The Role of a Dominant Masculinity Discourse in the Decisions of Early School Leaving Boys in Queensland.

Thesis submitted by

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Ingrid Harrington Date

DEDICATION

To

Nina Kurelauk

15 August 1915 – 27 August 2001

Armas Mumi!

Mumi, Sa julgustasid mind alati ja uskusid minusse!
Ma tänan Sind minu ergutamise eest koguda julgust minna vastu väljakutsetele!
See väitekiri vajas mul neli ja pool aastat tööd, mille
ma pühendan Sinu mälestuseks!
Ma kannan Sind alati oma südames! Ma tunnen puudust Sinu järele!
Mumi, ma loodan, et Sa oled minu peale uhke!

Sinu Ingi

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I also wish to acknowledge the teachers, children and parents who participated in this study, especially the school leaving boys who generously gave their time and willingly shared their school experiences, hopes and fears for their futures. Without them, this thesis could not exist.

Abstract

The research was motivated by concerns about the consistent pattern of poor retention of some boys to Year 12, and overall poor performance of some boys in Australian schools.

The study broadly drew on critical discourse theory to examine the circumstances surrounding the decision to leave school by 22 boys from three different social locations i.e. provincial, rural and metropolitan, in Queensland, Australia. Adopting Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse as a conceptual framework for this research allowed the exploration of the different socio-cultural practices as perceived by the boys in their broader social context.

For the purpose of the research, a dominant masculinity discourse was understood by using concepts commonly associated with masculinity, namely an individual sense of power and control, independence, and a sense of 'self'. The boys constructed narratives to explain their personal circumstances and what influenced their school leaving decision. Their explanations were identified as seven generative themes (Freire, 1972), and the themes could be analysed through the lens of the three concepts of a dominant masculinity discourse. Analysis of the boys' narratives through these concepts created the opportunity to link a dominant masculinity discourse with their attempts to justify their school experiences and early school leaving decision.

Despite the similarity of the boys' school experiences, there were differences in the range of storylines (Bruner, 1990) identified in their narratives to illustrate their experiences in their broader social context differed. Similarities in the boys' narratives included their belief in the value of learning, and that the *context of school* was unable to provide them with learning that was both meaningful and relevant to their post school pathways.

The study concluded that consideration be given by education researchers to the construction of a dominant masculinity discourse in broader social contexts, when understanding boys' overall performance, engagement and retention at school.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

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, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2005; McMillan & Marks, 2003) and internationally (Arnot, David & Weiner, 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 research positions itself within a bigger picture of boys' schooling, and seeks to explore a possible link between their use of elements of a dominant masculinity discourse and their early school leaving decisions. Through the use of qualitative research, this study set out to explore the school leaving boys' accounts of their decision to leave school early in three social locations in Queensland.

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 Rate[1] (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 completion rate for boys steadily rising, the ARR of 69.8% in 2002 is still deemed to be low considering that the successful completion of Year 12 has important benefits to students.

[1] 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.

The individual and societal ramifications of school non-completion to Year 12 extend past school and into the employment sector (Green, 2004; Hartman, 2004; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Penman, 2004). In 1996, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon Dr David Kemp MP, observed that 19 year olds who left school early and had no vocational qualifications, had an unemployment rate close to 27%. This represented a sharp contrast to the 7% unemployment rate for youth who had completed secondary school and held a vocational qualification. It is important to keep in mind that, in fact, while more boys fail to complete school than girls, the consequences of school non-completion are much more severe for girls than boys (Collins et al., 2000). Nonetheless, the impact of non-completion to Year 12 appears to have long-term effects and costs to both boys and girls and society as a whole (King, 1999; Long, 2004; Penman, 2004). It is these long-term ramifications that have prompted recent changes to national and state educational curricula and policies designed to improve student performance and retention to Year 12. Aspects of curriculum and policy designed to improve education and retention to Year 12 need to take into consideration links to the larger processes of social cohesion and exclusion. One of these links that this research explores is the connection between boys' retention to Year 12 and patterns of discourses of masculinity.

A body of research exists linking masculine practices and cultures of schooling (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Beckett, 2001; Connell, 1997; Epstein, Elwood & Maw, 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; James et al., 1999; Kenway et al,. 1997; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2002; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Yates, 1997), and Gilbert (2002) suggested that a further understanding of the culture of masculinity was crucial to understand individual boys' engagement with school. An important feature of the current research will be to investigate the role a dominant masculinity discourse plays in influencing early school leaving boys' attitudes and responses to school, and their ultimate decision to leave.

Society's notions of what it means to be 'male' impacts upon boys' expectations of male behaviour, and influences the sorts of meanings they assign to their experiences. In particular, boys' beliefs about their own masculine identity may influence their willingness to participate in school activities and impact upon their attitudes to teachers, subjects, and what they consider to be worth knowing. Such a focus would provide an

insight into how boys define and position themselves at school and within the wider society.

The Research Question and Aims

Understanding how masculine practices and a dominant masculinity discourse impact upon the educational experiences and broader life outcomes of boys within their broader social context, may provide valuable insight into how they 'make sense' of their decision to leave school early. The primary aim of this research is to answer the following question:

- What insights into the decision-making process(es) about school leaving can be gained from an understanding of the social and cultural pressures connected with boys' imagined futures and their developing sense of masculinity?

Subsidiary aims are explored through the following questions:

- How do boys 'make sense' of their decision to leave school early?
- How are their explanations for leaving school early related to their experiences of schooling?
- How are their explanations for leaving school early related to the specific cultural, social and discursive practices of dominant masculinity that operate in their social context?

The subsidiary questions underpin the main aim of exploring the role a dominant masculinity discourse has in the construction of masculine cultures and practices in three different social locations, namely, provincial, rural and metropolitan. It has been argued that different social locations may impact on the construction of local cultures and discursive practices, including cultures and discourses of masculinity (Bruner, 1990; Evans, 2000). The research will investigate early school leaving boys' perspectives on school and employment by exploring their school leaving circumstances, or narratives through the lens of a dominant masculinity discourse. In doing so, links between the societal practices and expectations they may experience as males in their social context and their early school leaving decision can be explored.

Analytical Considerations

The nature of the research question, subsidiary aims, and certain design aspects of the study resulted in a complex series of levels in the analysis of the boys' narratives. The purpose here is to clarify at the outset the different levels of analysis, define the use of certain terms within the context of the study, and justify the need for them in order to explore the research question and subsidiary aims thoroughly. In short, the study comprises:-

- The narratives of 22 early school leaving boys;
- Three social locations – rural, metropolitan, provincial;
- Six specific social contexts – two from each social location;
- The experience of school and its links with the boys' broader social contexts;
- The analysis of the boys' narratives through a dominant masculinity discourse represented through three concepts: a sense of power and control, independence, and a sense of 'self';
- Seven generative themes – found to be common to the 22 school leavers' narratives;
- Identification of a range of particular storylines in the boys' narratives that illustrate how generative themes manifest in their personal circumstance.
- A range of discourses the boys took up in the contexts of school and the broader social context.

At the most general level, a range of storylines were identified in the boys' narratives. Patterns of dominant storylines were identified and grouped into seven generative themes. Within these themes, evidence of a dominant masculinity discourse was identified. Analysing these storylines and themes illustrated the ways in which the boys made sense of their school experiences and school leaving decisions.

Clarification of Terms

Clarification of terms used in this study is important to contextualise the purpose and application of those terms.

"Early school leaver"

Literature on school retention and early school leaving has focussed mainly on three groups of students:

i) those who fail to complete Years 11 and 12,

ii) students who leave school once they are legally entitled to do so at age 15 (age 16 in Tasmania), and

iii) students who leave school prior to the legal leaving age.

Terms that have been at the centre of some confusion include "early school leaver" and "non-completer". Research by Lamb et al. (2000) and Ball and Lamb (2001) in the area of school retention, recognised that current definitions of the two terms were too narrow and restrictive, as they confused the exact nature of school participation and completion. They defined an "early school leaver" as a young person under school leaving age, or a student who left school either before or on completion of Year 10 (typically aged at 15-16 years of age) (Ball & Lamb, 2001).

"Non-completer"

A "non-completer" is a student who leaves school *after* Year 10 but before completing Year 12, hence leaving without a Year 12 leaving certificate[2], even though they have continued beyond the compulsory years of schooling (Lamb et al. 2000). As this research examines boys who left school between Years 10 and 12, they are "non-completers" in terms of the categories just defined. However, and for the purpose of this research, the terms 'non-completer' and 'school leaver' will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified. The boys in this study will be referred to simply as "boys" or "leavers", and the process being investigated will be referred to as early school leaving.

"Narrative"

"Narrative" in this thesis refers to the boy's interview transcripts that provide an account of their life circumstances.

[2] In Queensland, the equivalent qualification is the Senior Certificate issued by the Queensland Studies Authority.

"School context"

This term refers to the culture of the school, including the professional work of teachers, the school curriculum, the policies and procedures of school administration, and the intangible 'feel' of the experience of school as reflected in the boys' narratives.

"Social location"

Social location refers to the three categories used to describe the geographical regions of the sites investigated in this study. They were provincial, rural and metropolitan.

"*Broader social context"*

Broader social context refers to the local environment where the student attended school, lived and sought employment.

"Discourse"

Discourses are particular ways of "doing" language and of "being in the world" (Gee, 1990, p.24). The use of language in a particular context or setting constructs and reflects the value systems, beliefs and assumptions which operate in that context.

"Generative Theme"

The term 'generative theme' will be used in the context of this study to refer to the seven themes found in the 22 boys' narratives.

"Storyline"

Bruner's (1990) concept of story and storylines is designed to assist in understanding the meaning-making processes of individual decision and action. For the purpose of this study, the term 'storyline' will refer to the specific stories found in the boys' narratives which illustrate a particular generative theme as it manifests in their personal circumstances.

Figure 1.1 below provides an illustration of the relationship between Freire's generative themes and Bruner's concept of storylines relevant to this study.

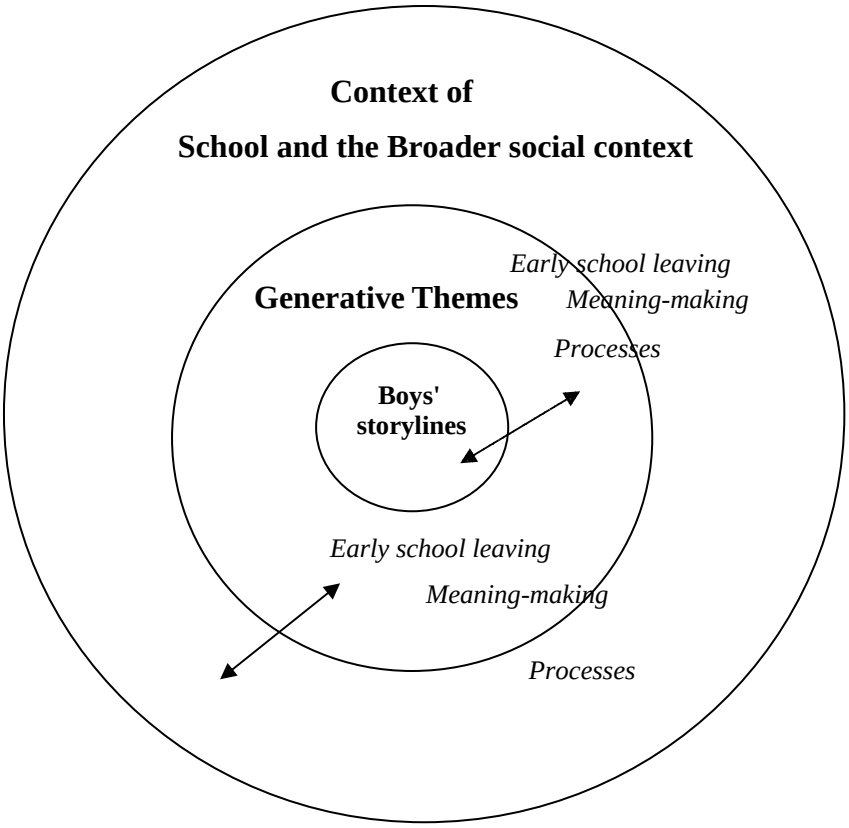

Figure 1.1: The relationship between Freire's generative themes and Bruner's storylines as analytical tools for this research.

Such a complex network of analytical levels was necessary for a thorough analysis of the boys' narratives with the aim of making links among a dominant masculinity discourse, the broader social context and early school leaving decision. In keeping with providing clarity to the analytical process and design of the study, the next section will briefly describe the conceptual framework chosen for this study.

The Conceptual Framework for this Study - In Brief

Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse as 'text, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices', developed within his theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), will prove useful as a conceptual framework for this research as it allows the researcher to make links between different contexts, cultures and individual decision-making processes as driven by the aim and questions of the research. It is important to

distinguish here that this research uses Fairclough's model of discourse as its conceptual framework, but does not engage Fairclough's CDA as a tool for analyzing text.

Fairclough (2002) suggested that the interactions in his three-tiered model (see Figure 1.2) should be viewed essentially as constitutive ones, between *micro* and *macro* levels. The *micro* level occurs in the central box of 'text', which is constituted by the middle and outer boxes of 'discourse practice' and 'sociocultural practice', or the *macro* level. He claimed that their interrelationship should be perceived as a discursive web that linked participants and their involvement in the production and interpretation of a range of texts.

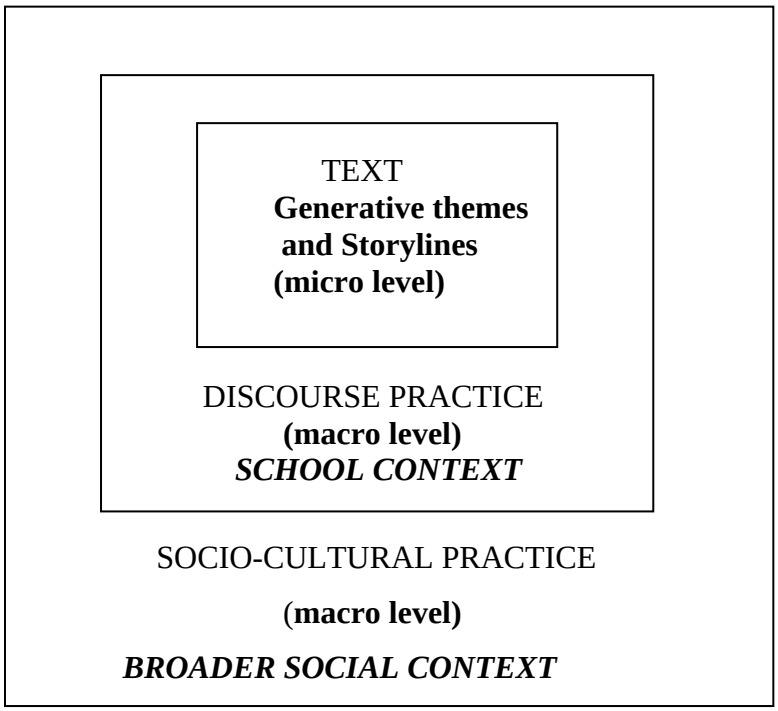

Figure 1.2: Fairclough's framework for the critical discourse analysis of a communicative event (Fairclough, 2002, p. 59).

In this study, Fairclough's model is used to illustrate the discursive system within which the boys' accounts are constructed. The relevance of the model to the current study can be seen in Figure 1.3.

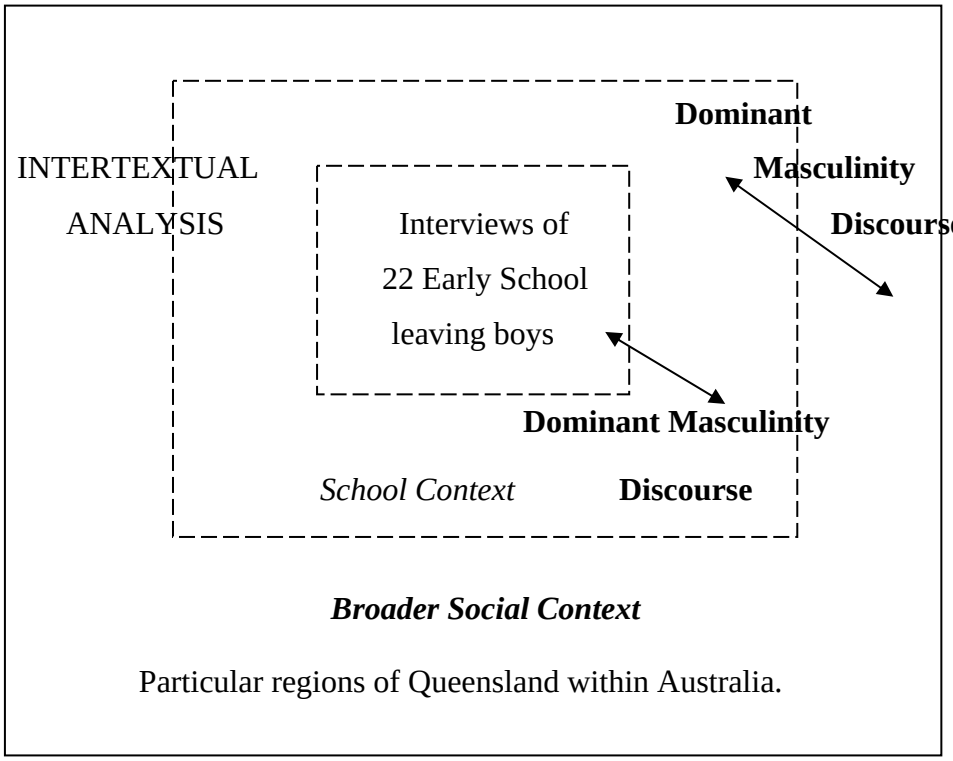

Figure 1.3: Fairclough's (2002) framework as applied as the conceptual framework to this study.

The central 'text' box in Figure 1.3 represents the 22 boys' interviews which form the body of data for this research. As this research involved the interviewing of boys from three different social locations characterised by a range of cultures and socio-cultural practices, the central 'interaction' and outer 'socio-cultural practice' boxes need to be viewed as multi-layered dimensions of the contexts of the boys' experiences. The broken lines encompassing the school context and the boys' narratives symbolise the fluidity of the dominant masculinity discourse as perpetuated in each broader social context. The interplay of discourses between the micro and macro levels will provide the basis for understanding the boys' school leaving decision in their broader social contexts. A more in-depth discussion of the conceptual framework for this study will occur in Chapter 4.

The Context of this Study

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.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted within the guidelines of "The National Health and Medical Research Council Statement on Human Experimentation and Supplementary Notes". The James Cook University Human Ethics Committee granted approval for the proposed research on 11 August, 2000. The reference number for the Ethics approval was H 1087. Education Queensland's Ethics Approval Committee approved this research in September, 2000.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

Recent national and state concern regarding the retention of boys in schools motivated this research with the result that the research concentrates solely on boys and school leaving in Queensland. Despite this focus on male students, the research acknowledges that both boys *and* girls at state and national levels experience difficulties at school, and on-going research is required to understand the difficulties they both face in the current education system.

A dominant masculinity discourse was represented through three constitutive concepts, specifically that of a sense of power and control, independence, and a sense of 'self'. It is important to establish early that this research does not claim that these elements are important only for boys. However, there is a considerable literature that shows their importance within a dominant masculinity discourse. This research position acknowledges that in the tradition of masculine discourse, these three concepts are significant in particular ways. Presumably, femininities discourses would also have to

deal in some way with issues of power and control, independence and a sense of 'self', but this question is not the focus of this research.

Significance of the Study

This research seeks to add to the development of educational strategies by providing an insight into the impact a dominant masculinity discourse has on the decision of some boys to leave school early. It seeks to add to the body of literature on boys and schooling undertaken to improve the general nature of boys' schooling experiences, principally the retention of boys to Year 12. On-going research that specifically explores the interplay of gendered practices with social and cultural issues is necessary in order to better understand the construction and practice of masculinities in schools and the broader society.

Relevant to this study is the question of *which* boys (Teese, 1996) decide not to complete school, and what influences their school-leaving decision. Do all boys who leave school early possess special characteristics, have common backgrounds, or is leaving school early not as easily defined? This research also explores whether early school leaving is a viable option for all boys' futures. If male early school leaving contributes to future employment disadvantage as most research reports, why do so many boys consider leaving school early, and more importantly, *which* boys consider early school leaving to be a viable option?

While indicators of boys' performance, participation and retention have been widely researched (Collins et al. 2000; Connell, 1995a; Dwyer, 1996, Epstein et al. 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Poole, 1986; Teese et al. 1995), primary research has not focussed on the role a dominant masculinity discourse plays in boys' early school leaving decision. Accordingly, this research will consider the socio-cultural practice of a dominant masculinity discourse with a focus on the implications of social location as a factor, and how masculine practices in the broader social context may impact on the decision-making process of boys who decide to leave school early. This research hypothesises that some boys' understanding of what dominant masculinity 'is', and how they negotiate the socio-cultural norms of masculine practices within their school and

broader social context, impact on the level of their schooling participation, performance and attitude, and ultimately their retention to Year 12.

Organisation of the Thesis

The primary research aim is to investigate links between two significant areas of research: boys' early school leaving and a dominant masculinity discourse.

Chapter Two examines the literature on early school leaving, while Chapter Three examines the literature relating to the concept of masculinity, and its relevance to the primary research question.

Chapter Four details the methodological approach to the research. Details of the conceptual framework for the research through the application of Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse as "text, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices" are outlined later in the same chapter. Arguments about research paradigms and perspectives are visited, along with an overview of the proposed tools for analysis, which include storylines (Bruner, 1990), and generative themes (Freire, 1972). The chapter also describes characteristics of the six broader social contexts chosen for this research.

Chapters Five and Six explore the seven generative themes identified as common to the 22 boys' narratives as they manifest in the school and social contexts respectively. The two chapters will analyse the boys' accounts at the levels of generative themes and storylines.

Chapter Seven provides a more detailed discussion of the seven generative themes in the two contexts, but through the lens of the three concepts associated with a dominant masculinity discourse.

Chapter Eight provides conclusions to the research, and considers future implications for the education of boys in Australian schools, and directions for further research.

Early school leaving has been the subject of considerable research, as have problems in the retention of boys. A key feature of the present study is the attempt to combine these two areas of research. The following chapter reviews the literature on the first of these questions, namely that relating to early school leaving.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Introduction

The issue of boys' early school leaving is of concern at national and international levels. At the heart of the concern is the difficult transition into the workforce and restricted future employment opportunity most early school leaving boys experience. The narrowed entry points into the workforce and restricted employment opportunities that are found in different social locations, are among a range of factors that characterise the difficult transition from school to the workforce facing some early school leavers.

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature and research findings relevant to the issue of student early school leaving and investigates the short and long term effects for those who decide to leave school early. Despite the study's focus being on boys' early school leaving, this literature review will reflect retention data on both boys and girls to highlight the difference in gender school performance, but later will refer specifically to boys' retention data. The chapter then presents the early school leaving statistics for Queensland within national and international statistical data. A discussion is provided of the profile of a student who, the research suggests, is most likely to leave school, together with a brief exploration of research into the factors that place students 'at risk' of early school leaving eg. socio-economic status (Collins et al., 2000), gender (McMillan & Marks, 2003), ethnicity (Collins et al., 2000) and social location (Penman, 2004). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role schooling has in student early school leaving.

An Overview of Early School Leaving

The body of research literature into boys' education in Australia and the western world has grown rapidly in recent years. It consists of a range of qualitative and quantitative

studies, case studies, government reports and literature reviews. (See Boys Education Lighthouse Project, (2003); Collins et al., (2000); Cullingford, 2002, 2003; House of Representatives, (2002); Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, (2002); Martino & Meyenn, (2002); and Penman, (2004)).

Concerns about the underachievement of boys in schools are perennial. For instance, Cohen (1998) noted that in the seventeenth century, the English philosopher, Locke, expressed concern about the difficulties some boys were experiencing at school. Cohen viewed boys' poor engagement and performance at school through Marxist discourses of class disadvantage and inequality, whereas other debates have focused on behavioural deterministic models to explain boys' underachievement in school. The reality is that the 'solution' to the 'problem' of boys' early school leaving is deeply embedded in a complex network of societal, cultural and personal factors, that are constituted by and constitutive of each other. Factors such as literacy and language competence (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000), racial attitudes (Gardiner, 1997), academic performance (Marks & Fleming, 1999), social disadvantage (Thomson, 2002) and indigeneity (Lamb et al., 2000), need to be noted as contributors to the 'problem' of school leaving. However, the interplay of these factors with gender brings a higher level of complexity to the issue, reinforcing how intricate and difficult it is to assess the contributions of societal, cultural and personal relationships to the issue of early school leaving.

Effects of Early School Leaving - An Overview

As will be elaborated later in this chapter, current social and economic changes have heightened the importance of education as being more significant than ever before. The changes include the type and distribution of employment, social changes such as the structure of families, the status of women, and educational policies (House of Representatives, 2002). For example, those who do not maximise their individual educational opportunities whilst still at school, place themselves at risk of disadvantage. Research has suggested that those individuals who fail to complete school form an 'exposed' category of young people (Lamb et al., 2004; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Penman, 2004). As non-completers have the least amount of schooling, many of them

are likely to become most vulnerable to economic and social change. As Furlong (1991, p. 45) noted, these school leavers represent the 'hidden injuries' of school.

The cost of early school leaving, both at an individual and societal level, can be assessed in many different ways. The House of Representatives Standing Committee (2002, p. 9) report entitled *Boys: Getting it Right*, stated that,

> Early school leaving is a matter of great concern because young people who have not completed Year 12 have much greater difficulty making a successful transition from school to post-school education and training, and employment.

Students who fail to complete Year 12 are more likely to be reliant on government income support (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003; House of Representatives Standing Committee, 2002; Kellock, 2005; Lamb et al., 2004; McMillan & Marks, 2003). According to Lamb et al., (2000, p. 4) students who leave school early "face a greater risk of exclusion in a society that requires active learning well beyond school years". They are also more likely to experience "extended periods of unemployment, and those who do succeed in finding work, are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations" (Lamb et al., 2000, p. 1).

A study by King (1999) discussed more specifically the individual costs associated with early school leaving, and suggested that these costs can be grouped into two categories: "direct monetary" costs, and "social" costs (King, p. 2). King analysed data from students who had left school early, and those who had completed Year 12. In a hypothetical longitudinal comparison between these two data groups over a "lifetime" of earnings (16 to 64 years), he found that over this period, an individual who did not complete Year 12 spent less time in full-time employment than the individual who completed Year 12 (55.1% and 67.3% respectively). The non-completers spent more time unemployed and not in the labour force, than the completers (39% and 22% respectively) (King, 1999, p. 27). King's report concluded that 50% of non-completers could effectively be considered "lifetime" early school leavers in that after leaving school, they failed to engage in further education and training. He conservatively estimated the cost to the nation of each early school leaver to be $74,000 per year, or in

the vicinity of $2.6 billion a year for the nation's total number of early school leavers, if costs to the individual, government and the rest of society are included in the estimates.

There may be circumstances where leaving school early is an appropriate decision for some boys (Fine, 1991; Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1989). As Trueba et al., explained, leaving school early is,

> never the most desirable solution in the long run, but it may be the pragmatic one that works for the individual under conditions of stress, confrontation, conflict, and failure on the part of the school to adjust to realistic circumstances (Trueba et al., 1989, p. 5).

Despite recognising that early school leaving may not disadvantage *all* boys since there are other alternatives for continuing education, research has suggested that most boys who fail to complete Year 12 experience some employment and personal difficulties in terms of low self-esteem and confidence (Collins et al., 2000; Lamb et al., 2004; Penman, 2004). It should be recognised that some boys who leave school early access work and training more readily than girls (Collins et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003, Penman 2004). Girls who leave school early are more likely to be ignored in unemployment statistics because they opt for domestic and family duties, and are therefore are less likely to register for employment. Collins et al. (2000) reported that 16% of young women on social security received social security sole parent pensions, whilst no males received such pensions.

The next section will briefly explore the prevalence of early school leaving at international, national and local scales.

The Prevalence of Early School Leaving

International Studies

Internationally, there has been a strong research focus on understanding issues relating to boys and retention to Year 12, as well as differences in student engagement and educational outcomes (Arnot et al., 1999; Cullingford, 1999; 2002; Epstein et al., 1998; Fine, 1991; Francis, 1999; MacKinnon et al., 1998; Mills, 2002; Skelton & Francis,

2003). Research from the UK and USA into the topic of boys and education highlights many similarities and differences compared with boys' education research conducted in Australia. International research reported by Lamb et al. (2005) suggested that similarities exist between aspects of boys' overall educational experience when compared with Australia eg. more boys left school early in other OECD countries, and that more boys accessed Vocational Education programs than girls.

Retention rates to the final year of school of European boys are higher than those of Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 2002). For instance, in 2001, the retention of boys to the final year of schooling in Germany and Denmark was 92% and 90% respectively, with Australia at 67% (Education Queensland, 2002). These figures beg the question of whether male early school leaving has more to do with the structure of schooling and other variables than with masculinity. Regarding early school leaver's successful transition to the workforce, Long (2004) in his report *How Young People are Faring, Key indicators 2004*, found that the average time an early school leaver in Australia takes to be gainfully employed is longer than an early school leaver in most OECD countries. He attributes this difficulty to a serious disconnection between the national labour market and skill development policy, and the lower rates of active employment seeking by young people.

These international comparisons are supported by considerable research into early school leaving in Australia, as the following studies show.

National Studies

Comprehensive studies of school retention in Australia have been available for many years. However, identifying a successful measure of retention has been difficult.

Nationally, the measurement of retention of students to Year 12 is recorded through the use of Apparent Retention Rates (ARR). An important issue exists in the problematic nature of ARRs as representative of each state and territory's student retention levels. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) acknowledges the problematic nature of

using ARRs by alerting the reader to a multitude of factors the ARR figures do not take into account, thereby affecting their accurate calculation and interpretation. These factors include:

i) students repeating a year of education;
ii) student migration interstate;
iii) other net changes to the school population;
iv) enrolment policies (which contribute to the different age/grade structures between states and territories); and,
v) inter-sector transfers of students.

It is important to note that if a student migrates from one State to another, or from one school to another, they will be recorded as a 'non-completer'. Despite these problems, the use of ARR figures provides a generally fair indication of the differences in student retention across Australian states and territories. Table 2.1 below illustrates the general patterns and recent statistics of the ARR to Year 12 of secondary students between 1999-2005.

Table 2.1: Apparent Retention Rates (%) of Full-time Secondary Students[3] from Year 10 to Year 12 between 1999-2005. Source: ABS, Cat. No. 4221.0. Schools, Australia, 2005, Table 51.

									Australia		
	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA (a)	Tas (b)	NT (b)	ACT (b), (c)	Male students	Female students	Total persons
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All Schools											
1999	70.0	78.7	78.3	71.4	71.5	68.9	64.7	92.5	68.9	79.9	74.4
2000	69.8	79.7	78.7	69.5	71.6	71.6	62.2	88.7	69.0	80.0	74.4
2001	70.3	81.6	79.7	69.6	71.9	70.5	64.9	93.3	70.8	80.1	75.4
2002	72.4	82.8	81.1	70.6	73.9	75.0	66.2	89.8	72.4	80.7	77.0
2003	72.7	82.9	81.5	70.8	70.6	76.4	68.7	90.3	72.3	81.6	76.9
2004	73.2	83.0	80.8	71.6	72.4	76.3	75.2	88.4	72.4	82.3	77.2
2005	**73.2**	**82.2**	**79.3**	**72.1**	**72.2**	**67.8**	**69.5**	**88.1**	**71.5**	**81.6**	**76.5**
Government	68.5	77.0	72.7	64.4	66.3	67.2	76.2	99.5	65.4	77.4	71.3
Non-government	81.3	90.2	91.2	86.2	82.3	69.2	54.2	74.5	82.1	88.8	85.4

Notes:
(a) Data for Western Australia (WA) have been affected by changes in scope and coverage over time. The WA Department of Education and Training also advised that, from 2003, the majority of students in a small number of WA colleges are no longer in the scope of the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC) and have been classified as belonging to the Vocational Education and Training sector. The removal of these students in 2003 to 2005 has affected a number of series. It has, for example, contributed to a fall in apparent retention rates in WA when compared with earlier years.
(b) For Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), relatively small changes in student numbers in these smaller jurisdictions create apparently significant movements in retention rates.
(c) Some ACT rates exceed 100%, largely reflecting the movement of students from non-government to government schools in Years 11 and 12, and of New South Wales (NSW) residents from surrounding areas enrolling in ACT schools.

