

A boy behaving badly: Investigating teachers' assumptions about gender, behaviour, mobility and literacy learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex behavioural and academic issues that surfaced in an Australian primary school following the enrolment of a student whose parents were itinerant farm workers. The student did not merge easily into the school population as most of the other itinerant farm workers' children seemed to do. Instead, he stood out because of the challenges he posed for school personnel and school processes. This single case study examines teachers' social and discursive constructions of a boy who behaved badly; teachers' growing recognition that he was a student who achieved well on some literacy tests, and the challenges of reconciling understandings and assumptions about gender, school behaviour, mobility and literacy learning.

Introduction

Discussions about school literacy results often highlight the lower achievement of boys in comparison to girls. In Australia, national results indicate that boys underperform on key literacy measures (DEST, 2003; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education & Training, 2002). Such data have been touted publicly and politically as 'overwhelming evidence' that boys are 'falling behind in our education system' (Nelson, 2004). Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment has shown that 15 year-old females outperform their male counterparts in reading literacy in all countries participating in the testing program (OECD, 2000). With high value placed on literacy achievement within school and community contexts and research evidence showing that low levels of school literacy achievement do not augur well for students' later successes in life (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; OECD, 2000), the topic of 'boys and literacy' remains a current and significant educational issue.

Attention has been called to the way that boys, compared with girls, achieve lower scores on key literacy measures, are also less likely to engage with school, enjoy school, complete high

school or progress to tertiary study, and are more likely to experience disciplinary problems or face school exclusion (DEST, 2003; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education & Training, 2002). Many, however, have cautioned against simplistic readings of the relationships between social or demographic characteristics and literacy results (Alloway, 2004; Martino, 2003; Masters & Forster, 1997; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training & Youth Affairs, 2003). As Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert and Muspratt (2002) demonstrated, a disaggregation of Australian national literacy results showed ‘very clearly that not all boys are doing equally poorly ... that some girls are scoring at lower levels than are some boys,’ and that socio-economic background, language background and Indigenous identity were significant factors impacting on literacy outcomes (p.45). This suggests that there is a need to move beyond constructions of boys as ‘the new disadvantaged’ (Martino, 2003) and to consider the complexities that contribute to the social and discursive construction of boys as literacy learners within particular contexts.

Similar to the research on gender as a single factor variable influencing literacy achievement, one approach to research on mobility has concluded that mobility results in lower scores on language and literacy tests (e.g. Bolinger & Gilman, 1997), affects children’s progression from one year level to the next (e.g. Straits, 1987), and increases the risk of high school dropout (e.g. Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In contrast, there is a growing body of research that is exploring the social and cultural contexts of groups who are mobile for occupational reasons (e.g. Danaher, 2000; Henderson, 2004; Moriarty & Danaher, 1998), although very little of this research has focused specifically on issues relating to school literacy learning. However, there is considerable evidence that different social groups achieve differently on literacy assessments and that the interactions of a range of factors, including mobility, play a role in this (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon, & Pitt, 2001; OECD, 2001). Children arrive at school with diverse home and community experiences, take up school literacy learning in different ways, and develop in directions that are not always predictable, linear or sequential (Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland, & Reid, 1998, 2002).

In addition, it appears that students are constructed as literacy learners – by teachers, students, parents and researchers – within complex webs of diverse discursive contexts. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and geographical location feature in the social and cultural constructions that explain successes and failures in literacy learning. Even though several studies (e.g. Comber et al., 2001; Comber & Barnett, 2003; Hill et al., 1998, 2002)

have drawn attention to student mobility as one of many factors that enable and constrain literacy learning, research focusing specifically on mobile groups and literacy achievement has been reasonably limited. This paper begins to fill that gap by describing one case study within a larger research project investigating the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children. The rich data provided by this case offer insights into the complex issues surrounding the literacy learning of one student.

The case study

The case study reported here was part of an investigation into the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children who enrolled at one primary school in North Queensland. With up to 60 itinerant children enrolling annually during the winter months, it was not unusual for the school's population to increase by more than 10 per cent and for a range of flow-on effects to impact on the school's operations.

