

## **BOYS PERFORMING ENGLISH**

Abstract:

*This paper explores the gender dynamics of boys' responses to one particular aspect of English teaching: oral performance work. It focuses on the possibility that the requirement to perform publicly in dramatic and other oral tasks may be an important factor in the rejection of English by many boys, and contribute to boys' relatively poor achievement in English. The paper provides a study of boys' engagement in English oral activities in two classrooms, and identifies a number of factors influencing boys' English learning. In particular, it shows that there is no simple relation between the performance requirements of English learning activities and boys' disengagement with English.*

Discussions of literacy in schools have increasingly focused on the lower levels of achievement of boys on simple comparison with girls. And this difference has been noted in a range of countries. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, for instance, noted that average scores for nine year old girls were higher than average scores for nine year old boys for all thirty two countries participating in the study – and that in nineteen of these countries the difference was statistically significant (Elley, 1994).

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In Australia, concerns over boys' literacy have been widely voiced in reports of poorer performance in a range of contexts. While literacy performance is particularly worrying for groups affected by race and class inequalities, the lower performance of boys is evident even within these categories, and for boys in general it occurs across States, year levels, and for different forms of literacy (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a; Marks & Ainley, 1997; Masters & Forster, 1997; New South Wales Government Advisory Committee on Education, Training & Tourism, 1994).

Various factors have been suggested as relevant to this outcome, including boys' leisure pursuits (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997b), the nature of the English curriculum (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1995), and assessment practices (Matters, Pitman & Gray, 1997; Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1993). The general pattern of argument is that there is a mismatch between the demands of school English and common experiences, interests, or aptitudes of boys, and that this discourages many boys from engaging enthusiastically and successfully with English learning.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the tensions between the discourses of school English and boys' gendered classroom practice. In particular, it addresses the role of masculinity in participation and achievement in classroom English activities involving oral performance.

### **Oral performance and boys learning English**

Oral communication is now widely recognised as an integral part of an English curriculum, and oral performance in English is regarded as an important goal in its

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own right. The significance now given to oral performance is reflected in English assessment programs, where, for example, in Australia, oral performance can contribute up to 40% of the English result that a student might receive in the junior secondary school. Even most final year English results for students in Australia include some weighting for a student's performance on a range of oral tasks.

Oral performance has recently taken on particular significance in the context of boys' English learning, for two reasons. First, the educational literature contradictorily identifies oral performance both as a potential problem for boys in classroom contexts (see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a, pp. 50-51; Paechter, 2000, p.122) and also as an area of particular opportunity for engaging them in English (Harris, 1998). These conflicting claims warrant further investigation. Second, the notion of performance highlights the role of gender in boys' poor literacy achievement, since recent research on gender has focused on the performative aspects of gendered behaviour. In viewing masculinity itself as a performance, we can see its relationship with the practices of learning in the English classroom.

Harris (1998), for example, points out that some writers on language teaching have identified oral performance as an activity in which boys welcome the chance to 'hold the floor', while others have reported that boys are reluctant to speak out publicly. Such claims are supported by the very considerable classroom interaction research literature of the seventies and eighties (see, for example, discussion in Swann, 1992). This literature notes that while it is the oral performances of boys which have dominated and monopolised classroom contexts across a range of curriculum areas

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(see Clarricoates, 1983), it is not all boys who are participants in this domination (see Bousted, 1989).

Swann (1992) cautions, for instance, that differences identified between boys and girls as speakers in classrooms are “always average ones” (p.53), and that there are always talkative girls and quiet boys. Clearly different kinds or contexts of performance evoke different responses, as do the different ways in which boys are positioned as speakers, and as learners, in school contexts. This suggests that we need a closer analysis of the nature of oral performance, its demands on students, and the relationship between these demands, as well as a focus on other aspects of boys’ responses to schooling, particularly the practice of masculinity.

For instance, Frater (2000), in his recommendations for pedagogies that improve boys’ literacy achievement, argues that boys perform best when there are short structured tasks with clear targets and deadlines. This matches Martino’s (1995) report that the open-ended responses required by many English tasks were seen by boys as a difficulty. How these views might affect oral performance is an interesting question.

