

# Boys' Literacy Development: Navigating the Intersection of Popular Culture, New Literacies, and High-Stakes Assessments

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**Abstract:** Prior scholarship suggests that many boys are disengaged from school-based literacy because they do not see its value or significance in their lives. In response, this study investigates the role of popular culture and new literacies in motivating adolescent boys within secondary English. Drawing on sociocultural approaches to literacy research, this case study at a boys' high school in Australia builds upon previous research on boys' literacy and offers insights into the potential connections between boys' school-based literacy practices and their out-of-school interests and experiences. The findings indicate that teachers positively believe in the potential for new literacies and popular culture texts to motivate and engage adolescent boys. At the same time, the study suggests that some boys find new literacy practices unnecessary as they move into their senior years of high school and prepare for the New South Wales Higher School Certificate exam.

## Introduction

International assessments indicate that students who perform well on literacy assessments are those who regularly read for enjoyment, use specific strategies, and engage in self-guided learning (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). As students move into high school, literacy becomes increasingly pertinent to academic achievement, as they need to have the capacity to 'synthesise and evaluate information' (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p. 588). Indeed, Manuel (2012) indicates that success in schooling is contingent on students' use and command of language across the gamut of modes. Moreover, students' motivation is enhanced when they perceive reading and writing as satisfying 'a personal need' and having 'a clear purpose and reward' (Broughton & Manuel, 2012, p. 104).

In the last decade, a widening gender gap in literacy achievement has emerged from the results of national and international standardised tests, including Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Programme for International Assessment (PISA). This has led to greater concerns regarding boys' literacy, motivation, and engagement (e.g. Fisher & Frey, 2012; Munns, Arthur, Downs, Gregson, Power, Sawyer, Singh, Thistleton-Martin & Steele, 2006; Sawyer, Singh & Zhao, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010).

Literacy plays a significant part in boys' academic success (Munns et al., 2006). However, difficulties arise when hegemonic versions of masculinity operate against being literate. For instance, boys may perceive reading as feminised (Wilhelm & Smith, 2012); therefore, reading may be avoided in the construction of their sense of masculinity and identity (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In recent years, scholars have considered how popular culture can engage

reluctant male students and encourage their interaction with new literacies, multiple modalities, and digital tools (Munns et al., 2006; Steinkuehler & King, 2009). Consequently, teachers can harness students' out-of-school literacies and their interest in popular culture to make reading enjoyable and relevant to their lives.

This case study investigated how integrating popular culture and new literacies can motivate boys in their literacy practices. Situated in an Australian boys' government school, the study examined students' and teachers' beliefs and practices related to boys' literacy achievement as well as the motivational potential of new literacies that are increasingly digital, multimodal, and participatory. The study asks:

- To what extent do popular culture texts and new literacies influence boys' engagement in secondary English?
- What beliefs do English teachers have about using pop culture to motivate male students?

### Theoretical framework

From a sociocultural perspective, literacy practices are shaped by social, cultural, and material contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1997). More specifically, *new literacies* include both 'new technical stuff' and 'new ethos stuff' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, pp. 7–9). The new technical stuff involves media and technology, such as multimodal texts and digital tools. The new ethos stuff is a shift in our understanding how the world uses technology and includes literacies that are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed in nature. Notably, new literacies afford new social practices within local and global contexts. For instance, digital storytelling, instant messaging, blogging, programming, and video gaming are all examples of new literacy practices (see Black, 2010; Cowan, 2010; Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Davies & Merchant, 2007; Fields, Magnifico, Lammers, & Curwood, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Vasudevan, DeJaynes & Schmier, 2010). New literacies are situated in diverse social and cultural contexts, which then significantly shape the literate lives of young people.

