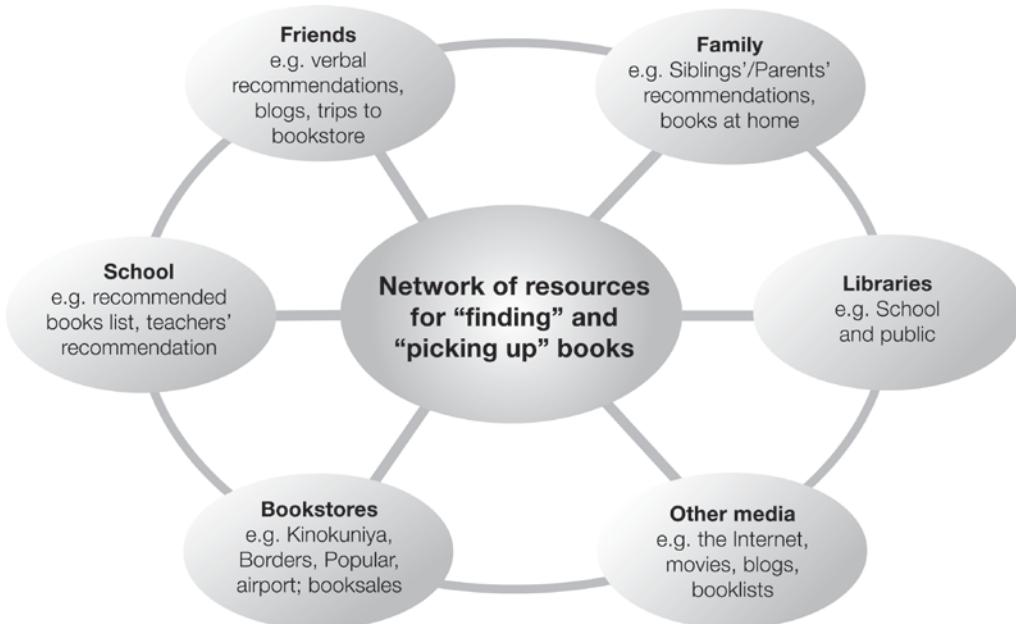


Figure 1. Invisible Network of Resources

The network is invisible in that the boys were unaware of the many resources that have encouraged them towards reading (and reading particular kinds of literature) as everyday practice. Like the middle-class children in Heath's (1986) study, these boys' parents valued reading and exposed them to print-rich environments from a young age and the boys learned ways with words that were conducive to eventual acquisition of school literacies (see Table 2). Joshua and Joel remembered weekly library visits, and Robert reminisced about his aunt reading to him during her visits. Michael remembered that there were "shelves of good books" at home and Sanjeev shared that his parents did not think that watching television was suitable entertainment but instead encouraged reading by allowing him to buy as many books as he liked to read during his leisure time. Research in the United States (Lareau 2003), United Kingdom (Ball 2003) and Australia (Doherty 2009) have shown how middle-class parents use all means possible, investing both money and time, to secure school advantage for their children, whether through enrolment in private schools or through provision of cultural capital in the form of extra-curricular activities. In the Singapore context, it seems that there is little difference in the "concerted effort" of university-educated parents to ensure the "transmission of differential advantages" (Lareau, 2003:5) by encouraging their children to pick up reading, something that was well-suited to later success in school readings.

No.	Reading Resources	Examples
1.	Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joshua: Then, the whole family stashes our complete collection of <i>Tintin</i> comics and <i>Asterix</i> comics in there [bookshelf] too. Other than that, there's my dad's collection of <i>Peanuts</i> and my mom's collection of <i>Lat</i> comics. [Email Reading Log, June 16, 2009] 2. Robert: I was read to frequently, and mostly from <i>Berestein Bears</i> and <i>The Magic School Bus</i>. I don't think I ever needed any encouragement to read, although my parents were quite supportive and actually bought quite a few of the books I wanted. [Email Reading Log, June 23, 2009]