Participation in the communicative and expressive aspects of English has often been identified by boys as a feminine activity (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999). English teaching, and literature teaching in particular, have encouraged a self-revelatory form of expression and a concern for feelings (see Patterson, 1995) which are in opposition to certain masculine stereotypes (Gilbert, 1998; Smith, 1996). This

issue may well have important implications for boys' involvement in oral performance activities.

Further, masculine cultures and their practice by many boys in schools have been said to be competitive and aggressively independent, leading to alienation from the cooperation and compliance required by the disciplinary regimes of school (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996). This is sometimes related to an image of coolness which valorizes detachment and indifference over a commitment to participation (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999). Again, the public performance of oral English activities may appear to conflict with these observations of boys' classroom practices.

Similarly, while dominant masculinity has been argued to valorize individualism (Smith, 1996), Frater (2000) recommends that successful English teaching for boys is characterised by collaborative approaches (see also Barrs, 2001). This has interesting implications for oral performance, since pedagogical practice can emphasise either individual presentation or group participation as oral activities.

Studying oral performance as a teaching and assessment strategy, then, raises many aspects of the complex relations between boys' construction of themselves as masculine subjects, and their experience of schooling. It also connects in interesting ways to developments in gender research, where a more general notion of performance has become a central concept in ways of thinking about gender. In place of essentialist ideas about the biological or psychological origins of masculine practices, Butler (1990) has recommended that we see gender as a performance, "a

reenactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (p. 140). It is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33).

Rather than being driven by a pre-existing internal state, the performance of gender creates the impression of the expression of an essence or predisposition (Butler, 1990). Such an interpretation would give warning to suggestions that boys are innately predisposed or socialized to any particular response to English. It draws attention to the negotiated character of gendered performance, and the fact that the outcomes of performance are never determined, highlighting the open-endedness and unpredictability of classroom interactions and events. This perspective also invites fine textured analysis of actual classroom contexts and the negotiation of learning experiences among students and teachers.

### **The study**

The evidence for this discussion of boys and oral performance is drawn from a broader study of boys’ literacy learning and the performance of masculinity. The research was designed to identify key teaching activities used with boys in English language classrooms, the kinds of performance required/expected of boys in engaging with and responding to these activities, the patterns of achievement on the assessment of these activities, and how these activities relate to the performance of masculinity.

The evidence was derived from case studies of a year 10 secondary classroom in two provincial Australian cities. It was gathered through naturalistic observation of 20-24

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English lessons over a 2 month period, as well as semi-structured interviews with 6 boys and their teacher in each of the classes involved. In addition, the English assessment results over the year were analysed. The students were on average aged 15 years. The year 10 class in School A, taught by Ms White, contained 14 boys and 15 girls, while the year 10 class Mr O'Brien taught in School B, had 13 boys and 16 girls.

Observations provided a narrative and critical incident record of classroom activities and the nature of boys' responses to and engagement with the activities. Individual interviews were conducted twice with 6 boys in each class, to gauge their interpretations and evaluations of the activities and materials, and the significance of these to their developing masculine identities.

Questions in the first interview focused on boys' perceptions of the 'work' and 'performances' required of them in English classrooms. Boys were asked to describe the sorts of activities they would typically be engaged in in English, and what they thought the teacher expected from them in each of these activities; to comment on which aspects of English they enjoyed and which they didn't enjoy; and to give their perceptions of how other class members seemed to relate to various strategies and activities used in English lessons. They were also invited to comment on whether they considered that girls might have different perceptions from boys about these issues.

In the second interview, we extended the focus by asking the boys to comment on what activities and strategies they had found useful and/or valuable in English

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throughout the year, and to tell us how English might be changed to make it a more relevant, useful and enjoyable set of experiences. In this interview, we also asked the boys to comment on what could be done – within the school, and within individual classrooms - to improve boys' achievement in English.

