

Exploration of Generative Themes and Storylines to Understand Boys' Non-Completion of School

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Introduction

The concern in Australia about boys and girls leaving school early has become prominent in social, political and educational arenas over the past two decades. The Apparent Retention Rate⁵ (ARR) to Year 12 indicated that in 2002, 19.3% of females and 30.2% of males left before completing Year 12 in Australian schools (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). Despite the steady rise in completion rates for boys, the ARR of 69.8% in 2002 is deemed to be low considering that the successful completion of Year 12 has important benefits to students.

How well Australian boys perform during the compulsory years of schooling has generated consistent interest from academics, school personnel and state education departments alike. Considerable research nationally (Ball & Lamb 2001; Collins et al. 2000; Lamb et al. 2004, McMillan & Marks 2003) and internationally (Arnot et al. 1998, 1999; Cullingford 1990, 1999, 2002; Erskine 1999; Fine 1991) has highlighted that boys experience problems at school in terms of learning, behaviour, achievement and participation when compared to girls. In particular, the retention of boys to Year 12 has been problematic. This paper reports on themes identified as common with 22 school leaving boys from three different social contexts – provincial, rural and metropolitan – and two sites were chosen from each social context. Analysis of the themes will provide greater clarity to what motivated their early school leaving decisions.

Method

As this research contributed to a larger ARC/SPIRT study⁶, the choice of secondary schools in certain social locations in Queensland was primarily driven by the study design of the ARC/SPIRT project. On the advice of Education Queensland six schools were chosen to be included in the research. Preparation for the boys' interviews began in January 2001 to ensure there was sufficient time to successfully track and interview any

⁵ The Apparent Retention Rate is a crude index of retention in that it shows the number of students who remain in Year 12 as a percentage of the number in that cohort who started secondary school the relevant number of years previously (Collins et al. 2000). It does not account for inter-sector, inter-state or repeating students.

⁶ This research parallels a larger three-year longitudinal study entitled *Factors affecting boys' engagement with schooling at the Secondary level* (2000) project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC)/Strategic Partnerships with Industry – Research and Training Scheme (SPIRT). The project was co-managed by Education Queensland (EdQLD) as the Industry partner and James Cook University (JCU) Townsville.

boys who had left the selected schools early. Each school provided the name and contact details of boys who had left their school during or after Year 10, and the researcher contacted the boys from each school⁷.

The research combined two similar analytical tools to analyse the boys' narratives: generative themes (Freire 1972) and Bruner's (1990) concept of storylines.

Storylines and Generative themes

Bruner (1990) argued the centrality and importance of culture as constitutive of individual action and thinking. He stated that:

it is culture, not biology that shapes human life and the human mind that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system. It does this by imposing the patterns inherent in the culture's symbolic systems – its language and discourse modes, the forms of logical and narrative explication, and the patterns of mutually dependent communal life (Bruner 1990 p. 35).

Bruner viewed culture as instrumental in the construction of human thought, mind and action. He claimed that individuals drew from 'tools' provided in their existing culture, i.e. shared symbolic systems of traditionalised ways of living and working together. He argued that individuals used storylines as a communicative tool to describe their understanding of the meanings ascribed in a cultural community.

Freire (1972 p. 76) claimed that his concept of 'generative themes' found in narrative, assisted the reader in developing a 'critical consciousness'. He said that individuals essentially challenged their surrounding circumstances, and in doing so, recognised the cultural and social constraints under which they lived. The generative themes were expressed in terms of oppositions, and the exploration of them constituted the same cultural and social constraints.

The initial analysis of the boys' narratives was intended to be broad and general, seeking to identify the 'generative themes' that manifested in and through the boys' narratives. In order to appreciate any variation between and amongst the six broader social contexts, a closer exploration of how the generative themes manifest in each boys' personal circumstance was required. The way in which this was achieved was by using Bruner's (1990) model of the role of storylines, his concept of 'meaning-making' and the processes by which meanings are created and negotiated within a cultural community. He defined 'story' as:

a vicarious experience and a treasury of narratives comprising reports of real experience, or offerings of culturally shaped imagination (Bruner 1990 p. 54).

⁷ All boys' names and town locations are pseudonyms.

The generative themes identified in the boys' narratives were then analysed to recognise which storylines each boy manifested in their personal circumstance. By exploring the boys' meaning-making processes, constituted by the local discourses available to them, and attending to the storylines that emerged from the generative themes found in their narratives, the analysis provided an insight into how the boys' 'made sense' of many decisions affecting their lives.