In this study, the construct of motivation is taken from Deci and Ryan's (2000) definition of self-determination theory as a base for understanding boys' motivation related to new literacies and popular culture texts. Human needs underpinned by autonomy, competence,

and relatedness (that is, connections with others) drive students' desires to engage in particular activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). More specifically, *motivation* is defined by Munns et al. (2006) as 'individual energy' that stems from a student's desire and willpower to learn, to work effectively, and to reach their potential at school. Prior research indicates that new literacies can motivate young adults by offering multimodal representations, diverse pathways to participation, and opportunities to engage with an authentic audience (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013) and that popular culture can connect students to the school curriculum (Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010; Morrell, 2002).

### Literature review

Literacy learning within physical and digital contexts, and through students' engagement with print-based and multimodal texts, is now recognised as important and relevant to students' lives (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999; Curwood, 2013; Guzzetti, Elliott & Welsch, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Recent scholarship offers a more nuanced view on the ways that teachers perceive new literacies and their capacity to motivate and engage students; specifically, they emphasise the need for teachers to bring students' out-of-school experiences and literacy practices into classroom contexts (Burn, Buckingham, Parry & Powell, 2010; Lammers, Magnifico, & Curwood, 2014; Lewis, 2007).

### Boys' literacy and motivation

Research suggests that students' motivation is influenced by several factors, including purpose and meaning (Broughton & Manuel, 2012; Sawyer et al., 2009), agency and choice (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), and teacher pedagogy (Manuel, 2012; Pitcher, Albright & Delaney, 2007). Munns et al. (2006) suggest that when classrooms connect the curriculum to boys' interests, boys' motivation and engagement are favourably affected. Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) seminal work on literacy in the lives of young men found that boys wanted to read material that 'fed [their] pre-existing interests' (p. 108), but felt that school denied them choice and control, and hence any sense of 'personal agency or competence' (p. 109). Sawyer et al. (2009) argue that schooling only becomes relevant and telling when a teacher's knowledge of 'boys' interests, aspirations, and imaginings' is meaningfully used to engage them,

connecting the curriculum to 'boys' interests and experiences' (p. 25).

There is often a disconnect between school literacy and boys' everyday lives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). As such, there continues to be strong concern for adolescent boys who are underperforming in literacy (e.g. Brozo, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Sawyer et al., 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Watson et al. (2010) suggest that boys may struggle as literacy learners because of their adherence to heavily masculine paradigms, their perception of English as a more feminine subject, and their belief that teachers fail to 'accommodate boys' interests and learning styles' (p. 358). However, these studies did not look towards building upon boys' cultural background knowledge through school-based engagement with popular culture.

#### *Popular culture and new literacies for literacy learning*

In recent years, researchers have posited the importance of using popular culture to engage students in literacy learning (e.g. Hagood et al., 2010; Morrell, 2002). As some boys choose not to engage in the literacy practices privileged in schools (Smith & Wilhelm, 2009), teaching with popular culture is potentially a means to combat this problem (Morrell, 2002). *Popular culture* can be broadly defined as cultural texts widely consumed in society (Hagood et al., 2010). These texts may provoke oppositional readings (Alvermann et al., 1999), and they are historically perceived to be unworthy of academic study. Morrell (2002) suggests that pop culture is a 'terrain of ideological struggle expressed through music, film, mass media artefacts, language, customs, and values' (p. 73).

Research indicates young people use a range of new literacies in out-of-school contexts and suggests there is a need to make school-based literacy more engaging and meaningful to their 'present and future lives in a digitally mediated world' (Lewis, 2007, p. 236). Burn et al. (2010) contend that there is a substantial gap between students' out-of-school experiences of digital cultures and the forms of learning that are currently available in schools. Thomas (2007) argues that teachers need to take notice of the 'pleasure, motivation and pure joy' (p. 162) of their students' engagement with various new literacies and popular culture. To understand the impact of integrating popular culture and new literacies on boys' motivation, this case study investigated related teacher and student perspectives, beliefs, and practices.