2.	Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Robert: It [<i>Four Loves</i>] was recommended to me by my brother because he read it and it's quite a powerful book. [Group Interview, February 3, 2009] 2. Michael: My aunt has all the Jodi Picoult books so I just take them from her. [Michael, Group Interview, February 16, 2009]
3.	School	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Roger: I remember quiet reading in school. [Group Interview, January 16, 2009] 2. Joshua: I liked primary school books... <i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> I loved. <i>Frederick</i> was ok. [Group Interview, February 3, 2009]
4.	Bookstores	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Michael: I just picked up the book [<i>Fifth Avenue</i>] because it was there [Borders]. [Interview, March 27, 2009] 2. Sanjeev: I go to the bookstore, usually Kinokuniya, and pick up something from the bestsellers' list. Usually I find something I like after four or five books. [Email Reading Log, January 29, 2009]
5.	Libraries	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joel: I mostly borrow books from the library. [Interview, March 26, 2009] 2. Joshua: I just found out there are two more books in the series [<i>Indian</i> series by Lynne Reid Banks] and I'll be borrowing them from the library. [Email Reading Log, June 16, 2009]
6.	Other media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joel: I watch anime and read manga. It started with <i>Pokemon</i> which I used to watch, and then I moved on to manga. They can be quite philosophical. [Survey, October 13, 2008] 2. Robert: I watched the movie [<i>Lord of the Rings</i>] and I saw the details and it looked interesting so I thought I'd try it [the book]... But <i>Lord of the Rings</i> is actually quite a good interpretation as far as it goes. [Group Interview, May 26, 2009]

Table 2. Reading Resources.

As they grew older, the boys learnt to access books on their own through visits to the library and bookshops and through online resources, and gained more independence from parents and siblings in the kinds of books they read. Peer influence and school recommendations saw the boys reading Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling's books

as part of their regular diet, and their primary school curriculum ensured that they engaged with children's classics such as *Charlotte's Web* (White 2004). By the time the boys reached secondary school, their reading diet and practices became more varied although they still valued reading as a leisure activity: Jeremiah read *manga* on a regular basis and Robert liked "Terry Pratchett and British humour" whereas Michael declared he read "anything" from classics to "chick lit" and Singapore literature when he could find the time.

"I Love Sports and am a big fan of 'chick lit': Reading as Feminine Practice versus Reading "Girl Books"

While reading was for most part perceived as a solitary activity, social networks of home, peers and schools are important to encourage reading. As Moss (2007) has pointed out in her nuanced study of the reading practices of boys and girls in four primary schools in the UK, reading networks were essential to provide resources and encouragement to read and to sustain reading, regardless of gender. In contrast to uncomplicated studies of boys and girls' reading practices, it was clear from the boys in my study that there was a need to distinguish between reading as an activity and reading "girl books". Given home and school backgrounds where reading was encouraged as a valued activity (both for leisure and as academic pursuit), the boys were not ashamed to identify as readers. Reading was not perceived as a feminine activity (cf. Cherland 1994) and reading was not limited to non-fiction. The group interview with Michael (a national canoeist), Sanjeev (a school runner and prefectorial board member) and Roger (a violinist with the school symphonic orchestra) about reading *Life of Pi* showed how it was acceptable practice to read and to recommend readings, whether verbally or through blogging. That many of the boys in this class read widely and recommended readings to each other was borne out in the survey data; even boys who did not identify themselves as readers could list at least four books read in the last six months, and many of them indicated that they sometimes selected books based on friends' recommendations.

In addition, it was alright for these boys to engage in “discourses of feeling” as well as “discourses of action” (Simpson 1996), as reflected in Michael’s blog entry.

Recently I have been noticing how beautiful life is. Perhaps it's due to the novel Cliff lent me entitled *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. Although I've only read up till Chapter 17, but I can safely say that this book has been an intellectually challenging read yet one which could accompany you as you go through your lazy Sunday afternoon alone. It describes in length the wonders of this world as the protagonist "Piscine Molitor Patel" otherwise known as Pi Patel goes through different experiences as the son of a zookeeper and a believer of 3 religions: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Yann Martel has used the magic of words to allow me to understand this world better. [Blog Entry, retrieved on February 18, 2009]

Michael reflects on the Booker prize-winning novel as an inspirational and thought-provoking novel, expressing an emotional as well as intellectual response to the novel. Michael explained unabashedly to me that a good book “touched” him and that he was open to reading different kinds of books. This “emotional” response to books was not limited to Michael. The following sharing by Robert shows an insightful analysis of character as well as personal identification with a main character.