The focus of this paper is 'Ryan Neilsen', an Anglo student from New Zealand. Ryan arrived in Australia with his parents who had a three-year plan for 'getting ahead' financially. Ten-year old Ryan enrolled at the Queensland school for the winter of one year, moved to southern New South Wales for the summer harvesting season, then returned to the north for the following winter. The study tracked Ryan during his two seasons at the North Queensland school.

Whilst most of the itinerant farm workers' children appeared to adjust quickly to the school and its processes, Ryan alienated some teachers rapidly and in an extreme way. He did not adopt the routines and expectations of the school and he spent a considerable amount of time on detentions and suspensions. As this paper will demonstrate, teachers struggled to modify Ryan's behaviours and to encourage him into accepting their expected ways of being a student at the school. However, amidst beliefs that Ryan was neither interested in schooling nor focused on learning, he continued to surprise teachers with his level of success on literacy tests.

Data collection, including semi-structured interviews with Ryan and his teachers and the collection of school documents, was conducted at the school during the two harvesting seasons Ryan was enrolled. This paper draws mainly on teachers' and school administrators' narratives about Ryan and discusses their attempts to make sense of a student who appeared to

resist the accepted practices of the school. Although this paper does not do justice to the complexities and intricacies of Ryan's story, it provides insights into the shifting and multiple explanations that teachers used in trying to make sense of a boy who seemed intent on behaving badly.

Teachers' narratives about Ryan the literacy learner

A tough guy hiding his capabilities

On arrival at the North Queensland school, Ryan was assigned to a Year 4 class. The teacher, 'Mr Greene', regarded Ryan as a reasonably capable student, but acknowledged that he 'didn't give the appearances of being a great lover of reading' and that 'looking at his classroom demeanour, you'd tend to probably rate him down a little.' Ryan, it seemed, did not demonstrate the behaviours that Mr Greene associated with 'good' readers. In writing, however, Ryan was described as 'very capable' even though he 'tended to work at about three and a half million miles an hour.' According to Mr Greene, Ryan did not put in the effort that was required for high literacy results. This view was reflected on Ryan's report cards, where satisfactory achievement levels were reported for reading, writing, listening and speaking, and behavioural comments indicated that Ryan was 'capable of achieving well, but needs to maintain a more orderly management of his impulses and energies.'

However, Ryan's results on the *Australian Schools English Competition*, conducted by the University of New South Wales, caused Mr Greene to rethink his assessment of Ryan's literacy progress. This test placed Ryan at the 93rd percentile for the Year 4 students from the school who entered the competition. The result affirmed Mr Greene's view that Ryan 'definitely has a fair amount of ability' and indicated that Ryan could achieve near the top of his year level cohort. In trying to make sense of this result, Mr Greene suggested that Ryan was 'pretty much into that sort of category of the guy who doesn't want some of his skills to be recognised.' He went on to describe Ryan as a student who was deliberately downplaying his ability, deceiving teachers and manipulating classroom events. He also explained that itinerant students were generally 'below the peer group' and that Ryan's take-up of 'the tough guy image in the tough guy crowd' had virtually assured that he was not going to be a successful literacy learner. In this way, he attributed Ryan with undesirable behavioural characteristics that were linked to literacy underachievement.

A boy on a chain

Mr Greene's descriptions of Ryan, as a 'tough' and 'challenging' student who was always 'pushing the boundaries' and displaying 'unacceptable behaviour', were sometimes couched in prison metaphors. For example, Ryan's departure from the school (when he and his parents moved to the south for the summer harvesting season) was called an 'escape'. Mr Greene explained that the Year 4 teachers at the school always tested students at the beginning and at the end of the year. Ryan, however, had arrived 'after we did the start-of-the year one' and 'managed to escape before we got round to doing the end-of-year one.' The use of the escape metaphor suggested that Ryan was unwilling to be controlled or restrained by the rules of the school and that the school was unable to exert sufficient control to regulate his behaviour or to ensure that information was collected about his literacy levels. In this way, Ryan's perceived negative behaviours, including untrustworthiness, deviousness and work-avoidance, were linked to his itinerant lifestyle. Indeed, Mr Greene extended his thoughts to itinerant students in general, suggesting that their avoidance of schoolwork contributed to their 'image' as academic underachievers. He described 'these kids who travel around' as managing to 'sneak through and play dumb and happily reduce the amount of work they're expected to do,' thus 'contributing to the image a little themselves ... a sort of defence mechanism.'

