

Boys and Girls Talking About What Matters: Student Voice as Text in the English Classroom

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Introduction: Who's speaking? Who's writing? Who's reading?

For some years now we have been talking with young people across Australia. They have shared their experiences with us about school, family, their friends, relationships and just life in general (see Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a). Our major aim in this work has been to give young people the opportunity to 'speak their hearts and minds', to collaborate with us in the structuring and stylisation of a text 'by them and for them', and to enable their voices to be heard in the broader society, beyond the exclusive space of the academic journal (see Le Compte 1993). This is established praxis in feminist and postcolonial research that challenges the detached and hierarchical relations between researcher and researched in traditional Western masculinist research:

no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself ... I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own, my re-writing you ... I am still author, authority. I am still coloniser, the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk. (hooks 1990, p. 343, see also Trinh 1990b, Anzaldúa 1987).

Our research was framed by the following questions: How do I 'write up research' so that the 'written-about' can access the work, identify themselves, and collaborate with us in the portrayals of their realities? For whom are we researching and writing? Of what use

is our research and writing? What do the people we research and write about gain?

In undertaking this kind of research and writing, we have attempted to address issues of *context*, *purpose* and *audience* in our writing and publication of texts targeting young people in this country. These are issues which are integral to the very business of English teaching itself and which involve a consideration of what constitutes writing for a specific audience to involve and engage potential readers (Curriculum Council 1998). This has not been an attempt to mask our own politics. This kind of work – which targets youth and which attempts to translate complex theories in accessible, relevant and meaningful ways – is considered valuable and necessary, particularly in terms of widespread criticism about the density and esoteric nature of much poststructuralist and postmodernist discourse. For example, in *Reviewing English* (an excellent resource for teachers and student teachers edited by Sawyer, Watson and Gold) Peel claims that '[t]eachers and students at whatever level find the sheer quantity and density of this theory [cultural studies] intimidating.' (1998, p. 75)

In the light of these concerns, this paper explores gender and diversity, and the significance of drawing on what boys and girls say about their lives in contemporary society as potential text for the English classroom (see Doecke & McClenaghan 1998, Sawyer 1998, Green 1995). Doecke & McClenaghan (1998), for instance, argue for the need 'to reconceptualise the nature of student-centred curriculum, namely through our continuing efforts to acknowledge the validity of youth

culture (i.e. the cluster of cultural activities in which our students engage outside school) and to make it a legitimate frame of reference in our classrooms' (p. 46). Thus our research reports *Girls' Talk* and *Boys' Stuff* can be situated within these frames of reference as class resources for involving students in a range of literacy practices that legitimate student voice and youth culture as pedagogical text. In this paper we re-visit these student voices and discuss their potential uses in the classroom as text. In this way student voice as text can be incorporated into an intertextual approach to teaching which involves deploying student voice as *parallel text* situated alongside other literary and popular cultural texts in the English classroom (see Luke, Freebody & Gilbert 1992). This approach, we believe, has significant implications for engaging young people in a critical literacy agenda designed to address issues of labelling and homogenisation in their lives (see Martino 1995, 2000a, 2001, Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995, 1999b, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, in press, 2003). Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold.

About our research: some background

Over the past 7 years we have interviewed and worked with Indigenous and Anglo-Australian students, boys and girls from rural, regional and urban locations, students with disabilities, young people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, students of diverse sexualities. Overall, we have surveyed, interviewed and received work from 700 young men and women, ranging from the ages of 11 to 24 years of age.

In our semi-structured interviews, we asked the following questions:

What does being a boy/girl mean to you?

What is school like for you? Do you experience any problems?

What do you like about school?

Can you talk to us about your friends, teachers, family and their influence on you?

What subjects do you enjoy/dislike? Why?

Are you experiencing any pressures in your life at school?

In order to include a diversity of young people's voices, specific schools and teachers in various locations throughout Australia were invited to participate in the research. We also approached youth/health organisations, Indigenous educators in schools, support networks for students with disabilities and PFLAG

(Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). These groups put us in contact with young men and women who may not have otherwise had the opportunity through mainstream schooling to tell their stories. For example, we interviewed a few young men and women in their early twenties who reflected upon their schooling and adolescent experiences in ways that they had been unable to do while at school for fear of reprisal from teachers and peers. A snowball method was also used with friends, parents and young people themselves introducing us to other research participants. Individual teachers often put us in contact with particular students whom they thought might like to contribute to *Girls' Talk* and *Boys' Stuff*.