This paper takes the position that an individual's actions, thoughts and attitudes are constructed through the dominant cultural discourses of their community. The purpose of the thematic analysis was to identify any overarching themes common to the boys' narratives as a whole. After thoroughly examining the boys' transcripts and noting the themes that emerged, the thematic analysis revealed seven generative themes common to the 22 boys' narratives. The generative themes were then explored in relation to the boys' early school leaving decisions, as they related to the school context. The seven generative themes reflected that the boys:

All commented on the impact teachers had on the quality of their school experiences
 Described the lack of application and relevance school-based learning offered to their post-school pathway
 Had invested time researching and planning for their career
 Possessed a strong work ethic
 Expressed a desire to start their career early, i.e. have a 'head-start' over others
 Had a view of the type of person they were, i.e. their strengths/weaknesses, likes and dislikes
 Had knowledge of local experiences.

In explaining the significance of these aspects of their schooling, the boys took up a range of storylines in the school context to explain their school experiences and early school leaving decision. Whilst undertaking the thematic analysis, it was evident that themes 1 - 3 were more prominent in boys' references to the school context than to the broader social context. This paper will explore only one of these three generative themes and the storylines that underpin it, as illustrated in Table 1.

Generative Theme	Storylines
The impact of teachers	<i>'Good' teachers</i> <i>'Cutting slack'</i> <i>'Bad' teachers</i> <i>Abuse of power and authority</i> <i>Loss of student voice</i>

Table 1: *The relationship between one of the generative themes and storylines the boys'*

used in discussing their experiences in their school context.

Generative Theme One: The impact of teachers

The researcher was interested in learning what school experiences were significant to the boys in both positive and negative ways, and how these experiences shaped the quality of their school experience. The interview schedule questions were designed to invite the boys to share their opinions and experiences on a range of topics that surrounded the circumstances of their school leaving. Although the questions were open-ended and flexible, not one question specifically asked the boys to speak about the role or impact of teachers in their school experience per se. It became evident, however, during the course of interviewing, that all boys were able to distinguish between teachers who were effective and ineffective educators, or put another way, 'good' and 'bad' teachers. It was apparent that the boys' school experiences with teachers impacted upon a range of other aspects relevant to the school context, such as their attitude towards learning, the understanding of their social and academic capabilities, and the value of school-based education to their careers. According to the boys, teachers also impacted upon their active participation and positive engagement with learning. The next section will make links between the boys' school experiences with teachers, and how they used 'good' and 'bad' teacher storylines to make sense of their school experiences.

Good teachers

When the boys were invited to discuss their positive and negative experiences of school, only seven out of the 22 boys mentioned any positive school experience involving teachers. These boys were clear in their understanding of 'good' teachers. From the boys' perspective, they made direct links between these 'good' teachers and their level of admiration for the teacher, class participation, engagement and academic performance. Typical comments included:

These ['good'] teachers were probably the nicest teachers out of the whole entire school. You wanted to be taught by those teachers. Students did everything they asked (Paul, Mitcham)

'Good' teachers made time to help you with your work, and they were just the teachers to respect and not muck around with. I learnt heaps (Daniel, Laburnum)

'Good' teachers actually teach you how to learn properly. I learnt heaps (Max, Listerfield)

The three teachers I had were probably the nicest teachers out of the entire school I'd have to say. That had an impact on how I behaved and how much time I put into my homework (Ben, Blackburn)

I did everything they asked. I made the time to do the work they asked (Phil, Heatherdale).

Closer analysis of the boys' narratives revealed there were many things they understood of what constituted a 'good' teacher storyline, and being respected and acknowledged as an individual was one of them. Central to the 'good' teacher storyline was the word respect. The boys valued being treated as individuals, and not just as a number in the class by the teacher.

My maths teacher was good because of the way he taught me. He knew I was there (Max, Listerfield)

You would build up your respect for certain teachers. Knowing you were there was like acknowledging you as a person, not just like a number in the whole class (Brian, Ashwood)

Out of all the teachers I had last year, I had one good female teacher and two good male teachers, and what made them good was they respected me as a student (Josh, Mitcham)

The way some teachers listened to what you had to say was good (Craig, Blackburn)

I really liked my English teacher because I could say something that was against what she was saying, and she didn't mind (Peter, Laburnum)

'Good' teachers went that extra step to make me feel part of the class (Daniel, Laburnum)

There were some good teachers that remembered my name. I liked that (Simon, Heatherdale).