## **Methods**

### *Research context*

Alton Boys' High School (all names are pseudonyms) is a secondary government boys' school situated in metropolitan Sydney, Australia, with an enrolment of 1100 male students across Years 7–12; over half have a language background other than English. The school seeks to engage boys, promote well-being, and 'build fine men' (ACARA, 2013, para. 1). In the Higher School Certificate, Alton Boys' High School generally achieves above average results in the subject of English, and it is well known for its achievements in mathematics and science. In the 2012 exam, for instance, 70% of English (Advanced) students achieved a band 5 or higher, and 39% of English (Standard) students achieved a band 5 or higher<sup>1</sup>.

### *Participants*

Participants in this study included five Year 10 male students and seven English teachers. The students took part in a focus group interview as well as individual interviews. These focused on their in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, use of media and technology, and attitudes toward the use of popular culture and new literacies in motivating them to engage in the English classroom. At the school, students were sorted into streamed English classes, with stream A as the top class, followed by stream B, and so on (see Table 1); the student participants in the study were representative of their respective classes. The seven members of the English faculty at Alton Boys High School participated in the study through a focus group interview and individual interviews that focused on their perspectives on using popular culture and new literacies in the classroom (see Table 2).

### *Data collection and analysis*

The study employed qualitative research methods within a site-specific case study. In addition to the focus group and individual interviews, lesson plans, programs, and student work samples were collected throughout the duration of the study. Data analysis consisted of an inductive thematic analysis across the transcribed interviews and focus groups as well as collected documents. In this way, triangulation was achieved to strengthen the rigour and trustworthiness of this study. Thematic analysis offered a way of seeing and making sense out of 'seemingly unrelated material' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). More specifically, an

**Table 1. Student participants, their English class, and their attitudes towards English**

Student Participant	English Class	Reflection
Adam	English B	'The Board of Studies isn't recognising that English isn't for everyone and English doesn't need to be for everyone.'
Matthew	English A	'I like reading obviously and I don't mind looking into the books and the history around them.'
Michael	English B	'I like comparing texts ... No one likes writing an essay but I thought – I don't know – I just enjoy comparing texts and seeing the comparisons between them.'
Lawrence	English D	'Some of the things we do in English – like analysing texts and stuff [...] it gets hard, in a way. But some things are hard and good [...] it sort of puts me off.'
Reese	English C	'You need a good book and a good teacher to help you get through [English].'

inductive thematic analysis helped bring together the data to effectively answer the research questions. The study used an iterative data analysis approach, which included preliminary coding followed by a cycle of closer descriptive coding. From this, the codes were grouped and then placed under threads in order to arrange the data into themes.

### Findings and discussion

While teachers repeatedly articulated their support for new literacies and popular culture texts, they were ever-conscious of the demands of the New South Wales English Syllabus. The findings suggest that teachers and students support the use of new literacy practices in schools, but only up to a certain point. Notably: (1) teachers valued the role of new literacy practices as an opportunity for student engagement with the secondary English curriculum; and (2) high-stakes assessments in NSW schools facilitated the devaluation of popular culture and new literacies for engagement in senior English classrooms. Indeed, teachers' perceptions of the content and structure of tests like NAPLAN and the HSC often undermined their views on using popular culture and new literacies. This presented a disconnect between boys' and teachers' beliefs about new literacy practices and the reality of high-stakes assessments.

**Table 2. Teacher participants and their thoughts on using popular culture in class.**

Teacher	Reflection
Brendan	'I think pop culture is one of the only things that we have at our disposal in order to make [the curriculum] accessible to the students.'
Edward	'I think you'd be a fool if you didn't [use popular culture]'
Robert	'There are clear benefits in using pop culture to engage. I think you're making it real-world and authentic for the kids.'
Vivian	'We try and encourage popular culture in different ways throughout.'
Sarah	'I think it's good that they can use things that the boys are interested in outside of school, because surely that's going to raise engagement.'
Renee	'I definitely think it can be a very effective way of getting boys into actual texts.'
Elliot	'I am hundred per cent in favour of [employing video games and online gaming], if I was allowed to.'