Translating the theory

Our work has been influenced by theorists such as Foucault (1978, 1984a, b) and postcolonial feminists such as Anzaldúa (1987) and Trinh (1989, 1990a, b, 1991, 1992). We were interested to interrogate the ways in which identity is defined, negotiated and policed in young people's lives. We found that the question of what it meant to be a *normal* boy or a *normal* girl emerged as a significant issue for many of the young people we spoke to and who also sent us written accounts of their experiences (see Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001b). But we also wanted to explore issues of diversity among young people and to avoid homogenising them on the basis of their gender, class ethnicity or race. We wanted to open up a space for young people who are often positioned on the margins to present their own point of view (Martino 1997), while still being aware of diversity, differences and hierarchies amongst white Anglo-Australian youth. The following frameworks proved useful in enabling us to examine both the effects of normalisation and the pecking order of power relations between and within particular social groups and communities. These frameworks may be described in the following ways:

1. Normalisation and self-regulation

This framework draws attention to ways in which boys and girls learn to police their gender and to place themselves (and others) under a particular kind of surveillance. In other words, we are interested in young people's understandings of what counts as 'normal' or desirable behaviour and how they learn to fashion and embody their gender in socially acceptable ways (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001b). The application of the work of Foucault (1984a, b, 1985) has been

particularly useful in helping us to develop a greater understanding of the role that self-regulation and *normalisation* play in how young people learn to relate, behave and think as certain kinds of boys and girls. We are concerned to highlight, therefore, how particular power relations are played out in their lives (see Walker 1988, Connell 1995, Mac an Ghail 1994, Epstein 1997, Martino & Meyenn 2001, Martino 1999, Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995, Lees 1993).

2. Borderland and Mestizaje Existences

We use the metaphor of the 'borderland' in drawing on particular feminist and postcolonial perspectives (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981, Anzaldúa 1987, 1990, Lugones 1990, 1994, Trinh 1989, 1990a, b, 1991, 1992, Bhabha 1988, 1990, 1994, Said 1979, 1990) to examine the ways in which young people – from many different backgrounds and who are often marginalised on the basis of their various positions or locations in the culture – understand and construct their realities. 'Mestizaje' refers to people who negotiate being in-between, inhabiting a border space which is traversed by many different social systems of power, identification and categorisation. In this sense, we are interested in those young people inhabiting such in-between spaces. We draw attention to their realities of negotiating identity and belonging, both within the context of the expectations of the dominant white culture and within their own communities (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995, 1999b, c). In this sense, we focus on the ways in which disabled, same-sex-attracted youth, Indigenous and culturally diverse boys and girls construct and negotiate their identities.

What follows are selected examples from *Girls Talk* and *Boys Stuff* which illustrate how we have attempted to translate normalisation and borderland theories for the young people we are writing for and targeting in our books. These examples also provide some insight into how we deployed student voice as text in strategic ways to raise issues of diversity and to interrogate the impact of normalisation in youth culture, including issues such as drugs, drink and risk-taking behaviours; body image; peer groups and friendships and sexual, emotional and mental health issues. For the purposes of this article, however, we have focused on students interrogating gender and sexuality and have thus selected these examples from the two texts.

Boys talk about 'the rules'

The following examples A and B are taken from *Boys'*

Stuff and are included as pop-up boxes in Chapter 1, entitled 'Being a Guy'. These boxes are strategically placed to introduce readers to important normalisation and self-regulation concepts and notions about being a guy, which are then illustrated through a range of student voices:

Example A

Rules for Boys and Boys Breaking the Rules

W/M: Being a boy means there are rules you're expected to follow. Many boys feel that they have to act and think in certain ways to be accepted, to be popular, to be something called 'normal'. These rules are taught to boys from a very young age. The following boys let us in on what they think the rules are and how they've impacted upon their lives. But you'll also see that many guys are questioning the rules for boys and are choosing to break them. They feel that these Stereotype Straitjackets are restricting their choices in life. As you read about what these guys have to say, have a think about:

* Who makes the rules for boys?

* How and where do boys learn these rules?

* Why do boys who break the rules often get punished? Who does the punishing? Why?

One of the other major issues is to be cool and macho in a world where those who play sport and are strong are supreme and those skinny, 'four-eyed nerds' are the 'underworld rats'.
(Christian 16)

As Aboriginal boys we got a lot of pressure on us because we have to be role models for younger students. We can't really misbehave that much around the younger students or they'll start copying us and that. We have to be on our best behaviour most of the time.