While it is not the focus of this study, it does need to be noted that the ARR of male students in non-government schools is greater than that of female students in

[3] To calculate the apparent retention rate of full-time students at the Australia level the total number of full-time students in Year 12 in 2005 is divided by the number of full-time students in the base year, which is Year 7 in NSW, Vic., Tas. and the ACT in 2000 and Year 8 in Qld, SA, WA and the NT in 2001 (since those years represent the commencement of the secondary school system in the respective state or territory). The resultant figure is converted to a percentage.

government schools. This highlights the fact that retention issues occur in the education of girls as well as boys. Excluding Tasmania and the ACT that reported a decrease in student retention of -1.1% and -4.4% respectively, the figures reflect varying rates of a generally positive shift of male student retention in all schools between 1999 and 2005. The Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales showed the largest positive shift in retention rates with increases of 4.8%, 3.5% and 3.2% respectively. Overall at a national level, the retention of males to Year 12 in 2005 was reported at 71.5%, an increase of 2.6% since 1999, which is still relatively low when compared with the retention of females to Year 12 (81.6%) within the same period. The ARR figures show that students from government schools in the ACT, Victoria, Northern Territory, and Queensland were generally less likely to leave school early than students from South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia.

A multitude of explanations and factors exists to explain why some states and territories had higher retention rates than others between 1999-2003. For example, important structural 'school' changes as shown by the way Western Australia categorise their students attending Vocational Education and Training, may account for minimal changes in their ARR since 2003. It should be noted that for States and Territories with relatively small populations such as Northern Territory, Tasmania and the ACT, small changes in school populations may significantly impact upon ARR figures. Environmental factors that vary by state and territory such as broader social location, access to resources, and local economic dependency, may also impact on individual student retention, performance and engagement. Personal factors such as socio-economic status, parental education level, type of school i.e. government or private, parental employment category, ethnicity and culture, have also been shown to impact on the retention of some boys to Year 12 (Lamb et al., 2004). A more comprehensive discussion of these factors and how they influence the overall performance, engagement and retention of some boys to Year 12 occurs later in this chapter.

To provide a more detailed focus on the social locations from which this study is based, the next section will specifically discuss the State of Queensland.

Based on the ABS figures cited in Table 2.1, the ARR in the period of 1999–2005, the overall retention of all students to Year 12 in Queensland increased marginally from 78.3% in 1999 to 79.3% (+1.0%) in 2005. This result placed Queensland fourth in student retention to Year 12 at a national level, with the Northern Territory, Victoria, and NSW recording the highest number of student retention respectively.

Advice given by a statistician in the Measurement and Performance branch of Education Queensland reported that secondary education in Queensland in 2004 was provided in 274 State High Schools by staff employed by Education Queensland (Hardy, email communication, 14 April 2005). The Department provided services for 483,880 full time state school students. Of the full time student total, 34,050 were Year 10 students, of whom 17,321 were boys. The following table shows the numbers of boys enrolled at Year 10 and Year 12 in Queensland state schools between 2001-2004.

Table 2.2: Enrolment numbers of boys to Year 12 in Queensland State schools between 2001-2004
Source: Hardy, email communication, 14 April 2005.

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
Enrolment at Year 10	16, 675	16, 664	16, 982	17, 321
Enrolment at Year 12	11, 717	12, 174	12, 012	11, 817

The retention of boys to Year 12 in Queensland government schools has remained relatively stable over the period 2001-2004. Comparing year 10 enrolments with year 12 enrolments two years later, the table is able to show the ARRs for Queensland State schools from Year 10 to Year 12 were 72% in 2003, and 71.9% in 2004. While retention to Year 12 has been shown to be an important issue, the influences on it are complex.

The next section explores some typologies and models of school leaving that emerged from research to further understand, exactly *which* girls and *which* boys are ‘at risk’ of early school leaving.

Models of School Leavers

A range of typologies and models has emerged over the past two decades designed to cluster identifiable characteristics of someone most likely to leave school early. Research by Poole (1986, p. 23) suggested that the retention of students to Year 12 was affected by two sets of factors: ‘out of school’ factors, and ‘school’ factors. She suggested that ‘out of school’ factors included how the external environment and societal context impacted educationally upon students in terms of socio-economic status, location, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and indigeneity. Poole argued that a range of ‘school’ factors such as school policies on curriculum and organization, also impacted on student attitudes towards learning, their overall academic performance, retention patterns, post-school pathways, and their interpersonal skills.

Longitudinal ethnographic research with secondary school students conducted by Holden and Dwyer (1992b) supported Poole’s theory of the impact ‘out of school’ factors had on student performance in school. They found that students who experienced family troubles, including a lack of family support, who had a heavy workload associated with house-based or outside paid work, together with an accrued history of truanting, were most ‘at risk’ of leaving school early. They highlighted that what once may have seemed purely an academic debate about 'alienating' experiences within schooling or 'alienated' attitudes towards schooling, were now educational concerns that had direct implications for boys' school lives. They found that amongst the complexity and diversity of reasons associated with school leaving, it was school culture that seemed to impact most on a students' school leaving decision. Their research also suggested that as school was a significant institution to the lives of boys and girls, it needed to address ‘in-house’ issues such as curriculum offerings, negative school culture(s) and macro and micro-school structures to prevent or minimise the risk of alienation amongst these groups of people.

In 1996, Dwyer conducted a longitudinal study focussing on secondary school leavers. From the data, Dwyer generated a six category typology which he found useful in

distinguishing particular groups of students and individuals considered by schools to be most 'at risk' of leaving school early. Constitutive of his typology were positive leavers, opportune leavers, would-be leavers, circumstantial leavers, discouraged leavers and alienated leavers. These categories were designed to accommodate the broad range of individual student experiences and circumstances that influenced their decision to leave school early.

In Dwyer's (1996) typology:

Positive leavers were students who left school early to take up a planned employment opportunity, apprenticeship or alternative career-path.

Opportune leavers were students who attended school awaiting any opportunity to leave, such as an unexpected offer of employment.

Would-be leavers included students who preferred to leave school, but lacked any opportunities beyond school.

Circumstantial leavers were students who were forced out of school due to circumstances beyond their control, such as a low socio-economic status, traditions and expectations of males/females of particular ethnicities.

Discouraged leavers included students who were disenchanted with school and typically had negative experiences of schooling reflected in poor academic performance, negative issues with teachers, disciplinary action, or a history of suspensions.

Alienated leavers, were those students who had been effectively alienated by the education system, usually through poor academic performance and non-compliant/inappropriate behaviour.

Dwyer's (1996) typology was designed as a framework to be used in conjunction with the implementation of programs addressing the perceived needs of school leavers as identified in his study. The main focus of his research was to eliminate the categories of 'Discouraged' and 'Alienated' leavers through the implementation of specific school-based programs. Dwyer implied that links existed between student positive school achievement and attitude, and more structured post-school options such as apprenticeships, traineeships or enrolment in specific occupationally orientated vocational courses. Dwyer claimed that for 'Positive' or 'Opportune' leavers, their success in gaining full-time employment was more likely than with the 'Discouraged'

and ‘Alienated’ leavers. While such typologies should not be regarded as fixed categories into which boys 'fit', Dwyer’s research is helpful for this study as a heuristic to aid in understanding the practices of school leaving.

Kenway, Willis, Blackmore & Rennie (1997) suggested a link between the labour market and poor retention rates to Year 12. Similar to Poole (1986), Kenway et al. proposed a model based on structural and cultural factors which exist within the labour market that they believed greatly influenced the decision of some students to leave school. Structural explanations focused on employment opportunities, such as the relationship between paid work and family work, and emphasized constraints the family unit placed on the access to paid work. Cultural factors of gender difference accounted for how males and females often gained a sense of themselves as 'feminine' or 'masculine' according to the work they chose to do. The fact that many jobs in the current labour market, such as nursing, are gendered, reinforces this notion as traditional gender conventions attract those who readily ‘fit’ into such gender codes, and tend not to welcome those who do not.

Marks and Fleming’s (1999) research based on the 1995 Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), focussed on students who left school before the beginning of Year 11 and who were in Year 9 in 1995. A model of early school leaving emerged from the research, which Marks and Fleming based on four different ‘levels’:

- an individual level (social background and demographic factors);
- school level factors;
- students’ attitudes to school; and,
- students’ aspirations.

They found that at an “individual” level, school achievement had the largest influence on early school leaving. The “school” level factors included the schools’ socio-cultural environment and socio-economic status, academic climate and school norms. The third level, “student attitudes to schooling” revealed that male students’ sense of achievement and satisfaction with school had significant links to their school leaving decision. The last level of “student aspirations” revealed that student career objectives had the largest effect on their early school leaving decision.

The importance of the research by Marks and Fleming (1999), Poole (1986) and Kenway et al., (1997) to this study is that they provide illustrations of how researchers endeavouring to learn more about school leavers understand students' motivations to leave school early. Emerging from their research are models that present a picture of trends and factors affecting the retention of students in Australian schools. Analysis of the boys' narratives in this study will include consideration of the impact of 'school' and 'out of school' factors (Poole, 1986), and socioeconomic and cultural explanations in current economic times.

Research by Martin (2002, p. 51) identified school leavers through the adoption of a 'need achievement' theoretical perspective that considered some boys' motivations to avoid failure and approach success as paramount to their decision-making process to stay at school. He claimed that based on a model of motivation, students could be characterised into a three-tiered typology: those who are success-orientated; those who are failure-avoidant; and those who are failure-accepting. He explained that success-orientated students embraced learning with vigour and optimism and viewed poor academic performance as further challenges, not as events to be intimidated by. Failure-avoidant students were characterised as hard workers who lacked resilience, so when they experienced poor returns from their academic efforts, they slumped into self-doubt and questioned their ability to achieve success. Failure-accepting students lacked both motivation and resilience, and excluding the social aspect of school, were otherwise disengaged in all other forms of school-based success.

It is clear that researchers in the area of school leaving have formulated models in an effort to understand the motivation for some students to leave school early. Common to all models are factors external and internal to the school operations that were deemed important in the early school leaving decisions of some students.

The next section focuses specifically on attributes and/or characteristics of the individual early school leaver – who are they and why do they leave school early?

Boys who don't Complete Year 12

Who leaves school early?

A range of methodological approaches have been adopted by researchers in an effort to understand the factors that lead to early school leaving (Marks, 1998). Some studies have attempted to provide statistical data on early school leaving using national samples (McMillan & Marks, 2003; Marks & Fleming, 1999), whilst others have focussed on qualitative approaches (Holden & Dwyer, 1992b; Rosier, 1978; Trent & Slade, 2001). Both approaches of inquiry into the education of boys have been consistent in their findings on whom they consider to be 'at risk' of leaving school early.

A number of studies report that individuals who leave school early are more likely to have a low socio-economic background, to have parents who lack formal schooling and are employed in unskilled work, to attend government schools, live in rural/isolated settings, and to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Batten & Russell, 1995; Lamb et al., 2000; Long et al., 1999; McMillan & Marks, 2003).

Why do some boys leave school early?

Societal perceptions of secondary school students tend to vary enormously particularly towards boys who 'drop out' or leave school early. Fine and Rosenberg (1983, p. 258) put forward an interesting interpretation of what motivates some students to leave school early. They claimed that,

> High school dropouts represent individuals who challenge the dominant belief that education leads to labour market success – employment and income guarantees. It may be in the best interests of business and government officials to maintain the belief that dropouts leave school because of personal deficits and ultimately pay an enormous price for that decision. But we have learned that many dropouts are indeed fully capable of academic achievement and leave school with a critique of institutional inadequacies and discrimination … These adolescents expose contradictions in prevalent cultural beliefs about meritocracy, individualism, and self-motivation, and for that reason are socially constructed as 'losers', if not dangerous.

Fine and Rosenberg's (1983) research clearly views students who leave school early as individuals willing to challenge the inadequacies of schooling by taking responsibility for their own education and futures. These 'dropouts' achieved this by defying community and educational expectations by leaving school early to explore other, and according to them, more rewarding, productive and relevant pathways for their future. According to Fine and Rosenberg's research, they are not, as some may believe, a group of 'no-hopers' characterised by aimless despondency and low-self esteem. While Fine and Rosenberg's view of school leavers may be accurate, it does not account for the fact that more boys than girls leave school early. Nor does it address the long-term effects of early school leaving, and the associated risk of disadvantage.

In the period following the Australian economic recessions (late 1970s, and 1991-1992), with employment options beginning to emerge, boys, especially, were tempted to take up employment opportunities and leave school. More than a decade later, research had found that a number of boys still considered leaving school early a viable option. The Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) (1999, p. 9) reported from their ethnographic study of early school leaving that 35% of students who intended to leave school before completing Year 12 variously explained that they:

- wanted to get a job (94.6%);
- wanted to undertake job training not available in school (81.5%);
- wanted to earn money (71.8%);
- wanted to begin an apprenticeship (66.8%);
- considered some subjects to be useless (44.1%);
- were 'fed up' with school (40.1%).

Lamb et al.'s research (2000, p. 1) reported similar results. They found that 67% of boys cited reasons of getting a job, an apprenticeship or earning money as their main justification for not completing school, whilst 21% of boys cited their dislike of school and poor academic performance as their reason for leaving school early. Collins et al. (2000, p. 110) reported that the option of entering an apprenticeship at the end of Year 10 continued to attract more males than females, reflected in the fact that the number of male apprenticeships had not been lower than 100,000 a year between the period

between 1989–1997, (excepting the economic down-turn of 1991), whereas the number of female apprentices had not reached 20,000 in any year.

Collins et al., (2000) suggested that the attainment of a Year 12 certificate post-recession had become of less value to employers. Some boys considered Year 12 completion as less than advantageous for their future employment prospects, as the Year 12 certificate "no longer had rarity value" (Collins et al., p. 34). This view existed even though the early leavers may be concerned about their employment prospects. Recent research by Lamb et al. (2004, p. 13) reported that some young people left school because they did not believe that staying on at school would help them get a job[4]. They found another common reason for early leaving directly related to their experiences of school. One third of all early leavers said the main reason they left school was because they did not like it, they were not doing well, or that they had lost interest or the motivation to continue. Lamb et al. concluded that if the main motive for early school leaving was the desire to be employed, then the second motivation was the desire to get away from school.

Studies of early school leaving have highlighted a range of factors contributing to its incidence. It is important therefore to ask how prominent is the role of factors such as socio-economic status, rurality, ethnicity and indigeneity in early school leaving? Does one 'factor' have a greater impact on the decision to leave school early than another? A more detailed consideration of these factors is required.

Factors Affecting Early School Leaving

Previous international and national research has reported that some students from particular backgrounds are more likely to leave school early or experience some form of social disadvantage (Arnot et al., 1998; Collins et al., 2000; Cullingford, 1990, 1999, 2002; Dwyer, 1996; Erskine, 1999; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Hickey, Fitzclarence & Matthews, 1998; Kenway, 1997; Lamb et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003). Research by Lamb et al. (2004, p. viii) listed a range of factors that need to be taken into consideration to understand early school leaving decisions. They included:-

[4] See also Ainsley and Sheret (1992), Pitman and Herschel (2002), Teese (2002), Smyth et al. (2000) and Craven et al. (2003).

Social and demographic:

- Achievement, student aspirations and motivations, family structure, SES, ethnicity, Indigenous status, health, homelessness and disability.

Regional and economic:

- Urban, rural or remote, youth labour market, unemployment, part-time employment, industry structure, and community links.

School policies and context:

- Sector, school quality, teacher quality, pedagogical effectiveness, school resourcing, school organization.

Policy environment:

- System, State and Commonwealth policies, curriculum and qualification framework, income support.

It is important to remember that factors such as socio-economic status, social location (rurality), ethnicity and indigeneity usually do not occur in isolation; rather they tend to cluster and compound in effect. For example, single parent families tend to have lower incomes than other family types, hence they are more likely to exhibit characteristics of low socio-economic status than others. Factors such as rurality, indigeneity and non-English speaking background have been shown to impact greatly on school retention figures, affecting specific groups of students considered to be most 'at risk' of leaving school (Collins et al., 2000; Dwyer, 1996; Lamb et al., 2004; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Marks et al., 2000; Teese et al., 1995). One or more of these factors may negatively impact upon some groups of society. Effectively, some groups in society that experience disadvantage are alienated in the larger education system within mainstream schooling. Bullock and Stallybrass (1977, p. 16) defined 'alienation' as,

> a sense of estrangement from society; a sense of powerlessness to affect social change, or a depersonalisation of the individual in a large and bureaucratic society.

According to Collins et al., (2000) the disadvantaged groups of boys and girls currently experiencing alienation in Australian education systems are Indigenous students, students from low-income families, rural students, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Yet research by Yates (2001) claimed that using general terms

such as ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ was too imprecise, as it did not identify constitutive groups of those boys and girls who were particularly ‘at risk’ of underachieving at school. Her research indicated that more attention needed to be paid to which boys, and which girls were associated with *which* school-based outcomes.

This brings the discussion back to the distinction of experience underlying the differences between and among boys and girls; the relationships of gender. The next section will examine in more detail the impact gender has in the overall school performance, engagement and retention of students to Year 12.

Gender

Over the last two decades, a plethora of research into gender and schooling has provided a greater understanding of the differences between the school experiences of girls and boys, including comparisons of academic performance and general engagement with school (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Collins et al., 2000; Holden & Dwyer, 1992a; 2002; Lamb et al., 2000; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2002; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Martino & Meyenn, 2002; Mills, 2000). What these studies suggest is that these differences must be seen relationally, constructed within an overall system of gender relations.

A wide range of feminist studies in the 1980s began to reveal the gendered nature of education in Australian schools, and the impact of masculine practices within school cultures eg. boys' dominance in sport, maths/sciences, fighting incidents. Concerns about gender inequity in Australian schools prompted the release of National policy documents designed to increase teachers' awareness of the gendered nature of schooling. Policy documents like the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997 (*see MCEETYA[5], 1993) and later, *Gender Equity – A Framework for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA, 1997) emphasised the importance of addressing such masculine practices and their impact on students, especially girls in schools. MCEETYA (1997, p. 16) reported that factors such as parental education level, indigenous status, language background and social class increased boys' chances of

[5] Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

early school leaving to 1.9 times that of girls.In recent times however, greater attention has been paid to the impact of masculine practices on boys themselves.

The impact of gender construction on some boys' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, not only in educational settings but also in other domains of their lives, has increasingly been raised as an issue in need of serious attention (Collins et al., 2000; Connell, 1994a; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kenway et al., 1998; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2002; Martino & Meyenn, 2001). Research by Gilbert (2001, p.6) claimed that "the issues facing boys and the issues facing girls in schools stem from social constructions of gender and of gender relations in Western society", and elaborated in the following terms.

> The attributes, attitudes, and values that are part of society's stereotyped images of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are for the most part unattainable for many individuals. In seeking to meet these images both boys and girls often suppress their natures and create barriers to their education and life opportunities (pp. 6-7).

Gilbert (2001) reinforces the notion that the manner in which gender is constructed in society is an important educational issue for some students. Raphael-Reed (1999) reminded researchers to be aware of the consequences of relying on measurable outcomes as an indicator of gender issues in education. She stated that a broader concern existed in the form of what impact the 'hidden curriculum' and social processes of schooling had on both girls and boys and that this should remain a key priority within gender and schooling policy. Gilbert (2001, p. 6) argued that,

> Boys' difficulties with schooling are closely linked to their understanding of ways to 'do' masculinity - to become a successful 'man' … and girls' narrow curriculum selections are linked in with their gendered perceptions of subjects and of what is appropriate for girls to do.

Existing research on the disparity between boys' and girls' overall performance and engagement with school (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Collins et al., 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; McMillan & Marks, 2003) has highlighted a number of areas of concern, including:

- the school curriculum;
- the differences between girls and boys' academic achievement;
- literacy and numeracy levels;
- behaviour and retention at school, and,
- student attitudes and motivation towards school.

It may be useful to briefly visit these key areas to further understand how gender is related to boys' and girls' subject choices, participation and performance at school.

Curriculum

Structures of school such as the school curriculum and other support structures have been examined in relation to the impact they may have on student retention to Year 12 (Ball & Lamb, 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1996; Lamb et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Trent & Slade, 2001).

An examination of curriculum structures in Australian states and territories indicated that subject availability, for purposes other than pursuing a higher education, was a crucial influence on school retention (Lamb et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Vickers, 1995). Research by Batten (1989) and Marks (1998) found that students' general satisfaction and attitude towards schooling, perceived relevance of studies and sense of achievement was higher in schools where Year 12 curricula reforms had been introduced. For instance, the introduction of the Vocational Education and Training Certificate in 1993 offered nationwide a wider, more diverse range of subject learning areas as a major secondary curriculum alternative.

The introduction of more demanding common requirements for Year 12 certification in Victoria and South Australia between 1991 and 1993, may have contributed to poorer 1996 retention records, especially for males in those States (68.3% and 62.6% respectively) (Collins et al., 2000). By contrast, a relaxing of common requirements for Year 12 in the ACT, such as no Year 12 external examinations, a wider range of subject choice, and no compulsory subject rules for graduation, showed a marked change in the retention rate to Year 12. The retention of ACT Year 12 boys in 1996 and 1998 was

recorded as 91.7% and 91.2% respectively (Collins et al., p. 36). Collins et al. (p. 36) argued the case of what a more open education environment can provide in relation to Year 12 retention. With less pressure on schooling and common requirements, the retention of students to Year 12 seemed to increase, whereas States that offered narrower requirements tended to push students out of school, and record poorer student retention rates (Collins et al., 2000; Vickers, 1995).

Collins et al., (2000) found that in 1993, the level of available student support structures in Australian secondary schools dropped in all States and Territories. This highlighted the lack of access some students had to appropriately trained specialist staff in the areas of literacy and numeracy, and may have contributed to the poor retention rates of some boys and girls after that time.

Academic Achievement

Research by Astone and McLanahan (1991) and Kaplan et al. (1997) found that poor academic performance reflected in low grades was among the first signs of future dropout by students, and that during the early years of high school, motivation to learn declined among some low achievers, putting them on the trajectory towards disengagement and early school leaving. They found that declining achievement, motivation, a sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem accompanied the process of disengagement from school.

A study commissioned by the Commonwealth of Australia (2003, p. 3) that reported a range of opinions on the education of boys, stated that:

- in NSW, the difference between boys and girls average Tertiary Entrance Rating (TER) has risen between 1981 to 1996;
- the majority of mid-level to upper performers in Year 12 overall results were girls;
- boys dominated the bottom performers in Year 12 overall results;
- in the 1999 NSW Higher School Certificate (Year 12), the average mark achieved by girls exceeded the boys' average in 36 out of 40 subjects by up to 11%; and,

- in South Australia in 1998, girls made up the majority in the top performance bands in 27 out of 34 Year 12 subjects.

While these observations are accurate in themselves, they have been crtiticised as being over generalised and glossing over the differences amongst boys and the problems of groups of girls (Collins et al. 2000). The inquiry also highlighted that boys reported less positive experiences of school than girls in terms of “enjoyment of school, perceived curriculum usefulness and teacher responsiveness” (Rowe, 2002, in Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 3). The report showed that girls were likely to participate to a greater extent in school extracurricular activities than boys, consequently experiencing a higher level of attachment to the school.

Research has shown that girls consistently outperform boys in most subjects offered at school, and that the difference is widening (Collins et al., 2000). This difference is attributed, in part, to a shift in boys’ position at the extreme ends of the performance scale (Collins et al., 2000).

The result of the poorer academic performance of boys was seen to limit their choice of subjects, higher education options and career choices. In addition, boys' participation in a range of narrow, vocationally-orientated school subjects meant they may miss out on fostering their social and cultural capacities, and the development of diverse knowledge and other skills eg. civic skills.

Literacy and Numeracy

Boys’ poor performance in literacy has remained a consistent measure of their underachievement at school (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). This has been connected with boys association of literacy/English-based subjects with a feminine identity (Archer, Pratt & Phillips, 2001; Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; McLean, 1996; Martino, 1999; Walker, 1988). English and literacy have been viewed by some boys’ in schools as being "sharply inscribed as 'feminine'" whilst "competitive contact sport was coded as masculine" (Collins et al., 2000, p. 91). Those boys who enrolled in ‘feminine’ subjects were often the victims of negative male cultures of bullying and harassment, as their masculine identity was deemed ‘inferior’ and ‘inadequate’ (McLean, 1996, p. 54)

and aligned with femininity and other subordinate masculine types. McLean also argues that the gendered nature of subjects at school is supported by curriculum, policies and other school structures such as assessment practices.

It is however, important to note that not *all* boys performed badly in English, and not *all* girls performed well in English, so it is crucial to "deconstruct the broad gender categories and look more carefully at the intersections between gender and ethnicity, rurality, class and poverty" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 11).

Behaviour

Males are over-represented in behaviour management programs that target aggressive and inappropriate physical management, such as fighting and bullying of others (Collins et al., 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martin, 2002).

Browne and Fletcher's research (1995) reported a number of behavioural and academic outcomes for boys in schools, which included:

- 60% of school counsellor referrals were boys;
- Nine times as many boys as girls were in special classes for emotional and behavioural disturbance; and
- Boys performed considerably worse at Basic Skills English tests at all ages.

(Browne & Fletcher, 1995, p. 241)

Nearly a decade on, the 2003 Australian parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys entitled *Educating Boys: Issues and Information*, reported that:

- Males were more likely than females to be suspended for violence;
- Boys comprised about two-thirds of all students referred to *Reading Recovery* programs; and
- 80% of school suspensions were boys.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 8, 16)

In his analysis of how students establish their identities at school, Wexler (1992, p. 131) suggests that some boys struggle to align their masculine identity at school to forms of a dominant masculinity discourse, and that their misbehaviour and forms of violence were part of the on-going struggle to prove that they were indeed "somebody". The restrictive and authoritarian nature of school demanded that some boys needed to constantly display their self-worth to themselves and others to avoid repudiation from their peers, and violence was often a response to this repudiation.

Attitude and motivation towards school

Boys have been found to be more negative about most aspects of schooling, including completing homework, attempting academic tasks, and making links between the relevance of their educational outcomes to their futures (Martin, 2002). Research by McMillan and Marks (2003) and Martin (2002) found that boys were less motivated and organised about school in areas of time management, planning and overall management of resources. Boys tended to value school more and to see its relevance and significance when clear, unambiguous links were made with processes, agents and systems outside of school.

Indigeneity

Indigenous[6] students are most 'at risk' of becoming early school leavers and the retention of Indigenous students to Year 12 has been consistently lower than non-Indigenous students (Collins et al., 2000; Dwyer, 1996; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Marks & Fleming, 1999). Research by Fraser (1999, p. 8) concluded that "Indigeneity intersects with poverty, locality, and socio-economic disadvantage to make the chances of poor schooling participation and performance extremely high for Indigenous students".

Long, Frigo & Batten (2001, p. 46) in their report entitled *The School to Work Transition of Indigenous Australians* stated that "Year 12 retention among Indigenous school students is less than half that of non-Indigenous students" (30.9% and 72.8% respectively). Dwyer's (1996, p. 17) study found that 10% of Indigenous students reported a 50% non-attendance rate, with "significant numbers of school-age

[6] Aboriginal peoples and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Indigenous students, some as young as ten, considered permanent non-attendees". Researchers exploring the poor retention figures often associated with Indigenous students have identified various reasons for this problem. A major component included a greater Indigenous student attrition across all year levels of secondary schooling (Long et al., 2001). Marks & Fleming (1999) found that features such as low school achievement and low socio-economic status only partially explained the poor retention figures recorded for Indigenous secondary students. They suggested that other factors accounted for a "substantial component" (p. 26) of the low retention of Indigenous students to Year 12 that included:

- a set of local cultural social norms regarding school leaving;
- pessimism about their ability to remain at school;
- lack of encouragement to stay at school; and
- a feeling that remaining at school does not 'pay off' either in terms of further education or better jobs.

Similarly, the House of Representatives *Inquiries into the Education of Boys* (2002) found that Indigenous people faced racial discrimination and social and cultural alienation, both in local communities and in schools when seeking access to education. Broader social isolation, economic disadvantage and poorer living standards experienced by one-third of the Indigenous population who live in Aboriginal townships, homeland communities or other small townships were also viewed as contributing factors. The lack of co-ordination among services at various levels of government served effectively to isolate many Indigenous people from available education programs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). The House of Representatives 2002 report entitled *Inquiries into the Education of boys,* found that:

> Aboriginality has the greatest effect on achievement when considered on its own, far above that for all students, and within this group, the performance of boys is lower than that for girls indicating that they are more at-risk of lower educational achievement that all other students (House of Representatives, 2002, p. 32).

The educational implications for Indigenous students at a national level are a continuation of poor school participation, achievement and retention when compared to non-Indigenous students.

Socio-economic status

Collins et al., (2000, p. 4) concluded that "poverty is a major indicator of likely low participation and performance for both genders". Lamb et al. (2000) reported "socio-economic status made the largest difference to educational participation and the likelihood of early school leaving after Indigeneity". Their study reported that the percentage of male non-completers from low socio-economic status backgrounds increased from 35% to 44% from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. More students from low-income families selected school subjects, subject clusters, and post-school education and training options that largely led them towards low socio-economic status employment.

As lower school achievement drastically reduced their educational and career choice options, the chance of further social exclusion and disadvantage was increased (Collins et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003). Alexander, Entwistle & Olsen (2001) concluded that over time, through low achievement and scholastic failure, student self-esteem tended to decline more often among students from families of low socio-economic status, leading to an increasing disengagement from school and a desire to leave school and get a job.

Social location

Research by Lamb et al. (2000) found that factors such as distance and isolation impact negatively on the engagement, participation and academic performance of students living in rural settings. They found that between the late 1980s and the mid 1990s, the percentage of students who failed to complete Year 12 in rural areas increased from 35.5% to 42.5%. It was acknowledged that variations in school retention existed in different regions. However, the fact remained that in 1994, a higher proportion of rural students failed to complete Year 12 than their urban counterparts (Lamb & Rumberger, 1998).

Marks and Fleming (1999) found that male students living in regional and rural areas were 1.4 times and twice as likely (respectively) to leave school than students living in metropolitan areas. They claimed that it was likely that social-cultural factors such as the local social norms about leaving school influenced regional and rural students to consider leaving school early at higher rates.

Ethnicity

The role of parents was found to be significant in the retention and academic performance of non-English speaking background students (Collins et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003). In general, parental attitudes, academic performance and expectations of school varied greatly amongst different ethnic groups. Research found that a high number of female students from certain non-English speaking backgrounds saw schooling as a low priority, primarily due to domestic pressures to get part-time work, run households and act as interpreters for their parents (Collins et al., 2000; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Marks & Fleming, 1999).