### **Patterns of achievement**

To provide an overview of the context of achievement within which the boys and their teachers were operating, student assessment profiles were gathered for all year 10 students in each school. Any gender differences in students' English assessment results could be identified, including results for oral performance assessment activities.

As expected, when aggregated across the two schools, the assessment results for girls were superior to those of boys. Table 1 shows the distribution of grades on the five point scale used by the schools to assess English achievement, including the overall grades for the year, and a breakdown into results for oral and written assessment tasks.

#### TABLE 1 TO BE INSERTED HERE

The distribution of overall grades shows equal numbers at the highest grade, but many more girls at grade B, so that the proportion of girls in the top two grades is approximately three times that of boys. Boys predominate at the lower levels of achievement, with over 37% of boys in grades described as low or very low achievement, compared with only 14.9% of girls.

Differences between oral and written tasks were also investigated. The distributions across the grades show that both boys and girls do better on oral than on written tasks. For both sexes, the low and very low achievement groups are similar in size on the two forms of assessment. However, there is a substantial shift among the boys from grade C to grade B on the oral tasks compared with written, and from grade C to grades B and A among the girls.

In terms of boys' achievement, these figures show that, at these schools, most boys performed less well than girls, and a substantial proportion of boys were not achieving adequate grades. However, for some boys, performance on oral tasks was better than on written ones, an improvement which applied even more strongly to the girls.

### **Boys and Performance: Oral Work in Two Junior Secondary Classrooms**

The patterns of achievement clearly indicate that the boys in these two schools could expect to do slightly better on oral work than on written work, particularly with oral performance activities. And this pattern was the same for girls – although girls performed consistently higher across all categories than the boys. Given these data, it is interesting to examine in more detail how individual boys in the study related to this performance work, and to consider how constructs of masculinity, and individual boys' performances as masculine subjects, affected their engagement in such work.

In the next section of the paper, we focus on four boys – two from each of the schools in our study – and their responses to a particular oral performance task in their

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English program. Our focus is on the patterns of gendered performances boys established within these classrooms, and the way in which these patterns appeared to affect the classroom context, enabling and disabling the performance possibilities of others. In particular we examine how boys took up different positions as gendered subjects within the classroom – and how these differences influenced the type of performance they were able to provide.

### English performance work in School A

The year 10 English teacher in School A – ‘Ms White’ – was young, energetic and engaging, and obviously well regarded by the class. She was professionally focussed and knowledgeable, and the relationship she had developed with her students was relaxed, friendly and respectful. She worked hard and spent a great deal of time on preparation for each class, and on providing students with feedback on their work. In her interview with us, and in her general assistance and guidance with this project, she revealed how perceptive she was of the needs and competencies of individual students in her class, and of the behaviour dynamics in the room.

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During the year, the students in this year 10 English class worked on six different units of work, each of which had a unifying language theme, and set assessment tasks. During our observation of this classroom, the students were mainly working on a unit called “Bitter-Sweet Symphony: Poetry Analysis.” One of the two assessment pieces for this unit was identified as an oral task: “performance poetry.” After working on a poetry discussion and analysis unit for 6 weeks, the students were expected to present a five minute dramatic reading and discussion of two or more poems (of their own choice) to an audience of their peers.

This English class of 29 fifteen year olds was a difficult class group for any teacher to manage. It was regarded in the school as a hard class, predominantly because it contained six boys who had frequently to be disciplined by senior staff in the school for repeated disruptive class behaviour. Four of these six boys always sat together at the back of the English class, and were undoubtedly the dominant, confident group in the class. They were noisy, disruptive and frequently off-task. Typical disruptive activities included hitting, punching, pulling out each other’s chairs; walking around the classroom; calling out loudly to the teacher.

The rest of the class worked either alone or in small, relatively quiet groups. While many of the other ten boys were off-task at various times throughout our observations, their off-task behaviours were noticeably different from those of the dominant group. They would either talk quietly within their groups, or they would sit passively at their desks not doing the set task. Unlike the dominant group, their performances did not intrude into the physical and verbal space of other students.