Under the humor and the satire lies a theme of self-acceptance and confidence, and the main character, Tiffany is rather like me, I’m afraid: inquisitive and perhaps looked down by elders, yet possessed of a unique character. It’s rare that I find a character that I really can relate to, but Terry Pratchett does it so effortlessly it’s almost disturbing in its accuracy. [Email Reading Log, February 2, 2009]

For Robert, Terry Pratchett could be accessed at an intellectual level (in terms of the social issues dealt with), at an entertainment level (at plot level and through humour), and at an

emotional level (through personal identification). Like Michael, Robert was able to access a single text at multiple levels of analysis and enjoyment.

However, while reading and sharing about one's readings were acceptable, boys reading "girl books" was not completely tolerated,

Sanjeev: I wanted to read the Sophie Kinsella –

Roger: - *The Shopaholics* –

Sanjeev: But then my sis said it's so damn gay so I didn't buy it in the end.

Roger: My sister read the book. I saw the book. I wanted to throw it out. It looked so... dumb?

Sanjeev: Really? I thought it looked appealing.

Chin: (to Michael) Why do you read chick lit?

Michael: To understand the chicks better! [All laugh.] As in, it's nice. I think it's nice.

Roger: Don't you feel dumb reading it?

Michael: No, damn *shiock*² ah. Like, it's nice. I can relate to it.

[Group Interview, February 6, 2009]

During the group interview, the boys adopted different positions to reading "chick lit". For Michael, it was something he could relate to at that point in time (it was a phase and he declared by the end of the study that he was no longer interested in chick lit) and was not afraid to admit to reading. Yet, in his introduction of himself during the survey, Michael was quick to portray himself as a jock ("I love sports...") who was also sensitive and open to reading different kinds of books ("... and I'm a big fan of chick lit."). On the other hand, Roger vehemently opposed the reading of "dumb" books, a category to which "chick lit" belonged. Sanjeev, except for his sister's homophobic accusation that the book was "damn gay" might have read the book given its attractive cover and blurb.

² Singapore colloquial term for "very enjoyable".

What the study clearly shows is that gender alone does not predict whether students are likely to read and what they choose to read. For these boys from privileged print-rich backgrounds, the value placed on reading at home and in school made the construction of reading identities a strong possibility. The varied responses to the reading of “chick lit” also reminds us of the complex “tapestry of practices” (Ball 2003:76) within classed choices, reminding us that class decisions are not set in stone but subject to individual agency. Peer influence served as a particular node in the network that encouraged reading and reading particular kinds of books, even though individuals made choices as to whether to read or not and what kinds of books to read.

Cultural Crossings in Everyday Readings

The concept of crossing (Rampton 2005), suggesting movement from one place to another, captures how the boys were flexible in their readings. In this study, the boys made different kinds of crossings in their everyday reading practices – across different cultures, genres and media – as part of their global literate identities. Beyond the actual unfamiliarity of the geographical settings of story worlds, there were hidden cultural codes (Anderson 1994) and plural meanings (Barthes 1974) that the students had to learn to read to understand both the word and the world (Freire 1991). The stories read came from particular backgrounds, and required specific reading practices for the boys to access the meanings in the stories, and their early childhood readings provided a “home advantage” (Lareau 1989) by contributing to the ease with which they learned how to read culturally more diverse and difficult texts. That these boys were familiar with Eurocentric texts was echoed by the Dean of English when she explained to me that they chose to start with “books that the boys are familiar with before moving on to postcolonial and world literature”. While India and China may be geographically closer, and the poems in the Singaporean anthology *No Other City* (Pang and Lee 2000) situated in Singapore, for these boys, it was not geographical distance

but rather cultural and linguistic distance as well as conceptual difficulty that marked what was easy and what was difficult. Their ability to make these cultural crossings could thus be seen as a learned process where the school curriculum was scaffold to help them see across concepts and cultures as they matured. The following narrative vignette demonstrates how students were schooled in their readings of the word and the world.