Lamb et al. (2000) found that between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s, the completion statistics to Year 12 of boys from non-English speaking backgrounds remained generally stable at 85%. The completion statistics to Year 12 of boys whose parents were born in Australia (but were considered non-English speaking) also remained relatively stable, increasing insignificantly over a ten-year period from 72% between the late 1980s, to 73% at the mid 1990s. It is interesting to compare the completion statistics of boys from non-English speaking backgrounds (85%) whose parents were not born in Australia, with the completion rate of those boys from non-English speaking backgrounds whose parents were born in Australia (72%). The comparison between these groups highlights the need for a closer examination of *which* boys from which non-English speaking backgrounds are likely to leave school early.

While these broader contextual factors are important, they are mediated through the structures of schooling. It is therefore important for this research to explore what role the school plays in the decision of some boys to leave school.

Type of School

Notwithstanding the need for continuing work on girls' education, the current concerns and debates about boys' education are important, and research has highlighted how the school as an institution may contribute to the overall poor performance of some boys in schools (Collins et al., 2000; Holden & Dwyer, 1992b; Lamb et al., 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Holden and Dwyer's (1992b) project entitled *Disaffiliated Early School Leavers*, found the most common ground for boys leaving school early were associated with negative views about schools and teachers. Their research found that school factors such as curriculum, boredom, failing, and teacher relationships were signalled as main areas of concern in their study. They found that school culture was characterised by three distinct elements that contributed to the alienation of some young people:

> "a) a non-stimulating environment that had no discernible relation to the wider community or the adult world to which the young person was beginning to gain access;
> b) a lack of support and referral to appropriate agencies for young people that were experiencing problems in their personal and academic lives; and
> c) the existence of negative teacher/student relationships which were propped up by rules and regulations, which prevented young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community" (Holden & Dwyer, 1992b, p. 15).

Research by Trent and Slade (2001)[7] supported Holden and Dwyer's research findings as they found an overwhelming negative response to the institution of school and its associated culture(s) from the students they interviewed. Trent and Slade highlighted that explanations of the dissatisfaction and lack of motivation in school expressed by a large proportion of boys' in school, should not ignore the impact of teachers on the

[7] The research summarises the views of 1800 adolescent males, one third identified as being 'at risk' of not completing Year 12, in Years 9-11, drawn from 60 secondary schools in South Australia.

engagement, performance and retention of boys. Summarising Trent and Slade's research, boys' views on the institution of school included that:

- Schoolwork was boring, repetitive and irrelevant;
- School didn't offer the courses that most boys want to do, namely courses and coursework that prepared them for employment;
- Boys considered Years 8, 9, and 10 to be a waste of time, and the Year 11 workload was excessive;
- School pushed boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation that, for many, was too hard to stop;
- School posed too many contradictions and debilitating paradoxes: school expected adult behaviour but didn't deliver an adult environment;
- School pushed the rhetoric of education e.g. fairness, respect, flexibility, a celebration of difference, etc., but produced the opposite in practice;
- School was about getting most boys out of education;
- School was about preparing youth for adult life, but adult life got in the way of school;
- Culturally celebrated achievements and rites of passage into adult life e.g. sport, driver's licence, owning a car, part time work, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, establishing an adult identity, social life and sexual relationships, were deemed by school as negative influences on school achievement and on the preparedness of boys to stay at school;
- The primary factor, and the most troublesome paradox for boys, was that there were too many unsuitable teachers who either created or exacerbated their problems. "Good" teachers changed everything but there were not enough "good" teachers; and,
- For most boys, school was focused on preserving the status quo, which made it culturally "out-of-date" and unable to respond to change. School remained detached from the real world, distant from the rest of their lives, and neither convincingly forward looking, nor plausibly concerned with the need to prepare them for a place within the emerging society (Trent & Slade, 2001, pp. ix-x).

The results of Trent and Slade's (2001) research are relevant to this study in showing that schools do play an important role in the quality of boys' school experiences, academic achievement and attitudes toward the relationship they believe to exist between academic qualifications and their post school pathways.

Government schools and non-government schools

A correlation between the type of school i.e government and non-government, has been investigated in reference to the retention of boys and girls to Year 12. Revisiting Table 2.1 used earlier to discuss the ARR across state and territory, the same table displays the retention of full-time students to Year 12 by category of school.

The type of school has been shown to influence the retention of boys and girls to Year 12 as illustrated below in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Apparent Retention Rate (%) of full-time secondary students to Year 12, by category of school and gender.
Source: **Australian Bureau of Statistics, Catalogue 4221.0, *Schools Australia*, (2005), Table 52.**

	% Male students	% Female students	% Total persons
Government school	65.4	77.4	71.3
Non-government school	82.1	88.8	85.4

The 2005 ABS data indicates that the retention of the total number of students attending non-government independent schools to Year 12 was approximately 14.1% higher than students in Year 12 attending government schools (85.4% and 71.3% respectively). The data also shows that the ARR to Year 12 for females in both government and non-government schools exceeds Year 12 male student retention by 12% and 6.7% respectively. This fact is significant for this research as all non-completers interviewed attended government schools.

In summary

This chapter explored the literature on boys and early school leaving. What is evident is that early school leaving among boys is a phenomenon that occurs in both national and

international arenas to varying degrees, and that school completion to Year 12 for boys is an important component of their employment viability and future success in the workforce. The literature explored a range of factors that characterised students who choose to leave school early, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, indigeneity and their social location. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the interplay between these factors on some boys' early school leaving decisions, they need to be explored further in the context of gender. It is not within the scope of this study to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the connections gender has with all these factors. However, a focus on gender is an important element of this complex set of influences on the decision to leave school. How boys come to understand themselves to be masculine in the school context and social context, is an important consideration in understanding their engagement, performance and participation at school.

The next chapter explores the research and literature on masculinity. A number of theoretical perspectives of masculinity are explored, and detail provided on how the complex concept of masculinity is represented for the purpose of this research.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW
MASCULINITY THEORY

Introduction

This chapter examines the theories underpinning current understandings of masculinity. An understanding of masculinity is vital to this study as the main question seeks to explore possible links between boys' school leaving decision, and their use of a dominant masculinity discourse to justify their early school leaving.

Masculinity is a concept used in a myriad of ways within a variety of frameworks. Such frameworks have included psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology and history. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987) recognised this enormous diversity and argued that it was impossible to isolate a single coherent definition of masculinity i.e. the 'standard normative case' that captured the full range of men's activities. As such, Connell (1994) recognised the plurality of masculinity and referred to it as 'masculinities'. Whilst acknowledging the plurality of masculinities discourse, this research will focus on one type of masculinity, specifically, a dominant masculinity discourse.

Compounding the difficulty of defining masculinity is that masculine practices are individually practised and constructed, and viewed differentially by different people across different cultures. Petersen (1996) noted that masculinity in social and cultural groups was used in at least three senses to mean,

a) the code of behaviour prescribed for men;
a) the way a man acts in the world; and,
b) a man's awareness of his gendered self, or his memories of how it has been to live as a man.

It is now widely accepted that masculine practices are enmeshed in both social and economic structures of our society and the institutions within them (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Connell et al. 1982; Connell, 1995a, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 1996). Masculinities are therefore actively constructed or performed by individuals through a process which Davies (1989, p. 36) referred to as “doing gender” (see also Buchbinder, 1995; Butler, 1990; Connell, 1996; Frank, 1993).

It is not within the scope of this thesis to address in detail the journey the concept of masculinity has taken through time. It is however, relevant to the study to provide an appreciation of some of the shifting concepts underpinning a number of theoretical perspectives in the understanding of masculine practice(s). This process will reflect the shifting uses in contemporary academic research of the concept of masculinity.

Theoretical Perspectives on Masculinity

The multitude of theoretical perspectives on men and masculinity include biological, psychoanalytic, role-theorist, social, cultural and feminist perspectives. Each claims to understand the origins, substances, and varying forms, including deviant forms, which characterise different masculinities. The biological perspective chooses not to distinguish between the crucial distinction between sex and gender; psychoanalytic theories tend to create a form of psychic essentialism, and role theory can suggest a form of social determinism trapping people into sets of stereotypical socio-cultural roles (Connell, 1995a; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Consequently this study draws predominantly on a cultural perspective on men and masculinity, the value of which will be argued later in this chapter. The next section explores how, for the purposes of this study, the concept of masculinity within a cultural perspective, needs to be grounded in the broader concept of gender.

The Concept of Gender

In recent literature on gender and schooling, the term 'gender' has been used primarily in two different contexts and meanings. It has been viewed with the implication of biologically determined predispositions among girls and boys, and as a category for sex differences, and, as accepted as a premise in this study, gender had been understood to

be a set of cultural practices and meanings that are subject to change (Alloway, 1995; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Collins et al. 2000). Connell (2000) stated that,

> Gender is far more than an individual trait somehow connected with bodily difference … with gender, we are dealing with a complex and powerfully effective, domain of social practice (Connell, 2000, p. 18).

Related to this view is the poststructuralist claim that masculinity and femininity are on-going constructions based on normative cultural contexts and accepted practices (Davies, 1994a). In learning the discourses through which ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are spoken into existence, people learn to locate themselves within and through gender 'systems' of social practice and discourse through which gender is constituted. They learn to ‘make sense’ of their world and of themselves through “forced choices” (Davies, 1994a, p. 1), within binary themes of male and female, recognizing the expectation of being identifiably one and not the other; of being one that is also opposite to the other (Davies, 1994a; Derrida, 1991). Hence, ‘gender’ can be viewed as a term classifying 'femininity' and 'masculinity' as types of socio-cultural constructions of behaviours and identities.

The significance of the socio-cultural construction of gender to this research is its central place in influencing the different cultural experiences boys have at school. However, this is not a single uniform category. Within a social constructionist framework, boys are seen to engage with gender differently. As Noble and Bradford (2000, pp. 5-6) point out,

> There are thousands of individuals in schools from both genders who are simply not recognisable from the descriptors we are giving to their gender. Their behaviours, learning style, achievement and demeanour are nothing to do with under-achieving boys or focussed, self-managing girls.

This research will view gender as a social construct (Connell, 1995) and consider how boys construct and express their gender identity based on the socio-cultural discourses available to them in their broader social context i.e. metropolitan, provincial or rural. This study acknowledges that changing social and economic conditions inform

perceptions of gender practices and discourses within different cultural contexts. Different masculinities are constructed and practised within the same social setting from which a hegemonic form (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) emerges. Boys' masculine identities at school are thereby strongly affected by the different masculine discourses available to them.

The concept of gender as being constructed stands in clear contrast to some versions of the concept of 'gender identity' that see this identity as being the expression of natural and unchangeable dispositions, capacities and behaviours (Pleck, 1981). Rather, it is the relationship between masculinity and femininity that constructs (and reconstructs) one's gender identity, resulting in differing attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that are constantly in a state of flux (Connell, 1994b; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Cultural & Feminist Perspectives

A cultural perspective on masculinity focuses on the processes that constitute masculine discourses. A cultural perspective therefore, is interested in the social practices that constitute the 'ways of life' of any society. Integral to any culture is the individual embodiment of the shared understanding of societal themes, images or ideas (Edley & Wetherell, 1995). A boy's sense of 'maleness' is therefore something that he learns through participating in daily social practices. In this way, boys come to understand themselves by interpreting their immediate social environment and the discursive practices through which it is constituted. Relevant to this study then, are the common cultural understandings of what being 'male' means in the boys' different social contexts in which they live.

An influential perspective in the study of men and masculinities has come from feminist theory (Hanmer, 1990). Drawing from feminist theories and perspectives, factors such as class, ethnicity and gender are examined in order to explain the formation of masculine identities. Clark and Page (1997, p. 24) argued that,

> fundamental shifts about what it means to be female and male have occurred this century that highlight the historically and socially constructed nature of gender.

The key issue in feminist theory is the role of power and women's experiences of being dominated and oppressed by men (Chodorow, 1978; 1989; Oliver, 1989). Such feminist theorists have drawn attention to the power relations underlying hegemonic constructions of masculinity. From a feminist perspective, what distinguishes men as 'men' is their power in relation to women. A related perspective from which masculinity has been studied is the 'New Men's Studies' (Brod, 1987; Christian, 1994; Kimmel, 1987). The 'New Men's Studies' investigates the ever-changing nature of masculinities within particular historical and cultural contexts, thereby reinforcing the notion that masculinities are not the same for all men. These two approaches parallel the distinction drawn by Demetriou (2001) between External and Internal hegemony. Demetriou explains that External hegemony refers to the institutionalisation of men's dominance over women, whilst Internal hegemony refers to the social ascendancy of one group of men over all other men. Whilst Demetriou's two forms of hegemony are closely intertwined, this study is primarily focussing on internal hegemonies that prioritise a particular form of masculinity.

Themes of Masculinity

The notion of internal hegemony focuses attention on the concept of hegemonic masculinity. As explored in Chapter 2 many models exist to explain why some students leave school early. So too is there evidence of a number of themes and models emergent from masculinities research.

Connell's (1995a) call for a focus on the historical process and struggle surrounding dominant forms of masculinity was an effort to explain the power differences among men as they engaged in competing forms of masculinities. Connell claimed that masculinities were multiple and hierarchically arranged; some masculinities were particularly powerful and therefore valorised and privileged above others; some were marginalised or actively dishonoured, and others were considered exemplary. His particular perspective further acknowledged the interplay of multiple masculinities with class, ethnicity and race in gendered identities. Connell's categories of different masculine forms included Hegemonic, Subordinate, Complicitous and Marginalized, with the most studied group being the Hegemonic category. Connell (1995a, p. 77) described his concept of hegemonic masculinity as,

> The configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

In defining subordinate masculinity, Connell (1995a, p. 78) explained,

> Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men. The most important case .. are the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men.

Subordinate masculinities are viewed as antithetical to hegemonic masculinities, which positions homosexual masculinity at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, assimilating it to femininity. Complicit masculinities recognise the benefits of the patriarchal dividend and hegemony that are available to many men, even though they don't embody them. These men are "complicitous with hegemonic forms of masculinity even if they failed to live up to its rigorous standards" (p. 79). Marginalised masculinities recognise the interplay of class and race to gender, and refers to,

> the relations between the masculinity in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups. Marginalisation is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group (p. 79).

Connell (1995) explains that both hegemonic and marginalised masculinities are configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships.

Research by Doyle (1997) identified six themes of dominant masculinity. The themes describe the idealised form of hegemonic masculinity.

Not to be female: Doyle found this theme to be central to a male's prime directive of masculine identity. From infancy, boys were taught to respond differently to situations from girls; boys must not think, act or feel like girls do. Any male that showed

sensitivity or vulnerability was ridiculed as a 'sissy', 'wuss', 'wimp' or 'cry-baby' (see also, Kantrowitz & Kalb, 1998; Pollack, 2000).

Being successful: The second theme of hegemonic masculinity according to Doyle was a male's desire to succeed. He claimed that men were expected to achieve status in their professions, or as Kohn (1986, p. 168) re-stated, "not to be part of a group but to distinguish himself from the others in that group". Doyle added that constitutive of some men's desire to succeed was the desire to be better and more powerful than one's peers.

Being aggressive and being sexual: Doyle's third and fourth themes of masculinity included elements of violence and the subordination of women.

Being self-reliant: Doyle's fifth theme of masculinity highlighted how some males were expected by most societies to be emotionally controlled, thereby not allowing feelings to control them, and not to need the support of others (see also, Thompson & Walker, 1989). Males were also expected to be confident, independent, have all the answers, and be autonomous. Doyle claimed that autonomy was central to the social view of manliness. *Embodying and transcending the traditional views of masculinity:* Doyle's last theme of masculinity illustrated the complexity most males faced in embracing traditional or dominant hegemonic forms of maleness, whilst engaging in different types of changing masculine practices.

Doyle's themes of dominant masculinity highlight the shifting gender identities and changing relationships between men and women. While this picture of hegemonic masculinity is strongly grounded in research into adult masculinity, its significance for boys cannot simply be assumed (Swain, 2005). The concerns for boys' education make this an important issue, and leads to a consideration of the construction of masculinity among boys.

Understanding Boys' Constructions of Masculinity

Concerns about boys' educational experiences have reflected a range of theoretical assumptions and perspectives. Reference to the concern for the 'well-being' of boys is found in the NSW O'Doherty (1994) report, *Inquiry into Boys' Education – challenges and opportunities; a discussion paper* that was lauded by sections of the men's movement (Fletcher, 1995). Within this report, sex role theory occupied a predominant

place. Role theorists suggested that social roles could be broken down into two constituent elements: social positions and social expectations, as there were many different role positions males could take up, including occupational roles, and kinship roles such as father, uncle, son, brother. Each position carried with it a particular set of expectations, and when viewed like this, masculinity comes to be seen as a performance of a socially given script, rather than an essence. In a similar manner to girls, boys were seen to be trapped within oppressive roles. For instance, the O'Doherty (1994) report argued that male roles, oppressive to women, also limited boys. The report explained that male roles were,

> personally limiting for boys trapped by the dominant masculine stereotype, and it is increasingly having serious implications for their future career prospects. Employers increasingly recognize that co-operation and communication skills traditionally regarded as feminine are important. Boys who shun these 'feminine' subjects that develop these skills may find it increasingly hard to enter the workforce (O'Doherty, 1994, p. 22).

This perspective seemed to ignore issues of power and privilege, and instead emphasized problems facing boys as a consequence of particular gender roles that society had imposed on them. The reality remains that many boys in schools do not feel overly privileged or powerful. McLean (1996) argued,

> One of the central paradoxes of masculinity is that while men, as a group, clearly hold the reins of power, the majority of men in society experience themselves as powerless (McLean, 1996, p.19).

There is evidence that some boys in schools are less clear about their future directions and place in the world, than they would have been in the past (Collins et al. 2000). This accentuates the difficulty some boys have in understanding what being male 'is' and how to 'be' male in their specific social contexts (Yates, 2001). For example, some boys are uncomfortable with the notion that girls are just as successful and have equal access to areas traditionally associated only with males. For some boys, this can result in a sense of confusion about what boys are supposed to do and who boys are (Yates, 2001).

The on-going efforts of boys and men to subscribe to hegemonic forms of masculinities impact upon the hierarchic positions in male groups (Epstein, 2001; Mills, 2001; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996; Skelton & Francis, 2003). Salisbury and Jackson (1996, p. 219) claimed, "manly acts of living on the edge can't just be done in isolation. Boys need the confirmation and approval of the male peer group". Some boys' risk-taking behaviour with their peers represents attempts to "valorize forms of masculinity and how they distance themselves from girls and women" (Mills, 2001, p. 55). By engaging in activities such as driving 'fast' cars, listening to loud music, demonstrating a carefree and anti-authoritarian attitude in front of their peers, some boys are able to affirm their association to a hegemonic form of masculinities discourse within the "social organization of masculinity" in their social context (Connell, 1995a, p. 72). Understanding this process involves the concept of discourse.

The Discourse of Dominant Masculinity

Gee (1990, p. 24) highlights that discourses are particular ways of "doing" language and of "being in the world", which are distinguished by the "rules" which link these two activities. Communicating effectively in a particular context means being able to operate effectively within particular discourses: to say the right thing; to act appropriately; to share the values, belief systems, expectations and assumptions associated with that discourse.

Hence, it can be said that nothing happens outside discourse. Individuals do not just speak, think, read, write, discuss: they always talk about something within a particular context, and that something is always located in a particular discourse. Clearly then, individuals are constantly negotiating multiple discourses, some of which come easily, some of which make life difficult, and some of which inevitably clash at times. For the boys in this study, the interplay of the range of school, employment and masculinities discourses available in their broader social context will be analysed to 'make sense' of their early school leaving decision. The boys' narratives in their particular broader social location are based on the discourses they chose to take up to describe their interaction within that context, and are informed by the social and cultural 'rules' perpetuated by its society.

In order to explore the links between a dominant masculinity discourse and the early school leaving decisions of some boys, the key elements of dominant masculinity discourse need to be identified. For this study, concepts commonly associated with a dominant masculinity discourse, specifically, a sense of power and control, a sense of independence, and a sense of 'self', were derived from the literature on masculinity as the three concepts through which the boys' accounts were analysed. Use of these three concepts revealed links between their developing sense of masculine identity and how they accounted for their early school leaving decision.

The next section outlines these three concepts of dominant masculinity discourse as reflected in current literature on boys, men and masculinity.

Power and Control

The elements of power and control are central to a dominant masculinity discourse and inextricably linked to each other. Due to their interrelatedness they are regarded here as forming one concept and are reviewed together.

A great deal of research into boys, men and masculinities highlights how fundamental the theme of power is to the male sense of 'maleness'. The theme of power and dominant masculinity has been discussed in terms of its relationship to male privilege over women (Connell, 1994a); oppression and fear (McLean, 1996); capitalism and patriarchy (Edley & Wetherell, 1995); male's struggle for power and sense of powerlessness in society (McLean, 1996); and in the inequitable power relations that are perpetuated by institutional structures such as schools (Connell, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). The dominant understanding for social scientists on the relationship of power to a masculinity discourse, appears to be built "upon the feminist argument that any adequate theory of men and masculinity has to have the concept of power at its centre" (Edley & Wetherell, 1995, in Mac an Ghaill, 1996, p. 97).

McLean (1996) suggested that a range of dominant masculinity discourses are not only practised by individuals, but are embedded in the most powerful institutions and systems of society i.e. the police, armed forces, education, politics, law, and media,

which all exhibit and enforce the characteristics of patriarchal masculinity. He added that some men suffered as a result of conforming to gender stereotypes and this suffering contributed to the maintenance of systems based on power that oppressed others. Within these powerful institutions and social systems, masculinity discourses were constituted and were necessary for the preservation and perpetuation of those unjust and oppressive systems. In this rather negative context of oppression, it was the institution of school and its position of dominance in the network of power that McLean (1996, p. 25) found "excluded, exploited and demeaned people who did not conform to its requirements". It is important to note that while McLean portrays power as a negative aspect of social relations, it is important not to exclude the possibility of power as a positive aspect of discourse.

There exists a plethora of literature discussing the concept of control and its relationship with boys, men, and masculinity, and its connections with: capitalism (Seidler, 1991); patriarchy (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Pahl, 1980); individual boys (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; 1996; Theweleit, 1989); boys' relations with others (Connell, 1989; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; McLean, 1996); and the loss of control of themselves (Frosh, 1993; Benjamin, 1988). McLean (1996, p. 17) argued that "some men have experienced a loss of autonomy and control over their lives that is totally at odds with traditional masculine norms", confirming previous research in the area of masculinities and males' personal sense of control (French, 1991; Kimmel, 1987; Pleck, 1981; Roger & Tosh, 1991).

Edley and Wetherell in reviewing studies of gender (1995, p. 161) argue that,

> Feeling out of control, for whatever reasons, terrifies men as it erodes their very sense of self and threatens to undermine the basis of their power.

Edley and Wetherall's statement could be considered an extreme view, and it is questionable whether or not "feeling out of control" is as terrifying for some men as they claim. What Edley and Wetherall's statement does support are links between the concepts of power and control and the varying forms of masculine identities available within a masculinities discourse. It is important to add that the concepts of power and control are not exclusive to dominant masculinity i.e. males and females have some desire for power and control but these features manifest in different ways according to

circumstances and the gendered discourses in which they are constructed. It is the way in which these concepts are expressed in a range of discursive environments that distinguishes them, and in a dominant form, the concepts of power and control become part of a hegemonic masculinity discourse.

The theme of control is closely linked with the theme of power i.e. men in control have power (McLean, 1996), and being in control thereby asserts one's masculine identity as hegemonic.

Harris (1995) claimed that control had been a constant factor in the up-bringing of some males, as when boys are taught to control their emotions and reminded not to cry or show an inability to 'cope' at a young age. It appeared that experiencing a loss of control was central to some men's concern about being in control (Harris, 1995). Being 'out of control' was often associated with a loss of control over one's emotions, and men seen to have lost control over their emotions were positioned with femininity and subordinate masculine forms. Male concern about being in control implied difficulty in working successfully as an individual or part of a group, or having to ask others for assistance. Within competitive masculinities discourses of school and society, it may be difficult for some males to ask for help, as the request alone implied their inability to cope or perform tasks unsupervised; part of being 'male' was being seen to be competent and "having all the answers" (Evans, 2000, p. 4). Harris (1996) added that some men did not like being told what to do as it implied their dependency upon others. Harris (1996, p. 111) went on to explain that,

> Men who value control do not make themselves vulnerable and have a hard time letting others help them. These types of men try to climb to the top of any hierarchy because they want to be in control. Men who exhibit these characteristics are looked up to because they have everything in hand and show no signs of stress – no problems.

The concept of control is at the very centre of Edley and Wetherell's (1995) discussion of the link between capitalism and an individual's sense of masculinity. They argued that characteristics so often associated with some men such as being emotionally inarticulate, aggressive and competitive, were a consequence of the current institution

of economic production. To illustrate the interplay between capitalism, the loss of individual control and the impact this may have on a male's sense of masculinity, Edley and Wetherell cited an excerpt from Nicholay (1991) that outlined a brief case study of a man who worked as a labourer and machine handler at a warehouse for large electrical equipment. The excerpt reported the employee saying,

> As I write I feel the boredom and sloth coming back to me. This is what hurt me the most when I was there – the lack of control I had over how I spent nearly eight hours of my day. This hurt everyone who worked there. I got increasingly angry with the managers and I resented the jobs I was asked to do – hated the work and saw everything as the floor manager's fault. I lost sight of the roots of my anger in the whole environment around me, and blamed the floor manager for everything (Nicholay, 1991, pp. 161-162).

Nicholay's case study illustrates how some males' sense of self and masculine identity is negatively affected by a loss of control in their lives, especially when placed in a position of powerlessness. This individual sense of powerlessness in turn 'fed' into the themes of power and control where those males who failed to live up to their culture's masculine ideal, were viewed as 'inadequate' and aligned to subordinate and/or feminine forms of masculinities (Edley & Wetherell, 1995).

We have explored the literature that highlights the concept of power and control as a significant aspect of a hegemonic masculine discourse. Relevant to this study is how schools impact upon some boys' sense of power and control as a male in school, for if a similar sense of powerlessness exists in this context, there are likely to be consequences for engagement.

Power and Control in Schools as 'Masculine-Making' Sites

Past research has been extensive in examining the promotion of masculine cultures in institutions (Connell et al. 1982; Connell, 1997, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kenway, 1997; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Walker, 1988). A consideration of this research is how gender influences the institutional power structures of schools, and how this can lead to the maintenance of negative and positive school cultures and masculinity discourses. It is notable that some students, especially boys,

seem to position themselves as victims of inequitable power structures which they claim teachers' perpetuate, and from which they experience personal losses of power and control (Connell, 1987). This apparent loss of individual power and control, together with the overall oppressive institutional structure of school, appears to impact negatively upon some boys' attitudes towards school, and promotes the development of harmful school cultures.

A range of qualitative research into boys' school cultures has provided valuable insight into understanding how school-based masculinities contribute to the formation of an individual's sense of power (Archer et al. 2001; Connell et al. 1982, 2003; Evans, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martin, 2001; Martino, 1999; Mills, 2001; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977). Connell (2003) claimed that constitutive of the power relations that exist in schools are teacher supervision and authority through patterns of dominance, harassment, and control of student resources; effectively, teachers determine what resources students have access to at any one time. In addition, Mac an Ghaill's (1994) study showed that power was central to the ongoing construction and deconstruction of hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinities within schooling contexts. Such ethnographic studies, with their focus on masculinities as discourse, are important to this research as they illustrate how central the theme of power is to the way in which some males 'make sense' of their masculine identity in school contexts.

Jackson's (1998) research on boys, masculinities and school referred to some boys' inability to align themselves to their desired forms of masculinities discourse in the cultural context of schools. Jackson (1998, p. 89) explained that,

> In many boys' lives at school, there is a dynamic interaction between their social/economic worlds of failure, dependency and powerlessness and their deep investments in dominant forms of heterosexual forms of masculinity. Sensing some of the despair and pointlessness of the jobless men around them and the fragility of their own lives, they counter failure of their own lives by reaching out to alternative sources of power and status and that often means buying into a culture of aggressive, heterosexual manliness which deliberately rejects school learning as an unmanly activity.

The promotion of masculinities and masculine practice(s) in schools occurs through a network of institutionalised structures that appear to produce a culture where some boys consider it 'uncool' to be successful at school. Having said this however, it is also important to state that not *all* school cultures are negative, and that there exist many aspects of school cultures that may benefit some boys eg. the valorisation of sport, and the intellectual challenge for high achieving boys.

Connell (2003, p. 95) argued that schools were "masculinity-making devices" due to the gender regimes evident in school. He added that in order to explore the role of schools as a major site of masculinities formation, schools needed to be examined in two ways: as an institutional agent of the process of masculinities formation, such as the structures and practices by which the school forms masculine cultures among its pupils, and as a setting in which other agencies, including those of students, are involved. Connell cited how schools actively promote symbolic oppositions between girls and boys in co-educational school settings through different school practices, including,

- school uniforms or conventions of dress;
- separate toilets;
- forms of address;
- practices such as lining boys and girls up separately;
- creating classroom competition of 'the boys' against 'the girls';
- teaching an unreflective heterosexual interpretation of students' sexual desires, that effectively defines masculine sexuality through marriage and fatherhood; and,
- covert gender messages in curriculum offerings (Connell, 2003, pp. 94-95).

Connell (2003) asserted that it was these daily school practices that promoted a range of masculinities discourses that may impact - positively or negatively - upon some boys' developing sense of gender identity. How images of hegemonic masculinities impact upon some boys' self-esteem, inclusiveness and acceptance by peers was evident predominantly through the construction of the 'other' (Davies, 1989) i.e. the image of

those males who were either unable or unwilling to conform to the cultural demands of hegemonic masculinities. Salisbury and Jackson (1996, p. 106) claimed that some

> boys themselves were seriously damaged by the expectations and labels of hegemonic forms of masculinity in schools, and given the chance have gender issues of serious import to share with teachers and each other in sorting out their senses of themselves.

McLean (1996, p. 17) asserted that some boys were haunted by a "desire for power and a fear of failure". In defining his use of the term 'power', McLean borrowed from Middleton (1992, p. 151) and defined power as,

> The possibility of affecting others, effects that can be bodily, emotional, or cognitive. Power is a network of possibilities into which any individual may be able to place him or herself, but the entry restrictions are complex and exclusive.

Connell (2003, p. 95) described how "a regular vortex of masculinity formation" can be seen in schools through the powerful ideology of gender difference and how some boys are pressured to conform to it. He identified three masculinity vortices that have the themes of power and control as central to their argument, including boys' subject choice, discipline and sport. Within the first vortex of boys' subject choice, he explained the symbolism of gender meanings through school knowledge. He claimed that despite the academic curriculum being common to both girls and boys, it became apparent in later years how in certain areas of study the pathways diverged and gender messages became more concentrated. Connell explained how academic subjects had often been associated with strong gender meanings, and how the physical science subjects in schools had long been culturally defined as masculine, with a higher percentage of male teachers. He added,

> In the eyes of many of the boys, English classes are distanced by their focus on the expression of emotions, their apparent irrelevance to man's work, the lack of set rules and unique answers, and the contrast with activities defined as properly masculine, such as sport (Connell, 2003, p. 96).