### Promoting literacy in young men's lives

At Alton Boys' High School, teachers asserted the importance of literacy as a significant, relevant, and purposeful experience in the lives of their students. Specifically, teachers indicated that popular culture was an essential element to support student motivation and engagement, create contemporary reference points for boys to connect with in their literacy practices, and provide a way into texts within the secondary English curriculum.

Teachers believed that using popular culture in the classroom offers a greater capacity to engage reluctant students. In particular, they repeatedly articulated their beliefs that boys need to perceive texts as significant and relevant to their lives (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Echoing the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2010) and Wilhelm and Smith (2012), Robert stated that boys perceive reading as 'passive ... rather than feminine. Because it's not something that they are actively engaged with.' To combat this, the teachers asserted that popular culture can serve as a means of engaging their unwilling male students. This perspective was reflected in the interviews and focus groups, as Edward emphatically suggested, 'I think you'd be a fool if you didn't [use popular culture]'. Likewise, Brendan explained, 'I think pop culture is one of the only things that we have at our disposal in order to make the curriculum accessible to the students.' These attitudes were prominent in the data and indicate that teachers can acknowledge and recognise the out-of-school literacy practices boys participate in, as they are often indispensable

to motivating and engaging them with the English curriculum.

For Edward, popular culture is a means of connecting boys with school-based literacy. His examples ranged from using *Pirates of the Caribbean* to explore archetypes, drawing on *Doctor Who* to teach science fiction, and employing a myriad of comic books and graphic novels. He said that for many boys, popular culture 'rewards fast' and offers a pathway to achievement. Edward added, 'I brought lots of graphic novels in. We've got *Astro Boy*, *Shaman King*, and lots of manga.' Furthermore, he recounted his use of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and explained how his students 'wrote intelligent essays about male-female relationships based on examining Buffy's relationships.' Edward's enthusiasm for films, graphic novels, and comics reflected his belief in the use of popular culture as a tool for motivating boys to engage with subject English.

Edward's reflections suggest adolescent boys need reference points that link their out-of-school interests with the texts and tasks they encounter in school. Edward's classroom practices reflect Morrell's (2002) claim that popular film and television are legitimately useful for academic instruction, Gomez, Schieble, Curwood, and Hasset's (2010) argument that graphic novels and online discussions can promote distributed cognition, and Lewis' (2007) assertion that school literacies need to be connected with boys' out-of-school literacies. This has significant implications for how teachers connect the curriculum to boys' lives in order to meaningfully engage them in the classroom. In this study, teachers valued and supported the use of popular culture for students to engage in reading and as a way in to accessing the NSW secondary English curriculum.

#### Encountering resistance in the English classroom

When teachers sought to create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for new literacies, students were sometimes disengaged because they found them lacking purpose. Sarah, in a discussion on using interactive videos and websites, claimed, 'They hated it. They were just saying 'Oh this is just so boring, Miss. Why do we have to do this?'' Vivian found it frustrating that her students were not engaging with an education-based social networking tool: 'I've set them up on Schoology. But at the moment they're so slack that not much is on there yet.' This serves to highlight that students may avoid these ways of engaging and

responding to texts, even when teachers try to use them as a motivational tool.

Integrating new literacies and pop culture does not necessarily lead to deep engagement (Curwood, 2012; Jacobs, 2012), as encountered by Sarah and Vivian. It is not enough to simply embrace the 'new technical stuff' of new literacies – it must be accompanied by the 'new ethos stuff,' which may require new approaches to instructional design and assessment. This was affirmed in the focus groups and interviews with students.