This construction of itinerant students as deliberately deceiving teachers was reminiscent of stories that were circulating in the community surrounding the school, stories that attributed negative traits and illegal actions to farm workers. As reported elsewhere (e.g. Henderson, 2005; Moriarty & Danaher, 1998), the linking of pejorative characteristics to itinerant peoples can be indicative of a perception that mobility is in opposition to residential stability and community commitment. Ryan's arrival after the beginning of the school year and departure before the end of the school year, along with his apparent decision to underachieve and to deceive teachers, seemed to be read as evidence of that opposition.

When Ryan returned to the school in the following year, he was placed in the Year 5 class of 'Mr Connington'. Within a week of re-enrolling, Ryan received a one-day in-school 'suspension' for bullying another student. Less than two weeks later, he was officially suspended for five days for being uncooperative and defiant and swearing at his teacher. Mr Connington and the school principal identified Ryan's behaviour as an escalation of behaviours that had been evident the year before. In referring to his previous enrolment at the school, they both used an 'on the chain' metaphor to describe Mr Greene's attempts to control

Ryan. In this way, it was suggested that Mr Greene had tried to prevent Ryan's escape and that Ryan had been metaphorically constrained, either as a punishment or as a way of trying to persuade or coerce him into changing his behaviours. Teese and Polesel (2003) reported that prison images and their associations with 'negative confinement' and 'academic prisoners' were popular with high school students, especially boys who were achieving poorly (p.138). It seemed here, however, that it was the teachers who drew on the metaphor, representing the recalcitrant Ryan as prisoner and Mr Greene as gaoler.

The prison and 'on the chain' metaphors, which constituted Ryan as a student who had to be restrained, constrained and kept constantly under surveillance, implied that his behaviour was so bad that his body had to be kept physically under control. Within the context of the school, a taken-for-granted oppositional logic seemed to assume that Ryan was resisting the constraints of the school's rules and punishments because he was accustomed to unrestricted freedoms in his itinerant lifestyle.

A boy under interrogation

Although the prison and 'on the chain' metaphors implied a link with crime, there were times when criminal attributes were associated more explicitly with Ryan. On one occasion, for example, Mr Connington used the language of criminal inquiries to describe an investigation into Ryan's behaviours. As the following interview excerpt indicates, Mr Connington discussed the need to keep accurate records of Ryan's behaviours because he could not be relied upon to tell the truth. He also discussed the investigatory work that went on, by representing the school administrators and students as detectives and witnesses:

We got sort of halfway through the day and I said, 'You can go up the office.' And he sat there and they had to get about three kids up from the class to say exactly what Ryan was doing before Ryan caved in and said, 'Yeah, I was being rude. I was calling out.' And what got me was the principal and the deputy principal, like a couple of Ds [detectives] in an investigation, working this kid over, and he's holding his ground, and they're calling in witnesses and they're all saying, 'Yeah, Ryan was calling out. Ryan was doing this.' ... So now every time he does something I write it down. He says, 'What are you doing?' I say, 'Look. I'm writing it down. Here it is, so we don't have a memory problem.'

Not only had Ryan been under the teacher's surveillance, but other students in the class were also expected to report on his actions. Ryan was constructed as a student who had deliberately taken up the identity of a school 'tough guy.' In attributing him with agency, this view positioned him as a student who was consciously deciding how he would act and with whom he would be seen, and identified his behaviours as direct challenges to the authority of teachers.