Connell's (2003) second masculinity vortex concerned disciplinary practices in schools. He closely linked school disciplinary practice to power relations and adult control over others, which effectively enforced a disciplinary system that became the focus of boys' masculinity formation. He explored how some teachers at all levels used gender as a means of control, such as shaming boys by saying they 'acted like a girl'. Connell explained how punishment too was usually gendered, with a far higher proportion of boys than girls being physically and violently beaten, typically in 1960 - 1970s classrooms by school authorities. The discussion led to the fact that in the New South Wales public school system in 1998, 81% of students given short[8] suspensions were boys, and 85% of long suspensions were to boys. The highest rates of suspensions were given to boys from working class areas. Connell (2003 p. 97) claimed that where the hegemony of the school was secure, the boys may learn to "wield a disciplinary power themselves as part of their learning of masculine hierarchy". Where a formal school hegemony was lacking in schools, identifiable through defiance of authority figures, boys constructed a 'protest masculinity' so often associated with working class schools. He explained that,

> With corporal punishment, defiance requires bravery in the face of pain, a masculinity test of the crudest kind. Even with non-violent discipline, the contest with authority can become a focus of excitement, labelling, and the formation of masculine identities (Connell, 2003, p. 97).

Boys' inappropriate behaviour and attitudes towards most formal aspects of schooling, especially teachers, seem to become the focus for some boys at school. As indicated earlier in this chapter, Browne and Fletcher (1995) report that students, especially boys, tended to flag their rejection of schooling discourses through an overt disrespect and disregard for institutional forms of power and authority. Aspects of inappropriate behaviour so often cited in research on boys' school behaviour (Archer et al. 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Smyth et al. 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001) seem to serve a myriad of purposes for some boys. For these boys, rebellious behaviour possibly served to forge and advertise to their peers their membership of alternate hegemonic masculine identities at school, and for others, the taking up of a 'rebel' discourse was an overt

[8] A 'short' suspension is considered to be less than five school days, and a long suspension is considered to be greater than one school week.

expression of their general feeling of frustration and disappointment at not having their expectations and constructions of school met. What appeared to be fuelling the overt inappropriate school behaviours, were the boys' covert feelings of powerlessness and a fear of being seen as inadequate and somehow deficient as a male in school (Connell, 2003).

Signifying contexts such as the school setting provide an important arena for the performativity (Butler, 1990) of adolescent male identity. Carrigan (1979, p. 207) referred to school settings as a "theatre of regulated performances" where the power of dominant discourses essentially imposed restrictions on what identity-defining practices were allowable, and others not. He claimed that school provided rather limiting ways that some adolescent males could 'be'. Carrigan's perception was that the level of restriction and oppression for some adolescent males wanting to engage in identity-defining practices at school, had ramifications for some males' futures. He explained that,

> For some of us, the body is tightened, shaped, spaced, timed, and worded to *their* tunes, and we carry the wounds for a long, long time (Carrigan, 1979, p. 210, emphasis in original).

In schools, for those adolescent males whose identity is based most narrowly on hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987), any drift away from that façade becomes most threatening. Departure from such hegemonic forms of masculinities essentially aligned those boys' masculine identities to illegitimate and inferior forms.

Research has highlighted that the school experiences of some boys were not as completely negative as they may appear. Issues such as school-based power imbalances and teacher dominance may be viewed more as an on-going tension that exists in schools, continually negotiated by both teacher and student. For example, research by Walker (1988) and Willis (1977) highlighted how a type of informal larrikinism designed to share a laugh with one's mates was central to the construction of counter-school cultures and maintenance of hegemonic masculinities. Willis (1977) stated,

> The space won from the school and its rules by the informal group is used for the shaping and development of particular cultural skills and principally devoted to 'having a laff'. The 'laff' is a multi-faceted implement of extraordinary importance in the counter-school culture (Willis, 1977, p. 29).

It is important to note that the fact that some students willingly take up school-based discourses infers that they can either put aside or satisfy their need for power and control through these discourses (Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977). Whilst other students covertly reject these school-based discourses, yet others reject them overtly in the form of a 'protest masculinity' (Connell, 2003).

Connell claims that the third vortex of sport that blends power, symbolism and emotion, is an instance of schools using the consumer society to define hegemonic masculinity. By this he meant that sporting prowess in the form of aggression and domination essentially acted as a type of hegemonic masculinity that was most admired by boys. He referred to an ethnography by Foley (1990) that found that society's celebration of the 'great American football ritual' essentially reflected the dominant codes of gender. The game of football represented a pattern of aggressive and dominating performance as the most admired form of masculinity, effectively marginalizing other masculinities.

The studies reported here suggest that a sense of power and control is central to a developing sense of masculine identity. Related to this is the second concept associated with a dominant masculinity discourse, namely a sense of independence.

Independence

The process of becoming a 'man' is almost universally understood in symbolic terms as a passage from the dependence of childhood (Gilmore, 1990). Boys become men by becoming independent: they no longer need to be cared for and supported by others. They are able to rely on themselves for personal strength, their own knowledge to know what to do, and are fully accountable to themselves and others for the decisions they make.

The experience of boys and men within specific cultural and social contexts provides the medium through which they express their sense of masculine identity, the primary determinant of who they are. For example, what a male chooses as employment is central to the construction of his masculine identity (Davies, 2001; Kenway et al., 1997; Walker 1988; Willis 1977). In discussing the relationship between work and masculinity, Tolson (1977) explained how,

> Contemporary definitions of masculinity are inextricably linked with definitions of work, through the values, qualities and priorities that inscribe both: physical strength, mechanical expertise, ambition, and competitiveness. Boys are taught, through the family, schools and ultimately the workplace, to aspire to these values as the yardsticks of manhood, and eventually come to internalise these norms as identity. Men learn to define and judge themselves against these values, and work is the most important testing ground for these attributes (Tolson, 1977, in Leach, 2002, p. 28).

It is understood that boys full-time engagement in the workforce epitomises their successful transition into manhood (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Gilmore, 1990; Tolson, 1977). In traditional masculinity, being employed was synonymous with being able to provide for others, typically family, guaranteeing men's patriarchal right to independence separate from the domestic demands of the household. It followed therefore, that the role of work in the construction of a male's masculine identity was crucial to reinforce their distance from the 'feminine' domestic duties of home. In this view, for a male to remain at home and not provide for the family would constitute failure as a man (Tolson, 1977).

Reinforcing Tolson's view of the link between employment and masculine identity, Davies (2001) argues that,

> Men define themselves primarily through work. They have been defined primarily by what they can output, not by what they can take in (Davies, 2001, p. 5).

Given the strong relationship between masculine identity and work, the stigma attached to unemployment attracted a sense of failed masculinity, and one of ‘bludging’ dependence. The situation described by Tolson may have moderated in recent times, but it remains an important issue in men’s negotiation of the more traditional aspects of masculine discourse.

For instance, research by Evans (2000) argued that a multiplicity of rural masculinities discourses constituted a general set of possibilities from which male activities and masculine identity could be formed. The possibility therefore existed for the construction and identification of what constituted a "rural working" masculinity. He identified independence as one of the key themes of a dominant masculine discourse which was frequently taken up by male subjects in his study, which they claimed to be central to what it meant to ‘be a man’ in their broader social context. Bound up in the notion of distance and isolation often associated with rurality, was a male's heightened sense of self-reliance and the possession of skills and behaviours to improvise when situations demand it. As the element of ‘work’ remained a dominant component of a male's identity, Evans showed how discourses of masculinity were constructed around the performance of that work (2000).

It is within the context of contemporary capitalist economies and ideologies that a corresponding reflection of hegemonic masculine values such as competitiveness, authority, individualism, strength, aggression, and a belief in hierarchy is perpetuated (Leach, 2002).

Tolson (1977, p. 102) discussed the motivation and significance behind the male impetus to be employed to perform paid work, and claimed that males were motivated to seek employment due to “the older, vestigial traditions of patriarchy or male domination within the home”. He defined patriarchy within this context as an inherited set of ideas, customs and traditions from their fathers and through their family tradition. As some boys modelled their behaviour from their father, Tolson claimed that most boys learnt to associate the independence of paid employment with masculinity, such that the tradition of earning becomes an important sign of manhood. He added,

> The small boy learns to respect, and hopes to duplicate, the alienness and distance of his father, preoccupied with a world outside the home. Work thus becomes seen as a privilege, an instantiation of masculinity (Tolson, 1977, p. 103).

Willis (1977) and Walker (1988) showed too that boys' sense of independence was linked to their involvement in paid employment. An extension of this in research by Evans (2000) and McLean (1996) found that being a 'real man' was not only thinking or talking about being a man, but being completely at ease with one's masculinity, 'getting on with the job'; and dealing with practical matters. The concept of independence seemed to be associated with 'adult' personal attributes such as a sense of responsibility, self-reliance, control over one's activities, and being able to exercise reason and rationality (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1987; 1995; Evans, 2000; Harris, 1996; McLean, 1996).

Vick (2003, p. 34) reports that ownership of "the car" also played an important role in some boys' cultural construction of masculinity, specifically as part of their sense of independence. Vick claimed that understanding car ownership afforded insights into "the roles of risk, bravado, a sense of 'self' and more inclusively, machismo in the fundamental constitution of some young men's sense of identity". He identified that the car had a place in the Australian male youth culture as it provided a level of insight into both the patterns and contexts of young men's uses of cars and the symbolic significance of cars to them. Vick explained at length how "the car" might act as a symbolic marker of individual masculinity, and of the distinctive lifestyles associated with youth.

> Possession of "the car" might be seen to put the provider/possessor in a position of power in a variety of contexts: she/he controls events to a significant degree, it enables him/her to control where they go to a degree, and offers him/her an active role in demonstrating who she/he is as they drive. Further, the type of car owned and transformations of it might perform as symbolic markers as well as material conditions of membership of a range of social groups and identities (Vick, 2003, p. 34).

Under the general umbrella of *machismo,* Vick explained how the more dominant forms of masculinity tended to place a high value on taking risks, skill, bravado, and subverting authority. He commented that research had found that for some youth, the act of driving provided a means to transport some youth from vulnerable and dependent states, to levels of power that were invoked as a fantasy (Silverman, 1992). Hence, the act of driving "the car" provided some young drivers with the opportunity to make their sense of masculinity real, a masculinity that he suggested "was contracted on discursive terms and appropriated at the level of fantasy" (Vick, 2003, p. 35). Vick's research provides important insights into the links between car ownership and the cultural constructions of masculinity, links that are significant aspects of the value of independence in hegemonic masculinity.

Sense of 'Self'

Most individuals actively seek to discover a sense of 'self', i.e. an understanding of the factors that make them unique as an individual within their cultural and social environments (Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1991). In actively seeking a sense of 'self', individuals tend to dynamically appropriate a range of meanings about their identity, forming an identity they wish to be aligned with in their cultural context. Consequently, the process of identity-construction is an on-going one where, in searching for a sense of 'self', one constructs a sense of identity as a person within the social and discursive norms operating in their cultural context. As a main aim of this study considers the impact a dominant masculinity discourse has on some boys' school leaving decision, how some boys understand their sense of masculine identity i.e. what it means to be a *male* in their cultural context, needs to be explored.

The constant tension of the on-going constructions of masculine identity is a pervasive process. Boys and men are bombarded with media images of desirable forms of hegemonic masculinity such as success, competitiveness, toughness and strength, though only a small proportion of boys and men will actually embody them (Connell, 1996; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Due to the enormous pressure on males to conform to gender stereotypes, some boys will take up these media images and other concepts constitutive of dominant masculine discourse often associated with hegemonic forms of masculine practice, such as maintaining a sense of power and control (Connell, 1987;

McLean, 1996), independence (Edley & Wetherell, 1995), and assertiveness, skill and responsibility (Evans, 2000). Some males tend to take up these aspects of dominant masculinity in an effort to confirm their 'place' within the school-based masculine hierarchy, to protect their personal integrity and their sense of public 'face'. This reinforces the traditional position of males as more conventionally active in the public, rather than the private arena.

Ethnographic research into boys' school cultures (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977) found that some boys fear being seen to fail, since failure could threaten their association with a particular hegemonic masculine identity. This fear was central to their choice of discursive practices in a range of cultural contexts such as school and home. The desire by some boys to distance themselves from the feminine and other subordinate forms of masculine identity seems to be important for them to fend off possible recrimination by peers. Writings by McLean (1996) and Smith (1996) suggest that a man's failure to succeed at goals, aims or tasks, essentially placed their masculine identity 'at risk' of being judged as 'inadequate' by others. They further discuss how men tend to translate the impact of their failed efforts to succeed as an attack on their sense of masculine identity. They reported that if some males exhausted all viable avenues to succeed and were ultimately still unsuccessful, they then tended to shift blame elsewhere and view their failure as someone else's fault. Hence, in order to protect their sense of masculine identity from possible reproach, some males attributed blame for their personal failure and poor performance elsewhere.

The developmental psychology model that currently dominates literature on adolescent identity-construction, assumes that identity is a core aspect of individuals that can be maintained in a singular form. A more critical view is that defining an individual's identity is not only difficult because it has no materiality, but because it is in a constant state of flux due to individuals constantly constructing and deconstructing facets of their identity according to environmental and personal pressures. In an effort to clarify the link between a sense of self and identity, it may be advantageous to explore current theories underpinning identity formation; identity as a process, and identity as a performance.

Identity as a Process

A central component of this thesis is the sense of masculine identity the 22 boys perceived they had at school, and how this may have influenced their decision to leave school early. Rather than looking for something that has been achieved, researchers investigating identity perhaps need to focus on how the quest for achievement is pursued. Hall (1990, p. 222) described identity as a process where the individual is engaged in a continuous struggle to arrive at a knowable sense of 'self'. He said,

> Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact we should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.

Individuals searching for a sense of self, an understanding of themselves and their positioning in the wider scheme of society, invariably find themselves in environments where social conditions and competing sets of realities are constantly changing. Hence, the sense of self that individuals seek in the process of identity construction manifests within and through a range of social institutions, signifying practices and discourses. Discourses are an important aspect of identity construction because they act as sources of knowledge and practices that confirm community understanding and expectation of behaviour. For the present study, an integral component of boys' identity is linked to discourses of masculinity.

Identity as a Performance

According to Butler (1990), individuals seeking to define their identity engage in identity-defining practices. Butler labels these identity defining practices of individuals as performativity. In this sense, gender is a constant act of 'doing', constituting the identity it is purported to be. Butler (1990, p. 25) added,

> There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

Hence, gender performances are not just enacted, they are achieved, appropriated and embedded in individual consciousness. One's identity does not constitute the individual, but is itself constituted as performance. In defining their masculine identities, boys tend to seek different social relationships from girls. These different developmental paths seem to encourage boys to become achieving and independent, and girls to become nurturing and relationally orientated (Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986).

Due to the instability of identity, identity-defining practices tend to become a preoccupation of individual lives. For adolescent boys, the significance of performativity is great due to the prevailing social expectations that see the teenage years as a period in which the individual attempts to come to terms with who they are. Consequently, adolescents need to identify for themselves a preferred sense of self in order to aspire towards embracing it. For boys, dominant masculinity plays an important role in this process.

This study will refer to the term sense of 'self' as shifting and unstable, reflecting the fact that boys' identities are constantly changing, irregular and not fixed. The term 'masculine identity' will be used to mean the boys' sense of themselves as masculine subjects in their cultural context.

Understanding Hegemony

It is appropriate that this research acknowledges recent developments in the use of the term 'hegemonic masculinity'. Connell, who is best associated with the term, recently critiqued and defended the use of the term in men's research with Messerschmidt (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The paper addresses five criticisms made since the concept of hegemonic masculinity became the focus of research in the early 1990s. The five criticisms and their relevance to this study include:

1. *The underlying concept of masculinity:*
Collinson (1994) and Hearn (1996, 2004) claim that the definition of masculinity is blurred and uncertain in its meaning; that it de-emphasizes issues of power and

domination; is unnecessary to the task of understanding and contesting the power of men; and that the idea of multiple masculinity tended to produce a static typology.

This chapter described earlier the difficulties associated with defining masculinity. The focus of this study is on a particular form of masculinity – a dominant masculinity discourse, and this study has understood a dominant masculinity discourse in terms of concepts commonly associated with it, one of which is the concept of power. In this study, there are no assumptions that the specific forms of masculinity identified are unchanging or universal. Analysis of the boys' narratives will make links between their understanding of a dominant masculinity discourse and its influence to their early school leaving decision.

2. *The ambiguity and overlap of hegemonic masculinity*

This criticism focuses on *who* actually represents hegemonic masculinity. Martin (1998) criticises the concept of masculinity for leading to inconsistent applications: sometimes referring to a fixed masculinity, and on other occasions referring to whatever is dominant at a particular time and place. The study sees the relationship between local and general forms of dominant masculinity as a matter of evidence. The possibility exists that, as regional and local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by gender systems, different versions of hegemonic masculinity will be perpetuated in the three different broader social contexts.

3. *The Problem of Reification*

This criticism highlights that hegemonic masculinity reduces in practice to a reification of power. Collier (1998) and Martin (1998) further criticise the concept of hegemonic masculinity for focusing on negative characteristics of men that in turn associate men with criminal behaviour. The study's use of the concept of dominant mascuslinity is for purposes of analysis and explanation rather than making value judgements.

4. *The Masculine Subject*

It has been argued that hegemonic masculinity is based on an unsatisfactory theory of the subject as a whole. Edley and Wetherell (1999) claim that hegemonic masculinity cannot be understood as the settled character structure of any group of men. They suggest that hegemonic masculinity should be understood as defining a subject position

in discourse that is taken up strategically by men in particular circumstances; men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, masculinity represents not a certain *type* of man, but a *way* that men position themselves through discursive practices. The manner in which hegemonic masculinity is used in this study is as Edley and Wetherell describe.

5. *The Pattern of Gender Relations*

There has been a tendency towards functionalism viewing gender relations as a self-contained, self-reproducing system. Hegemonic masculinity is not a self-reproducing form whether through habitus or any other mechanism. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men to the exclusion or discrediting of women.

This study design includes three different broader social contexts. As such, evidence of how a dominant masculinity discourse is understood and policed by the boys may vary between and among the different social contexts.

Despite these criticisms of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt argue that certain characteristics of hegemonic masculinity need to be retained. They include the need to recognise the combination of the plurality and hierarchy of masculinity. In this plurality, certain masculinities are more socially central or associated with authority and social power than others, and are associated with hegemonic and subordinate forms. A hierarchy of masculinities is viewed as a pattern of hegemony, and not a pattern of simple domination based on force. Consequently, Connell and Messerschmidt agree that the simple model of social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinity needs to be dispensed with, due to the inadequacy of attempting to locate all masculinity in terms of a singular pattern of power.

Connell and Messerschmidt make a number of suggestions about masculinity that have value and impact on this study, specifically, their defence of the plurality and hierarchy of masculinity. The study understands that regional and local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by the articulation of gender systems. Hegemonic masculinity is symbolically represented through the interplay of specific local masculinity practices that have regional significance. The study accepts that while

structured relations among masculinities exist in all local settings, the motivation toward a specific hegemonic version varies by local context, and such local versions may differ from each other.

In summary

This section has explored a number of theoretical perspectives on masculinity. The chapter identified key themes of dominant masculinity and a number of typologies of why some boys leave school early. Research perspectives on boys' constructions of masculinities were seen to be based on a range of theoretical assumptions. The chapter showed how the three key concepts of a dominant masculinity discourse are reflected in the current literature on boys and men, and highlighted some significant changes to the use and context of the term 'hegemonic masculinity' when studying a dominant masculinity discourse. The discussion showed potential links between the three concepts of dominant masculinity and the culture of schools as sites for the production of a range of masculinities.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, outlines the choice of methodology and provides more detail of the conceptual framework for this study. It explores a range of theories that informed the study design and choice of data collection tools, and in particular, the use of Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse to explore data within a "text - discourse practice - socio-cultural practice" framework. The chapter will demonstrate how the study design and chosen analytical methods provide the basis for exploring the role of a dominant masculinity discourse in the boys' decision-making processes with respect to school leaving.

CHAPTER 4

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter details the conceptual framework and choice of methodology for the current research, and discusses how a range of theories informed the study design. The chapter elaborates why certain theoretical approaches were engaged, and others were not. The chapter discusses in more detail a number of main areas identified in the literature review on early school leaving, and how they link to the research aim, study design and approaches employed in data collection and analysis.

This study explores the complex decisions boys make about leaving school as they relate to the range of masculinity discourses available to them in their broader social context. At the centre of this study are the boys' voices, specifically, those who chose to leave school early. Analysis of the boys' narratives will delve into how they navigated their masculine identities through the complex unfolding relationships of authority, meaning and identities relevant to their individual circumstances. This research will highlight how the meaning of masculinity within different cultural contexts plays an important role in the process by which boys find their place in the social and economic order.

Theoretical Perspectives as Identified by the Literature

The literature review revealed a range of perspectives on why some boys are not performing well in most areas of school, and why fewer boys complete Year 12 when compared to girls. Chapter 2 highlighted a number of features that influence boys' school leaving decision, and how the quality of their school experiences is intricately woven with their social, individual and cultural contexts.

Different theoretical perspectives, including socio-cultural, social, psychological, and behavioural perspectives have presented arguments to explain the phenomenon of early school leaving amongst boys. Of particular relevance to this research are theories based on socio-cultural presuppositions (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988) that explore the "nature and cultural shaping of meaning-making, and the central place it plays in human action" (Bruner, 1990, p. xii). Particular attention to the constitutive nature of narrative and discourse in the boys' accounts underpin the conceptual framework chosen for this research. Of special interest are the patterns of subjectivities reflected in the boys' ideas and how these releate to their decisions to head in certain directions and not others, set amongst a back-drop of socio-cultural and local contextual factors.

Masculinity – Boys and Men

Numerous theories incorporating biological, psychological, sociological and cultural approaches have addressed the issue of the construction of multiple masculinities (Brod, 1987; Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Clatterbaugh, 1990; Connell, 1994b, 1995b, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996; Treuba et al. 1989).

Martin (2002) in his report entitled *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Boys,* put forward features of gender construction he found relevant to the formation of masculine discourses in schools, and acknowledged that masculinities was multiple, hierarchical, dynamic and actively constructed. He claimed that schools were one of the major sites where masculinity discourses are constructed. The literature review on early school leaving discussed a range of influencing factors that affected the behaviour, performance and engagement of some boys in schools. Relevant here were the ways in which forms of masculinities discourses and identities are policed and maintained and influence boys' experience of a number of areas relevant to school i.e. academic performance, sexual identity, engagement and participation in academic/sporting/social activities, and subject choice.

A specific focus on how masculine identities are constructed, negotiated and maintained will be important in understanding the masculine cultures they constitute. How the boys in this study position themselves within the local masculine discourses

available to them will be analysed through the narratives of their school and life experiences in their broader social and school contexts.

'Culture' and 'Context'

The term 'culture' has come to mean a multitude of different things to different academic disciplines. For the purpose of this research, the term 'culture' will follow the concept described by Bruner:

> … a culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts, and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation … The symbolic systems that individuals use in constructing meaning were systems that were already in place, already "there", deeply entrenched in culture and language. They constitute a very special kind of communal tool kit whose tools, once used, make the user a reflection of the community (Bruner, 1990, p. 13).

The cultures and sub-cultures of masculinity within the different broader social locations are constructed and negotiated through the interplay of local socio-cultural influences and school culture. Drawing from these local discourses in their cultural context, the boys 'make sense' of their world and develop a sense of masculine identity.

The focus on 'context' will search for:

> … the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings in that cultural context. These contexts are always contexts of practice: it is always necessary to ask what people are doing or trying to do in that context, and why (Bruner, 1990, p. 118).

At a macro level, as highlighted in Chapter 2, there are identifying features that may influence some boys' decision to leave school, including features such as gender, culture, indigeneity, and socio economic status. At a micro level, analysis of specific discourses of masculinity, and how these discourses relate to individual behaviour and attitudes in their cultural context, may provide insight into how some boys 'make sense'

of their world. Masculinities discourses can be related in the broader social context and the context of school, and to the boys' early school leaving decision within a framework provided by Fairclough's theory of discourse as 'text, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices'.

The Conceptual Framework for this Study

This research was motivated by concerns about the consistent pattern of poor retention of boys to Year 12, and overall poor performance of some boys in schools. The research required a conceptual framework that was cohesive and flexible, and would allow the researcher to examine a complex network of social, cultural and discursive practices within three different social locations, and a wider frame of society and culture. As Fairclough's model of discourse emanates from his theories of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (1989, 1992, 2002), exploration of the principles underpinning his theories of CDA will be included in this section.

Fairclough's model of discourse demonstrates how common-sense assumptions may hide existing power relations, and may make social hierarchies appear natural and normal. Fairclough's (1989, 1992, 2002) theory of CDA addresses factors such as institutions, subject positions, contexts, beliefs, values, ideologies and how they manifest in language or are implied in language. His approach sets out to identify connections that are frequently hidden and to make them explicit. CDA looks at how people are positioned in certain relations to other people, the economy and social practices, and how they 'make sense' of their world through the discourses they take up.

Fairclough (2002) advocates in his CDA theories that the relationship between social structures, practices and events, are essentially semiotic. He states that in order to gain a clear understanding of the way a culture *is* in terms of its meanings and symbolic significance, a dialectical approach is necessary to understand the relationships between the individual and the way power structures operate and interrelate in that culture. The problem of contextual explanation in research was identified by Gilbert (1992) who explained that as context is a construction of research, Fairclough's CDA theories are valuable, helping to "make explicit what in so many ethnographic studies is taken for granted" (p. 41) as,

> it acknowledges the historical dimension in which people reproduce and change discourses by using them to make sense of and act on the world. It recognizes that while particular situations are unique, they comprise elements that articulate with other sites in space and time (Gilbert, 1992, p. 56).

Fairclough (2002) states that it is inadequate to restrict analysis of any text to an individual narrative level, but that consideration must also be given to contextual and cultural factors such as institutional power(s) and the economy. It is for these reasons that the principles of CDA will be useful to this research, as the *critical* element attempts to draw links with the broader social structures such as the economy. Analysis of the boys' narratives will attempt to interpret the meanings of what they say at interview, using concepts of CDA and discourse analysis more generally, though not in the detailed linguistic manner of language analysis that Fairclough advocates.

There are advantages in applying Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse as 'text, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices' to this research as a conceptual framework (See Chapter 1, Figure 1.4, p. 9). It emphasizes the fact that discourse never occurs as a socially isolated incident and highlights how social practice(s) are constructed within social structures, with discourses determined by other socially constituted orders of discourse, or sets of conventions associated with social institutions. When relating Fairclough's model of discourse to this research, it is essential that the interviews (texts) were not seen as solitary events. The 'texts' produced during these interviews are a re-creation of the interviewee's prior experiences and discursive histories, as well as the institutional, societal and situational contexts within which they occur. Thus, the 'texts' are related to the subjects' positions, the social relationships between or amongst the subjects, and the contextual systems of beliefs and knowledge. Fairclough's model of discourse also acknowledges the role of cognitive processes in producing and interpreting texts, and that these processes are themselves shaped by social events and conventions.

Text

The primary sources of text in this research are the boys' interviews. The 'text' in Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse allows the researcher to explore the interview transcripts from ideological and interpersonal perspectives. These two dimensions are significant to this research in understanding the contextual and socio-cultural practices that shape the social representation(s) and individual constructions of identity. Further understanding of these at a local scale will be helpful in providing a detailed insight into the impact of possible influences on the boys' school leaving decision.

Discourse practices

The central dimension of Fairclough's (2002) discourse model situates 'discourse practice' astride 'text' and 'socio-cultural practice'. Accordingly, the 'discursive practices' relevant to this research include the institutions of school and gender i.e. masculinity/femininity (See Chapter 1, Figure 1.3. p. 9). Fairclough's rationale for positioning 'discourse practice' centrally suggests that the link between 'text' and 'socio-cultural practice' is not a direct one, essentially placing the role of 'discursive practices' to be constitutive of and constituted by, 'text' and 'socio-cultural practice'. To complement this analysis of 'text', he introduced the role of Intertextual Analysis (IA).

Intertextual Analysis

Fairclough's most recent model of discourse (2002) provides additional opportunity for the researcher to widen the scope of 'text' and 'discourse practice'. His model also provides avenues for a more detailed analysis of discourse in text, which he called 'Intertextual Analysis' (IA). IA essentially views text from the perspective of discourse practice, specifically looking for traces of discourse practice in text. IA acts as a transitory process between text and discourse practice, and text and socio-cultural practice, constituted by networks of discourse. This research's principal focus is on the existence and impact of specific contextual masculine cultures and discourses, and their potential impact on some boys' decision-making processes to leave school.

Socio-cultural practice

In order to understand events, consideration of the immediate context in which the event occurs is central to its intended meaning. Fairclough (2002) claimed an event may,

> involve its more immediate situational context, the wider context of institutional practices the event is embedded within, or the yet wider frame of the society and the culture (Fairclough, 2002, p. 62).

The importance of contextual difference in understanding specific cultural and discursive practices such as masculinity, is laden with interpretive potential. It is this very aspect of Fairclough's (2002) discourse model that lends itself well to this particular research, as the component of contextual difference is a major consideration in the research design.

In summary

Adopting Fairclough's (2002) model of discourse as a conceptual framework for this research allows the researcher to explore the different socio-cultural practices as perceived by the boys. Identification of the socio-cultural practices provides an opportunity to locate the identified cultures within institutional and broader social contexts. Linking cultures within institutional and social contexts in turn, may provide valuable insight into what aspects impact on the decision-making processes of individual society members, specifically, of boys who leave school early.

The next section will explore the relationship between the study design and chosen methods to explore the role a dominant masculinity discourse plays in the construction of boys' masculine identities and school leaving decision

Methodology

This section describes the current research design, outlines the process by which the research sites were chosen, and briefly mentions the local economic and social demographic that typified each research site. It also explores the choice of method and data analysis tools, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen mode of data collection.

The Current Study

This study positions itself within a socio-cultural perspective which views a male's sense of 'maleness' as being strongly influenced by the historical, social and cultural discursive norms practised within each community (Brod & Kimmel, 1994; Harris, 1995; Smith, 1996). This perspective is supported by research that advocates that masculinities discourses are strongly influenced by gender 'messages' men receive from their social environment within historically based patriarchal cultures of power and control, and the shifting nature of local economies (Connell, 1994b; Harris, 1995). McLean (1996) argued that,

> Men and women share the many experiences as do men from different cultural and class backgrounds. What is different even when there are similarities, are the contexts within which these experiences take place, and the meanings that are given to them (McLean, 1996, p. 14).

This study will take the position that an individual's actions, thoughts and attitudes are constructed through a community framework of understanding the dominant cultural discourses. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, 'culture' will refer to the daily customs, traditions and 'way of life' of a community, set within changing social and economic conditions (Geertz, 1989). Men therefore, come to imagine themselves as masculine through the different masculine discourses in part handed down from one generation to another, but also generated by contact with other cultures, new technologies, and changing historical circumstances. Analysis of the boys' transcripts may highlight how they imagined themselves to be masculine in their cultural context.

Delineating a Dominant Masculinity Discourse

The notion of key elements in a dominant masculinity discourse is useful as a hypothesis for the current study. There has been a range of attempts to identify recurring generative themes (Freire, 1972) of a dominant masculinity discourse in the literature on men and masculinity. For the heuristic purposes of this study, three elements were identified as concepts of power and control (over oneself and others), (Connell, 1989 1995b; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 1996; McLean,

1996), independence (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Harris, 1995) and a sense of self (Bakan, 1966, 1968; Butler, 1990; Hall, 1990). This thesis acknowledges the interrelatedness of the three elements constitutive of a dominant masculinity discourse, and will attempt to show their role in the production of specific forms of knowledge that impact upon the boys' sense of masculine identity.

This research will link the three elements of a dominant masculinity discourse to the boys' sense of masculine identity at school and post school. An exploration into how the boys perceived their individual sense of power and control, independence and sense of self may provide some insight into how they 'made sense' of their lives as males within their cultural context. Figure 4.1 illustrates the interrelatedness of the three concepts that makes defining each one complicated, as invariably, in defining or discussing the elements of one concept, one touches on features that characterise another.