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We were concerned about the potential problems any one of the boys might face when they had to present an oral poetry reading and discussion within this particular classroom performance space. Our concerns were on two counts: firstly, the type of oral performance required here was clearly within the expressive, personalist domain. Students had to choose poems that were ‘bittersweet’ – with ‘bittersweet’ being defined as: “Pleasant but tinged with sadness.” And the students had to prepare emotionally sensitive readings and discussions of these ‘bittersweet’ poems. Criteria sheets that were used to assess the students’ performances made explicit reference to the need to interpret the mood of the poems, particularly through using rhyme and sound effectively. It was clear that this particular oral performance expected a public performance of emotional sensitivity.

Secondly, we were concerned that the blatant displays of almost ritualistic larrikin behaviour from the four dominant boys (the ‘bad lads’) at the back of the room had established a dominant, macho mode of masculine performance (Butler, 1990) that appeared to marginalise and silence other ways of ‘being’ as a boy in the classroom. We observed few other embodied performances of ‘masculinity’ in the room, and were concerned that boys who might try to present an emotional response to poetry would be derided and made to feel non-masculine by the dominant masculinist discourse in the room.

How two quite different boys managed this performance task will be the focus of the next section of the paper. Initially we will focus on ‘Mark’ – one of the four disruptive boys. Then we will look at ‘Chris’ – a boy from the more marginalised and

silenced group of boys. Our interviews with these boys, our observations of them in class, and our conversations with their English teacher, inform our discussion.

**Mark: capitalising on macho confidence for English performance work**

Mark was the obvious leader of the dominant group of four. His efforts at sabotaging Ms White's plans and at preoccupying his mates with off-task activities were clearly evidenced in the observational records.

Amongst his peers, Mark was relatively physically small and his mode of dress mostly conformed to school standards. In some of his conversations with his classmates, he revealed that he could not afford the kinds of clothing and shoes that would offer him more certain and visible status as a rebellious student. It was not the semiotics of his appearance that distinguished Mark as a leader amongst the group of four boys, but rather, his capacity to violate the rules of respectful classroom interaction.

During the time of our observations, Mark engaged constantly in elaborate rituals of distraction. For the duration of one English class, for instance, Mark introduced a matchbox toy that the boys proceeded to pass amongst them. The toy was projected across the desk, between the pages of their books, and finally across their bodies and on to the floor, at which point, the boys' attention could not have been further removed from the lesson. On another occasion, Mark initiated a game of distraction wherein each of the boys took turns at removing one another's caps and replacing them, after painstakingly turning them inside out, on each other's heads. The mock games were interspersed with conversations about the purchasing power they had

gained through paid work, the value of items at a discount store, and the prohibitive cost of brand-name shoes and clothing.

Mark represented an interesting mass of contradictions. At interview, Mark reported that he wanted to improve his results in English beyond his current rating of a bare pass. He claimed to value the subject and volunteered comments about its functionality in the world outside of the classroom. By contrast with his positive valuing of the subject, Mark's patterns of inattention and non-compliance, as documented consistently in our observational records, indicated that he spent precious little time on-task in English class. Moreover, at interview, Mark displayed a remarkable level of unawareness of how the group of four boys established patterns of interaction that hindered, rather than enhanced, their chances of success in the subject. In response to a probing interview question about listening in class with a view to improving performance in the subject, Mark responded ingenuously:

*Yea, yea. I'm good at that because Ms White just says to be quiet and we just don't talk when she tells us to be quiet. We only talk when we are doing the work. We just talk quietly to each other.*

The observational records showed that this was not the case. The group, led by Mark, rarely paid attention or responded to teacher instruction but largely consumed their time with banter, games and frippery that appeared to bind them with the solidarity of group resistance.