Although such explanations did not directly discuss issues of masculinity, it appeared that the teachers saw Ryan as drawing on masculine discourses that foregrounded power and aggression and gave him kudos and notoriety with other students. Ryan was perceived as a student who refused to accept any form of regulation or authority. In the opinions of Mr Greene and Mr Connington, he had deliberately rejected the behaviours of the well-behaved student and characteristics that might have been seen as more feminine – such as a love of literature and creative writing, being polite or even acquiescent – in favour of the verbal and bodily performances of a 'tough' masculine subject.

The focus on Ryan's body – how he conducted his body and with whom he was seen – was also evident in the descriptions of Ryan's misdemeanours documented on *Individual student behaviour sheets*. These formed part of the school's official records of a student's misbehaviours and, as such, represented Mr Connington's official construction of Ryan as a badly behaved student. As demonstrated by the excerpt in Figure 1, Mr Connington appeared to read Ryan's body as the embodiment of unacceptable or inappropriate school behaviours. Bodily actions such as frog marching, squatting and tripping, along with a range of verbal actions, such as repeating the teacher's words and saying 'no,' were recorded as evidence of Ryan's disobedience, defiance, and perhaps even mockery of the teacher.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Mr Connington's description constructed Ryan as a deliberately naughty student who refused to accept school rules and the authority of teachers. Ironically, however, it appeared that attempts by school personnel to constrain and restrict Ryan and to encourage other students to spy and report on his transgressions were arguably acts of bullying and coercion, the types of behaviours that school personnel were supposedly trying to eradicate. It is perhaps not

surprising, then, that Ryan appeared to actively caricature behaviours that might be associated with crime, surveillance and forms of incarceration including prisons.

Ryan the cooperative student

The image of Ryan as a ‘tough guy’ seemed to be associated with macho behaviour and violence, not unlike the behaviours of some of Gilbert and Gilbert’s (1998) ‘bad boys’ (p.176). Although this seemed to be the dominant construction of Ryan amongst the teaching staff, it was not the only one. This was evident when Ryan returned to the school after his suspension. In what was meant to be a temporary measure, Ryan was placed in the Year 7 class of ‘Ms Anderson’, where he was expected to participate in problem-solving activities that would prepare him for his return to the Year 5 class.

According to Ms Anderson, however, Ryan’s ‘good’ behaviour in the Year 7 class provided few opportunities to work on problem-solving strategies. She explained that, ‘He has never displayed any behavioural problems in the classroom ... He’s polite. He puts his hand up. He’s just lovely. He’s well thought of in the classroom.’ Nevertheless, she attempted to continue with her brief, explaining that,

We’ve talked about the transition ... We’ve talked about the skills of, instead of answering back what can you do – stop, think before you say something, and then act. We’ve talked about putting your hand up when you want to speak, being polite, thank you, excuse me. All those things.

In talking about Ryan, Ms Anderson constructed him as a student who was trying to balance the conflicting identities of being a ‘good’ student with the physicality of hegemonic masculine discourses. Her opinion was that, ‘He’d like to be seen as a good kid, but he’s also rough and tumble and he’s also very sporty and he also likes to have a biff and a bash in the playground a bit, because he’s a boy. He’s a real boy.’

Ms Anderson was quick to point out that she did not believe that the disappearance of Ryan’s ‘bad’ behaviours was due to his placement in her class, where he seemed capable of engaging with Year 7 ‘work’, or to the classroom management techniques that she employed. Although she did not mention the terms masculinity or masculinities, she discussed her attempts to show Ryan that supposedly oppositional discourses could go together harmoniously. She did

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this by sitting him next to a student she described as ‘a tough rugby league player,’ but also ‘a nice boy’ who ‘gets his work done and gets on well with the class.’ She explained:

So Ryan sees that I can be well-behaved, I can be well-mannered, I can get on with my work, but I can also get out in the playground and play sport, make it to North Queensland [state-level competition] like this boy’s done. I can still be a real toughie but I can still be a nice kid.