(Sean 17)

I found in both South Africa where I'm from and in Australia that boys are faced with the dilemma that they have to live up to their friends' expectations and not their own, i.e. they have to be macho and brutal all the time when in actual fact they aren't, but if they don't act like that they are considered a faggot or gay!
(Tim 16)

A lot of boys talk about what girl they were with on the weekend. But some boys just don't do it. I don't do it

because I know that a girl wouldn't like it if she heard me talking like that, so I don't do it. (Beade 16)

Being a man means you love your sport, you fix your car, and you dig chicks and you drink beer. At the end of primary school I decided that I wanted to take up dancing which initially was this big taboo. It was like 'No, you are not a poofster, you do not dance'. I was very adamant and eventually I was allowed to dance. So the first time my father actually came to see me it was all pride and big eyes and 'Oh this is really good'. (Xander 19)

(Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, pp. 3–7)

In this example we introduce, through a conversational style, the notion of rules for guys – the idea that there are social expectations governing the way they behave, act and think. However, we also wanted to emphasise that not all boys on all occasions necessarily subscribe to these rules – that the rules are often broken! The voices of the boys which follow illustrate both boys' knowledge and understanding of these rules of masculinity, as well as their rejection or interrogation of them. This represents our attempt to translate the theories of normalisation and self-regulation which drive much of the policing of what it means to be a *normal* or a 'proper' boy (Martino 2000b, Mills 2001).

Example B

So Where Does Masculinity Come From?

W/M: *Did you know that some people are still hung up over hormones? They keep trying to say that being a guy is ruled by testosterone, and that boys have got one kind of brain and girls have got another. But as the guys you've been hearing from tell us, it's not that simple.*

At different points in history and in different parts of the world, biology has been used to explain and reinforce the 'fact' that men and women are different and that men are 'naturally' more powerful, and even more intelligent.

Did you know that in the nineteenth century, biology was used to explain the 'scientific fact' that women were less intelligent? This then was used to keep women out of school and universities, which then just made the 'scientific fact' seem more justified.

Did you know that in some cultures like the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria in Africa there was no concept of two genders doing different things? And in other cultures like that of the Wayana Indians in the Amazon rainforest, men raised children and women hunted.

You often hear people say that it's just 'boys being boys' when guys are pushing, shoving, mucking around and scragging on the oval. Someone will say, 'That's just what boys do, they've just got too much testosterone' or 'It's the hormones!'. But does this really explain why some boys act and think in the ways that they do? Is this really how all boys act? Why do some guys think they have to act in this way? Where do you think guys are getting these 'mixed messages' from?

Let's see how Tom and Ben sort through what it means to be a guy.

'On heat'

When I sometimes think about being a guy I relate it back to how I think we evolved from animals and how men have testosterone. When you look at the animal kingdom, the male is the one who's 'on heat'. I guess you could say that's all he has on his mind. Reproduction couldn't occur otherwise. It's the male who just goes around and I think that side kind of comes out in the human species because guys are just, 'Anytime!' because the testosterone's there! But with the females, they're more emotionally attached. Guys will look at sexual experiences as something that's just there to be used for enjoyment, whereas the females look at it from the emotional and the relationship side. I think about that because females are human like us – that's not the way guys should be. I like to think that I'm not like that and that I like to show my emotions. I guess you could say I've been in touch with my feminine side since the stereotype is that girls are more in touch with their emotions. I like to think of myself like that. (Tom 16)

'Masculinity isn't real'

Masculinity – just the word makes me mad! Masculinity is nothing but a concept – it isn't real, it doesn't really exist. Men are supposed to aspire to it but are all incapable of doing so. How can males be expected not to hurt or break with all the crap and injustice that goes on in our world? It's impossible. Masculinity is a cruel concept dreamed up by some ancient sadistic psychopath as a way of oppressing men and making them feel inadequate. It is something that must be challenged! You can punch someone's head in or have your head punched in but you can

never cry or try to talk it out. You're expected to swear and be rude, to drink and get involved with drugs and all that crap. There's a whole big contradiction in society at the moment. Men are now expected to have strength of character, conscience and sensitivity while still having the above 'macho' qualities. If you can't do that then you're not a 'man'. How can you be expected to maintain a balance of such extremes? You can't! (Ben 17)

(Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, pp. 18–19)

In this section we have attempted to highlight how masculinity in our culture is often naturalised and taken for granted, with the behaviour of men or boys being read as a consequence of their biology – it's the testosterone that makes men behave in the ways that they do, that accounts for why men are supposedly more active than women. Petersen (1998) argues that there are a number of deeply held cultural assumptions of people in the modern West about the naturalness of the body and highlights how biological essentialism has functioned to normalise and produce the sexed and gendered body. He provides an interesting historical perspective about this which could also be shared with students. For example, he also claims that natural differences between men and women became the foundation historically for explaining and legitimising social differences. He argues that there was a fundamental shift from the pre-enlightenment one-sex model in which women were considered 'to have the same sex organs as men, but on the inside of their bodies rather than on the outside' (p. 31). He refers to Laqueur (1990) who has found anatomical diagrams from the pre-Enlightenment period which 'supposedly demonstrate that the vagina is an inverted penis and the uterus an inverted scrotum' (p. 31). However in the late 18th century, Petersen claims that this one-sex model gave way to a two-sex model emphasising 'the anatomy and physiology of sexual difference' (p. 43). This concentration on biological sex differences, he claims, may be read as a response to 'the threat posed by the increasing demands of women to the dominant relations of gender following the rise of liberal democracy':

Just as women were beginning to question the imperatives of marriage and motherhood, male political philosophers were beginning to argue that differences in women's and men's roles were rooted in immutable 'natural' differences ... In the 18th century doctors began to define and redefine sex differences in every part of the human body, and anatomy turned to the

comparative study of skulls and pelvises, emphasising women's natural adaption to child rearing and their inherent inferiority to men. (pp. 43–44).

This 'threshold knowledge' is considered valuable in working with the student voices included in the above examples and could also be used to connect students to critical issues raised around the social expectations of masculinity in a range of texts such as:

- 'Manhood' by John Wain (*Reading Fictions*, Mellor et al. 1991): This is a short story about the relationship between a father and a son who imposes rigid expectations about what it means to be a man.
- 'The Altar of the Family' by Michael Wilding (*Gendered Fictions*, Martino and Mellor 1995): A short story about a boy living in a country town who feels isolated and who feels compelled to live up to the expectations of what his father expects of him as a man.
- *Bootmen*: A film directed by Dein Perry (2000), which is based on a true story about a young man's rise from working in the steelworks in Newcastle to become a renowned dancer, director and choreographer of the shows *Tap Dogs* and *Steel City*. In the movie, the young dancer returns to Newcastle after achieving success in a big Sydney dance show to establish a tap dance group of 'young tough men' working at the steelworks. The film raises important issues about male violence, as well as what it means to be a working class man in the face of changing de-regulated labour markets in the Australian context.
- *Billy Elliot*: A film directed by Stephen Daldry (2000) based on the life of a coal miner's son in northern England who has a desire to pursue his passion for dance and who becomes a ballet dancer. It also raises some important issues about the social expectations of masculinity. It also raises issues about de-regulation, unemployment and their impact on masculinity in the British context.

Girls talk from the borderlands

The following examples C and D are taken from *Girls' Talk* and illustrate/translate borderland *mestizaje* theory and postcolonial feminist theory (see also Pallotta-Chiarolli 2000a, 1999c). These theories are gaining

significance in Australia in understanding and empowering diasporic and culturally hybrid women living within, between and beyond the borders of two or more cultural backgrounds (Anzaldúa 1987, Lugones 1994, Molina 1994, Trinh 1991). Postcolonial and borderland feminist theorists represent individual identity as a site of the intermixture of ethnicity, sexuality and gender:

I am an act of kneading, uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light [going home], but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings [coming out] (Anzaldúa 1987, pp. 80–81).

Hence, in line with these theories, girls' writings and visuals in *Girls' Talk* can be used in the classroom to identify, illustrate and interrogate the significance of five main points in articulating multiple identity and/or multiple oppression (based on the work of Gilbert & Gilbert 1995). They are:

- acknowledging differences *within* a group as well as diversity *between* social groups;
- exploring the *relationships between* ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, geographical location and education;
- understanding that racism, sexism and homophobia are interconnected;
- acknowledging definitions and identities as situationally and historically specific processes in constant flux;
- exploring both the adherence to specific identity and community labels but also the ways in which young people resist, subvert and negotiate externally assigned labels.