At odds with his level of non-compliance, but perhaps consistent with his bold presentation of himself, Mark openly embraced the opportunity to 'perform' an oral in front of his peers. At interview, Mark claimed that orals were the most important and

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valuable part of the English curriculum. The interview transcripts were dotted with iterations of Mark's claim:

*I like the orals best.*

For Mark, oral performance seemed to represent another opportunity to dominate classroom talk, to 'hold the floor' and to turn the spotlight on himself as a performing body. When his turn arrived early in the class sequence of performances, Mark had his poems ready. Without hesitation, he walked to the front of the room, assumed a confident body pose and delivered his bitter-sweet poetry with flare and gusto. His voice was modulated and expressive and he employed deliberate arm gestures to enhance his presentation. Mark's performance of the bitter-sweet poetry was an embodied one. The class was attentive and as he walked back to his seat, an admiring classmate called out in affirmation of his performance, "A+ Mark."

For Mark, an oral presentation offered the opportunity for active bodily engagement, and it translated easily into the kinds of performances that he envisaged would be expected of him as a male subject negotiating his way through the world of work outside of the English classroom. Bitter-sweet poetry was not his preferred option for a performance, but he said he understood the value of being able to perform in public and to be able to express himself.

Mark received a B- grade for this oral performance. He had also received a B- grade for another oral performance he had given earlier in the year. Mark's oral grades were the best in his set of results for the year. His other results had all been Cs and Ds. His overall result for year 10 English was a C: Sound Level of Achievement.

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Without these higher oral grades, Mark would have been likely to have received a D: Limited Level of Achievement.

### Chris: the impact of ethnicity upon masculine performativity

Chris was potentially marginalised within the class not only by being outside the dominant group of four, but also by being the only Aboriginal student in the class. He sat either by himself or with one of the girls, and affected a ‘home boy’ look some of the time, with a black knitted beanie, and – even on hot summer days – a non-regulation t-shirt under his school shirt. This clothing subtly but deliberately positioned him as quite different from the white macho culture of the dominant group of four, and also from the other boys in the room.

At the end of one interview, Chris talked extensively to the interviewer about his commitment to Aboriginal rights and Reconciliation. He clearly identified strongly as an Aboriginal person and saw this identification as being a powerful influence on how he would take himself up in the world. He wanted to do well at school so that he could make something of himself – as an Aboriginal person. While he did not enjoy doing English, he considered that he had to master English and Maths:

*They're like key subjects.*

Chris was nervous about having to do the approaching poetry performance. He had generally not enjoyed the oral work that the class had done in the first two terms, and had done poorly on one oral task that he had been forced to do publicly. He had received a D+ grade (fail) for this task.

*It's like shame, Miss... It's just like – I don't know – embarrassing.*

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He thought that boys were not very good at oral work – “*Girls are better speakers*” – and that other boys also “*feel shamed*” when they have to present oral tasks in class.

He said that he wanted to be able to present his poetry performance as video footage rather than to perform in front of the class. Given the classroom performance context within which he would have had to present, we could understand his concern. His teacher did as well. She supported his attempts to produce a video of his performance, and subsequently defended it to the Head of the Department, who challenged whether or not video footage could count as a valid demonstration of oral performance.

The video that Chris produced was excellent. He had managed to get a friend to video him as he dramatically performed three protest poems about racism and Aboriginal identity. Each poem segment had been carefully planned, staged and rehearsed, and each was filmed in an appropriate setting for the purpose of the poem. In the first, Chris was on a basketball court, shooting balls and defending while he delivered his poem; in the second he was squatting in an outback bush setting, sifting the dust; and in the third, he was seated on the bonnet of a battered car.

The emotional intensity and the sensitivity of the performance were powerfully effective. There was no question that Chris managed to convey the ‘bittersweet’ quality of the poetry he had chosen, and that he demonstrated an impressive competence as a performer. The performance was rated highly by his teacher, and Chris himself was very proud of his work. Even though he completed the video after

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we had finished observing and working in his classroom, he was happy for us to borrow his film, and receive a copy of it.

As a young man having to prepare an oral performative piece for English assessment, Chris was not confident about the supportiveness of the classroom context. He could not take up the confident, almost aggressive performance mode that Mark had adopted, and, unlike Mark, he knew that he was not positioned within the eyes of his classmates as a public performer. His Aboriginality positioned him differently in terms of masculinity (see discussion in Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a, pp. 44-53), and his decision to choose anti-racist poetry for his performance foregrounded him as a politicised Aboriginal subject. This was clearly a difficult position for a fifteen year old young man to take up within the larrikin culture of this particular class.