To Ms Anderson, ‘real boys,’ those who were sporty, tough and popular with their peers, could also be good at literacy learning and well-behaved in class. By describing Ryan’s ‘rough and tumble’ characteristics as a natural part of being a boy, she was able to see her role as one of opening up opportunities for Ryan to become a ‘good student’ whilst allowing him to retain his ‘real boy’ attributes.

Teachers doing it differently

Ms Anderson’s readings of Ryan were different from those of Mr Connington. From the moment Ryan had walked into the Year 5 class, Mr Connington had constructed him as a troublemaker, reading his physical appearance as a sign of the bad behaviours to come. He described that event:

And the thing about Ryan, he had trouble written across his forehead when he walked in the door. He had this look in his eyes and as soon as he came to the door, all these guys in here went, ‘Oooooh Ryaaan.’ You know, they knew what was going to happen.

Yet, Mr Connington’s apparent attempts to bully or coerce Ryan into accepting the teacher’s authority – and to take up what may be perceived as a more feminine and less powerful position in the classroom – may have been one of the catalysts for Ryan’s ongoing attempts to push the boundaries and to assert his independence. In the Year 5 classroom, the options for Ryan seemed limited. Mr Connington appeared to expect that Ryan would either stop being the ‘tough guy’ and become the compliant ‘good’ student, or would persist with his ‘tough guy’ image and therefore be continually reprimanded. To Ryan, the first option may have seemed like a request ‘to “do boy” in non-hegemonic ways,’ a position which Renold (2004) argued often ‘involves inhabiting a marginalized and often painful position within a system of

gender relations that carries a host of derogatory labels for any boy who dares to deviate from a normative masculinity' (p.248). The second option, then, may have seemed the preferable one for Ryan, despite the difficulty of always being in trouble with the teacher. It was perhaps not surprising that Mr Connington had predicted that Ryan would choose to continue being the 'tough guy':

But I would say the next few days, next week, he'll do something. He'll defy me in the class. That's where he's at now. He's just very, you know, and he says 'whatever' and he's not prepared to follow instructions, so next week he'll probably defy me.

In contrast, Ms Anderson's construction of Ryan as having multiple subjectivities offered an option beyond the oppositional 'choices' that Mr Connington had presented. Ms Anderson wanted Ryan to be able to see that he did not have to choose between apparently mutually exclusive positions, but that he could be a 'real boy' and 'real toughie' in the playground, on the sporting field and in out-of-lesson times, yet be 'polite,' 'lovely' and 'well thought of' in the classroom. Although Ms Anderson's plan seemed to work, she did not claim that it was an easy solution and recognised that working with Ryan was fraught with difficulties. She explained: 'There's no way I would get into a confrontation with Ryan, because I would come off second best.'

What seemed to particularly worry Ms Anderson was that her apparent success with Ryan was likely to complicate her professional relationships with Mr Connington, the principal and the deputy principal. I suspected that she had worked hard to downplay comparisons between Ryan's behaviours in the Year 5 class and in her Year 7 class, in an attempt to avoid the situation being perceived as a good-versus-bad-teacher binary. Nevertheless, in our discussions, there were times when she implied that Mr Connington and the administration had not dealt with Ryan in the way that she would have done, but she stopped short of directly criticising their actions or of making what may have been construed as unprofessional comments about her colleagues. She did report, though, that she had told Mr Connington and the deputy principal that, 'You have to like him. He can tell that you don't', because 'it's the non-verbals. Kids pick up on that.'

Not surprisingly, the differences between Ryan's behaviour in the two classes were noticed. As part of his monitoring of Ryan, the deputy principal observed the Year 7 class and was

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impressed by Ryan's behaviour, work habits and interactions. He described what he had observed:

He seemed not only to be behaving in class, which is one thing, but he also seemed to be working. I went to a reading lesson when they were doing a play and he was actually working really well ... He was interacting almost as if he was at their level.

The Year 7 classroom provided opportunities for the deputy to see Ryan's potential as a literacy learner and to consider his strengths rather than his behavioural deficiencies. The deputy principal was surprised that Ryan was working well in a class of students two years beyond his chronological age. In the Year 5 classroom, however, it appeared that Ryan's abilities as a literacy learner had been hidden from view because the attention of school personnel and students had been focused on Ryan's infringements of school and classroom rules.