According to the boys, 'good' teachers valued their students' participation in class, listened to their comments, and respected them as individuals. By valuing students in this way the teacher tended to narrow the hierarchical difference in power and authority that traditionally exists between teacher and student. From the boys' perspectives then, they considered themselves more of an equal with teachers, rather than part of the student/ teacher hierarchy. Another illustration of how some teachers treated boys with respect was to 'cut them a bit of slack'. That will be explored next.

Cutting slack

Part of a 'good' teacher storyline was the manner in which some teachers responded to student behaviour in the classroom. A number of boys referred to 'good' teachers 'cutting a bit of slack' which described how the teacher communicated to students as epitomised by the following excerpts:

['Good'] teachers don't go off when they tell you off, they tell you calmly and don't lose their head. They don't yell at you. They cut you a bit of slack and that would build up your respect for them (Max, Listerfield)

If the teacher she catches you doing something bad, she won't just immediately get you in trouble. She'd talk to you and tell you not to do it again, and she'd understand. She'd reason with you instead of consequences being brought straight up and you're in trouble. She'd reason with you, try to talk you out of doing it again. It would just feel that she's not on your back the whole time (Peter, Heatherdale).

It seemed important for some boys to be given the opportunity by the teacher to take responsibility for, and to control their classroom behaviour. When teachers reasoned with the student and negotiated their response to student behaviour, the boys viewed the teacher's approach as a form of power sharing. In any case, the evidence suggests that 'good' teachers who 'cut you a bit of slack' were those who were flexible enough to accommodate a range of student behaviours within the confines of their classrooms, without taking the behaviour personally or being seen to be narrow-minded or old-fashioned. All boys elaborated on their experiences with teachers who did not provide this 'space' for them in class, and they used a 'bad' teacher storyline when discussing these teachers.

Bad Teachers

The previous section was consistent in the boys' understanding of how a 'good' teacher storyline appeared to be constituted by a sense of friendship, informality, respect, humour and equality between student and teacher. The question remains though, that if the impact of 'good' teachers was so positive for these boys, why did they still choose to leave school early? Possibly, the impact of the boys' negative school experience far outweighed the impact of their positive school experiences. Each boy seemed to have reasons for categorising certain teachers as 'bad'. It was notable that all 22 boys used 'bad' teacher storylines when discussing their experience with teachers, and all agreed that 'bad' teachers existed in schools.

There are bad teachers around at my school (Mark, Heatherdale)

Teachers are just bad, bad, bad, bad, bad! I don't know, just arseholes like most of them are (Brendan, Mitcham)

I don't like all the teachers at school. Some teachers are really bad (Shane, Ashwood)

You can really pick the bad teachers at school. No-one likes them (Craig, Blackburn)

I had lots of bad teachers at school (Sam, Laburnum)

Yeah, there are bad teachers at school. I've always had one of them (Jim, Listerfield).

Despite the details and circumstances of each boy's experience with 'bad' teachers differing slightly in nature, how the experience impacted upon their attitude towards school and authority remained the same. One boy explained how his decision not to return to school was influenced by the presence of these 'bad' teachers:

I had a few nice teachers that I know asked me to stay and I thought about it, and then I thought no, I'll go. I thought that sometimes [school] might be ok with the nice teachers and that, but then if they leave, then you're stuck with the other teachers and I couldn't hack that. I've always thought that I might go back to school one day, but I know I couldn't hack the other teachers (Brendan, Mitcham).

Prominent in the theme of *the impact of teachers* was the storyline that described the boys' sentiment that a number of 'bad' teachers abused their power and authority with their students. The consensus from the boys was that 'bad' teachers were a part of school life, and they went on to explain a range of incidents that illustrated how unprofessional they deemed the behaviour of some teachers to be.

Abuse of power and authority

The boys provided numerous examples to illustrate their understanding of teachers abusing their power and authority, including teachers' keeping them in class that ran into recess and lunch times, and authorising detention times for minor incidents. Central to the boys' protest about teachers abusing their authority, was the power the teacher used to control students' school activities, time and movements.

Every single day the bell went, [Miss Brown] never let you get out on time ever, never, not once. She'd do it everyday and I hated it (Peter, Heatherdale)

School was just a hassle. The times, being told to be somewhere at a certain time, and bugger all lunch hour. It was bad (Josh, Mitcham)

If one student mucked up, the teacher would just yell at that person and say 'Get out, you've got a detention' just for mucking up once in that class. That's not fair. No-one liked that teacher. She was just bad (Daniel, Laburnum).