Experiences of masculinity and of ethnicity were intermingled here in Chris's quite realistic fears and concerns about the context for an oral performance. However the video evidence clearly indicates that, given a more distanced audience, and a more controlled medium, Chris was very capable of preparing and presenting a poetry performance that very effectively fulfilled all of the English program's criteria. It is doubtful, however, whether Chris would have completed (or submitted) this particular English oral task if he had not been able to present it through video. And this was a common pattern. Earlier in the year, Chris had negotiated with his teacher to give another set oral performance to her privately at lunch-time, so that he did not have to 'perform' in front of the class.

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Chris received an A- for his video performance – and a B for the earlier lunch-time private performance. These were his best English results for the year. His oral grades helped him get a C: Sound Level of Achievement for year 10 English. Without these higher grades, it is highly likely that he would have received a D: Limited Level of Achievement.

The perceptive understanding of his teacher in allowing a variation on ‘performance’ conditions was obviously, however, critical for Chris. Ms White commented that she was convinced that Chris needed this special consideration. Without it, she was convinced that he would not have prepared the tasks, and that his year 10 results would have been seriously jeopardised. She recognised the dynamics and tensions of the classroom context for male ‘oral performances’.

### English Performance Work in School B:

The second two boys that we focus upon were located within a high school in a North Queensland beach-side provincial town. Their English teacher, ‘Mr O’Brien’, was an inexperienced teacher who had come to teaching after several years in another profession. He had arrived at School B at the beginning of second term and had taken over the year 10 English class and other classes from a previous teacher. The Head of Department was particularly pleased with his teaching and had recommended him as a potential volunteer for this study.

This school’s year 10 English program incorporated eight units of study, each with a set assessment task. The units were common to all year 10 classes and all classes operated on the same time frame. During our observation period, the class worked

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firstly on a four week drama unit based on Ken Cotterill's play *Rhinoceros Hides* and then on a four week poetry unit. The focus here is on the drama unit, which culminated in the students presenting short dramatic monologues based on their choice of character from Cotterill's play. During the drama unit, the class spent one lesson with a poet who was 'in-residence' at the school for a week and worked with him on aspects of dramatic performance.

Mr O'Brien's year 10 English class was regarded as being a difficult one, with several students described as having short attention and listening spans. To try to overcome the difficulties he experienced with the class, Mr O'Brien explained that he had a seating plan for the students and he tried to keep his talk to the class and his instructions as short and as concise as possible to avoid behaviour management tasks taking up a lot of time.

During our observations of English lessons, many students, both girls and boys, appeared to be off-task. For most of the students, their off-task behaviour included talking to the students sitting near them, fiddling with pens or other pieces of equipment not necessarily related to English lessons, or passively 'staring into space'. For one group of boys, however, off-task behaviour involved loud and visual performances that incorporated movement around the classroom and a range of other behaviours, including calling across the room, throwing objects or playing ball-games with screwed-up pieces of paper. Although described here as a group, it was a variable cluster of four or five boys who joined in on activities that seemed to be often instigated by one student, 'Luke'. Whilst group members were not seated in close

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proximity to each other, as a result of Mr O'Brien's seating plan, Luke's movement around the class tended to reduce the physical distance between them.

The oral assessment task that the students were required to perform was described as an "inner monologue" and the marking criteria pointed to emphasis on a "perceptive and creative interpretation of character" and the need to creatively explore the theme of the script. As with the task at School A, the required performance was clearly expected to be creative, emotional and entertaining. In the following section of the paper, we will focus on the different ways that two boys engaged in classroom activities during the drama unit and in the dramatic monologue that was required for assessment purposes. Firstly, we discuss 'Jason', a quiet student who rarely interacted with members of Luke's group, and secondly, we focus on Luke. In both cases we draw on our classroom observations and interviews.