An ongoing puzzle for school personnel

Nevertheless, Ryan remained a source of puzzlement for school personnel for the remainder of his enrolment at the school. After the 13 week transition period in Ms Anderson's class, he returned to Mr Connington's Year 5 class. The next day he was suspended again. Following that suspension, Ryan returned to the Year 5 class for approximately 8 weeks, until he and his parents departed for the southern harvesting season. At about the time of Ryan's departure, the results of the Year 5 Test, which form part of Australia's national literacy benchmarking program, arrived in the school. In the writing component of the Aspects of Literacy Test, Ryan and another student shared the highest result of the students in the school's Year 5 cohort, a result that placed Ryan amongst the highest achievers in the state. On the reading/viewing components of the test, Ryan scored in the top 13% of his school cohort. Thus Ryan, who had been separated from his Year 5 class and from the Year 5 curriculum for extensive periods of time, had achieved well in comparison to his peers.

For Mr Connington and the school administrators, these results added another dimension to their ongoing bewilderment about how to work successfully and peacefully with Ryan. School personnel had not been able to isolate any one factor as the cause of his misbehaviours, and the failure of conventional behaviour management strategies to change his behaviour had been a major complication. Despite the success of Ms Anderson's strategy,

which promoted the co-existence of a range of acceptable behaviours, there did not seem to be any discussion of how to apply that strategy to other classroom contexts.

The actions of school personnel in relation to Ryan had been legitimised by the school's behaviour management policy. In particular, Ryan's removal from his peers and from the school – through his suspensions and his relocation to the Year 7 class – was a strategy of persuasion, even coercion, which aimed to modify his behaviours so he would conform to school expectations. However, as Meyenn and Parker (2001) pointed out in their research about school perspectives on boys and discipline, approaches that focus on individuals ensure that 'questions of discipline, school culture and classroom organization remain essentially unproblematized' (p.174). Indeed, the focus on Ryan as the perpetrator of a range of misdemeanours may have deflected teachers' attention away from other explanations. For example, almost all of the incidents that had been documented in Ryan's file had originated in Ryan's social interactions with others, mostly with teachers but sometimes with students. The dominant view of Ryan as a troublemaker may have served as a narrow lens that ignored the contextual factors that may have been involved.

Ms Anderson, though, had considered contextual factors. In viewing the situation with a wider lens, she moved away from a search for essentialised personal attributes and instead considered how Ryan might take up different subjectivities in different contexts. She also thought about the way that Ryan's return to the school at the beginning of the harvesting season might have been implicated in the events that had occurred. Like Mr Connington, she suggested that Ryan's itinerant lifestyle played a role in what was happening in the school context. She explained that, 'It's hard coming in, when you've been away. And when you come back, you've got to make your mark very quickly. You don't just slot in. It just doesn't happen. Maybe you want to be noticed.'

Teachers' social and discursive constructions of Ryan as a literacy learner were constituted by 'readings' of him as a boy, as a badly behaved student, and as the child of itinerant farm workers. During Ryan's two periods of enrolment at the school, there was evidence that at least some of his schooling experiences were characterised by discontinuity. For example, because of his family's itinerant lifestyle, Ryan had enrolled after the beginning of the school year and had departed before it ended. Through the processes of the school's behaviour management strategy, he had been removed for periods of time from his year-level peers and

from the school curriculum through detentions, suspensions and relocation into an older class. Nevertheless, Ryan continued to surprise teachers with his ‘good’ results on some literacy tests.

In trying to make sense of Ryan, teachers drew on multiple factors including gender, behaviour and mobility as points of reference. For some teachers, it appeared that a focus on Ryan’s misbehaviours may have masked their ability to see his apparent strengths in literacy learning. It was not that they were totally unaware of his abilities, but it seemed that they had been so busy trying to convince him to take up particular classroom and playground behaviours that issues surrounding literacy learning had been given lesser priority. In contrast, Ms Anderson took context into consideration and looked beyond essentialised characteristics towards providing Ryan with opportunities to take up different subjectivities: to still be the ‘tough guy’ in some situations, but to also be a good student. However, Ms Anderson was quick to admit that working with students like Ryan was complex and tricky.