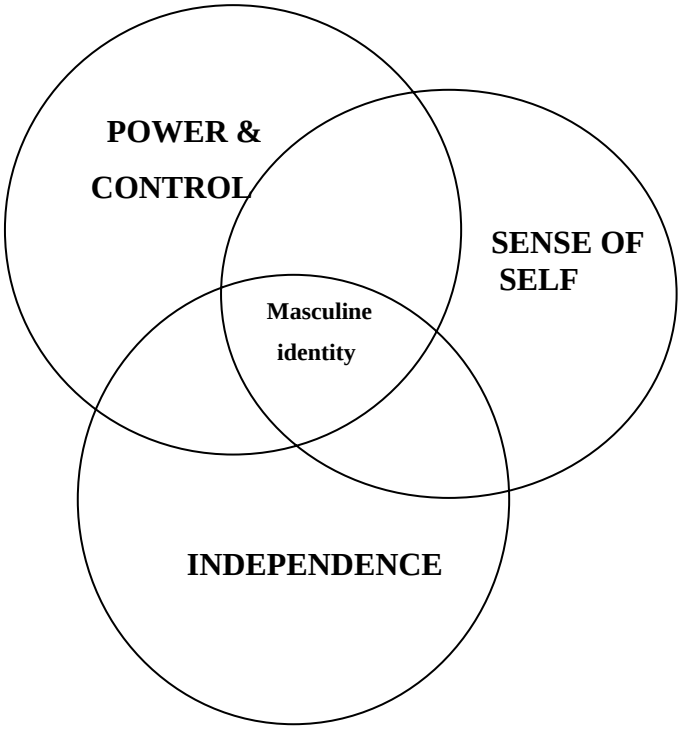

Figure 4.1: The relationship between the elements of power and control, independence, and sense of 'self' constitutive of a dominant masculinity discourse.

The three elements of a dominant masculinities discourse illustrate the complex process by which boys' sense of masculine identity is constructed, and which potentially influences their decision to leave school early.

Choice of Schools

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. The following table lists the six schools as pseudonyms.

Table 4.1: School by pseudonym name per the broader social location.

RURAL	METROPOLITAN	PROVINCIAL
Mitcham	Heatherdale	Laburnum
Listerfield	Blackburn	Ashwood

Aspects that required consideration when choosing participating schools included a range of different social locations incorporating a diverse student body reflecting the range of socio-economic backgrounds as recorded in the 1999 Socio-Economic Index For Areas[9] (SEIFA) for schools in Queensland provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Other considerations included the size of the school, and the number of male students in Years 10, 11 and 12. The next section provides some detail of the three social locations in which the six schools were chosen.

Rural Context

Historically, the term 'rurality' has been "notoriously difficult" to define and measure (James et al., 1999, p. 3). For the purpose of this research, the term 'rural' and 'rurality' will borrow from the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition to mean,

[9] This measure is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as an indicator of socio-economic status of individuals/families. The values of the SEIFA index are derived from the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) based upon 1996 Census data, and 1998 school catchments and enrolments.

> A population threshold of at least 10,000 but not exceeding 25,000 in recognition of "the concentration of secondary facilities in towns of this size which serve not only the town but also the hinterland populations (Jones, 2000, p. 27).

The towns of Mitcham and Listerfield were chosen to represent the 'rural' context, representing both coastal and inland locations respectively.

Mitcham

Mitcham is a small coastal town situated in far north Queensland with approximately 10,500[10] residents from diverse socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Mitcham offers the services of a state High school, a Technical and Further Education College (TAFE), and other community-based education learning centres to cater for its community's learning needs. It is well resourced with sporting and recreational activities.

Mitcham's local economy is driven by a combination of tourism, sugar cane harvesting, and banana growing industries. The town regularly experiences a seasonal influx of transient workers, taking up the opportunity of well-paid, casual employment, harvesting sugar cane, bananas and other tropical fruit eg. pineapples and mangoes.

In 2003, the State High school at Mitcham recorded a student population of approximately 500, with 26 non-teaching staff and 40 teaching staff. Approximately 15% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander whilst 2.5% of students are of non-English speaking background. To cater for the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds of its student population, the school provides special learning support classes to assist students identified as having degrees of learning difficulties.

Listerfield

Listerfield is set approximately 1,000km inland and comprises a community of approximately 21,200 people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds that give the city a distinctly multi-cultural character. Despite its remote location, it is well serviced

[10] The Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 Annual Census data, provided all population figures cited.

offering a range of sporting, recreational, cultural and social opportunities. A strong community network is evidenced by links between the community and welfare agencies that provide the necessary support structures for the highly transient nature of its population.

A mine that serves as the major employer dominates the town. The different phases of mine management such as strategic planning, re-structuring and re-sizing impact greatly on the community, small business, employment and school enrolment. It is estimated that the mine employs directly and indirectly 80% of the town's local population.

Listerfield's State High school's student population in 2003 was 625, with 51 teaching staff, and 29 non-teaching staff. 13% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 1.5% identify as students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The school's student and teacher populations are highly transient in nature. The school reported that in 2001, 20% of teachers were transferred out of the town at the end of 2000, 19% of their existing student cohort left, whilst 16% of students were enrolled for the first time.

Approximately 6% of students are involved in some form of learning support programs throughout the curriculum. The school reports that these numbers are on the rise, and are implementing a range of intervention strategies and programs in response.

The Sample Population

Research questions were asked through semi-structured interviews with seven male non-completers from Mitcham and Listerfield. The school leavers interviewed were three non-completers from the inland region of Listerfield and four from the coastal region of Mitcham. At the time of interview, two boys from Listerfield left prior to completing Year 10 (early school leavers), and one left with his Year 10 certificate (non-completer). All three had secured locally based full-time employment. The four boys from Mitcham did not return to school after successfully completing Year 10, and three of them have locally-based full-time employment, while one was still trying to secure employment.

Metropolitan context

For the purpose of this study, 'metropolitan' will refer to:

> The Statistical Divisions (SD) or Statistical Sub-divisions (SSD) surrounding the State/Territory capital cities and major centres of 100,000 people or more (Jones, 2000, 27).

The two schools in the metropolitan context are set in Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, with approximately 1.6 million inhabitants.

Ashwood

The two schools chosen in the metropolitan context are quite different in nature and location. The first school, Ashwood, has a community population of approximately 3,260 residents, and is located approximately 20 km. southwest of the Brisbane central business district. It is situated in a low socio-economic area with a significant portion of its residents being third generation welfare payment recipients. The surrounding area is semi-industrial dominated by small business and factories. The community demographics comprise a highly multicultural population, one that has a large population of Islander/Samoan and South East Asian cultures. The Seventh Day Adventist Church is quite dominant within this community offering religious instruction and leisure/recreational programs seven days a week. Small businesses such as auto mechanic/repairs, industrial part suppliers, sandwich and take-away shops, and a large number of small to medium sized industrial factories dominate the Ashwood area. Most of the immediate employment opportunities fall into the 'light to medium' industrial labour category.

The local state High school at Ashwood had a student population in 2003 of approximately 790 students, and the school employed 60 teaching staff and 39 non-teaching staff. As the school is located within a low socio-economic area, it has access to the Literacy Enhancement Special Program School Support Scheme (LESPSS) funding provided by Education Queensland, to support the 42 different ethnic groups represented in the student population. Approximately 52% of the student body are non-indigenous Australians. Due to the ethnic diversity at Ashwood State High School and

the complex issues that emerge as a result, there is a total school *Conflict Resolution* approach that underpins their school behaviour management policies.

Laburnum

Laburnum is a coastal Shire situated approximately 26 km. south east of the Brisbane central business district, and in 2003 had a current population of 13,140. The median age for residents is 34 years and the local government area (LGA) had more 'middle-aged' and 'teenagers' when compared with the rest of the LGA . The 1996 census reported that, compared to the State average, the surrounding LGA had a higher proportion of employment in the construction and retail sector, with only 7% of the LGA labour force classified as 'Professional'. Over 50% of the labour force was employed outside the LGA with 87% of local businesses employing 10 or fewer employees. The LGA has shown consistently lower unemployment rates than the State average for the last 10 years[11] (School document, 2003).

Laburnum's State High school services the bayside district south-east of Brisbane's central business district. The student population is approximately 1070, with a teaching staff of 80, non-teaching staff of 40, and 18 students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The school's feeder area predominantly includes five government primary schools, but also receives enrolments from four non-government schools, and accepts students from the adjacent Bay Islands district.

The school particularly prides itself on its 'specialist' program areas, including a comprehensive music program and supportive anti-harassment/bullying policies. The school employs a full-time teacher coordinating behaviour management programs, a part-time social worker, a part-time nurse and a school chaplain.

The school boasts that it offers the broadest curriculum of any competitor school, government or non-government within the Shire. Senior students can choose from 30 Authority and 17 Authority Registered and TAFE subjects, while Years 9 and 10 students select their electives from 20 subjects offered.

[11] Although this information is taken from a school document, this document has not been referenced as doing so would negate the use of a pseudonym.

The Sample Population

Semi-structured interviews were held with eight male non-completers from the metropolitan context: three boys from the industrial area of Ashwood, and five from the coastal region of Laburnum. At the time of interviewing the Ashwood boys, two had left school prior to completing Year 10 and had successfully secured full-time employment. The third boy had left school with his Year 10 certificate, and was currently receiving government unemployment benefits whilst trying to secure employment.

Of the five boys from Laburnum, two were expelled on truancy and drug possession incidents prior to finishing their Year 10 certificate. One of these boys has opened his own business from home as a computer technician, and the other boy is in the process of trying to secure employment. Of the other three boys, the local supermarket employs two on a full-time basis, and the third attends the local TAFE College on a full-time basis.

Provincial Context

The term 'provincial' for this study refers to large urban centres outside of the metropolitan area of at least 50,000 people.

The two school sites of Blackburn and Heatherdale are located in the same provincial city. The population of the two locations in the provincial context in 2003 was approximately 155,372. The main town was coastal, originally developed as the central access to the inland tablelands and surrounding districts.

There is a dominant presence of the Armed forces in the city resulting in a highly transient population. Central features of the town include the existence of a large Army and an Air Force Base; the Army is the major employer of the town.

The local economy is supported and driven predominantly by a range of different industries such as zinc and copper mining, pastoral (beef cattle), and agricultural interests including sugar cane, market gardens (pineapples and mangoes), and tourism.

Blackburn

Blackburn State High School is situated on the fringe of the fastest growing regional centre outside southeast Queensland. Its diverse community comprises a mix of blue collar and transient workers, members of the Armed forces, and some professional/academic workers.

The school takes enrolments from five other public and private schools in the area. The school reports in 2003 its student population to be approximately 2,200 students, and staff comprising 132 teaching staff and 43 support staff. The school has experienced a high student population for the last four years, and expects the high student numbers to continue in the foreseeable future. Approximately 220 students (10%) identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and the school employs four Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, one of whom is a full-time counsellor. The school also provides a chaplain, two guidance officers, a school-based nurse, and a school-based police officer.

In an effort to cater for such a large school student population of different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and social needs, the school's curriculum is flexible, offering a total of over 60 subjects. The school offers a wide variety of vocationally orientated subjects, in conjunction with school-based apprenticeships, work experience and placement, TAFE and community links. The school offers a Special Education Unit that services extension classes for gifted and talented students, and provides additional assistance for those students with learning difficulties. The school prides itself particularly on areas of specialist development that includes a wide variety of sporting excellence programs, music and the performing arts, and technology development.

Heatherdale

Heatherdale State High school in 2003 had 540 students, employed a teaching staff of 53 and non-teaching staff of 35. The school is multi-cultural in nature and has an enrolment of 15% of students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin, a Community Education Counsellor, and two teacher aides that support them.

The school is located 15 km south from the main town's centre in an area of mostly residential housing, with some acreage and semi-rural developments. School enrolment information indicate that there is a high degree of mobility of students, and the Commonwealth census data indicate that the surrounding region is an area of significantly higher mobility than that of the main town region. The school has noticed a pattern developing amongst its students that indicate that students who enrol *after* the first week of the year, have a much higher rate of mobility than the rest of the school population. The movement is attributed to the significantly high number of new families who settle in the region, and move after their initial years in the area. This movement seems to coincide with the progression of children into the teenage years. Community members are predominantly a mixture of blue collar and transient workers, single parent families, the unemployed, and a variety of ethnic and cultural groups.

The Sample Population

Semi-structured interviews were held with seven boys, three from Blackburn and four from Heatherdale. At the time of interview, of the three boys from Blackburn, two had left with their Year 10 certificate and were employed on a full-time basis, and the third boy, who did not receive his Year 10 certificate, was engaged in full-time work at his father's business. The four boys interviewed from Heatherdale State High school had all received their Year 10 certificate and at time of interview, were all successfully employed in trade apprenticeships.

The six schools in the three broader social regions were chosen specifically to provide a variety in culture, contexts and discourses. By interviewing the early school leavers from each school, the researcher sought clues into what influenced their decision to leave school when they did.

Qualitative Data

The issue of early school leaving has in the past, been researched in a variety of ways such as statistical mapping (Lamb, 1998), surveys (Teese et al. 1995) and ethnographic methods (Archer et al. 2001; Smyth et al., 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001). Each method served to address specifically tailored research questions and associated aims resulting in an interpretation of the boys' school leaving decision from different perspectives. As

this study seeks to explore the impact socially constructed discourses have on boys' school experience and their school leaving decision, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the form of data collection, designed to capture the boys' experiences.

Method

As this research contributed to the larger ARC/SPIRT study, the boys used in this study came from schools where boys remaining to Year 12 were also interviewed. Preparation for the boys' interviews began in January 2001 to ensure there was sufficient time to successfully track and interview any 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 school. The sample of boys who agreed to be interviewed can best be described as being an opportunity sample rather than a random sample. The table below illustrates the numbers of boys contacted and interviewed for this study.

Table 4.2: The numbers of early school leaving boys contacted and interviewed, per school.

2001	Number of names put forward by the school.	Number unavailable and/or declined to be interviewed.	Number agreed to be interviewed.	Actual number interviewed.
RURAL				
Mitcham	8	3	5	4
Listerfield	9	6	3	3
METROPOLITAN				
Ashwood	8	4	4	3
Laburnum	5	0	5	5
PROVINCIAL				
Blackburn	7	4	3	3
Heatherdale	4	0	4	4

Despite boys from Mitcham and Ashwood agreeing to be interviewed, one from each of these areas did not show for interview. A comprehensive verbal and written explanation was forwarded to each boy and his parents about the research aims and objectives, and,

if they agreed to participate, what was expected of them during the course of the research (See Appendix A, Information letter). It was made clear that their involvement was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Each boy was reassured that all names and locations used in this study would be pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Once the boys and their parents were satisfied with their role in the project, written consent was obtained from both of them prior to commencement of the interview (See Appendix B, Boys' consent form and Appendix C, Parental consent form). Letters confirming the interview arrangements were then sent to the boys (See Appendix D, Confirmation letter). A total of 22 boys were interviewed once for approximately 45 minutes to one hour at their place of choosing: 15 boys were interviewed in their family home, whilst the remainder chose public places such as coffee shops and parks. The interviews were taped and later fully transcribed for analysis.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions, inviting the boys to comment on a range of overarching themes that guided the research (see Appendix E, Boys' interview schedule). The interview questions invited the boys to share their general experiences of school. Although a list of interview questions was prepared, the nature of the semi-structured interviews was flexible enough such that the interviewer could be guided by responses from the boys. Specific points of interest included the influence peers, teachers and parents had had on their academic performance, participation in school activities, subject choice, post-school pathways, and their school leaving decision. The boys were also invited to share any other factors they believed influenced their school leaving decision.

Possible Difficulties and Qualitative Data

Similar research on school leaving by Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) and Herr and Anderson (1997), discovered that in interviews with school leavers, some students tended to exhibit a form of "self-silencing" when asked to share their school experience(s). The 'self silencing' was typically identified in their narratives as blaming themselves "growing from the tensions created by holding oppositional beliefs about school, oneself, and the relationship between the two" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 266). It was of paramount importance and in the research's best interest to

ensure that questions posed to students were framed in such a manner as to identify such ‘self silencing’.

A difficulty in interviewing early school leaving boys may include those that deliberately do not want to be ‘found’. Dwyer (1996, p. 9) in his research came across this dilemma when he noted that,

> Given that many of those who quit school … have made their decision for a variety of negative reasons, it is not surprising that they prove difficult either to trace or to identify.

The researcher experienced similar difficulties. Because the boys were chosen by the schools, I considered the boys as an 'opportunistic sample' (Burns, 2000, p. 92). Opportunistic sampling may produce biased samples and with reference to the boys, it may be possible that the boys who were more willing to be interviewed may have been more confident that those who were not. Despite the school providing contact details of the boys, it was difficult to make contact with them. If a school leaver declined to be part of the study, they could not be included in the project.

As this research seeks to understand the experiences of secondary school boys, the individual narratives or stories of the boys needed to be understood within their particular social, cultural, historical, and political settings. The analysis adopted as empirical data the information ‘re-created’ (Mishler, 1986) by the boys from their material experiences. The boys' narratives were viewed in the manner described by Scheibe (1986, p. 131):

> Human identities are evolving constructions; they emerge out of continual social interactions in the course of life. Self-narratives are developed stories that must be told in specific historical terms, using a particular language, reference to a particular stock of working historical conventions, and a particular pattern of dominant beliefs and values.

How boys negotiated competing discourses within the context of their local cultures was central to understanding the role of a dominant masculinity discourse in their

school leaving decisions. As discussed earlier in this chapter, adoption of Fairclough's (2002) three-tier model of discourse as a conceptual framework for this research provided the opportunity to trace any cultural differences in the six social contexts. Analysis of the texts within this framework reinforced that culture was constituted by language and symbols found within contextual sites (Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Data analysis - Narrative Inquiry

There has been a marked shift over the past twenty-five years in the focus of research paradigms, notably from logico-scientific models to narrative inquiry. A motivation behind this research has been to further comprehend the potential use of qualitative method(s) as an epistemological tool in understanding human behaviour (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1992). It has been the increasing interest in how people 'make sense' of their experiences that has generated a focus on individual narrative and storytelling. Coles (1989) claimed that it is only through the exploration of people's stories that one can fully enter another person's life. Narrative inquiry promotes not only this understanding of human action, experience and intention, but assists in identifying the cultural composition of a society (Atkinson, 1990, 1991; Bruner, 1990; Denzin, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1992; Usher, 1994).

Narrative inquiry in educational contexts has tended to focus on perceived disadvantages and conflicts found either in the classroom or in the institution of school. These have included social location (Teese et al. 1995), ethnicity (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995; Walker, 1998), class (Collins et al. 2000), and gender (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1996). A consensus in educational research has been reached that researchers must have an appreciation for the lives and experiences of students and teachers, in order to understand the institution of schooling and its relationship with associated cultures (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Collay, 1993; Goodson & Walker, 1991). Through the use of semi-structured personal interviews, the boys' narratives were a rich source of their personal experience and reported feelings. Identifying the presence of a dominant masculinity discourse in their narratives will provide an insight into how the boys made sense of their early school leaving decision.

Analytical tools

To satisfy the research question and aims, this 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 traditionalized 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 individuals to challenge their cultural and social circumstances, and in doing so, recognize the cultural and social constraints under which they live. Whilst consciouness- raising in the 'Frierian' sense was not an aim of this research, the interviews did ask boys to reflect on critical decisions they had made about their lives. The initial analysis of the boys' narratives was intended to be broad and general, seeking to identify the 'generative themes' that manifest in and through the boys' narratives. In order to appreciate any variation within and amongst the six 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).

The generative themes identified in the boys’ narratives were then analysed to recognise which storylines each boy used to illustrate how the themes manifest 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.

The relationship between Freire’s generative themes and Bruner’s storylines complements Fairclough’s model of discourse in a number of ways as illustrated in Chapter 1, Figure 1.1 (p. 7). The ‘micro’ level in Fairclough’s model (the boys’ interviews) are reflected in the inner two concentric circles i.e. the storylines and generative themes identified in the boys’ narratives are underpinned by the dominant masculinity discourse available to them in the social context and the context of school. Aspects of the boys’ narratives may include how they viewed their employment prospects, their future hopes, dreams and aspirations for their lives, and their overall beliefs about the world they live in. The ‘macro’ levels in Fairclough’s model i.e. the institutions of school and gender in the State of Queensland, are reflected in the outer-most concentric circle. Using Bruner’s and Freire’s concepts as analytical ‘tools’, an understanding of the boys’ choice of storylines was developed to explore the role of a dominant masculinity discourse in their accounts of their school experiences.

This research works from the premise that culturally-specific discourses such as a dominant masculinity discourse, are deeply entrenched within the broader social context and school context, and that they manifest through the boys’ narratives as storylines and generative themes. Figure 4.2 illustrates the analytical process.

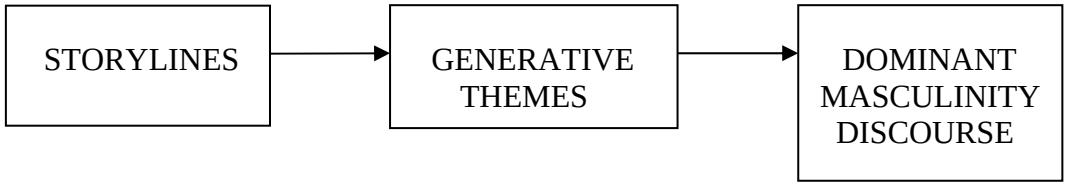

Figure 4.2: The process of analysing the boys' narratives.

In summary

This chapter described the construction of the current study within its chosen theoretical perspective and conceptual framework. The chapter provided details of the six school research sites and their contexts. A description of the research method, data collection and analytical tools was provided, as well as a justification of their choice for this research.

The next chapter signals the initial exploration of data collected from the boys in the school context. Identification of the generative themes and storylines the boys used offers insights into how they made sense of their school experiences.

CHAPTER 5
STORIES OF SCHOOL

Introduction

Chapters 1-4 discussed the methodological and conceptual framework upon which this research is based, and illustrated how previous research had shaped our current understanding of boys, schooling and early school leaving. This chapter makes links between the generative themes and storylines the boys used to explain their school experiences.

The following two chapters will analyse the boys' narratives to explore the generative themes related to their school and broader social contexts.

Exploring the Discourses of School

This study takes the position that an individual's actions, thoughts and attitudes are constructed through the dominant cultural discourses of the 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 explored in relation to the boys' early school leaving decisions, as they related to both the school and broader social contexts (Chapters 5 and 6 respectively). These themes were then analysed through the lens of the three elements previously identified as being central to the notion of a dominant masculinity discourse (Chapter 3). The seven generative themes reflected that the boys:

1. All commented on the impact teachers had on the quality of their school experiences;
2. Described the lack of application and relevance school-based learning offered to their post-school pathway;
3. Had invested time researching and planning for their career;

4. Possessed a strong work ethic;
5. Expressed a desire to start their career early i.e. have a ‘head-start’ over others;
6. Had a view of the type of person they were i.e. their strengths/weaknesses, likes and dislikes and,
7. Had knowledge of local experiences.

Fairclough’s (2002) model of discourse as “text, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices”, with its context-interaction-text framework as the conceptual framework for this study, allows the researcher to analyse the possibility that the contexts of school and the broader social context may impact upon the boys’ lives in different ways. Whilst undertaking the thematic analysis, it was evident that certain themes were more prominent in boys' references to the school context than to the broader social context. Reinforcing the prevalence of certain themes in certain contexts were the specific storylines that illustrated how the themes manifest in their personal circumstance. Figure 5.1 below illustrates the three prominent themes relating to the school context.

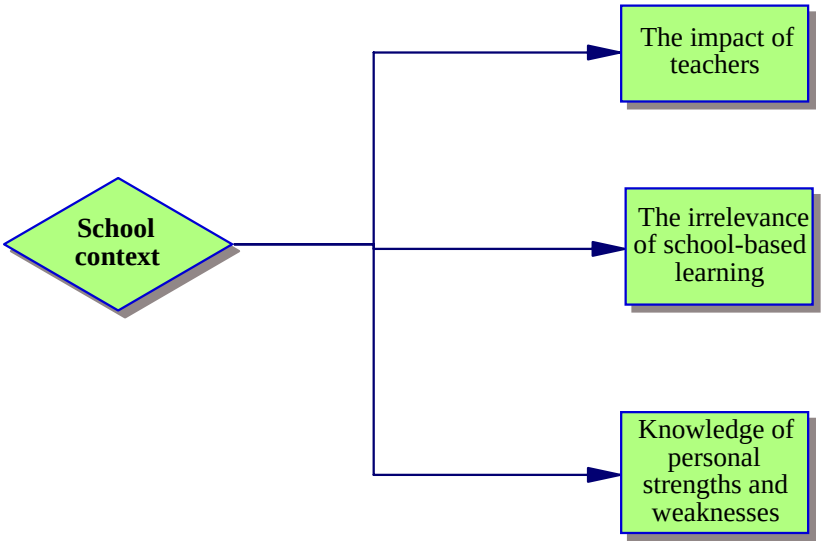

Figure 5.1: Three generative themes relating to the school context.

In discussing their school experience, the boys' comments reflect three key themes:

i. The impact of teachers
ii. The irrelevance of school-based learning
iii. Knowledge of their personal strengths and weaknesses.

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. The following table shows the relationship between the storylines and generative themes found in the boys' narratives to describe their personal circumstance and experiences at school.

Table 5.1: The relationship between the three generative themes and storylines evident in the boys' narratives used in the school context.

Generative Theme	Storylines
The impact of teachers	*'Good' teacher* *'Cutting slack'* *'Bad' teacher* *Abuse of power and authority* *Loss of student voice*
The irrelevance of school-based learning	*Why do I need to know this stuff anyway?*
Knowledge of strengths and weaknesses	*I know what I'm good at, and I know what I'm not good at.* *Poor academic performance* *It's not my fault I failed!* *Realising (one's) self*

The next section explores the themes and storylines expressed in the boys' narratives of their experiences.

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 (see Appendix E, Boys interview

schedule). 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 had an opinion on 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. This 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. The 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).

It is clear that there were benefits for both teacher and student where the boysconsidered teachers to be 'good'. Characteristic of a 'good' teacher discourse was a mutual understanding with students, and an informality and relaxing of power and authority between teacher and student in class. The boys viewed power sharing in class as a two way process that led to a range of positive spin offs for both teacher and student.

Closer analysis of the boys' narratives revealed there were many things that constituted a 'good' teacher storyline, and being respected and acknowledged as an individual was one of them. Central to both 'good' and 'bad' teacher storylines was the word respect. The boys' valued being treated as an individual, 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’ perspective 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’.

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 outlined 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 identifying certain teachers as a ‘bad’ teacher. It was notable that all 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).

Each boys' experience with 'bad' teachers differed, and the impact the experience had on each boy's attitude towards school and authority varied. 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 a teacher 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 the teacher abusing their authority, was the power the teacher had to control their 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 with 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 realized 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 a 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. Experiences like these 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.

A number of 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).

> 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);

> 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).

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, 1992b; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Martin, 2004; Trent & Slade, 2001). Another area the boys had to comply with was the topic and content of certain subjects in the curriculum that were deemed "a waste of time", and comprised the second generative theme.

Generative Theme Two: The irrelevance of school-based learning

Why do I need to know this stuff anyway?

According to the boys, the value of school-based learning diminished when examined in terms of how useful and applicable the information would be when applied to their specific career goal. It became evident that most boys found aspects of the school curriculum boring and irrelevant to their future career goals. When the boys were asked to comment in a general sense on how relevant they believed the school curriculum was to their futures, some typical comments were,

> At school, they don't teach you what you want to be taught, or need to be taught for your coming job (Daniel, Laburnum);

> I wasn't learning what I needed to learn at school to go into the job I wanted, so I thought it would be best to leave school and go and get my career started early

(Jim, Listerfield);

Once you learn your basic English and stuff like that, it's not worth learning it again 'cause you learn your basic English at Primary school, why go over it again? (Josh, Mitcham);

It would really be a waste of two years if I stayed at school 'cause I wasn't learning what I needed to know for my job, and if I can already get the job that I want to do even if I haven't finished school, then why not? (Shane, Ashwood);

I wanted to have some confidence that I'm going somewhere instead of sitting at school learning stuff I don't know where I'm going to use it (Brendan, Mitcham);

I used to go to work experience diesel fitting, and after doing it, I'd then sit in class and think, 'Oh, if I was at work experience now, I would be pulling apart a v8 diesel motor. Instead I'm sitting here with this pen'. You know, it was harder to go back to school after work experience than it was before work experience. School was so boring. I use to tell the teachers, 'Do you know how boring school is after pulling apart motors and shit?' They just laughed and told me to make the best of it, but I just couldn't (Max, Listerfield).

When the boys considered what contribution their school-based learning would provide their career plans, its value faded. The boys claimed they were forced to partake in activities that were meaningless to their interests, strengths and career path, without any successful recourse for appeal. They deemed school-based learning 'boring' as school did not teach them specific skills and knowledges they needed to apply to their career choice.

I just didn't see the sense in the work that we had to do at school. Half the stuff you do, you don't even use after school, like Algebra. What else? A bit of stuff in English that we were doing, we'd never use, like poetry. I just didn't see the sense in learning it (Craig, Blackburn);

I didn’t see why I had to learn a lot of stuff at school. It was boring and I wasn’t going to use it for my job, so I left (Andrew, Mitcham);

Generative Theme Three: Knowledge of Strengths and Weaknesses

I know what I'm good at, and I know what I'm not good at

An interesting aspect of the boys’ narratives, which underpins the discourse of ‘saving face’ to be explored in chapter 7, was their views of their personal strengths and weaknesses in both the school and broader social context, and what they needed to achieve in order to make their career plans a reality. This awareness was central to the boys’ post-school planning and they openly discussed their strengths and weaknesses as justification of their early school leaving decision.

I can’t just sit down and write things all day. I’ve got to do things with my hands (Simon, Heatherdale);

I’m meant to be here living in the country. I’m more of an outdoor person. I like the space and I don’t like crammed stuff. This place is perfect with the beach and all that space. I just love the freedom of the place. I couldn’t stand living or working in town. I can’t hack stuff that is just busy all the time (Brendan, Mitcham);

I know you can join the army in Year 9 as a grunt, or a soldier. You’d get in straight away. I’m not going to do that ‘cause I don’t like that sort of stuff. I want to go into the army and really *do* something, like be a mechanic or something, and work on trucks all day. Anything in that area where I can use my hands would be good (Craig, Blackburn);

I wasn’t doing well at school and I knew that I wasn’t going to pass Year 12. It was as simple as that, so I left and got a job (Richard, Ashwood);

I know what I’m like, I just needed a break from school. I left school so I could take my time and grow up a bit. I just think that school didn’t interest me at the

> time, but it does now. Now that I've left school, I'm working harder to get back to school and get higher grades. I'm going to go back to school next year and do Years 11 and 12, but I need to do my TAFE course to get my Maths and English up to get a better mark. I don't have to but I want to. I need my Year 12 to do what I want to do for my future (Peter, Laburnum).