Jonathan, Gary, Michael and Robert are presenting. Their task is to reflect on the character of Obi in *No Longer at Ease* and the protagonist in a short movie by a Singaporean film-maker, Royston Tan. Jonathan explains that “the girl in the *New York Girl* (2005) wants to be the first Singaporean girl in Hollywood and Obi wants to change society. Both of them want to break free from stereotypes.” At the end of the presentation, Mr. Lee notes that “both characters feel a sense of displacement that is linked to their identities. Obi wants to get rid of the corrupt Nigerian idea but there is a clash when reality differs.” [Fieldnotes, February 17, 2009]

Through school readings and discussions, the boys acquire the ability to identify culture as an underlying source of tension in both literature and life. Sanjeev demonstrates his ability to grasp cultural conflicts in the short stories read in class in the following interview.

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, 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*, it’s like Them against Us. [Interview, March 20, 2009]

This familiarity led Robert to remark that “it’s almost certain that one will find issues to do with cultural conflict in what we read”.

Beyond cultural issues, the boys were also able to cross different genres and media, partly through schooled exposure but also through their individual exposure to various genre and media forms. Robert deftly explains how the different genre and media forms affected the book and musical version of *Wicked* (Maguire 2004) in the following excerpt.

The musical is more or less based around the friendship as opposed to the whole underlying story of Elphaba in the book. In the book, you have Elphaba portrayed as this demon child at birth, with fangs and all but you don't see it in the musical because it's not really important, in a sense, to the whole message of friendship and stuff... the majority of the musical is about friendship and all. [Group Interview, May 26, 2009]

The ability to make such genre, media and cultural crossings is a form of flexibility as the boys were able to access different kinds of texts and understand the different purposes served.

This progression to reading a wider variety of literature was also evident in the boys' out-of-school readings. Roger, who declared that he only "read classics" because "they are worth reading" and who was trying to plough through *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy 2004) at the beginning of the study, was more open to contemporary literature such as *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini 2003) towards the end of the study. Sanjeev, who admitted that he "mostly read American literature" at the beginning of the study progressed to novels by Japanese writers towards the second half of 2009. He had picked up *What I Talk about when I Talk about Running* (Murakami 2009) at the airport, and had liked it well enough to decide to explore other books by Japanese writers. The airport and travelling in fact served as a metaphor for how the boys read at times: just as travelling to other destinations was a regular affair (for example, Robert had flown to Whistler, Vancouver, at least twice to visit his godmother and four of the boys went on a holiday to an overseas destination at least once a year), reading to imagine other worlds (Anderson 1991) was the norm. The boys could be said to be

cosmopolitan in their exposure to other worlds through their travels as well as their readings, and possessed at least a superficial awareness of the existence of different cultures.

Critical Evaluations

Bourdieu suggests that the critical attitude is one mark of the middle classes. The ability to distinguish between high and low art, to decide one's superior preference as a matter of taste is in fact "social necessity made second nature" (Bourdieu 1984:474). The boys' confidence in books and their reading judgments was what placed them above the masses even though they read popular literature as well as classic literature. Though habits inculcated from young, they are plugged into global book markets through informal institutions such as international bookstores Borders and Kinokuniya as well as institutionalized book markets through their school readings. As such, book consumption was very much part of their identities and their knowledge of books provided them with the confidence with which to evaluate their readings and the reading practices of others.

The boys evaluated books from two different criteria - aesthetic value (literary value) and entertainment value (popular value), and positioned themselves as competent readers who were able to evaluate their readings and make independent reading choices. In the following excerpt, Sanjeev positioned himself as someone who was aware of the quality of available choices, even if he did not always read what he considered valuable.

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.

[Group Interview, February 6, 2009]

Sanjeev appealed to the dual criteria of entertainment and aesthetic value to evaluate Dan Brown's novels, but ultimately seemed to indicate that the worth of one's reading should be judged by aesthetic rather than entertainment value. Though he admitted to reading "trashy novels" when he did not "feel like reading anything too heavy", he was quick to criticize such books from an ironic distance (Ang 1982). By being able to identify the "trashy" nature of the book, he positioned himself as someone with taste – who could distinguish what was good and what was not but who also allowed himself the occasional indulgence of reading that which was worthless from an aesthetic angle but appealed to the popular masses. Despite Michael's vehement objections to Sanjeev's categorization of Dan Brown, he too was a flexible reader who could access both popular and prize-winning literature.

This critical evaluation was also applied to school readings. In the following interview, Robert and Joshua openly critique school choices of literature.