When asked if technology can create ways of engaging with the secondary English curriculum, Matthew repeatedly and insistently affirmed, 'It might – if it was done well.' The boys felt that teachers needed to be sufficiently competent when implementing digital tools and new literacies, and most of them agreed that their teachers failed to successfully use these within the classroom. Michael indicated, 'Teachers try to make an assignment interactive and use all these fun sites. Like Glogster was just complicated and annoying.' Adam added, 'There were lots of people struggling so much with the Glogster interface that they were at the point where they didn't know if they were going to be able to hand [the assignment] in.' This has significant implications for approaches that attempt to integrate new literacies and can potentially lead to students' disengagement.

#### Critically considering high-stakes assessments

While teachers believed that new literacy practices can positively impact boys' literacy, they also believed that their students lost interest in them as they entered their senior years of high school. Specifically, the students and teachers in the study tended to believe that using popular culture and new literacies became unnecessary during Years 11 and 12, which focus on the Higher School Certificate in New South Wales. This was seen in three different ways: 1) the senior years of high school are significantly shaped by the Stage 6 English curriculum and therefore, a teacher's choice in texts is limited; 2) the final examinations are written assessments, and teachers and students may feel pressure to prepare for them; and 3) students may lose interest in digitally mediated learning in favour of pursuing excellence in print-based reading and writing. These points are supported by prior research that found that teacher pedagogy and student learning are notably influenced by the HSC exam (Ayres, Sawyer, & Dinham, 2004). Moreover, high-stakes assessments often privilege traditional forms of English instruction

and may effectively discourage teachers from integrating digital tools, online spaces, and new literacies into their classrooms.

Each teacher interview revealed the significance, value, and demands of HSC English. Teachers almost always realised the potential for popular culture texts and new literacy practices to motivate students, but became hesitant regarding their use in senior English. Similarly, the boys positively acknowledged that their teachers integrated popular culture in order to engage them; however, they believed that certain texts and tools were irrelevant, as they did not contribute to their preparation for their HSC exams.

Teachers articulated their concern that in Years 11 and 12, reading for pleasure and writing for enjoyment are stifled because what is read in HSC English is dictated by the curriculum. Edward emphasised the fact that while new literacy practices can be a way into the English curriculum, his students became carried away with the importance and increased value of the HSC as a high-stakes assessment. He indicated that his students looked directly to the HSC exam and therefore did not see the value of reading for pleasure or being engaged by multimodal, digital, and participatory literacies.

Other teachers, like Brendan, emphasised the fact that the HSC is a written assessment and that writing is essentially a skill that needs to be honed as students move into the senior years of high school. While the Stage 6 Prescriptions include films alongside novels, plays, and poems, print-based forms of reading and writing are more highly valued over other forms. He explained, 'At the end of the day, the HSC assessment task is a written task, so they need to write.' This demonstrates the influence of high-stakes assessment on both the teaching and learning of English in NSW schools. Here the value of popular culture and new literacies is diminished by the high prioritisation of the HSC in the boys' lives.

This perspective was echoed by Matthew and Adam, two of the Year 10 students. Matthew explained, 'I reckon the English teachers could put more scaffolds online... so that you can put your information in that and make it and get used to how it should be structured. [We need scaffolds] for the different types of writing.' While Matthew did not explicitly link this with the HSC and the demands of writing involved in the examination referenced by Brendan, his response clearly echoes the prominence of print-based writing in NSW Stage 6 English. Similarly, Adam shared, 'I think that [writing] is a really important skill to

have especially with the HSC and all the writing that you do in that.' Even as a Year 10 student, he already understood the demands of HSC English in Year 12. Evidently, adolescent boys' literacy practices undergo a major shift as they move into the senior years; this reveals the pressures of testing English in high-stakes assessments, particularly in NSW.

At Alton Boys' High School, teacher Robert reflected on the fact that while the boys at his school eagerly used their government-issued laptops in Years 9 and 10, by Year 11 he claimed 'they don't want to bring them' and further stated that students have the mindset of 'Well, I'm not going to mess around with this'. Student Reese echoes this sentiment:

Honestly, I'd say veer away from using technology and using the Internet ... I mean, in Years 7, 8, and 9, things are pretty easy ... and now it's more like Year 10 we're all starting to turn around and going, 'You know, this isn't going to be too useful on the HSC.' ... Now it's more like, don't even bring [the laptops] to school or don't take them out of the bag. Because they get distracting ... So I'd say don't use technology in English especially.