There were some boys who said they knew in earlier school years that they would leave school early, and other boys claimed they began secondary school with an understanding that they would finish Year 12. Interestingly all boys interviewed from the Listerfield (Rural) and Blackburn (Provincial) areas reported that they had originally thought they would stay on to complete Years 11 and 12. Some comments were:

> No, I thought I'd be going through until Year 12 (Ben, Blackburn);
>
> I wanted to stay at school until the end of Year 12, but it didn't work out that way (Daniel, Laburnum);
>
> No I didn't think I'd leave school early. I always thought I was going to go through to Year 12, but that sort of fell through when I moved out of home (Shane, Ashwood).
>
> No I thought I'd go right through to Year 12 until December last year when I got offered this traineeship (Jim, Listerfield);
>
> I always thought I'd stay on through to Year 12 (Max, Listerfield);
>
> I always thought I would finish school to the end, but I sort of hummed and haaed and half way through Year 10, I made up my mind to leave school (Andrew, Mitcham).

It is interesting to note the number of boys who believed they would complete Year 12 when in fact they ended up leaving school early. The argument here is that the competing discourses of school and work, together with the pressure to conform to

gender stereotypes, replaced these plans with other motivations to leave school when they did.

In recognising their personal strengths and weaknesses in the school context, the boys channelled their efforts into areas where they knew there was a greater chance of success, hence narrowing the likelihood of personal failure. Common to the boys was their experience of poor academic performance at school, and it became evident that this aspect of their school experience was significant in their early school leaving decision.

Poor Academic Performance

Poor academic performance and its relationship to early school leaving has been well documented (Collins et al., 2000; Long, 2004; Martin, 2004; Penman, 2004; Teese & Polesel (2003). The literacy and numeracy achievements of students, especially boys, remain a strong determinant in the decision to leave school early (Martin, 2004; Penman, 2004). All but one boy in this study confirmed that at school, their chances of enjoying academic success was poor and that this was a determining factor in the decision-making process for them to leave school. They claimed:

> I wasn't doing well at school, and I knew I wasn't going to pass Year 12 simple as that, so I left and got a job. So I thought 'Oh well, I can stay at school and bludge for two years, or I can leave and get some work and money, and build on my work experience in the work force' (Mark, Heatherdale);
>
> I was not doing too good academically at school. I was struggling a bit and I thought that if I'm struggling now in Year 10, then there's no way I'll make it through Year 12, so I left (Andrew, Mitcham);
>
> Going to Year 12 never interested me, especially with my learning problem and all that. I knew I would struggle all the way through senior, so yeah, I left school (Paul, Blackburn);
>
> I knew my marks probably wouldn't be too flash in Year 12, so I left school (Brian, Ashwood);

> I thought I would go through to Years 11 and 12 but it wasn't as easy as I thought it was, the actual difficulty of the school work and that. So I got a good Year 10, left school and got a job (Jim, Listerfield);
>
> I knew I'd fail years 11 and 12, so I left school and got a job (Ben, Blackburn).

For most of the boys, the decision to leave school was the culmination of a series of events, and realising their academic limitations was central to their school leaving. The school leaving boys had concluded that the chances of experiencing academic success at school when compared to the financial 'success' of employment meant that continuing on was not worth the time or effort. They accepted their academic limitations and questioned the purpose of school learning that would most likely result in on-going failure. However, their failure in the school context meant that they were a minority, as the majority of students were able to negotiate class requirements and enjoy varied degrees of academic success.

Central to the boys' self-confidence, was their need to experience success. All boys had come to realise that their chances of experiencing success in the school context were highly limited.

> Not until I hit Year 10 I figured that I might be lucky just to pass Year 10, let alone Year 11 or 12, so I left (Luke, Laburnum);
>
> Basically, it was just hard to cope with the schoolwork so I said 'bugger it', I'll leave (Brendan, Mitcham).

It's not my fault I failed!

Knowing that their chances of experiencing academic success were limited, the boys attributed blame to the teacher for their poor academic performance. This may be an attempt to 'save face' i.e. maintain a sense of pride and ability in front of their peers. While this link can only be inferred, such an explanation would be consistent with aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

> I hated school. The teachers just don't do it right. They don't make learning fun. Its always 'sit down and do times tables', like who would really want to do that, you know? They could make it into a game or something, geez, because we're kids after all (Andrew, Mitcham).
>
> Teachers gave you the occasional help, but it was still never enough (Phil, Heatherdale);
>
> If there's a pissed off teacher and he's sitting down writing something, you're not going to go up and ask for help and talk to him about all this and that. Even if you want to go up and talk to him, you can tell that he's pissed off because of something. You could tell because of his breathing, he'd be sitting there and sighing, and you just ask 'what's the point of going and asking him for help when he's in that mood? I've said that to the teacher once, I said 'you get paid by the hour or whatever to help kids out, and look at what you do, you just sit there and do nothing. That was to the Maths teacher. He was an old guy, and he just laughed because he knew I couldn't tell him what to do (Brendan, Mitcham).

The boys' narratives took up a victim discourse and attributed blame for their poor academic performance based on their perception of the teacher's lack of caring and understanding of their individual learning needs. The school context was a reminder of academic struggle and failure, where students followed directions and simply had to accept what was being asked of them. Based on the understanding they had of their personal strengths and interests, the broader social context in comparison, offered success, money and independence.

Realising (one's) self

The boys' stories link their negative experiences in the school context with their overall performance, engagement and attitude towards school. In recognising their own abilities, the boys were able to map out realistic futures for themselves that offered greater opportunities to experience success. Their detailed career research and planning acted as a scaffold for the development of a dominant masculine identity they wished to be aligned to.

This echoes research by Harris (1996), Evans (2000) and Doyle (1997), that central to being 'male' was a cultural expectation that males need to be confident, independent and autonomous, and that autonomy was fundamental to the social view of manliness. It followed then that in the school context, some males did not like being told what to do as it implicated their dependency upon others. Asking for help would have undermined their allegiance to a dominant masculine discourse, and risked their masculine identity being aligned to subordinate forms. What the boys in the study did to protect their masculine identity in the school context was blame others for their failure.

In summary

This chapter broadly investigated the themes in the 22 boys' narratives that highlighted the range of generative themes and storylines they used to explain their school experiences. In all of the boys' narratives, they attributed blame to the teacher for their poor academic performance, lack of motivation to learn, disengagement from school, and for some, their early school leaving decision.

The next chapter explores the generative themes and storylines the boys used to explain their experiences in their broader social context. They provide a number of examples that support the realisation of their future career goals, and form the basis of their early school leaving decision.

CHAPTER 6

STORIES OF REAL LIFE

Introduction

The school and broader social contexts presented a range of specific generative themes that were evident in the boys' accounts. Negotiating these themes in these two contexts allowed the boys to make sense of their experiences. The previous chapter explored the storylines the boys used in discussing the school context. However, of particular interest to the research aims is the impact the broader social context had on the boys' decision-making process to leave school early.

Exploring Themes and Storylines in the Social Context

The boys' narratives showed that four of the seven generative themes were strongly linked to their broader social context. The themes revealed that the boys:-

1. Had invested time in researching and planning their career;
2. Possessed a strong work ethic;
3. Expressed a desire to start their career early i.e. have a 'head-start' over others;
4. Believed they understood the local experiences of securing employment in their broader social location.

Figure 6.1 below illustrates the four themes relating to the boys' social context and this section links the four themes to the boys' broader social context to explore their relationships with their early school leaving decision.

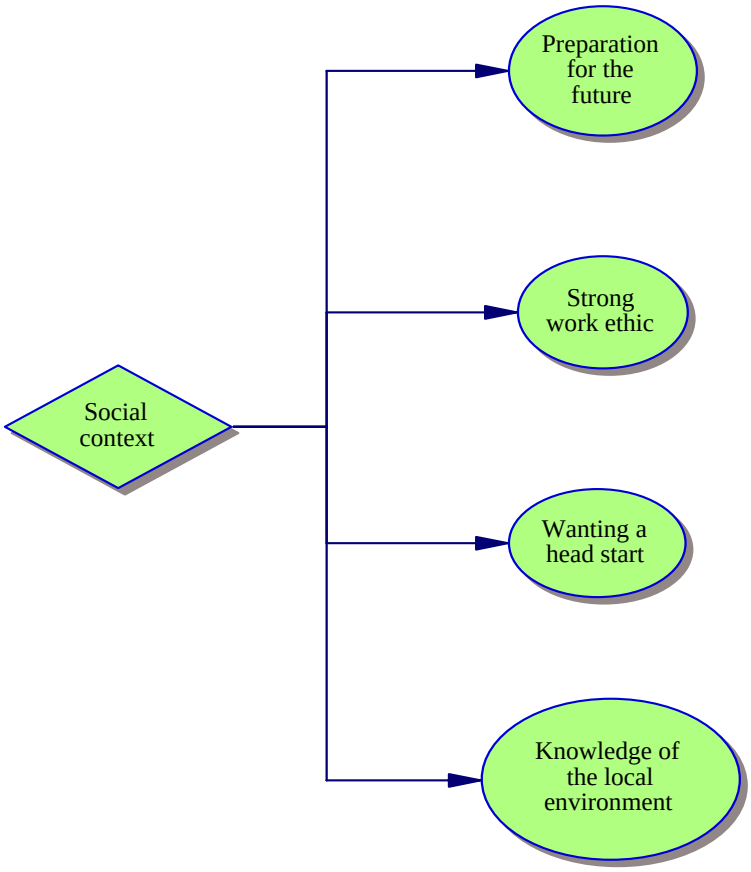

Figure 6.1: Four generative themes relating to the broader social context.

The analysis in this chapter will focus on the storylines in the boys' accounts to illustrate how the four generative themes relate to their broader social location. Analysis of each theme and storyline will consider how they were perpetuated in the six social contexts that may be linked to the boys' understanding of their situation. Table 6.1 summarises characteristics of each broader social context where the six school sites were chosen. Characteristics of the locations may assist in making links between the socio-cultural practices available to the boys, and their early school leaving decision.

Table 6.1: Characteristics of the broader social contexts of the six school sites[12].

RURAL SETTING

	Population	Location	Mean age of population	Economic interests	Employment
Mitcham	10,500	Coastal (far north)	37 years	Banana, mango, sugar-cane harvesting	Agricultural based. Seasonal and highly transient
Listerfield	21,630	1,000km inland	30 years	Zinc, Iron, Lead, and Copper mining	Industrial and Retail

METROPOLITAN[13] SETTING

	Population	Location	Mean age of population	Economic interests	Employment
Ashwood	3,260	35km south-west of the GPO	32	Semi-industrial	'Light-medium' industrial labour
Laburnum	13,140	60km south-east of the GPO	34 years	Semi-industrial, agricultural	Construction and Retail

PROVINCIAL SETTING

	Population	Location	Mean age of population	Economic interests	Employment
Blackburn	96, 372	Coastal	34	Semi-industrial.	Armed forces, 'Blue collar', and transient workers
Heatherdale	69,000	15km south of the town centre	33	Zinc and copper mining, beef cattle, pineapples and mangoes	Armed forces, 'Blue collar', and transient workers

[12] Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005.

[13] The city of Brisbane, the State capital of Queensland, was chosen as the metropolitan setting. Ashwood and Laburnum are part of Brisbane's outer suburbs.

Analysis of the boys' narratives found that similar generative themes were 'taken up' in the six different social contexts, but the storylines that reflected these generative themes differed. The relationship between the themes and storylines in the broader social context are summarised below as Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: The relationship between the four generative themes and storylines evident in the boys' narratives used in the broader social context.

Generative Theme	Storyline
Preparation for the future	*Knowledge of employer requirements* *The value of education vs. employment* *The security of being skilled up* *Taking the employment opportunity*
Strong work ethic	*'I don't want to do nothing and be a bludger!'*
Wanting a head start	*Possession of a car* *The value of money*
Knowledge of local experiences	*Previous school leavers as positive role models*

In the previous chapter, it was shown that the boys claimed that it was the *context* of their learning, i.e. the school context, which was unable to maintain their interest and engagement in learning relevant to their careers. However, placed in another learning context e.g. as an employee in the workforce, the boys argued that their attitude towards engagement and participation in learning would change dramatically. This next section explores the shift in their attitude towards learning.

Generative Theme One: Preparation for the Future

Knowledge of employer requirements

All boys explained in great detail the extent of preparation and research they had undertaken to understand the requirements to be employed in certain careers. Their research included not only ascertaining what employment opportunities were available in their broader social context, but also understanding what employers in their social context valued most when recruiting staff. Despite differences among the three social contexts, the boys' understandings of what employers valued from their employees, were similar as evidenced in the following excerpts.

> If you're willing to work around here, it doesn't matter what grades you got. If you're willing to work and you show you're keen, you'll get a job, even if it's basic stuff (Richard, Listerfield);
>
> It's mainly what you know, and how good your work is around here, that's what you get paid for (Josh, Mitcham);
>
> I know that once I've got my trade papers, they're just as good as the Year 12 certificate, and so do a lot of employers I've talked to around here (Paul, Blackburn);
>
> In this area, as long as you have a good resume of work experience, you'll get a job (Jim, Listerfield);
>
> The employers that I've talked to aren't really worried about Year 11 and 12 certificates. Whether you have a Year 11 and 12 certificate or not doesn't matter, not around here anyway. It's whether you can do the job or not that counts (Daniel, Laburnum).

An educational qualification was not considered to be valued by employers when compared to personal characteristics such as reliability, responsibility, ability, stamina, experience and competitiveness. One boy stated, "in all the jobs I've had, the employers have never asked for my Year 10 certificate" (Paul, Mitcham), which confirmed his understanding of the lack of value educational qualifications offered his employment opportunities.

The boys' frustration at attending school may have been increased by their belief that attaining a senior educational qualification provided no advantage to their employment chances in their social context. One of the many attractions of leaving school early for the boys was the fact that they were now able to spend time learning skills and knowledge they deemed relevant and applicable to their post school pathway, as the following discussion shows.

The Value of Education vs. Employment

A consensus from all boys was that school 'work' was not *real* work i.e. school 'work' was irrelevant, boring and not applicable to their career plans. Whilst in the school context, the boys were eager to escape the restrictions of school-based work, and perform *real* work out in the workforce. Some boys discussed their understanding of the advantage having a Year 12 certificate provided to their hourly wage, when compared to someone who lacked a Year 12 qualification in their broader social context.

> Those kids who stay at school think they can get more money if they get their Year 12, and when they leave school they believe they can get a higher rate of pay. Most of the time I think they've got it wrong. I know a lot of people who said yeah, I want to go and do Year 12 at school 'cause they think they'll get more money, but it's got nothing to do with it, not around here anyway (Josh, Mitcham).

> Some students reckon it's worth going higher up in school than repeating Year 10 and getting better marks. I got LA's and SAs[14] in Year 10, and the school keeps putting you up, but when you go up you lose your marks, so when you get to Year 12 your marks are pretty bad. You'd be better off having a lower grade with higher marks than a high grade with bad marks, that's how I looked at it, so I left school (Jim, Listerfield).

Through their interviews some boys showed an understanding of the relationship between the level of an individual's work effort and hourly rate of pay. What appeared

[14]. In the hierarchal assessment scale of the Queensland Studies Authority school assessment grades, levels of achievement are indicated as VHA (Very High Achievement), HA (High Achievement), SA (Sound Achievement), LA (Low Achievement), VLA (Very Low Achievement).

important to the boys was how they could optimise their hourly earnings, and, based on their understanding, staying at school to Year 12 provided no advantage for this. Rather, the belief in their strong work ethic and ability to work appeared to be motivating factors in these boys' early school-leaving decision. The boys' discussion of their future wage potential was only one aspect of career planning they had taken into consideration. Two boys were motivated to plan for their futures by what they saw as important priorities for them as providers for their future families

> It's important to be able to put food on the table and a roof over your head. That's what it's all about. That's why you have to start your career early (Phil, Heatherdale);

> I want to get a good job so I can earn good money. I want to be able to feed a family, own a house and have kids and all that. You need a good job and money to do that (Sam, Laburnum).

In best preparing themselves for their futures, the boys' plans encompassed short and long-term goals. The boys' justifications for their career plans were based upon their confidence of local knowledge and driven by their personal aspirations. It seemed that one of the incentives to leave school was motivated by carefully thought out goals and aims that promoted a sense of security for their futures.

The Security of Being Skilled Up

An important factor some boys took into consideration was the level of employment security a job had to offer as illustrated in the following excerpts.

> I have been thinking about joining the army for a long time because you've got a job for life … The army is just a good stable job … I know I could have a job for 20 years if I want it (Craig, Blackburn);

> I left school because I got a job early, and I knew that the job I got would last a while. After a couple of months, it would turn into a full-time job and I'd be set, so I left school (Mark, Heatherdale).

Important to the boys was a sense of security and continuity in their employment. Security in employment required that they were able to fulfil job requirements to a satisfactory level, and most boys were mindful that school was not the only context where it was possible to fail. One boy's post-school plans included the accumulation of other skills, and crafting of alternate plans to be activated to ensure they stayed on their desired career path, as epitomized by this next quote.

> I've done a few courses in horticulture, I wanted to get more things out of my life I suppose. I didn't want to be some bum laying on the street really. I wanted to make sure that I had at least *something* I knew how to do to make money (Carl, Laburnum).

The strong motivation to avoid the stigma of being unemployed or a 'bludger' led the boys to invest time in planning for their desired career goal. This meant they were prepared to take 'side-steps' from their original career plans, and to pursue other employment options to ensure they would eventually be engaged in their chosen career interest.

A theme in the boys' narratives was that despite not seeing the relevance of school-based learning to their careers, they acknowledged that continuing to learn skills and knowledge was vital to the success of their future employment opportunities as epitomised by this next quote.

> Now that I've left school, I'm doing Native Animal and Conservation at TAFE. Next year I'll be doing Year 12 Maths and English at TAFE so I'll do that and keep up with the courses. After the Native Animal and Conservation course, I was thinking about going into Marine Studies to get some marine background, because with being a Park Ranger, you have to know, or you should basically know everything there is to know about Science (Daniel, Laburnum).

The boys had indicated their determination to succeed at their career goals, through the preparation of alternate career paths, and recognising the value of learning skills and

knowledge. Important was the opportunity to continue learning in other contexts external to school, typically at TAFE, apprenticeships, and general employment positions.

The evidence showed that in some cases, boys' decisions to leave school were the product of a process of deliberation, planning and maturity, one whose focus was clearly set on the optimum way they could use their time to achieve their career goals more quickly.

Taking the Employment Opportunity

The study investigated whether the boys' decision to leave school early was spontaneous and unexpected, or planned and expected. A purpose of this line of inquiry was to ascertain if some boys had considered both short and long term effects of their school leaving on their future employment opportunities. It became evident that through either planned or serendipitous opportunity, the boys were faced with a choice to leave school and take up employment that offered more relevant and interesting learning.

> It's always been my aim to leave at Year 10 if I could get the apprenticeship (Shane, Ashwood);
>
> My biggest aim was to get a boilermaker's apprenticeship at Year 10, because the sooner I start, the sooner I'll finish. The sooner I'm qualified, the sooner I'll go and earn the big money (Paul, Blackburn);
>
> I got a phone call saying there was a job over at Hurstville one night while I was still at school, and the bloke I worked for asked how would I like to do a traineeship under him, and I said that would be great, so here I am (Brian, Laburnum);
>
> I have always wanted to do that job for a long time, and the opportunity came up, so I took it (Ben, Blackburn);

> I wanted to get my Year 10 certificate and then get a job as an apprentice chef. I had the apprenticeship lined up before I left school, and now, I'm working at the Silky Oaks restaurant just down the road (Paul, Mitcham);
>
> I pretty well had a job lined up and I wasn't learning what I needed to learn at school to get into the job force, so I thought it would be best to go and get started early (Jim, Listerfield);
>
> I got a job in the area I wanted to work in, so I left school (Josh, Mitcham);
>
> A job offer came along and that pretty well made up my mind to leave school (Andrew, Mitcham);
>
> It's only that I got the job I wanted to do early that I knew that I wouldn't finish school (Craig, Blackburn);
>
> I've always been into trucks and when I was offered an apprenticeship as a truck mechanic with the guy I was already working for on Saturday mornings, I took it. I love it. It's excellent! (Ben, Blackburn);
>
> I really wanted to be a mechanic ever since I was little. The opportunity came up so I took it (Scott, Heatherdale);
>
> I got offered a job, which was easy access into the workforce so I took it (Max, Listerfield).

The evidence suggests that some boys had already managed to find some form of employment in their area of career interest whilst still at school. One implication of this was that they had placed themselves in another learning context where they experienced a level of satisfaction in learning. For some boys, when the chance to do what they've "always wanted" "ever since [they were] little" arose, the opportunity provided them with a legitimate reason to leave school and begin relevant learning in their particular

career interest. The evidence substantiates some boys' claims that their school leaving was in fact part of a pre-existing plan they had devised for their futures.

As the evidence suggests, waiting for a career opportunity to present itself in order to legitimise their school leaving, was very much central to some boys' career plans. For a number of boys, leaving at Year 10 was always part of their planned career path, and their idea of a 'head start'. The boys viewed leaving school more as the *beginning* of their career, rather than a premature *ending* to their formal secondary schooling. Having researched the pre-requisites of their relevant career interest, the boys were certain that completing two more years of senior school translated as a waste of time. Years 11 and 12 offered them no advantage to their career goals, and delayed their capacity to earn money and engage in meaningful learning.

An attraction for some boys to leave school was an opportunity to embrace a learning path they themselves had researched, designed effectively to bring their career and personal ambitions closer to reality. In doing so, these boys were therefore able to justify to themselves and others that they made the right decision to leave school when they did.

Generative Theme Two: Strong work ethic

I don't want to do nothing and be a bludger!

Relevant to this study is the boys' motivation to be employed post-school. It became clear that all boys shared a desire to better themselves and be *someone* and *something* (Wexler, 1992) in their lives. Some boys provided detail of how important *real* work was to them by elaborating on their work ethic i.e. how seriously they viewed the responsibility attached to being employed to do a task, and how well they performed that task. Typical comments were,

> I'd rather not be bludging off the government, I'd rather just work (Josh, Mitcham);

> If I don't get a job straight away, I'll just keep on looking. Just because you don't get a job doesn't mean that you stop looking and sit on your arse and do

> nothing, you got to keep on looking. It is important not to get lazy (Mark, Heatherdale);
>
> I thought I would rather be out there working and getting money than staying at school, so I got myself a job (Richard, Ashwood);
>
> I'd rather work instead of sitting at school doing and learning nothing. I'd rather go and do work (Paul, Mitcham);
>
> Working and earning money is good. To have money and have work everyday instead of doing nothing at school is what I wanted to do, so I left (Paul, Blackburn).

The evidence reflected the motivation the boys had to partake in paid work. By taking up a *real* work discourse, the boys sought to be associated with money, expertise, skill, ambition, competitiveness, being considered as dependable and reliable, and being responsible for themselves and others. Interestingly, these points are conspicuous by their absence in the school context, hence the boys' eagerness to take up the *real* work discourse.

By way of illustration, one boy, Josh, referred to another boy Brendan, interviewed for this study in the same social context, and voiced his thoughts about Brendan's choice of not making more of an effort to be employed. According to Josh, the boy was just being a 'bludger'.

> Everyone I know who has left school is working, all except one kid … He's a bludger. He reckons he can't find a job but I reckon he's full of shit. There's jobs out there but he doesn't want to work. He says that transport is a problem and yes, I agree it would be for him out there, but he's still a bludger 'cause he doesn't want to try and make it work. I know his brother works at the Port, and they live in the same house, so he could get a ride into the Port with him no problems and work, but he doesn't want to. He's just a bludger (Josh, Mitcham).

Josh makes clear how antithetical his attitude towards being engaged in some form of employment was to Brendan's. Research by Davies (2003) reported a link between some males' masculine identity and their choice of employment. It is interesting to note that the majority of boys sought to be included in work that was by its very nature, dangerous, physically demanding, requiring stamina and highly competitive. Yet, there was one boy who took up work traditionally associated with women e.g. working as a kitchen-hand in the kitchen, his masculine identity was 'saved' from being associated with 'non-masculine' types due to:-

a) the extremely competitive nature of securing apprenticeships in his broader social location,
b) the elitist profile of the resort where the restaurant was based, and,
c) the fact that by all accounts, he had started his career early, was earning money, and was independent of his family and others for his daily needs.

For boys unable to secure employment on the other hand, their masculine identity was placed at risk by being associated with a discourse of unemployment that was to be avoided at all costs. This is especially true in the social contexts studied here where central to the dominant masculinity discourse was one's ability to be employed. The importance of getting a job was epitomised by one boy who indicated that he viewed unemployment as being associated with "some bum laying on the street" (Carl, Laburnum). Carl's view epitomised all boys' motivation to avoid unemployment, and the boys scrutinised those who were unsuccessful in this.

It was evident how powerful the *real* work discourse was for all boys interviewed. Just as powerful was the unemployment discourse that was associated with a subordinate masculinity discourse: weakness, inferiority, dependency, and being viewed as a 'bludger' or lazy. It is important to note that *not one* of the boys interviewed indicated that they entertained thoughts about not wanting to work, nor once mentioned the option of taking up government unemployment benefits. Important to gaining employment was the boys' understanding that they would start their career early and gain a head start from their peers.

Generative Theme Three: Wanting a head start

The third theme in the boys' narratives was their belief in the advantages to be gained in procuring a 'head-start' over their peers. A variety of reasons were given by different boys as to their perceived understanding of what a head start meant for them, and of the advantages to be gained by leaving school. The competitive edge of a 'head start' represented for most boys a means by which their sense of academic inadequacy in the school context could be masked. They could leave a context where they experienced failure, and enter another context that offered greater chances of success.

Upon leaving school, all boys excluding one, had successfully gained employment. The poor academic performance at school common to all boys, combined with the shortage of apprenticeships and other general employment opportunities, instilled a sense of urgency to take employment opportunities when they arose.

> You'd be mad not to take a job if it was offered to you (Brian, Laburnum);
>
> The only reason why I left school was because I got offered a job I was interested in (Max, Listerfield);
>
> As soon as I get a job, I'm out [of school] (Phil, Heatherdale).

The boys in all the social sites had an understanding of how significant an offer of employment was when compared with the prospect of experiencing more failure in the school context.

> Well a lot of people stay at school for the whole time and they get out of school and they can't find themselves a job anyway, so I thought I'd get a bit of a head start on my friends and get a job earlier (Shane, Ashwood);
>
> Well most jobs now they ask for a Year 11 and 12 certificate but I kind of a head start 'cause I got lots of work experience. Since leaving school, I've had one employer say work experience is just as good as having a Year 11 and 12 certificate 'cause I get offered just as much work (Mark, Heatherdale);

Yeah, it's important to have a head start because if you've got that head start, you will have a car, you will be able to have a license, you will drive your car, you will be paying your own way, so you will be two years up on all your friends, and becoming an adult (Richard, Ashwood);

I wasn't doing well at school and I knew that I wasn't going to pass Year 12 simple as that. So I thought that oh well, I can stay at school and bludge for 2 years or I can leave and get some work and build on my work experience in the work force. At least that gives me a head start over everyone else (Simon, Heatherdale);

Most of my mates that have left school pretty well left for the same reasons as me, or they want to get out and get a job, a car, get money you know, have some confidence that they're going somewhere instead of sitting at school learning but not knowing where they're going to go. I'm going to start early. I'll have a job and all that and everyone else will be coming out of Year 12 thinking, oh what shall I do? (Brendan, Mitcham);

In 4 years time, I'm fully qualified in a trade, so I've got my trade behind me. I can do anything. I can further my skills. I can do pressure welding and get bigger money. I'll have a trade behind me and I can still do what I want then. I couldn't do that if I stayed to Year 12 (Paul, Blackburn);

I reckon it's important to have a head start on people. Because, not so much now at our age 'cause we're still relying on our parents to take us places, stuff like that, but in a couple of years, it will be different. We'll have to look after ourselves and if you have a head start then you'll have more experience of what the world is *really* like, so you can deal with it better (Shane, Ashwood).

I'll have more experience out in the world over those that have just gone to school, and that's important. That's what will give me an edge over others (Jim, Listerfield).

There was a strong element of competitiveness between the boys and their peers in their social locations. The evidence shows that the boys' understood a head-start to provide them with a career advantage, but there were other benefits as well, specifically of being able to provide for their future family. Edley and Wetherell (1995) and Tolson (1977) argued that fundamental to being a provider was a sense of loyalty, responsibility, independence, and accountability to themselves and others. It was evident in the following boys' narratives that the role of being a 'provider' motivated their impatience to start their career early, earn money and begin their life as an adult.

> It's important to be able to put food on the table and a roof over your head. That's what it's all about (Phil, Heatherdale).

> I want to get a good job so I can earn good money. I want to be able to feed a family, own a house and have kids (Daniel, Laburnum).

The boys explained how beginning their career early by learning skills relevant to their career goals was an advantage in itself, and what they understood to be their head start. A head start for the boys also signalled their likelihood of purchasing symbols of independence, such as a car.

Possession of a car

As shown earlier in this chapter, the boys discussed how they had researched what employers deemed important when recruiting staff. It was evident that the possession of a car was another prerequisite for participating in the broader social context. Central to the sense of competition to gain employment was earning money and buying a car. They were most prominent in the rural context due to the broader social isolation of the two townships. However, earning money and buying a car, irrespective of broader social site, represented positive affirmations of a successful transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood' for all boys, and a career head start from their peers.

> Once I buy a car, I'll be able to do what I want, when I want. I'll be working and earning money and living out of home (Josh, Mitcham);

> All working means is that I'm earning money to save for a car. I'll be able to go anywhere then (Phil, Heatherdale).

In all boys' narratives, there was evidence that they took up a competitive discourse to explain, in part, their early school leaving. Central to their justifications was starting their career early i.e. getting a 'head start' over those that stayed at school, and earning money that allowed them to buy a car.

> There's nothing I could do really in the workforce if I stayed at school to Year 12. I wouldn't have a car or be able to do a job especially around this area, because you need a car to get to work. Unfortunately living up here, it's the only way to get to work (Josh, Mitcham);

> To have the job and work towards what *I* want, a car or something like that would be good. That way, I can drive anywhere to get to work. I bet there's not many guys my age who can say that (Paul, Blackburn);

> Yeah, it's important to have a head start because if you've got that head start, you will have a car, you will be able to have a license, you will drive your car, you will be paying your own way, so you will be two years up on all your friends, and becoming an adult. Being able to drive your car to work means I can go for any job that comes up (Richard, Ashwood);

> I've bought myself a $6000 motorbike so I can get to work. I wouldn't have been able to do that if I was still at school (Craig, Blackburn).

For boys living in relatively isolated areas, possession of a car was central to accessing employment. For others, the evidence reflected that what was important for these boys was to have a sense of 'one-up-manship', an advantage over others their age, particularly their peers who had chosen to stay at school, and possessing a car was a way in which some boys could do this. The points raised in these boys' narratives confirmed that for some boys, the ability to "pay your own way" and "work towards what *you* want" was significant to their sense of independence.

The next section explores how powerful and influential the ability to earn money was to the boys' early school leaving decision.

The Value of Money

According to all boys, earning money whilst living out their personal dreams or career aspirations was a more attractive option than staying at school. While the interview schedule did not ask the boys to comment specifically about the influence earning money had on their decision to leave school, it became a notable inclusion in the boys' narratives. For the following boys, earning money was central to their ability to provide for themselves, and what they deemed important in their lives.

> To get your way through life, you need somewhere to live, you need a job, a steady income, and you need money (Richard, Ashwood).

> Working is about money. Everything in life runs on money (Brendan, Mitcham);

> Oh money is more important than school definitely, because you can't live without money, and it means you'll have an easier life if you have more money (Ben, Blackburn);

> One of the good things about leaving school early is that I've got a job and I've got money (Max, Listerfield).

