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# 1

## Introduction

### Contextual frame

From the moment when foreign language study becomes optional, classrooms across the English-dominant communities of the world are inhabited primarily by girls and staffed predominantly by women: boys for the most part disappear. Foreign language classrooms, it would seem, are considered inappropriate or uninteresting places to be. Although this has not always been the case, this gendered shape of foreign language programmes has long since settled into the status of 'how things are'; there is nothing new about the situation, which is only occasionally commented on. What *is* new, however, is the context within which it now sits.

Educational thinking is currently framed by discourses of multiliteracies and global citizenship. The world outside school is recognised as requiring new kinds of competencies and skills, presenting new kinds of opportunities and challenges. Intercultural competence is identified as a core targeted outcome and young speakers of the global language are officially encouraged to join in the global project of increased intercultural communication. Proficiency in additional languages would seem to be an obvious component of this agenda; yet the majority of boys continue to refuse the languages option. And the fact that players in the increasingly imagined global games will consist largely of all-girls teams seems to be of minimal concern to educators, parents or to students themselves.

There is a second context to the boys–languages relationship which also makes the lack of interest in boys' disinterest surprising. Countries such as Canada, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom are currently collectively reporting themselves as being in 'crisis' in relation to boys and schooling. Recent studies into gender equity, gender disadvantage, that is, gender differences in terms of what happens in

classrooms, indicate that the 'gender' which is now the locus of concern is that of boys (for an overview, see Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000). Boys are increasingly constructed as a disadvantaged and problematic group in school; underachieving in comparison to girls, particularly in the areas of language and literacy. This concern is translating into initiatives to improve their level of engagement and learning outcomes in these areas; but intervention is directed almost exclusively at first language and literacy. Little attention is accorded to the continuing poor representation of boys in foreign language programmes. While educational planners, teachers, parents and wider communities engage in vigorous debates about boys and literacy, about multiliteracies and boy-friendly pathways to literate futures, there is continuing silence in most quarters about boys and foreign languages. The literate futures are seemingly understood as uniquely English-speaking places.

This book represents a contribution to the empty space in the conversation about boys, education and foreign language learning. It comes out of a determination to find out more about the issue from the perspective of boys themselves; to see how they think about themselves as boys in school, as learners and – most particularly – as foreign language learners. It acknowledges the interconnection between foreign language study and the broader, more foundational relationship between language, culture and socially constituted masculinities; and draws upon theories of discourse, culture and gender constitution, as well as on findings on masculinity, schooling and languages education. In this sense, then, it is an academic, theoretically framed project; but it is a grounded one, built around commentaries collected from conversations with more than 200 boys, aged between 12 and 18, from a variety of school contexts and backgrounds; with commentary, too, from teachers and girls who work alongside boys in language classrooms.

It is important to clarify that the focus is not on *all* boys studying *all* foreign languages. It is on boys in the major Anglophone countries of the world: The United Kingdom, the United States, parts of Canada, New Zealand and Australia – where the project was carried out. These are what Kachru (1996) would refer to as 'inner circle' boys – native speakers of the global language; for the most part, comfortably monolingual boys. As will emerge from both the data and analysis, this first fact is part of the boys–languages 'problem'. Incidental conversations with boys from other language backgrounds not included in this study produce different accounts. Boys from countries such as Japan, Norway, France, Hong Kong or Korea speak differently about foreign language learning. Many, of course, are learning English, which represents access

to valued cultural capital, a global commodity; but many are not only bilingual, they are multilingual. They know from lived experience the usefulness of additional language and cultural proficiency; and while many (not all) subscribe to the stereotypical views that come through our data from English-speaking boys – about girls being ‘better communicators’ – they appear to have no gendered sense of languages being an inappropriate curriculum option for boys. The issue of compulsion is certainly part of the equation. For most of these boys, languages have never been an optional elective, but rather an ongoing, compulsory, core component of their education. This is an important difference. Signals from the wider community that languages are (or are not) important are noted and internalised.

It is also important to clarify that this project itself involves some ‘empty spaces’ in terms of focus and analysis. The notion that there is no such thing as a ‘generic’ boy – that gender always intersects with other key informing social variables – is central to the analysis; and the variable which emerged most saliently from the data collected in this project is that of social class. The boys in this study speak from distinctively different social spaces; and this has been selected as the variable which is in this case most helpful in terms of identifying the complexity and variability of the boys–languages relationship. An equally relevant and complex analysis would have been an exploration of the relationship between boys from other-language backgrounds and in-school language programs. This dimension of the boys–languages issue fell outside the parameters of this study, but is clearly an equally important focus waiting to be explored.

## **The structure of the book**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 sets the scene in broader terms. A short review of the history of the boys–foreign languages relationship, together with an outlining of the participation of boys and girls in foreign language learning in four regions – Australia, England and Wales, New Zealand and Scotland – provide an informing frame to the following chapters. Many of the issues which subsequently emerge from the data can be linked back to the patterns traced here. Chapter 3 provides closer discussion of the key contexts in which the boys–languages relationship is being played out, identifying the discourses, debates and various positions currently framing the ‘problem’, as well as identifying the points of connection between the boys–schooling–languages discussions and wider cultural conditions. This chapter elaborates the theoretical frame which guides subsequent analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 is the first of the four data chapters. After an introductory account of the circumstances and approaches to data collection, the chapter presents the commentaries collected from boys in state schools, who talk in detail about their sense of themselves as boys, as students in school and as communicators/language learners. They talk about their experience in foreign language classrooms, and about the teachers – and the teaching – which went with this experience. The following chapter, Chapter 5, presents commentaries collected via the same process but from different contexts, from boys enrolled in private/independent schools. The same issues are explored, the same questions asked; and some clear similarities show up in the commentaries collected. But there are also some interesting differences in how these boys talk about the languages option; differences which indicate the significance of the intersection of different social and cultural variables.

Chapter 6, the third of the data chapters, shifts focus from the voices of boys themselves to the voices of teachers who work with these boys. They talk about similar issues, and are seen to share remarkably similar opinions in many respects with boys themselves. Their comments reveal the tensions involved in teaching (boys or girls) when it comes to aligning theory with practice; and gender is seen to be an interesting point of focus in this respect. Their comments indicate the extent to which pedagogy is shaped by teachers' understandings of how boys/girls 'are'. Chapter 7, the final of the four data chapters, provides insight into how girls 'read' the boys they share the language classroom with – from the other side of the divide. This complementary evidence shows how closely differently situated cultural narratives about boys parallel each other, cumulatively constructing a solid binary account of boys/girls as learners and communicators.

Chapter 8 reconnects with the original research questions which framed this project in light of both the evidence presented in the preceding chapters and the conceptual frame outlined in Chapter 3. The final chapter, Chapter 9 – resisting the temptation to offer definitive conclusions or fail-safe solutions – considers the implications of the intersecting frames which impact on the boys–languages relationship and suggests some points of departure for developing dialogue, changing thinking and ultimately transforming practice in ways which might result in more appropriate levels of engagement by young people of both sexes in the project of additional language learning.

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