These particular attitudes and beliefs reflect the pressure of the HSC on NSW students, often at the expense of engaging them with new literacies and popular culture. This is significant to understanding the influence of the texts and literacy skills that are heavily privileged in tests like NAPLAN and the HSC.

### Conclusions and implications

From *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Macbeth* to *Doctor Who* and *Astro Boy*, the teachers at Alton Boys' High School integrated new texts and tools in an effort to engage students. Despite encountering some resistance, teachers believed that boys can be motivated to participate in school-based literacy practices through the successful implementation of popular culture and new literacies in the secondary English curriculum. The study, however, shows the problematic effect of the HSC on adolescent boys' perception of English, where the value of literacy is sometimes distorted by the reality of high-stakes assessments. In NSW, print-based forms of reading and writing may be privileged over new literacies that are digitally mediated, particularly as students move into the senior years of high school.

Teachers in this study believed in the significance and relevance of literacy within young men's lives. In particular, they valued and created opportunities for boys to engage with new literacies to motivate them in school-based learning. But as Mills (2010) highlights,

teachers of English need to do more than just integrate boys' out-of-school interests and literacy practices. With the focus on the HSC present at Alton Boys' High, teachers must be conscious of the decisions they make in their instruction as high-stakes testing may diminish student engagement and the enjoyment of subject content (Jones, 2007). Moreover, if they integrate new literacies into the curriculum, they must embrace the new ethos alongside the new technology.

This study takes a sociocultural perspective and highlights how English teachers can make informed decisions to motivate their students. It suggests that teachers must create a culture of using new literacies and popular culture to engage students to foster authentic learning experiences, including in relation to both formative and summative assessments. For instance, this can be achieved through fostering critical class discussions via a class blog or a class social networking platform when closely studying mandated texts such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Similarly, students' creative and critical work can be published online to give students an authentic audience and purpose. In addition, NSW English faculties need to value the out-of-school literacies boys participate in and actively encourage the use of these to foster a love of reading, writing, and designing. Notably, the boys in the study firmly asserted how teachers need to incorporate students' interests and choice of texts to effectively motivate them in English. For instance, a survey to poll students' interests and learn about their out-of-school experiences can inform teachers' instructional design.

Building on this study, future research can investigate the relationship between implementing new literacy practices and boys' motivation to engage with the NSW secondary English curriculum. Of particular note, it may be useful to examine the literacy practices of boys from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers, researchers, parents, and policymakers alike must critically consider the role of high-stakes tests like NAPLAN and HSC, and whether these are accurate measures of student learning. This study suggests that to maximise student achievement and engagement, including in the senior years of high school, teachers must teach according to the diverse needs of their students and confidently navigate the intersection between popular culture, new literacy practices, and high stakes assessments. As Brendan proclaimed, 'I think pop culture is essential to use. The minute we stop using pop culture is the minute we start becoming backward in our thinking.'

## Note

- 1 *Editor's note:* In the NSW Higher School Certificate Band, student results are reported in performance bands, with Band 6 representing 90–100 marks, and Band 5 representing 80–89 marks. Average performance in most courses is a mark in the mid 70s (Band 4). For further explanation, see: <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/hsc-results/understanding.html>
- 2 Year 11 (Preliminary) and 12 (HSC) English in NSW is governed by the *Stage 6 English Syllabus*. In the HSC year, the English Prescriptions document lists particular texts to be studied in a Prescribed Area of Study and a range of Modules for each of the HSC English courses. For further information, see: [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus\\_hsc/english/eng-std-adv-prescriptions-2015-20.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/english/eng-std-adv-prescriptions-2015-20.html)

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