Central to some boys' successful transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood' was the acquisition of a range of material symbols that advertised their success in the 'adult' world to others. They explained,

> Just to have the job and work towards what *you* want, a car or something like that would be good. Or moving into a house and supporting myself (Paul, Blackburn);

> See that motorbike out there? I wouldn't have that if I was still at school

(Jim, Listerfield);

> Most of my mates left school pretty well for the same reasons as me. They want to get out of school and get a job, a car, and get money (Brendan, Mitcham);

> When the others have finished their year 12, I would have got some money behind me, brought a car and that, and be in a far better position that those just finishing year 12 (Andrew, Mitcham);

> I'm able to do a lot more in my life because I am able to pay for things myself. I'm able to work and keep the money I work for, and spend it on what I want to (Craig, Blackburn).

There is little doubt that the capacity to earn money was an attractive option for the boys. They believed they were at an advantage over the boys that stayed at school, as the money they earned brought them a *freedom of choice*, and an opportunity to advertise their membership of a lifestyle that school could not offer.

Generative Theme Four: Knowledge of local experiences

All boys indicated their determination to be employed after school. It is likely that just as they observed the progress of other boys who had left school early before them, they too felt their activities post-school would be scrutinised by others at school and in the community. In doing so, it was imperative to be able to advertise their successful transition from school to work in the form of a car, motorbike, and other material things money could buy.

Previous school leavers as positive role models

The boys' confidence in their ability to succeed in the workplace was evidenced in their knowledge of:

- what local employers valued in their employees;

- their belief in their ability to succeed in the workforce, when compared to the previous early school leavers; and,
- what was best for them i.e. personal happiness and success.

Relevant here is the value the boys placed on their knowledge of others who had left school early, and of how successful other early school leavers in their broader social location had been in realising their post-school plans. Collins et al. (2000) and McMillan and Marks (2003) reported that for most early school leaving boys, the choice of career and job options were severely limited and their long-term job stability was considerably restricted. However, analysis of the boys' narratives showed that most were rich in references to other boys they knew of who had left school early. According to the boys in this study, the school leavers they knew of had not experienced any difficulty in making a successful transition to the work place as reported in Collins et al's research. Their confidence about their early school leaving decision was based on their knowledge of other early school leavers who had made the successful transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood' in their broader social location.

> Yeah, the people I know who left school are doing pretty well (Josh, Mitcham);
>
> I know a couple of people who left school early and they're doing alright. Yeah, everyone I know is working. They are happy they're out of school and working (Brian, Ashwood);
>
> I don't know of anyone who left school [early] and hasn't been able to make a go of it (Ben, Blackburn);
>
> Everyone I know who has left school is out working (Jim, Listerfield).
>
> Most of the people who left school that I know of are getting on well. They're just doing what young boys do, just try and get a car, trying to get a job, and pretty well just trying to get their life together. Most of them have got jobs so they could save money to get a car (Brendan, Mitcham);
>
> All of the people I know that left school early are working. Yeah, they're

> doing pretty good (Andrew, Mitcham);
>
> Well most of my friends are pretty well like me and like working. They've all got jobs. Some of them wanted to just get out and earn money by working hard and be able to afford things they wanted (Richard, Listerfield);
>
> My mates I know who left school early are going alright. All my mates have got a job (Simon, Heatherdale);
>
> I know three people who left school early and they're all doing well. Yeah, they've all got jobs. They're out working (Richard, Ashwood).

It appeared important for the boys to remind themselves of the success other early school leavers enjoyed. The previous leavers' level of success reinforced to some boys that it was possible to enjoy success, despite severing ties with the formal learning structures offered in the school context. They used the previous school leavers' experiences as proof that not completing Years 11 and 12 did not necessarily impede one's ability to be successfully employed in the workplace.

In summary

This chapter analysed the boys' narratives in the broader social context, and highlighted how a range of personal and cultural issues played out in particular contexts. The boys had invested time in planning for their futures and researching the requirements their career demanded. Paramount in the boys' narratives was the theme that attending school to Year 12 was not an important aspect to fulfil their career goals. The boys' narratives reflected how they continued to place a value on learning, and leaving school was necessary for them to continue learning in an environment that provided more relevance to their career. The boys were clear in their belief that there were advantages to be enjoyed by leaving school early and gaining a head start over others through starting employment early and earning money.

Through their narratives the boys described how some of their decisions to leave school achieved a range of things for them simultaneously. Some boys were able to make

positive links between their career learning and its application, whilst others were able to make what they viewed as the transition to ‘manhood’ by taking up paid employment. The opportunity for these boys to leave school and start earning money provided them with a chance to take control of their lives and become independent in making decisions for themselves for which they would be responsible.

A key question in this study is the extent to which these accounts can be understood in terms of a dominant masculinity discourse. The next chapter will further analyse the boys’ narratives in both the school and broader social contexts, through the delineated lens of the three elements of a dominant masculinity discourse. It will illustrate evidence of a dominant masculinity discourse in the boys' narratives to make sense of their early school leaving decision in their personal circumstances.

CHAPTER 7

LINKING A DOMINANT MASCULINITY DISCOURSE TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Introduction

The previous two chapters explored how the boys used a range of storylines in the contexts of school and broader social location to understand their early school leaving. This chapter explores the relationship between a dominant masculinity discourse and boys' school leaving decision. The analysis will continue by exploring the boys' narratives through the lens of three concepts associated with a dominant masculinity discourse. This part of the analysis seeks to answer the subsidiary aims that include how boys make sense of their early school leaving decision, how their explanations of leaving school early are related to their experiences of schooling, and to the specific discursive practices of masculinity that operate within their broader social context.

The chapter then explores the boys' reflections on their school leaving decision. This part of the chapter reveals how, despite the boys' confidence and belief that leaving school early was the best thing for them to do at the time, this was, with the benefit of hindsight, not necessarily a wise decision. The chapter concludes with an examination of the different ways in which a dominant masculinity discourse manifests in the different social contexts as regional difference.

This chapter proceeds by linking the boys' narratives to each of the concepts of a dominant masculinity discourse, beginning with power and control. It is useful to revisit in brief the concept of power and control as one of the key elements of dominant masculinity discourse and males' developing sense of masculine identity.

Power and Control - Key Aspects of the Literature

The main points that emerged from the literature review in Chapter 4, *Masculinity Theory* included that:-

- The concepts of power and control and a dominant masculinity discourse are closely intertwined (Connell, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994);
- Some males' sense of power and control is an important aspect of their developing sense of masculine identity (Connell, 1994; 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McLean, 1996);
- Some males' sense of individual power over one's self, environment and others is central to the ongoing construction of dominant forms of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994);
- What masculinity means in the wider social/cultural context and how it is perceived and practised by others (particularly for some boys), is at the centre of gender identity formation (Connell, 2003);
- Schools as "masculinity-making devices" need to be examined as institutional agents in the process of masculinity formation eg. structures and practices, and as settings in which other agencies such as pupils, are involved (Connell, 2003);
- Schools perpetuate inequitable power relations between student and school authority, which for some boys manifests as teacher dominance. This dominance undermines some boys' sense of power and control (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Connell et al. 1982, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martin, 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001);
- From an historical perspective, the sense of control has been a constant factor in the up-bringing of most males, and a loss of control (typically of their emotions) signals that their identity is aligned with aspects that are distinctly 'non-masculine' (Harris, 1995; McLean, 1996); and,
- For some males, asking for help is difficult as the request alone implies their inability to cope or perform tasks unsupervised. Some males do not like being told what to do as it implies their dependency upon others. In doing so, their sense of identity is aligned with aspects that are distinctly 'non-masculine' (Harris, 1996).

The research into masculinity, boys and schooling highlighted the confrontation that exists between some boys' need to have a sense of power and control over themselves and others, and the manner in which most school systems operate. For most boys in this study, the imbalance of power relations that exist between teachers and students was understood as teacher dominance, as it effectively undermined their sense of individual power and control over their daily activities. Conversely, for the boys who reported positive experiences with some teachers, it was evident that both parties were able to successfully navigate the elements of a dominant masculinity discourse in the school context.

Initial analysis of the boys' narratives indicated that some friction existed between all the boys interviewed and the institutional protocols and demands of school. Alloway and Gilbert (1997, p. 54) foreshadowed this line of argument by stating that,

> there is a potentially abrasive interaction between .. [the] institutional attempts at regulating students at schools, and the ways that boys take themselves up as masculine subjects.

This next section explores this 'abrasive interaction' between school and the boys who left school early. The analysis considers the extent to which their conforming to some school-based practices and discourses undermined their sense of masculine identity at school.

Power and Control: The School Context

A variety of experiences at school impacted upon the boys' sense of power and control. Dominating the boys' school experiences was the influence of teachers. The boys expressed their resentment towards teachers through feelings of disempowerment fuelled by their perception of the imbalance of power between teacher and student. These factors contributed in different ways to undermining their sense of power and control over themselves, their learning and decisions, and ultimately, their sense of masculine identity.

The boys' understanding that the school context maintained discourses of oppression through the preservation of the power imbalance between some teachers and their students, is supported by similar research findings by Browne and Fletcher (1995), Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), Mac an Ghaill (1994), Smyth (2001) and Trent and Slade (2001). Those boys who did not negotiate the school discourses well, reported overall negative experiences of school. In order to distance themselves from subordinate forms of masculine identities, many of them took up a 'protest masculinity' discourse (Connell, 2003). Connell's 'protest masculinity' discourse was typically characterized by student positions of rebellion and anti-authority in class, designed to effectively undermine the teacher's authority and power.

It was evident that some friction existed between all boys interviewed and the institutional demands of the school. Central to most boys' comments was a resentment of having to abide by the rules of school authorities, which they translated as a personal loss of 'voice' and their individual freedom of choice. With no 'voice' as students to successfully confront or challenge the teacher about the inequitable relationship of power, the boys were left few choices but to accept the status quo. One sensed the boys' frustration at their lack of recourse to successfully challenge the schools' authority, which in turn, placed their masculine identities 'at risk' of being associated with subordinate, or 'non masculine' identities. Scenarios such as these only reminded and reinforced to the boys the lack of individual power and control they actually had in the school context. This common theme in the boys' school experience echoed other research findings that school leavers felt misunderstood and let down by the institution of school as a whole (Archer, et al 2001; Hattam, 2000; Trent & Slade, 2001).

For the few boys who reported positive experiences with 'good' teachers, it would seem it was not necessary for them to defend their sense of masculine identity by taking up Connell's "protest masculinity". According to these boys, what was common to 'good' teachers was the fact that the teacher communicated their respect to them by "cutting a bit of slack", or put another way, shared their power with students. Whether boys identified teachers "cutting slack" depended on how the teacher responded to student behaviours and negotiated class tasks. The teacher included the boys' voices in class by providing them with a 'space' in which to be accountable and responsible for their behaviour and academic engagement. As the concepts of power and control are

inextricably linked, the boys' experience of a sense of control allowed them to experience a sense of power over their activities (McLean, 1996). This in turn meant they could express their allegiance towards their preferred masculine identity without confrontation with the teacher.

For the 22 boys, leaving school early was an important transitional step in their personal and career development, and for their sense of masculine identity. Common to the leavers was their resistance to remaining dependent at school for their learning and daily activities. The school context could not compete with their motivation to take up employment that offered greater chances for them to experience success, provided choice and a sense of independence.

Central to the boys' developing sense of masculine identity was an awareness of the range of discourses that were maintained in both the school and broader social contexts. Significant to their developing sense of masculine identity was the way in which they understood how the dominant masculinity discourse i.e. what it meant to be a male, was constructed in their broader social environment, which will be explored next.

Power and Control: The Broader Social Context

When comparing the context of school and the broader social context, the boys' understood the outside world to offer them greater opportunities to experience a positive sense of power and control over their lives: they could choose their type of employment, and have a 'voice' in how they spent their money and spare time. All boys appreciated the value of relevant learning, and in their workplace, they were able to learn skills and new knowledge that would improve their future career chances. This was a refreshing change, as they were no longer forced to learn from a curriculum that made no sense to their careers as experienced in the school context. Hence, leaving the school context and becoming part of the workforce provided the boys with a sense of power and control over their daily activities and time.

The boys' accounts suggested that paramount to their sense of power and control was being prepared for future work opportunities. This aspect of preparedness was foreshadowed by Evans' (2000, p. 8) research, which reported that constitutive of

dominant masculine discourse was “being able to improvise, have all the answers, and get the job done”. The boys’ provided evidence of being prepared and taking control of their post school futures by being knowledgeable about what they needed in order to satisfy employer and industry requirements for their career. Based on their knowledge, they asserted that they did not need a Year 11 or 12 education, and that local employers did not value educational qualifications when compared to individual ability and certain work related characteristics.

Despite their extensive planning in the school context, for one third of the boys, these post-school plans failed. These boys whose plans were disrupted by personal and/or economic challenges appeared not to know how to get their career goals back on track. This may be explained in a number of ways, including that the boys:

i) Made an unrealistic career choice given their academic level, working ability and social networks;
ii) Had not fully taken into consideration the unpredictable nature of the economy, and its impact on small and large businesses;
iii) Harboured an unrealistic optimism that *their* career plans would not fail i.e. “it wouldn’t happen to me”; and,
iv) Overestimated their ability to succeed in the workplace.

The post-school experiences of a third of the 22 boys was that, despite having ‘back-up’ plans, in reality, they struggled to recover from the loss of opportunity and failure. Despite its mixed results, their positive approach to planning their school leaving and futures whilst at school can be linked to aspects of a dominant masculinity discourse through which the boys aligned their sense of masculine identity to the hegemonic form they desired.

In summary

The boys’ narratives supported the view in the literature that a male’s sense of power and control was an important aspect of the development of masculine identity (Connell, 1994, 2003). The boys' narratives illustrated how schools perpetuated a range of inequitable power relations between student and teacher, which typically manifest as

teacher dominance. They understood this dominance to undermine their sense of power and control as males in school (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). In the school context, the boys' sense of power over themselves, their environment and others, was stifled by a range of dominant school-based discourses they could not successfully challenge. This in turn impacted upon the ongoing construction of dominant forms of masculinity available to them (Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

For some boys, remaining in an environment where they were dependent upon others, signified a loss of control that aligned their masculine identity with aspects that were distinctly 'non-masculine' (Harris, 1995). The boys' understanding of what it meant to be a male in their wider social context and how it was perceived and practised by others was at the very centre of their understanding of their masculine identity (Connell, 2003). Hence, their decision to leave the school context early and take up employment was seen as a positive step by the boys in aligning their sense of masculine identity to dominant forms. Although the focus of this study did not include those boys who chose to continue their secondary education, it can only be hypothesised that these boys may have interpreted differently the elements of a dominant masculinity discourse in the contexts of school and the broader social context.

Independence- Key Aspects of the Literature

This section investigates how the concept of independence was evident in boys' attempts to make sense of their early school leaving decision. First, it may be useful to revisit points raised in the literature on the role of independence in a dominant masculinity discourse outlined in Chapter 3. The points central to the literature on independence and masculinity discourse are that:

- A sense of independence is central in the understanding and defining of some males' sense of masculine identity (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1987; 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Evans, 2000; Gilmore, 1990; Harris, 1996; Leach, 2002; McLean, 1996; Tolson, 1977);
- A popularly discussed phase of male adolescent development is the passage from 'boyhood' to 'manhood' (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Gilmore, 1990; Tolson, 1977). A boy's transition to manhood is associated with becoming

independent of those who have played a caring and supportive role with them (Chodorow, 1978);

- The concept of independence in males is associated with attributes such as a sense of responsibility, self-reliance, control over one's activities, accountability, personal strength, and being able to exercise reason and rationality (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1987, 1995; Evans, 2000; Harris, 1996; McLean, 1996);
- Strong links exist between some males' sense of masculine identity and the type of employment they engage in. Some males embrace a positive sense of independence through the taking up of paid work and other employment discourses that aligned their masculine identity with hegemonic masculine values, such as competitiveness, authority, individualism, strength, aggression, and a belief in hierarchy (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Gilmore, 1990; Tolson, 1977);
- As some males' masculine identity is measured by their choice of employment, those males who choose to partake in employment that falls outside traditional male professions, risk their masculine identity being associated with subordinate and/or feminine identities by their peers. As such, this association attracts stigmas of 'inadequacy' as a male, and a reputation of being dependent or 'bludging' from others (Harris, 1995; McLean, 1996); and
- Tolson (1977, p. 102) explained how some males seeking independence in the form of paid employment were motivated by "the older, vestigial traditions of patriarchy or male domination within the home". He claimed that some boys inherited patriarchal notions from their fathers and as most boys modelled themselves against their fathers, they learned to associate the independence of paid employment with their masculine identity.

The following analysis links the above literature on male independence to the narratives of the 22 boys interviewed.

Independence: The School Context

Central to the boys' narratives was their understanding that school-based learning was irrelevant to their chosen careers. Research by Trent and Slade (2001) claimed that boys in their study found school irrelevant, a waste of time, and felt resentful that they had to

> stay in a place they believed they can't stay in, doing work they believed was of no value, in order to get qualifications they believed did not accurately measure their ability, but which they will need if they were to get the chance to demonstrate their real ability to learn 'on the job' (Trent & Slade, 2001, p. 40).

Their research showed that these boys believed that continuing their secondary education at school was of little benefit other than as a necessary part of their success in getting a job. This view differs from the 22 boys in this study who believed whilst still at school, that senior school qualifications provided no advantage to their chances of employment. Staying at school only strengthened their belief that they were wasting their time, when they could be starting their career early by earning money, and actively learning relevant knowledge and skills.

The boys' accounts in this study suggest that they had already taken up aspects of a dominant masculinity discourse at school. They appeared to be very focussed and self-directed on doing what they believed they needed to do that would ultimately best serve their career interests. In doing so, the boys embraced a sense of independence where they relied on themselves, felt that they had all the answers, and that they could responsibly plan for their futures.

Conspicuous by its absence in the boys' narratives was any mention of being dependent upon specific individuals eg. family and friends, to support or care for them in the process of achieving their career goals. Edley and Wetherell (1995, p. 45) viewed the phase of males becoming independent as a transition between "boyhood to manhood", which paralleled Chodorow's (1978) research that associated boys' transition to manhood with becoming independent of those who have played a caring and supportive role with them. The opportunity for these boys to leave school and start earning money

provided them with a further chance to take control of their lives and become independent in making decisions for which they would be responsible.

For the 22 boys interviewed, leaving school early and embracing a discourse of independence was an important factor in the construction of their masculine identity. Constitutive of this independence discourse appeared to be storylines about trusting their abilities and not being dependent upon others (especially family) for support[15], and making decisions and being accountable for their actions[16]. Leaving school provided them with the chance to embrace this independence discourse. The dominance of their strong work ethic to perform what they considered to be real work, over-shadowed the purpose of attending and participating in school. It was important for the boys to be able to advertise to society their successful transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood', because failure to do so left their masculine identity at risk of being associated with 'non-masculine' discourses. The boys' narratives showed that the school context was unable to provide them with the sense of independence and masculine identity they wished to be associated with.

Independence: The Broader Social Context

Fundamental to the boys' sense of independence was participating in the work force, learning relevant skills and knowledge they believed were of use to their futures, and earning money. All boys were eager to avoid being associated with an unemployment discourse, where one remained unable to perform tasks, and remained dependent upon the government for unemployment benefits. To take up an unemployment discourse risked their masculine identity being associated with subordinate forms of masculine discourse, such as 'bludging'.

Some of the traits which the boys claimed employers deemed valuable in their broader social context were characteristics often associated with the concept of independence in

[15] See Generative theme three (*Understanding who I am)*, Storylines 1-3 in the School Context.
[16] See Generative theme three (*Understanding who I am)*, Storylines 1-2 in the School Context.

a dominant masculinity discourse: a sense of responsibility and self-reliance[17], a sense of accountability and control over one's activities[18] (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 1987, 1995; Evans, 2000). It was important for the boys to display these characteristics in the workplace to advertise their allegiance to a dominant masculinity discourse[19].

The limited yet different types of employment available in their social locations and the high level of interest they attracted from the boys, reflected the low value they placed on school 'work', when compared to paid employment. The boys' employment preference also provided some insight into the dominant masculine identity with which they wished to be aligned. In one rural site, the most popular form of employment was agriculturally based, such as sugar cane, mango and pineapple harvesting. In the other rural site, the boys' attraction was to be employed by the local mines. These forms of employment in the rural context were associated with a hegemonic masculinity discourse as they were physically demanding, dangerous, well-paid, and required stamina and a strong work ethic. Similar aspects of a hegemonic masculinity discourse were found in both the provincial and metropolitan sites. The boys' work choices were predominantly outdoor or involved physical work requiring them to be able to demonstrate characteristics of a hegemonic masculinity discourse. Most boys' aspired to be employed in trade apprenticeships, such as panel-beating, boiler-making, mechanics, or in physical labour work such as painting and gardening.

Strong links exist between some males' sense of masculine identity and the type of employment they engage in, and those males who choose to partake in employment that falls outside of traditional male professions, risk their masculine identity being associated with subordinate and/or feminine identities by their peers. This association can attract stigmas of 'inadequacy' as a male, and a reputation of being dependent or 'bludging' from others (Harris, 1995; McLean, 1996).

[17] See Generative theme one (*Preparation for the future)*, Storylines 1-4; generative theme three (*Wanting a head-start),* Storyline 2 in the Broader Social Context.
[18] See Generative theme one (*Preparation for the future)*, Storylines 3-4; generative theme two (Determination to succeed) Storyline 1 in the Broader Social Context.
[19] See Generative theme three (*Wanting a head-start),* Storylines 1-2 in the Broader Social Context.

It is interesting to note that despite the boys not considering school 'work' as 'real' work, they willingly left the school context to be engaged in jobs often associated with a subordinate masculinity discourse, such as washing dishes, packing and cleaning. It became apparent here that it was the *context* of their learning that made the difference to the boys' attitude towards the range of masculinity discourses in their environment. Leaving school and earning money allowed the boys to harness a sense of power and control, independence and a sense of themselves as males as understood in their broader social location. Put another way, they were able to align their sense of masculine identity to a hegemonic form as constructed in their social context.

The boys' decisions to leave school and join the workforce were motivated in large part, by their desire to earn money. Significant to the boys was the sense of personal freedom and choice earning money provided. The motivation to earn money meant different things to different boys. Whilst most boys acknowledged the centrality of money to their daily existence, some boys found that money provided the opportunity for them to pursue other educational options relevant to their post-school pathway. Most boys flaunted their successful transition to 'manhood' by purchasing symbols of independence such as cars, a motorbike, or by moving out of home. High on the list of priorities for all boys was to be able to buy a car, which was significant to their transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood'. As indicated in research by Vick (2003), possession of "the car" provided the boys with a sense of power and control, and the independence to "demonstrate who they are as they drive" (p. 34).

All boys left school early to take up employment options that they believed would provide them with an opportunity to enjoy a sense of independence in their professional and personal futures. The boys' narratives revealed their strong work ethic and level of determination to succeed external to school. The boys were clear in their belief that there were advantages to be enjoyed by leaving school early and gaining a head start over others by starting their careers early and earning money.

It was evident that a sense of independence was central in understanding the boys' developing sense of masculine identity (Brod & Kaufman, 1994). Some boys embraced a positive sense of independence through the taking up of paid work that aligned their masculine identity with hegemonic masculine values, such as competitiveness,

authority, individualism, strength, and a belief in hierarchy (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Gilmore, 1990).

The following section will explore the role a sense of self in the construction and maintenance of the boys' own sense of masculine identity.

Sense of 'Self'- Key Aspects of the Literature

Previous sections of this chapter outlined how power and control, and independence were important concepts through which the boys aligned their sense of masculine identity to a dominant form. The boys took on elements of a dominant masculine discourse such as power and control and independence in order to defend their position in the masculine hierarchy and protect their sense of masculine identity. This next section explores how the concept of a sense of 'self' manifested in the boys' narratives. But first, a summary is presented of the main points raised in the literature on the role of a sense of 'self'' in a dominant masculine discourse. The literature review on a sense of 'self' in Chapter 3, Masculinity Theory found that:

- Research tends to view identity-construction as a *process* (Hall, 1990; Mead, 1934) or *performance* (Bakan, 1966; Butler, 1990);
- Central to identity-construction as a *process* are discursive practices that act as sources of knowledge that confirm appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. Individuals negotiate a balance between societal constructions and personal behaviour (Hall, 1990);
- Some males experience a concern that their masculine identity will be viewed by others as lacking, when they are unable to maintain their desired masculine identity through a failure to achieve goals or tasks (Connell et al. 1982; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977);
- Some males attribute blame elsewhere when they experience failure and view their failure as someone else's fault. Central to this notion of attributing blame was preserving their sense of 'self' and saving 'face' in front of others (McLean, 1996; Smith, 1996);
- The context of schools and school culture is important in identity construction (Wexler, 1992).

It became evident that some excerpts of the boys' narratives used in earlier sections of this chapter to illustrate the concepts of power and control, and independence, were also appropriate to illustrate the concept of 'self'. The following section will explore the relationship of 'self' to the context of school and the broader social context simultaneously.

'Self' and the Context of School and the Broader Social Context

The on-going construction of the boys' sense of 'self' in their school context and social location was part of a much larger process of successfully negotiating a range of discourses that constituted their current schooling and future employment. The boys regarded the school context as inadequate to provide them with what they deemed as important to the developing sense of themselves as males. School for most of the school leavers represented academic failure and on-going confrontation with school policies and teachers. They deemed the curriculum offerings as irrelevant and not applicable to their career paths, hence attending school was boring and a waste of time. Most boys understood their personal strengths to be more applicable outside the school context, so leaving school early was escaping an environment that offered very little opportunity for them to experience success.

The boys' personal and career goals were motivated by their desire to avoid failure and experience success; to be *someone* at *something* (Wexler, 1992). Failure to succeed academically indicated the boys' inability to negotiate school-based tasks. In order for the boys to 'save face', or put another way, to avoid their masculine identity being associated by their peers with 'non-masculine' forms, they blamed teachers for their poor academic performance and explained their non-engagement at school in terms of the 'boring' nature of the curriculum offerings and irrelevance to their careers. In the social context, however, they advertised their employment success typically through their association with recognised symbols of 'manhood' such as purchasing a car or motorbike or living away from home. These symbols effectively prevented their masculine identity from being associated with 'non-masculine' types by their peers.

In summary

The 22 early school leavers in this study claimed they had an understanding of the type of person they were. Part of the understanding of themselves was an appreciation of their personal strengths and how these could be best applied in a job to increase their chances of experiencing success. The school context proved to be a site where the boys believed their chances of experiencing success was limited, primarily due to their poor academic performance and lack of interest in the curriculum.

The boys had spent time researching their career goals. For most boys, their futures were based on the realisation of short-term goals, such as being accepted into an apprenticeship or job, earning money, buying a car. For others, success post-school was a vital step in order to realise larger long-term goals, such as buying a home, providing for a family, and being able to "put food on the table" (Phil, Heatherdale).

Leaving school early and getting a job, or starting their career early, heralded a significant shift in the way the boys spent their day; they were able to utilise their strengths in a way they knew would increase their chances of experiencing success. In doing so, they avoided being associated by others with failure and non-masculine discourses.

The next section moves away from linking a dominant masculinity discourse to the boys' stories and examines how the boys, having left school early and entered the workforce, now viewed their school leaving decision.

Reflections on their Early School Leaving Decision

Most boys reported that, at the time of their school leaving, they believed leaving school early was the best decision they could make for their futures. However, having spent some time in the work place, some boys indicated feelings of regret at leaving school when they did.

Maybe I should have stayed at school …

It was evident in the boys' narratives that, despite the detailed plans they crafted whilst at school to realise their career goals, most boys' career plans failed for a variety of reasons. My reading of their narratives is that if they had their time at school over again, they would perhaps reconsider their decision to leave school early. When the boys were asked to consider if leaving school early was the best thing they did, some comments were:

> No, probably not the best thing (Brian, Ashwood);
>
> That I'm not in that good of a job now, I could have stayed at school and gone out and be what I wanted to be, like a carpenter or something. Just for the job, the standard of job you get. I reckon if you had a Year 12 you'd get a better job (Ben, Blackburn);
>
> I don't think leaving school early is good for other girls and boys 'cause working a job is a lot harder than school (Mark, Heatherdale);
>
> When I look back now, I don't think I really had a good think about leaving school and how it would affect my chances of getting a job. At the time, I thought things would work out well. You see if I had've got a Year 10 certificate, I still would have been able to get a trade, or go out and be able to get into TAFE. See I haven't got Year 10 so I can't really go into TAFE and get a trade. I shouldn't have left (Max, Listerfield);
>
> I actually wished I'd stayed at school now. I dunno, I just wish I had finished my youth. It's hard to actually look in that crystal ball and see what would be the right thing to do. I just think it was the best opportunity for me at the time (Daniel, Laburnum);
>
> Now when I look back on leaving school I wish I had stayed … I have a lot of friends who think 'Oh I hate school, I hate school,' but I just keep telling them to stay, stay the whole time (Richard, Ashwood);

> No. I don’t think doing anything early is good. I dunno, I was just stupid. (Shane, Ashwood).

One senses from these comments that the boys now viewed their early school leaving decision with some regret. The evidence shows that in the school context, they understood and had confidence in, their early school leaving decision based on the seven generative themes common to their narratives. What becomes clear from their experiences in the work force, however, is that they had misunderstood or not adequately prepared themselves for the range of difficulties they experienced. Emerging from their experience in the workforce is the advice they would give to others considering leaving school early, as the following discussion reveals.

Stay at school if you can.

When the boys were asked if, based on their experience in the workforce, they would recommend the same to their friends, we gain another insight into the level of regret they have for their school leaving. Some comments were:

> Nope. Because it's hard. Its hard work getting money, you just think of the money, you just think of the money. It’s different to school because you can just block school out (Max, Listerfield);

> Not going to school was nothing like I thought. I don’t know, it was really hard being self-reliant. It’s hard going from Mum driving you to school every day to having to get to work yourself (Paul, Blackburn);

> If they didn’t want to go to uni and leave school to get a job, I’d tell them no way, stay at school (Jim, Listerfield);

> For those kids that just bludge and do nothing at school, I’d tell them to leave and stop wasting everyone’s time (Simon, Heatherdale);

> I wouldn’t pressure them to leave, ‘cause I liked the fact that I left, but I also wished I sort of stayed and had the education and that I would have had at school so I’d tell them to stick it out while they’re there (Brendan, Mitcham);
>
> I’d tell them to try and stay at school as long as possible so they can get a good education to better themselves. It may be hard but it is worth it in the long run (Shane, Ashwood).

It is interesting to note the reported shift in the boys’ perception of the positives associated with early school leaving and getting a job. The boys’ acknowledge how they had underestimated the difficulty of life as an employee, and recognise the benefits of staying to Year 12 may have on their future employment opportunities.

I don’t know what there is after this …

Having experienced failure in employment, a number of boys shared their sense of career aimlessness, and implied their future employment success depended very much upon chance and opportunity. When some boys were asked what they were going to do now they realised aspects of their career plans had failed, they said:

> I don't know, I just let life go as it goes (Josh, Mitcham);
>
> I wouldn't have a clue where to start looking for a job. I'll just have to start going through the paper I suppose (Andrew, Mitcham);
>
> When I think about what I want to do for a career I just don't know, my mind just goes blurry (Simon, Heatherdale);
>
> Since I didn’t get the apprenticeship, I don't know what I can see myself doing. I don't know what there is after this (Paul, Listerfield);
>
> I don’t know what is going to happen now that the job fell through. I really don’t know. I think I’ll just take the days as they come. Just whatever happens, happens (Richard, Ashwood).