Robert: The thing with all these award-winning books is that... sometimes I think that the people who give literature prizes don't want to be entertained.

Joshua: [laughs] They're the super-artsy people who have very weird taste.

Robert: Who appreciate minimalist plays and such. [Group Interview, May 26, 2009]

Robert and Joshua juxtaposed the concept of entertainment for the masses against award-winning books that do not appeal to the masses. Robert's comment about people "who appreciate minimalist plays and such" was in direct reference to his Drama Club teacher who had wanted to put up a minimalist play for a national drama competition. Robert was familiar with literary styles and genres, knew about high culture and had the terms to talk it, even if he scoffed at it. This criticality was a form of distinction for him; he felt confident enough of his knowledge of different kinds of works to critique the school's choices.

The boys' familiarity with books was what entitled them to criticize the books and critique what they and others read from an ironic distance. They were able to read high and

popular culture and were confident about their own reading choices. They were able to evaluate the kinds of books they read and categorized them as either literary or popular, and were able to confidently label themselves as particular kinds of readers in relation to what others read. Distinction for these boys lay not so much in the books they read but in their confidence and their flexible ability to access different kinds of texts and make critical evaluations of these readings.

Playing the Game in School: Tactical Readings

Lareau (2003) points out that the ability to play the game or to move with ease within institutional structures is one mark of middle-class upbringing, and high-achieving students in Demerath's (2008) study reflect this same flexibility at manipulating the system to achieve the grades as well as educational outcomes they see as contributing to their market relevance. The boys in the study played the game in their school readings, choosing to comply with institutional demands of reading while resisting school readings in other ways. For example, although Robert thought that the school choice of texts were boring, he had to "grin and bear it" because he wanted to do well in his grades. The boys thus complied with school norms of literacy through classroom participation, written work and oral presentations that formed the modes of assessment for literary competence.

De Certeau's (1984) concept of "tactics" and "strategies" highlights the flexible practices of these boys in their relation to school literature. For de Certeau, many everyday practices are tactical in character. Strategies are moves that are situated in "proper" places and can be linked to institutional relations. On the other hand, tactics are disassociated from institutions and describe the improvisational aspect of practice. The act of reading is tactical in nature, where a reader "insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation"(1984:xxi), choosing to read the text as and when he pleased and seizing opportunities to read into the text what the author did not mean. On the other hand, school-

sanctioned ways of reading can thus be viewed as approved strategic moves where readers are encouraged to view the status of a text as well as what the text is trying to say in institutionally-approved ways. While these boys had to read and write in accordance with school-sanctioned ways of reading, they also chose to read these texts with the twin lenses of school-derived aesthetic criteria and the mass consumption criteria of entertainment. Thus, while Michael professed indifference to school work, he participated selectively in classroom discussions and handed in ‘A’ essays. He was proud of his identity as a good literature student and as the following quickfire exchange with Ms. Rani about the character of Macbeth showed, was deft at textual analysis and conveying his “natural” inclination for the subject.

Michael: His “vaulting ambition” clouded his judgment.

Ms. Rani: He lost his morality in the process.

Michael: The fact that his ambition was so great...

Ms. Rani: Exactly, in the end, the tables turned, and Macbeth rather than Lady Macbeth becomes the domineering one.

Michael: Now you know who is wearing the pants. [Fieldnotes, April 21, 2009]

Ms. Rani commented to me that she was often surprised by Michael’s excellent written work because of his professed indifference and sometimes uncouth behaviour in the classroom.

Like Willis’ (1975) working-class lads in the Britain of the 1970s, these boys resisted school culture in their critique of school readings. Unlike the lads, they actually believed in the value of the study of literature and were willing to comply with institutional norms that they saw as having tangible and intangible benefits in their acquisition of a globally valued literacy. These observations are in line with Reay’s observations that middle-class boys had

“less to contest” because “they are served by a curriculum and system aligned with their capitals and interests” (2006:344).