### Jason: an unwilling classroom performer

In class, Jason gave the impression that he was a quiet and passive student, sometimes seeming oblivious to what was going on in the classroom. As designated by Mr O'Brien's seating plan, he sat next to a girl towards the back of the classroom.

Although he interacted at times with some of the students who sat near him, he never offered answers to the teacher's questions or became involved in class discussions.

At times, Jason seemed to hide from the teacher and the rest of the class by tilting his head forward so that his longer length straight hair would flop over his face and hide it from view. Jason explained that "*I don't like English overall,*" that he found the subject boring and that he did not always understand what was required by the

teacher. When another boy in a group interview asked jokingly whether he wanted to take English off the curriculum, he retorted “*Take school off the curriculum.*”

Although it seemed as though Jason was one of the students who had been silenced in the classroom by the macho performances of Luke and his friends, our observations revealed that he too was involved in a group activity that was designed to replace the classroom tasks set by Mr O’Brien. Jason, the girl sitting beside him and another girl seated across an aisle were engaged in a writing task that continued throughout the duration of the two English units that we observed. The three students were involved in what appeared to be an elaborate writing ritual, surreptitiously passing a folded sheet of paper, waiting before opening it, apparently to avoid detection by the teacher, reading what had been written, adding to the writing, then passing it on to the next person in the triad. The students jointly wrote what Jason described as

*Anything we could be bothered writing. It’s like plans for the weekends,  
what’s happening in the next class, just anything. Sometimes we write a story.*

Although Jason said in an interview that he enjoyed the dramatic monologue “*because we get up in front of the class and say things, just learn better speeches and everything,*” his performance indicated otherwise. He made a half-hearted attempt at wearing a costume, pulling an open shirt over his school uniform. He shook visibly, tilted his head forward in his usual pose of hiding his face and consequently did not make any eye contact with the audience during his performance. Once he had delivered his speech, which he basically read from a piece of paper held in his shaking hands, he quickly retreated to his seat near the back of the classroom.

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Jason received a C+ grade for this oral performance, and a C- for an earlier oral performance. While most of Jason's English tasks were graded as Cs, he did receive 3 B grades throughout the year. They were, however, all for written tasks. Oral performance did not advantage Jason in his year 10 English results. He completed the year with a C: Sound Level of Achievement.

#### **Luke: a willing and enthusiastic classroom performer**

In contrast to Jason's attempts to hide himself, Luke seemed to enjoy being a visible member of the class. He always arrived at class chewing gum and with his shirt hanging out over his shorts. Whilst Mr O'Brien rarely commented on the gum, he always made the boys tuck their shirts into their shorts before entering the classroom. Between the door and his desk, Luke generally managed to pull his shirt out again. In the classroom, Luke appeared to set his own agenda. However, it was difficult to tell whether he was in fact the leader of the group of boys who were so obvious in their loud and unruly classroom behaviour. He was certainly the one whose loud voice and regular movement around the classroom made him visible and obvious to the other students in the class, and he certainly ignored Mr O'Brien's instructions and avoided doing the English work that was set.

During the period of our observations, Luke performed non-stop, engaging in numerous activities that attracted the attention of other students. On one occasion, when the class were supposedly writing individual monologues, Luke moved across the room, dipped his finger into a lip-gloss container belonging to one of the girls, then proceeded to parade around the room applying pink lip gloss to his lips. In the same lesson, he played handball, bouncing a scrunched-up piece of paper off the front

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wall of the classroom. In the course of this game, Luke managed to knock the waste paper basket over, spreading scrap paper across a section of the classroom and causing several class members to laugh loudly. After being instructed by Mr O'Brien to pick up the papers, Luke began to play a game of soccer with the balls of paper, flicking them into the air with his foot then kicking them into the waste paper bin. Although watched by Mr O'Brien, he continued with this game until all papers were in the bin.

Luke regarded the year 10 English program as irrelevant to his needs, saying "*I don't see where any of it is important.*" At the same time, however, he seemed to think that he worked on some of the tasks, even though our observations suggested that he often made it through a whole English lesson without writing a single word or attempting a single task.