These boys shared a sense of hopelessness, perhaps now realizing the price they paid for their early school leaving. In an apparent attempt to salvage something positive from his early school leaving, one boy claimed that:

> I've got my Year 10 certificate … at least now I'll be able to do some things. If I didn't have that, I couldn't do nothin' (Shane, Ashwood).

However, the "at least" in this statement indicates that Shane does not see his decision to leave before Year 12 as an unqualified success.

The next section investigates three other aspects of the boys' narratives, specifically, their views of gaining employment, the competitive nature of getting work, and the level of self-confidence they had in getting work. Exploration of these will consider similarities and differences among the broader social locations and how they shape the discourses perpetuated in each location.

It was evident that the boys' understanding of employment was constructed by the economic and socio-economic activities that prevailed in each site. Even though the leavers came from three distinct broader social contexts, commonalities existed in their understanding of employment and how they viewed themselves as employees.

Some similarities across all six sites included:

- A shortage of apprenticeship opportunities;
- strong competition for all employment positions;
- medium to high levels of unemployment;
- a lack of full-time jobs (typically casual or part-time);
- a range of low paid, low skilled employment opportunities, and
- a range of light to medium industrial employment opportunities.

The significance of these commonalities meant that the boys viewed seriously any employment opportunity they believed they were eligible for, and took steps to increase their chances of getting work by researching employer preferences in their local environment. It was inevitable that the boys who missed out on apprenticeship opportunities would eventually be engaged in a number of unskilled, poorly paid jobs.

Regional Difference

The differences in each of the six locations reflected more specific features of each site that impacted upon the boys' understanding of employment in each site. This had ramifications for their view of the value of education for their career. The differences are listed below in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Characteristic features of each broader social context in the three social locations.

METROPOLITAN	
Ashwood	Low socio-economic area i.e. third generation welfare recipients.
Laburnum	Highest number of 'middle-aged' and 'teenagers' when compared to the rest of the State. Consistently higher unemployment levels than the State average for the last 10 years.
PROVINCIAL	
Blackburn	- Highly transient population. - Dominant Army presence.
Heatherdale	- Highly transient population. - Low socio-economic status residents. - Dominant Army presence.
RURAL	
Mitcham	- Economy driven by banana, mango and sugar cane harvesting. - The bulk of employment opportunities were high-risk and dangerous, but the financial rewards were substantial.
Listerfield	- Economy driven by mining. - Isolated location. - The bulk of employment opportunities were high-risk and dangerous, but the financial rewards were substantial.

When sharing their experiences, the boys used particular storylines that illustrated the discourses present in their broader social location. For the boys in the rural setting, their early school leaving was motivated in part by the promise of earning big money, purchasing a car, and being engaged in physically demanding work on the land.

> From all the jobs I've been doing around here, if you are a hard worker and reliable, then you've got the job … The [farm] work is hard and that, but the money is good … I went on a contract and was getting $120/day … for 8-9 hour days. It's good that you get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work (Josh, Mitcham);

> If you're willing to work around here [on the farms], it doesn't matter what grades you got. If you show you're keen, you'll get a job, even if it's basic stuff … I'll then be able to earn money, buy a car and get on with my life (Jim, Listerfield).

For boys in the provincial setting and one of the rural settings, their understanding of employment was focussed on the limited range of local apprenticeship opportunities, and the abundant range of opportunities the dominant Army presence offered in comparison. The metropolitan context too lacked apprenticeship opportunities with strong competition in most employment avenues, despite there being a semi-industrial presence in both sites. It was evident that the boys' were mindful of the limited opportunities:

> The opportunity came up, so I took it. Jobs like this don't come around Everyday and I knew if I didn't take the job, someone else would (Ben, Blackburn);

> You have to keep on looking around, talking to people all the time about what jobs are going on. There's a lot of people going for the same job, so you have to get in quick or you miss out (Richard, Ashwood);

> I was lucky I was already working for the guy who offered me the apprenticeship. I reckon if I wasn't working for him, I wouldn't have got it. [Apprenticeships] are really hard to get around here (Peter, Laburnum);
>
> The job I want to do doesn't come around all the time, so you just have to go for it when it comes and hope you get it (Simon, Heatherdale);
>
> There's only a couple of places here besides the mine of course, that you can get an apprenticeship with. Everyone wants to work for them so its really hard (Jim, Listerfield);
>
> Around here, if you get offered a job or an apprenticeship, you're really lucky (Paul, Mitcham).
>
> The best way to get a job around here is to know someone (Brian, Ashwood).

Due to the high level of unemployment and competition for jobs in all contexts, it seemed that the boys' chances of getting a job were increased enormously by either knowing certain people, or seizing job offers when they arose. A number of boys in both rural and provincial contexts included the possibility of pursuing a career in the Army as their first or second career preference. This may be due to the fact that, as highlighted in Table 7.1 (p. 169), a large Army base was located in the provincial context, and its reputation extended to one of the rural locations some 300 kilometres away. A number of boys understood the Army to represent employment stability in a potentially volatile economic environment.

> I have been thinking about joining the army for a long time because you've got a job for life. You'd have money coming in every week. The army is just a good stable job. Just to know you've got that money coming in every week is good. I want to go in there and work for like 10 years even though I know I could have a job for 20 years if I want it. You'd have to do something pretty bad to lose your job with the Army (Craig, Blackburn);

> I've thought heaps of times about going to the Army but I have to wait a little bit more until I'm old enough. If everything goes to crap, then I'll most likely go to the Army (Peter, Heatherdale);
>
> Leaving school early just gets me ready for work in the Army sooner (Simon, Heatherdale).

For all the boys, getting an on-going, full time job, was fraught with problems irrespective of their broader social location. Whilst at school, the boys' understood getting a job to be negotiable and achievable. Their knowledge of the local environment provided them with a confidence about their success post school. It was only when they had left school and were actively seeking work that it became apparent how difficult getting a job was. Despite this, the boys remained determined to succeed in the workforce, enabling them to earn money and buy a car. This determination increased their chances of being employed, and of enjoying a 'head-start' over those who stayed at school.

In summary

It was evident that issues of masculinity entered into the way the boys viewed school and employment in their various social locations. The two contexts of school and social location provided different scenarios through which the boys' sense of power and control, independence, and 'self' were affirmed and contested. Fine and Rosenberg (1983, p. 257) claimed that, "critical perspectives on social institutions are often best obtained from exile, that is, persons who leave those institutions". This chapter explored the "critical perspectives" in the transcripts of 22 boys in "exile", and made links between a dominant masculinity discourse and their explanations of their early school leaving.

The importance of the school context to their developing sense of masculine identity confirmed research that schools play a role as "masculinity-making devices" (Connell, 2003, p. 95), and are important in the construction of the boys' sense of masculine identity. It is important to note that the boys' sense of masculine identity was actively constructed by the fact the school context denied them what they so desired from their broader social context. The boys' narratives highlighted the complexity of their

schooling experiences, but a common thread was the view that school-based knowledge was antithetical to the knowledge and experience they believed to be relevant to employment.

For all boys, teacher dominance undermined their sense of membership of a dominant masculine discourse, and aligned their masculine identity to subordinate forms. The boys tended to respond negatively to this loss of individual power, control and independence over their activities in some classes with teachers they viewed as 'bad'. The construction of their masculine identity at school, therefore, was subject to constant conflict with the discourses of school, and their desire to take up and express other aspects of dominant masculinity discourse, such as Connell's (2003) 'protest masculinity'. From this perspective then, a far more appealing option was the opportunity to leave the school context and be part of the workforce in their broader social context where there was scope to take up a dominant masculinity discourse.

The concluding chapter revisits the purpose of the study and its findings, and relates these findings to previous research. Recommendations for further study in the area of the education of boys will be made.

CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

Introduction

The current study was motivated by the low apparent retention rate for boys to Year 12 since 1975. The study examined the extent to which a dominant masculinity discourse was evident in boys' attempts to 'make sense' of their early school leaving. A dominant masculinity discourse was defined for the study by delineating three elements commonly associated with it, specifically, a sense of power and control, independence, and a sense of 'self'. Analysis of the boys' narratives through the lens of a dominant masculinity discourse provided an opportunity to explore possible links between their school experiences, social contexts, individual circumstances, and early school leaving.

The 22 boys in the study talked about their school leaving circumstances in ways that reflected a broadly common set of understandings. Their narratives reflected seven generative themes that were identified in their accounts. These themes were analysed within the two contexts of school and broader community, paying particular attention to the generative themes and storylines they used to describe the circumstances that motivated their early school leaving decision.

This chapter suggests a reconceptualisation of the factors that encourage early school leaving by broadening the research focus to include the social contexts within which masculinity is constructed. The chapter concludes with some suggestions for further research.

Revising the Study's Purpose and Construction

In discussing the findings of the current study, it is important to bear in mind the main focus question that motivated the research. To reiterate, the main focus question asked:

- What insights into boys' decision-making process(es) about school leaving can be gained from an understanding of the social and cultural pressures connected with their imagined futures and developing sense of masculinity?

The data for the study were collected from 22 early school leaving boys from six secondary schools situated in three distinct social locations of Queensland: provincial, rural and metropolitan.

Subsidiary aims included:

- How do boys 'make sense' of their decision to leave school early?
- How are boys' explanations of leaving school early related to their experiences of schooling?
- How are boys' explanations of leaving school early related to the specific social and discursive practices of masculinity in their local environment?

The subsidiary aims underpin the main focus question by exploring the relationships among masculinity cultures and practices in different contexts, the quality of boys' school experiences and their early school leaving decisions.

Research Findings

By analysing boys' accounts of their school experiences through the two contexts of school and social location, and the three concepts associated with a dominant masculinity discourse, the study confirmed aspects of previous research, and added to the understanding of the relationship between boys' school retention and dominant masculinity. This section briefly reviews the findings of the study relating to boys' early school leaving and masculinity discourse in both the school and social contexts.

The School Context

The boys' narratives of the school context confirmed research findings discussed in Chapter 2 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;
- They perceived that some teachers misused their power and authority with students;
- They believed that some teachers didn't always understand and attend to their learning needs; and that,
- 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. However, the more detailed analysis revealed some interesting insights into the boys' decision making process.

It was evident that a number of the boys had always considered remaining at school and completing Year 12. It was only when they understood the reality of their poor academic performance at Year 10 and their reduced chances of experiencing academic success in years 11 and 12, that they entertained thoughts of leaving school early. These boys left school and tended to settle upon any employment opportunity offered to them to justify to themselves and others the appropriateness of their early school leaving. On the other hand, a number of the boys had decided much earlier to leave school at year 10. The different experiences of these two groups could be an important consideration in planning strategies to promote retention.

Another contribution of the study is its focus on boys' post-school experiences and how in some cases, these experiences led them to rethink their attitudes to school. For instance, when their career goals failed to unfold, boys were left with little option but to take any employment opportunity that arose. Others were now unemployed without career plans to activate. In light of these experiences, a number of boys expressed regret at their early school leaving, again providing evidence that might feed into strategies to promote retention.

Chapter 3 outlined the difficulty associated with defining masculinity and a dominant masculinity discourse. It was evident that the boys took up the concepts of power and control, independence and a sense of self in different ways to understand their personal circumstances and early school leaving in their social location. This research expanded the literature by identifying how boys' accounts reflected the three elements of a dominant masculinity discourse in both the school and broader social contexts to justify their early school leaving. The key aspects of these conclusions will be summarised below.

Power and Control

The evidence revealed that all the boys viewed teachers as a major source of their negative school experiences. The boys cited examples of teacher behaviour that maintained a power imbalance between student and teacher. School policies and the teacher's authority negatively affected the boys' individual sense of power and control in that:

a) Boys sensed a loss of 'voice' over curriculum offerings. They understood school-based learning as irrelevant and not applicable to their futures;
b) They were made dependent upon teachers for direction and instruction;
c) They resented the daily practice of teachers telling them what to do;
d) They were unable to successfully challenge teachers' authority, especially when they believed that teachers acted unprofessionally; and,
e) Teachers' consistent, and inconsistent, reinforcement of school policies and procedures constrained what they could do.

All boys reported experiencing one or more of the abovementioned scenarios at school. The boys' understood school in terms of a 'waste of time', time they believed was better spent employed in a job working towards their career preference, increasing the chances of experiencing success, earning money, and learning relevant knowledge and skills. The boys' accounts were evidence that they believed that schools perpetuated a range of subordinate masculinity discourses, or school-based discourses of oppression. The

boys' experiences negatively affected their personal sense of power and control, as a loss of power and control placed their masculinity identity 'at risk' of being associated with subordinate forms of masculinity discourse.

Independence

The boys' narratives reflected the concept of independence within a dominant masculinity discourse through their motivation to leave school, earn money, and be engaged in some form of employment. Remaining at school translated as a barrier to their transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood'. In the school context they remained dependent upon teachers for how they spent their day, a dependence which associated them with a subordinate masculinity discourse. External to the school context, being employed gave them the opportunity to be independent of others in a number of ways: earning money which provided the means to purchase a car or motorbike; moving out of home; learning relevant information for their careers; and making decisions about their daily activities.

Sense of 'self'

In order to develop their understanding of 'self', the boys actively appropriated a range of meanings about their identity from the different contexts in which they lived. Their narratives revealed that they wished to align their masculine identity to dominant forms of masculinity discourse in the workplace. In doing so, their masculinity identity avoided being associated with subordinate forms found in the school context.

A lack of success in any of the boys' plans i.e. school or career, threatened their sense of masculine identity, both in and out of school: when they didn't succeed, they reacted negatively, and attributed blame elsewhere. This reaction can be seen as a form of 'saving face', to avoid their masculine identity being associated with subordinate forms by their peers.

An important aspect of this is the boys' apparent confidence in themselves and their sense of masculine identity whilst at school, specifically concerning their career plans. The boys reported their confidence in their planned career path whilst at school, a confidence compatible with their desire for a sense of power and control and

independence in planning their futures. The boys understood their personal strengths and talents were wasted in the school context, and experiencing on-going degrees of poor academic performance reinforced their belief they did not 'belong' at school. Their view of schooling discourses as a form of oppression negatively impacted upon their sense of identity as a male in school.

Early school leaving

It was evident that the boys' decision to leave school early was complicated. On the one hand, they were confident and positive about their decision to leave school and their future in the work force. On the other hand, they faced a rather uncertain future in the reality of a market economy and a risk society. This study showed that a number of factors identified in the literature on early school leaving (Chapter 2) also influenced these boys' decisions to leave school early. Specifically these include the boys':

i) Poor academic performance;
ii) Negative school experiences;
iii) Desire to earn money;
iv) Belief in their knowledge of their individual strengths and weaknesses; and,
v) Their perception of the lack of relevance school-based learning to their chosen post-school pathways.

Two aspects of the study have not been widely reported in the literature on early school leaving: one highlighting evidence of the boys' ability to plan for their careers while at school; and the second concerning a shift after leaving school from an emphasis on planning, to a less systematic response to daily challenges and opportunities.

Based on the thoroughness of their career planning at school, the boys recalled the confidence they had that their transition from school to work would be 'trouble-free'. However, despite their career planning, for one third of boys in this study, their post-school plans failed based on unforeseen events. It was evident that the boys' career plans were focussed only on attaining a *specific* career goal, and that they had not considered the likelihood that their career plan would fail. Despite their confidence at school of their career plans succeeding, they did not make alternate plans to

accommodate possible failure. Consequently, for those boys whose career plans did fail, they were left without alternate employment plans, were very disheartened and apathetic about their future employment viability, and in the process of "milling and churning"[20].

Compounding the difficulty experienced in getting a job was the absence of employment plans beyond their initial preference for a particular occupation. Consequently, the boys were at a loss as to what to do once their main career plans failed. Based on their lack of alternate plans, the boys reported experiencing a sense of apathy and lack of career direction, now realising the negative ramifications that their early school leaving had for their future employment prospects. This negative 'spill over' effect for those boys whose career plans did not go to plan, gives new insights into the early school leaving experience. It was evident that for these boys, their views about the value of planning for their futures had changed. They reported that they no longer made plans for their futures, given the disappointment and failure of their career plans.. This aspect of the boys' negative experiences did, however, confirm research highlighting the difficult transition some boys experience from school to the workplace.

The Broader Social Context

This study confirmed research on what early school leavers deemed important in their transition from school to employment in their social context. This included:

i) A desire to earn money;
ii) Wanting to spend their time in a context that offered learning which was relevant and of interest to them;
iii) Wanting to start their careers early i.e. have a 'head-start' over others;
iv) Wanting to spend their time learning skills and information in a context where they could experience personal and professional success;
v) A desire to act as an adult, and to be treated like an adult by adults; and
vi) Wanting to get a job.

[20] A term McMillan and Marks (2003, p. 8) used to describe the movement by school non-completers to unemployment, part-time, casual, and/or low-paying unskilled work with limited career prospects (see also Lamb, S., Dwyer, P., & Wyn, J., 2000; Lamb & Rumberger, 1999).

The boys' understanding of the economic climate and employment opportunities available in their social area impacted upon their early school leaving decision, as did their understanding of what local employers valued most when recruiting new staff. According to the boys, having previous employment and work experience, and the ability to demonstrate personal qualities such as reliability, stamina and competency, were valued more highly by employers than educational qualifications. The boys viewed leaving school as providing a 'head-start' over those that remained at school, as they were starting their careers early. They made clear reference to their priority of being engaged in paid employment post-school, and how they looked forward to earning and spending their wage on symbolic markers of 'manhood', such as cars and motorbikes.

A Dominant Masculinity Discourse

Whilst the three social locations were distinct in a number of ways, the boys sought to align their masculine identity to the dominant form in ways that were largely similar across sites. The three concepts of power and control, independence and a sense of self were evident in all the boys' attempts to justify their early school leaving decision. There were few differences among the boys' reasons for leaving school, or their use of a dominant masculinity discourse to justify their school leaving, across the three different social locations. It would seem then that social location as a defining factor in boys' decisions about their school and work futures, was not as important as first thought. What the study did show was the importance of the difference *between* the contexts of school and community to the boys' early school leaving decision, and how they used a dominant masculinity discourse to make sense of the differences between the two contexts.

Power and Control

Once distanced from the school context and engaged in employment, the boys reported enjoying an individual sense of power and control by:

a) Learning relevant and applicable knowledge for their career;

b) Having a ‘say’ in their daily activities;
c) Earning money and having the freedom to spend it;
d) Taking responsibility and being accountable for their actions amongst adults; and,
e) Starting their career early i.e. having a ‘head start’ over others.

In the workforce, the boys felt that they were able to positively embrace the concepts of power and control and align their masculine identity to a dominant form.

Independence

All boys discussed the importance of being engaged in *something* post-school, and this was reinforced by the fact that not one boy accepted unemployment as a satisfactory option, as accepting government unemployment benefits was associated with ‘bludging’. In their social contexts, all boys made reference to their understanding that paid employment was of greater value than school ‘work’. Employment was an expression of the masculine identity that they wished to be aligned with, especially in occupations that conformed to this image. The types of employment the boys' sought shared characteristics of being physically demanding, skilled, dangerous, well paid, requiring stamina and a strong work ethic eg. sugar cane harvesting, mining, trades (boilermaker, builder).

Sense of ‘self’

All boys displayed a positive sense of ‘self’ through their strong work ethic, extensive career plans, and feeling that they were aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. A number of boys’ plans centred around catering for their future families and appreciating the security associated with a home and a steady income in uncertain employment times. This aspect of the boys’ narratives reflected their understanding of themselves and the desirable image of being a male in their social context.

The study showed that boys’ transition from school to the workplace was complex. Yet analysis of the boys’ narratives revealed that the three concepts of a dominant masculinity discourse were evident in the accounts of boys who seemed to have made a successful transition from school to work, but also those who had not. This interesting

fact highlighted the broad presence of a dominant masculinity discourse in the boys' circumstances, and how it was reflected in their attempts to make sense of their school and employment experience in their particular social context.

Early school leaving

In the longer term, for some boys, leaving school early was not to their advantage as they were unable to fulfil their primary career goal. Only upon leaving school and being part of the workforce did some boys find the reality of being employed more complicated than first predicted.

The boys whose primary career plans failed expressed regret at their early school leaving decision, as they only now realised how limited their employment options were without a senior education. The failure in their main career plans motivated the advice they gave other boys considering leaving school early. They were clear in their message to those still at school that the perception that employment was a better option than remaining at school was flawed. This indicated that irrespective of the quality of their school experience, the boys had come to realise just how important education was to their employment opportunities. Their plans with respect to further education and training are interesting, but when describing their planning at school it was evident they fully intended to continue to up-skill, but when their plans failed, so too did their intentions to continue with further training.

Limitations of the Study

Issues surrounding the concerns of validity and interpretation have long been associated with qualitative forms of research (Clough, 1992; Denzin, 1989; Rosaldo, 1989; Silverman, 1997), and this research was no exception. The limitations found in this study are noted in three areas, including: the scope of the study, the data collection method, and access to resources and time.

Scope of the study

Only boys from the State of Queensland were interviewed, so it was possible that their views on school reflected specific issues they may have had with the Queensland education system, and not schools in general. Further, only boys who left from Education Queensland State High Schools were interviewed as students from non-government or Catholic school students were not included in the research design.

It was beyond the scope of this study to examine whether those boys *and* girls who choose to stay at school and complete their senior education, shared any of the views expressed by the early school leavers in this study, or how girls who leave school early might account for their decisions. What the study has shown is that boys' accounts of their school leaving conformed in important ways to a dominant masculinity discourse which is widely evidenced in the literature. It is this connection that adds to our understanding of their decisions.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the research on boys and schooling has shown that a range of forms of masculinity discourse exists in schools beyond the dominant form described here. It has also shown that success at school can be compatible with a version of the dominant form (Connell, 1995a; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998), but that the accommodation of boys who are successful at school with the dominant form of masculinity is quite different from the oppositional and/or protest form reflected in the accounts of the boys in this study. This prompts the opportunity for future research into the differences *between* the motivating factors to leave school early by male and female school leavers, and between those students who leave school and those who stay.

Data Collection Method

A constraint on the data collection was the willingness of the boys to reveal their personal views. Research by Smyth et al. (2001) found that some schoolboys were intimidated or embarrassed talking about their school experiences to someone who was a) a teacher and b) representing a University (considering the purpose and nature of the research). This researcher sensed similar experiences to Smyth et al. (2001), and the issue of the boys' possible embarrassment and intimidation may have been further

complicated due to the fact that the interviewer was female (Fielding, 2004). Conducting informal, semi-structured interviews with a group of adolescent boys who saw merit in deciding *not* to further their education, by a woman who *did* see the merit in furthering her education to a tertiary level, may well appear as a rather imposing and illogical balance of 'minds'. The researcher was mindful to be sensitive when probing deeper into narratives, being prepared to take frequent breaks when needed, or even to terminate the interview in the best interest of the student if need be, although this did not eventuate in the study. While the willingness of the boys to speak at length varied, the position taken is that the quality of the evidence reported here is sufficient to warrant the claims being made.

Future Research and Implications for Policy and Practice

To achieve a more comprehensive image of the relationship between boys' early school leaving and a dominant masculinity discourse, three themes guide the scope for further research. One relates to the limitations of the study, specifically a lack of resources and time. Another centres on the age at which boys take up a dominant masculinity discourse to justify their attitudes regarding the value of school-based learning to their futures. The final theme refers to the act of early school leaving itself within the boys' local area.

Successful transition to the workplace was not clear for all boys; some were successful, others were not as successful, and for a number it was too early to tell. A follow-up interview with the boys to discuss their experiences of work may have provided an opportunity to determine how well they make the transition from 'boyhood' to 'manhood'. It would also reveal useful information on how successful the boys really are in sustaining employment in the workplace six to twelve months since leaving school. This insight may add to the research in the area of boys' transition from school to employment, specifically tracing employment patterns and trends of early school leavers to return to formal study.

The second theme concerns when boys actively take up aspects of a dominant masculinity discourse to negotiate their daily activities in the school context. Based on the boys' narratives, some mentioned they had decided at Grade 6 that they would not

finish the senior years of school for a variety of reasons. The implication is that there may be boys in late primary school who already have an understanding about what they need from school to fulfil their career plans. Identification of these boys in the late primary/early secondary school stages may prompt a re-think in the manner in which schools:-

i) Encourage students to start thinking about their career plans.
   a. Should schools encourage students to think about their career plans prior to Year 10?
   b. Should all students be encouraged to have another plan for employment in the event their primary career plans fail?

ii) Provide opportunities to link boys who have already set their career plans at a junior level, to learning material that sustains their interest and engagement in learning for their career; and

iii) Build and nurture a relationship between local employers and secondary school students. This may involve local employers making guest appearances to speak to students regarding their work expectations and opportunities.

A key matter that merits further discussion is the extent to which learning that is external to school is valued. The boys in this study indicated that it was their understanding of the irrelevance and lack of career applicability of information learned in the school context (amongst other issues) that led them to disengage and ultimately leave school early. Schools may be able to access topic specific learning material to promote 'relevant' learning for students prior to Year 10. Emphasising relevance, interest and applicability in the curriculum may sustain the interest and engagement of those students who perceived their career requirements would not be met by the school curriculum.

There were a number of boys who understood they would complete Year 12. It was only when they reached Year 10 and realised how unlikely it would be for them to experience academic success that this became a significant aspect of their early school leaving decision. If schools encouraged students at an earlier stage, to think about their career interests and increase their awareness of alternative employment opportunities,

then when students decide to leave school early, some foundational planning, or at the very least consideration, would already have taken place. In doing so, those students who leave school early to take up unexpected (or expected) employment opportunities, may reduce the likelihood of a poor transition from school to employment.

The third area for further research involves a closer examination of the boys' local environment with respect to their early school leaving decision. It would be interesting to explore if early school leaving was seen to be encouraged in the work cultures of particular social locations, or whether the boys' early school leaving was simply motivated by personal circumstances and/or employment opportunities, or both. Schools and local employers should play a part in communicating to students the frequency of employment opportunities as they present in their social location. This will assist students in planning for their primary and secondary employment plans.

Concluding Comment

This study responded to many calls for greater attention to be paid to the diverse ways in which masculinity interplays with experiences of education. The research provided valuable insights into how a number of boys adopted a dominant masculinity discourse in accounting for their decision to leave school before the completion of Year 12. The two contexts of school and the broader community acted as a 'back-drop' for the boys' decision-making processes, and their reasons to leave school early were illustrated as seven generative themes. The boys used a number of storylines in discussing their experiences and expectations in the two contexts to explain their early school leaving decision. The analysis showed that there was a connection between the boys' accounts of their early school leaving decision and a dominant masculinity discourse.

In particular, exploration of the three elements of a dominant masculinity discourse, the boys' sense of power and control, independence, and a sense of self showed that they manifested differently in the boys' accounts of the school and broader social contexts. Acknowledging these links adds to our understanding of boys' school leaving decisions, and of possible courses of action to assist boys to make decisions which will enhance their life chances.

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APPENDICES:

APPENDIX A: **Information letter**

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION LETTER

JCU LETTERHEAD

School of Education, James Cook University, Townsville

FACTORS AFFECTING BOYS' ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOLING

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Another year has rolled on, and we find ourselves in the second year of the James Cook University and Education Queensland three year study exploring boys' engagement and participation at the Secondary school level.

You may recall that the study aims to understand how boys respond to school, what leads them to choose certain subjects, and what influences them to leave school early, or to continue with their studies. Ingrid Harrington from James Cook University Townsville, will once again be visiting your son's school interviewing boys who have agreed to be interviewed for this study. If your son has agreed to be interviewed he will need to make arrangements with Ingrid. If you are unable to come in for an interview, then a phone interview can be arranged at your convenience.

Please feel free to contact me on 07 4781 XXXX or Ingrid.Harrington@jcu.edu.au at any time to discuss the project further, or to provide me with an opportunity to clarify any queries or questions you may have. James Cook University and Education Queensland wish to take this opportunity again to thank you for your participation in this most valuable research into boys' engagement and schooling.

Yours faithfully,

Ingrid Harrington
Research Associate
James Cook University, Townsville

APPENDIX B: BOYS' CONSENT FORM

CONSENT

I am happy to participate in the 3 year research project called 'Factors affecting boys' engagement with schooling at the Secondary level'.

The aims of the study and the nature of my participation have been clearly explained to me, and I am happy to participate with the research team over the next three years.

I understand that:

anything I say will remain confidential and anonymous;
the research team can make use of the information I provide in written publications on condition that I am not identified;
I will notify the research team to the best of my ability, if I am unable to continue to participate in the project at any time;
that I may withdraw from the project at any time;
my participation is voluntary and I may refuse to answer some questions.

PARTICIPANT'S NAME AND SIGNATURE: *Consent to participate in the Survey*

Name: (printed)

Signature Date:

WITNESSED BY RESEARCHER OBTAINING CONSENT

Name: (printed)

Signature

Date:

APPENDIX C: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FOR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE - PARENT/GUARDIAN

As Parent/carer/guardian of : .....…… attending "XYZ" State High School, I consent to him taking part in the study 'Factors affecting boys' engagement with schooling at the Secondary level'.

I understand that any information he gives will be kept strictly confidential and that no names will be used to identify him with this study without his approval.

I am happy to let the research team know if he is unable to continue participating in the study, for whatever reason.

....

Signed:

....

Print name:

....

Date:

Contact details:
Please feel free to contact me at any time if you need more information on the project.
Ingrid Harrington ph. 07 4781 XXXX
E-mail: Ingrid.Harrington@jcu.edu.au

APPENDIX D: CONFIRMATION LETTER

6 March 2001

Boy's name
Address Street
Suburb postcode
State

Dear Name,

Further to our discussion on Thursday 1st March, please find confirmation of the time and place where I will informally interview you on your reasons for leaving school early.

Your voluntary participation in this project will assist JCU and EdQLD greatly in trying to understand the factors that may contribute to boys' decision to leave school early.

Day: Friday

Date: 16th March 2001

Place: Address Street
Suburb

Time: 6.00pm

The interview should not take any longer than 30 minutes, and please feel free to contact me at any time if you should have any queries about the project, or wish to change your interview time.

Looking forward to meeting you.

Yours faithfully,

Ingrid Harrington
Research Associate
James Cook University, Townsville

Ph – 07 4728 XXXX
e-mail – ingridh@one.net.au

APPENDIX E: BOYS' INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

2001 Early School Leavers Interview Schedule

Tell me about your decision to leave school early?

What was it influenced by money issues, job or apprenticeship opportunities, parents, teachers, poor academic performance, peers, Other?

Pros and cons of school / school leaving

In what ways do you consider yourself "better off" by leaving school early?

Do you believe that leaving school early was the best thing to do? Why?

Perceptions / decisions about relation to school

Did you always know that you would leave school early? Why?
When did you decide that you would actually leave school early?

Why did you leave when you did?
Did anything significant happen just before you made that decision?

Would you have stayed at school if things had been different there? What would have needed to be different?
What efforts did you make (if any) in trying to stay at school longer?

What advantages / disadvantages can you see in leaving school early?
What areas of school do you miss (if any)? Why?

Other people

What did parents, teachers, peers think of your decision?
Did they influence you in any way? How?

Is there anyone who was supportive or not supportive of your decision to leave school early? Who and why?
Would you recommend to any of your friends to leave school early?
Do you still keep in contact with anyone at school? Why? How are they getting on?

Do you know other people in your year who have left school? How are they getting on?
Did they leave for the same reasons as you?
What are the differences between those who've stayed at school and those who've left?

Have you thought about in what ways your decision to leave school early may/may not effect your future working career/employment?

Have you considered doing any further study later on? In what and why?

What is important to you now? Why?

Where can you see yourself, and what do you think you'll be doing in 6 months time? 1 year on?

What things about schooling would need to change for you to consider returning and finishing your year 12?