Loss of student 'voice'

The boys reported that some teachers abused their power and authority over students primarily through denying them their 'voice' in the choice of class tasks and management. The boys begrudged how the

teacher was able to deny them their personal sense of power and control over the school day, and all boys resented being told what to do without having an avenue to successfully challenge the teacher's authority.

I just had enough of everything, like the work and the teachers pushing me around and stuff like that. Something snapped and I realised I can't live like this, and how much school really annoyed me, so I left (Max, Listerfield)

For me school was more like a jail really, locked in with other kids. I had no say in what I wanted to do. I just got told what to do and I couldn't wait to get out of school (Daniel, Laburnum)

I just hated being told what to do all the time by the teachers (Simon, Heatherdale)

I hate all the people at school bossing you around, telling you what to do all the time. Just all the rules really (Craig, Blackburn)

I would like to see kids having more freedom at school, and not have teachers telling you what to do all the time. Having a say in what you do for the day would be good (Brian, Ashwood)

I hated the attitude of the teachers, mostly like 'We're teachers, you have to obey us. We can get you kicked out' and all of that. I've had that heaps of times (Andrew, Mitcham)

This sort of stuff really annoys the crap out of me when teachers pressure you to do things. It's like they're trying to control your life really. It's pretty well the same as pushing you in a corner and making you do what you're told. I couldn't wait to leave school (Brendan, Mitcham).

It was evident that friction existed between the boys and the demands of school that was reinforced by the teachers. For the boys, their main grievance tended to focus around being forced to comply with authority, with no real avenue to successfully challenge it.

Consequently, the boys admitted they would disengage from learning tasks and behave inappropriately to express their disregard for the teacher. This storyline generated a great deal of resentment and anger from the boys towards the teacher, and sentiments of being victimised by the teacher emerged as they discussed the poor level of their academic performance.

Most boys admitted to struggling academically, and shifted blame onto the teacher for abandoning their learning needs. They claimed it was not a lack of effort on their behalf that resulted in their poor academic performance, but rather a lack of caring and insight from the teacher to assist them in learning:

You get so far behind and you can't understand what they're doing so you're even more behind, and they expect you to keep up. The teachers don't understand or care that you're behind and help you catch up, so what do you do? I just gave up (Paul, Blackburn)

The teachers would give you the work and say 'Learn it' and that was it, 'Just do it'. It wasn't right (Richard, Listerfield)

I went on medication for ADD and it calmed me down but the teachers were still hacking at me. They said that 'if you're taking these kind of medications you should be working harder', and I would say that I'm trying to work harder but I'm just not getting ahead. I just need more help. They would say, 'I'll be back in a minute' and you wouldn't see them again (Brendan, Mitcham)

Well, there was heaps to learn but they wouldn't continually help you out to make you learn it. They would just give you the work and say 'learn it', and that was it, 'just do it'. So once I got stuck, I just pretty well just packed up and sat around and did whatever I wanted to do (Brendan, Mitcham)

My marks were bad because of the teachers not helping me, and me not being able to keep up with them, so I just left school (Luke, Laburnum).

The boys claimed that their level of motivation to learn, their engagement and participation in class dwindled to the extent that all care for learning vanished. The boys' references to the restrictive nature of school and a dislike for the school culture, echoes research that found that school factors such as the relevance of curriculum offerings, fear of academic failure and poor teacher relationships influenced some boys' school leaving decision (Ball & Lamb 2001; Holden & Dwyer 1992; McMillan & Marks 2003; Martin 2002; Trent & Slade 2001).

Summary

The boys' narratives of the school context produced research findings about the motivating factors for some boys' early school leaving decisions, namely:

The boys viewed school-based learning as irrelevant and not applicable to their chosen career

Certain teachers formed the basis of their negative school experiences in that they perceived that some teachers misused their power and authority with students

They believed that some teachers didn't always understanding and attend to their learning needs

Some teachers failed to care for their academic progress.

In these respects, the evidence presented here of the boys' experience in the school context confirmed similar findings in other research. The 22 boys in the study talked about their school-leaving circumstances in ways that reflected a broadly common set of understandings. This paper explored the five storylines that underpinned a generative theme whose focus concerned the impact of teachers at school. Analysis of the boys' narratives provides insight into the quality of their school experiences to their early school leaving decisions.

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