Yet, complicatedly, the boys did not just see reading literature as a means to a good grade and better educational opportunity. They enjoyed the subject even though they may not see how it could contribute directly to future educational endeavours. Thus, Sanjeev, who planned to pursue a MBA degree in an Ivy League university, admitted that he “liked literature” and that it helped hone his analytical and language skills and his “understanding of human nature”. Yet, he also made special effort to work on his writing and improve on his grades so that he could acquire a literary identity that was awarded with ‘A’ essays by the end of the year. The ability to make these tactical moves was part of the boys’ flexible manoeuvring in the construction of their identities as global literate citizens able to plug into different forms of literacies appropriately. The ability to read different kinds of texts for different purposes and to know when and how to apply these readings was a form of intercultural capital that they were unconscious of but utilized accordingly. As tactical readers, they were able to plug into different knowledge forms, including those that had symbolic value and potential economic value in portraying them as highly literate individuals within and beyond the Singapore context.

Conclusion

Guillory (2003) has suggested that canon construction is really less an issue of representation and more an issue of the distribution of social power, a form of cultural capital, which regulates access to literacy through the practices of reading and writing. The boys’ possession of knowledge in the form of English school classics and more recent postcolonial works as well as their knowledge of contemporary prizewinning and popular literature was a form of cultural capital. 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. It was their relation to knowledge – their ability to utilize such knowledge in appropriate situations – that put them in a position of power. Through their grasp of both strategic and tactical moves in their everyday reading practices, these boys were able to demonstrate flexible literate selves relevant for global English-speaking markets. They know when to use these moves, and to shift between modes of reading for school purposes and for their own purposes. Their flexibility is a form of power that allowed them to plug into global notions of literacy relevant to international markets in their localized context.

The study demonstrates that the acquisition of the boys' global literate identities cannot be isolated from structures of class (Collins 2009). Although the high value placed on academic performance in the Singapore context and the huge government, societal and family investment in education means that there are many possibilities opened to Singapore students, educators need to be aware that learning to read and learning to read particular kinds of texts are not as "natural" as educators often believe, and gendered notions of reading and identity can be complicated when set alongside issues of class. As Neuman and Celano (2001) have demonstrated in their study of four neighbourhoods in an urban area in the United States, middle-class parents and low-income parents access resources such as libraries differently. They suggest that providing access to literacy must include examining the real opportunities that children have in specific situations in order to provide better access to literacy. This study demonstrates that as literacy educators, we need to pay more attention to the access students have to specific nodes in the invisible network of resources instead of purely focussing on reading methods and instructions that categorize students into poor and good readers without attention to the contexts in which reading habits and practices were cultivated.

While reading fiction is not the only avenue through which a global identity is acquired, it is certainly one area which demonstrates how flexibility in terms of literacies is a

classed concept. Rather than celebrating the agency and achievements of these boys as “shape-shifting portfolio” individuals (Gee, 2004), we need to complicate the problematic issue of literacy acquisition by pointing out that availability of rich resources and networks do go towards the construction of reading identities that align with school-sanctioned literacies and perceived global-mindedness. The richness of their resources that allowed the boys to construct identities as global literate citizens highlights the lack of others, and educators need to ask how meritocratic literacy education can take place when some children are better prepared than others from early childhood for flexibility. Given the different starting points and constraints for different populations in individual systems, how can flexible literacies be understood and framed to prepare students for a globalized world, and what is the role of literature study in this context? Future research can examine the issue of literacy acquisition in different social and national contexts (while taking the global into account) to further refine our understanding of literacies and identities in a globalized world.

What the study also highlights is how we may not be serving our students if we do not teach them to “read” their own reading histories and to understand from a critical perspective that their reading stances are not neutral. While I am impressed by the cosmopolitan readings of these boys, I am worried that they may be acquiring a superficial awareness of culture (Resnik 2008) that does not delve deeper into social inequities from their vantage point of privilege. Finally, my involvement in this study has emphasised my own lack of understanding as a literacy educator, despite having been a practitioner in the field for more than six years. Hicks (2002) reminds us that teachers draw on our own reading histories as teachers to teach, and reminds us of the importance of “seeing”. For myself, sharing a similar reading history as the boys in the study made me blind to the linguistic and cultural difficulties embedded in the texts I brought to other less-privileged classrooms. The study highlights a need in pre-service and continuing education for literacy (literature) teachers –

the need to foreground teachers' own non-neutral histories and backgrounds, their own learning identities so that they can understand their own class-based limitations as starting points for their own educational journeys.

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