*I always do some work mostly ... It just depends on how the day's been or something, if I'm tired or something like that. If it's interesting well I would. Usually it's boring and it's something we've been over or something we don't understand.*

Despite his general avoidance of class work, Luke was the first to volunteer when students were required to act out the play *Rhinoceros Hides*. It was as if Luke enjoyed this opportunity to 'perform' legitimately in front of the class. According to him, English oral activities were ones where

*You get to make a fool of yourself ... it's good fun ... just like muck around.*

Although Luke saw some value in the oral activities they did in English lessons – "*They made you more, made you able to speak publicly, like getting up and stand in*

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*front of an audience*” – he did not see that they were particularly useful for his own career aspirations. He commented:

*I enjoyed like the orals. I liked them, but as I said they are probably not all that important.*

When it came to the dramatic monologue that was the assessment for the drama unit, Luke excelled. He was obviously prepared and had his costume ready. When it was his turn, he donned a jacket, a necktie and a cigar made from cardboard, moved to the front of the classroom and performed. Using his loud voice and bigger than lifelike arm movements, he confidently strode across the front of the room presenting his monologue. When he finished, the class applauded loudly.

Luke received a B- grade for this performance. Throughout the year he received only two B grades, and both were for oral performances. Two of his major written results were Ds, so Luke’s oral grades clearly improved and lifted his overall English results significantly. He received a C: Sound Level of Achievement for his year 10 English result, despite his poor written task results.

### **Boys and oral performance**

These four stories of the oral performances fifteen year old boys engaged in in their English classrooms indicate some of the complexities of gendered performativity.

Boys like Mark and Luke were able to take full advantage of their positioning as ‘bad lads’ in the classrooms to perform publicly with confidence and gusto. They were already acknowledged as successful ‘masculine’ subjects in their school contexts: subjects who blatantly resisted the authority of the teacher and the school, and who

ignored any regulation of movement and space. They could confidently take the floor for oral performances knowing full well that other boys – and girls in the classroom – would not mock or deride them.

On the other hand, Chris and Jason had much more difficulty negotiating a successful mode of ‘performance’ as masculine subjects in their classrooms. Their positions within their classrooms were far more marginalised, and they were almost ignored by the dominant and aggressive boys who gave such strong masculine performances.

Chris, as an Aboriginal boy, and Jason, as a boy who spent most of his time with two girls, had taken up positions outside of the dominant ‘bad lads’ masculinity that was so pervasive in each of the two English classes. As we have seen, Chris was able to bypass the public performance by preparing a video presentation for the teacher to watch privately. However Jason tried to proceed with his dramatic performance, but his embarrassment and unease were very obvious to his audience.

Our study suggests that the interplay between masculinity and oral performativity in English classrooms is important in any analysis of boys’ achievement in and engagement with English. However our study indicates how complex this interplay is. For some boys, the opportunity to include public performance work as part of the assessment demands of English is an advantage – and the pattern of achievement in oral work indicates that this advantage is often reflected in an improvement in result. However for other boys, public performance work is not an advantage, and is a source of anxiety and tension.

Data from our study suggest that the way in which boys are positioned as masculine subjects within their classrooms – and the opportunities they have to play out dominant and more macho forms of masculine behaviour – may well influence their participation in and success with classroom oral work. The data remind us again of the differences in the ways in which young men take up and ‘perform’ masculinity – and the ways in which particular contexts influence this process. It also reminds us of the powerful role teachers can and must play in constructing classroom contexts for performance that are cognisant of the gender dynamics operating within classroom cultures, and effective in controlling and regulating excessive and aggressive modes of masculine behaviour.

Our study suggests that some boys are likely to enjoy classroom oral work, and to achieve slightly better results for oral work than for written work. However our study suggests that this advantage is not evenly enjoyed by all boys. Just as we know that the domination of classroom linguistic space and of teachers’ time is not evenly enjoyed by all boys, we can reasonably predict that similar dynamics occur in terms of public oral performance. Only some boys are advantaged here, and we would argue that an important factor influencing this process is the way in which boys are able to take up and play out various modes of masculinity.

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