Data from the case study highlighted many of the complexities. It also demonstrated that simplistic and stereotypical explanations about the literacy achievements of mobile and recalcitrant students did not explain why Ryan’s extreme classroom and playground (mis)behaviours had managed to challenge and frustrate school personnel to such an extent. Ryan disrupted many of the assumptions that teachers had made about the literacy learning of ‘tough’ boys and students with itinerant lifestyles, and it became evident that information about ‘how boys do *on average*’ was not useful for making sense of Ryan or for helping him to engage with school literacy learning. In fact, if Ryan’s ‘good’ results on the Year 5 Test were considered in isolation, one could be excused for thinking that he was not at risk in the school setting. Yet, it appeared that he was at risk: at risk of being isolated from his year level peers, at risk of being suspended and perhaps even excluded, and at risk of becoming totally disengaged from the school system and from school literacy learning. It became apparent that ‘easy solutions’ were not the answer to solving ‘the problem’ that Ryan had become.

Conclusion

This study moved beyond a view of boys and literacy that relies on considerations of ‘how boys do *on average*’ and offered insights into the multiple and intricate details of teachers’ constructions of one boy as a literacy learner. As demonstrated throughout this paper, teachers’ readings of Ryan Neilsen’s body, his school behaviours and the lifestyle of his

family suggested that he was going to ‘test’ the school’s code of behaviour and be an unsuccessful literacy student. Teachers’ social and discursive constructions of Ryan shifted over time, drawing on a range of assumptions about the relationships between gender, behaviour, mobility and school literacy learning. Other factors, such as social class and economic disadvantage, may have been implicated in teachers’ constructions of Ryan as well – particularly as the teachers knew that his parents were unskilled labourers working in the fields – but they were not referenced explicitly by teachers.

By unpacking teachers’ shifting constructions of Ryan, this paper highlighted how important it is for teachers to reflect on their assumptions and practices and on the consequences of these for students. Ryan was fortunate, in the short term, that there were some unexpected benefits from the school’s focus on behaviour and the decision to isolate him from his peers. In a new class context for a relatively brief period of time, he was able to demonstrate a level of engagement in literacy learning that had not seemed possible in his age-appropriate class. That short period offered some hope that Ryan could be successful in a school context.

The data presented in this paper suggest that teachers and policy-makers need to be cognisant of the complexities underpinning constructions of literacy learners. The findings call attention to the way that teachers’ assumptions can play a critical role in students’ success or failure to engage productively with classroom literacy learning. This is particularly the case for mobile students, whose relocations from one school to another add the dimension of limited time and the need for teachers to identify literacy learning needs as quickly as possible and to respond in timely and appropriate ways. The transitions of mobile students in and out of schools require consideration, so that they may be achieved in trouble-free ways that avoid the misunderstandings and angst that occurred in the case of Ryan.

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A boy behaving badly, but good at literacy

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Date	Behaviour
May 25:	1.50 pm. Repeating what the teacher has just said. Warned twice – he continued – asked to go to [another teacher’s class] to work and refused to go. Frog marched to [the other class].
May 28:	Refused to sit on parade – squatted instead – On being asked to sit properly replied ‘No.’ 1.50 pm. Repeatedly disrupting class – sent to [name of another class]. Answered with ‘No.’ Marched to [the other class].
May 30:	10.00 am. Repeated rudeness and disruptions during the day. When asked why he was out of his seat he asked me ‘Why are you out the front?’ 2.30pm. Ryan tripped [student’s name] during T-ball. He was asked to sit out and replied ‘No.’ I escorted Ryan to a seat on the edge of the oval and during this time Ryan called me a ‘F**king wanker.’

Figure 1: Ryan Neilsen’s *Individual student behaviour sheet*.