Given the current Australian political and socio-cultural climate regarding refugees and the impact of racism and cultural stereotyping on diasporic students in our schools and communities, we have selected examples, C and D, that can be used to initiate discussions which explore Australia's multicultural gendered realities. Students can be encouraged to explore five social processes:

1. *Exploring cultures and cultural change within the broader framework (the political, social, economic contexts), and thus seeing cultures as being continually reshaped and dynamic*

2. *Exploring the impact of migration* such as identifying adaptation strategies; stages in the process of migration such as grieving, 'culture shock', romanticising the past culture; how and why migrants might retain and cherish the past; and how and why they identify strongly with others of similar background
3. *Exploring the self of the first culture*, the cultural framework of the early years of childhood and the present home culture, thus identifying the values that are still relevant to their present lives and/or identifying the changed expressions of these deepest values
4. *Exploring the self of the second culture*, the contributions and new outlooks, the reinforcement of the first culture perspectives and the points of contradiction and conflict;
5. *Exploring the self in many cultures*: the self that has continued to be, the self that becomes fragmented, the self that is lost, the self that is imposed, how to enjoy being multicultural and indeed value the psychological and social skills gained in negotiating differences and diverse situations from the borderlands.

Example C

It's automatically assumed that if you wear a hijab, you must be oppressed. I've seen people stare at veiled Muslim women as if they were aliens. And it's always been weird for me that some people don't seem to be able to get past that veil to actually talk to, get to know and relate to the woman as a person... yes, a real live human being who has opinions about music and school and friends and work and life like everyone else. Ayse Uygunteur tells us what it's like to wear a veil and notice how that makes a big difference to the way EVERYONE treats you.

Even if you don't wear a veil but tell people you're a Muslim, like Karima Moraby, automatically some people start thinking TV news images of wars, Saddam Hussein, riots and bombings. Or women's magazine horror stories of harems and kidnapped women.

'A Metre of Chiffon'

Ayse Uygunteur

My brother was so proud of me. I was his favourite sister. I could do no wrong. I came in the top 10% of the state for my HSC, was dux of my year, won the Caltex All

Rounder Award, had an active social life, a strong circle of friends, and most of all a loving and supportive family. I was the living, breathing example of why my family migrated from Turkey 27 years ago. I was a success – first generation Australian Turkish Modern Woman. But for me this wasn't enough ...

... So my fall from the pedestal of the ideal sister, daughter, and Australian Turkish Modern Woman began. What had I done that was so evil, so wicked, that it could break a loving mother's heart, and leave a doting brother's dreams shattered? Was it drugs? No. The closest I've ever been to an addictive substance would be nicotine. Was it promiscuity? No. I'm sure I would be up for the award of the biggest fridget in my senior year of high school. Then what was it?

I could never have imagined that a one metre square piece of chiffon could have made such a dramatic difference, not only to myself, but to the attitudes of the people around me.

I'm writing about a young Sunni Muslim Woman, of Turkish descent, born and raised in Australia. It's about acceptance, tolerance, understanding and confusion. It's about trying to get over the distorted view that all Islamic women are 'victims' and 'oppressed'. This will be me SHOUTING and pleading with every Western woman that I am a woman. That I believe in rights for women. That I am a feminist. That I am real and I'm here to stay! So don't try to 'rescue' me. I'm happy as I am. Just learn to accept me and my decisions and see me as your equal. I'm tired of having to constantly justify my decision to live my life in the path of Islam. So brother dearest, and the feminist movement, listen to me as I try to make you accept once and for all why I am not a victim, and certainly not a second-class citizen as you may think Islam classifies me.

As I sit on the train, dressed in my suit, with my brief case at my feet, I watch them. I watch them watching me – seeing my hijab – seeing Iran – seeing Islam. Why is it that since I have chosen to wear the hijab, yasmak, esarp or 'that cloth' I have suddenly developed a new identity. As if growing up with the difficulty of having a dual identity of Australian and Turk wasn't bad enough now it seems I've suddenly grown another identity, culture and personality. And all this based solely on the way people perceive my hijab. I was born in Australia, have lived in Australia, in fact

have never left the east coast of Australia but I'm too dark to be an 'Aussie' I guess. And well, I do wear the hijab, so I'm considered a 'radical Muslim' by my family and Turkish community, therefore neither consider me as 'one of them'. And I'm considered a conservative Muslim by the wider Australian society.

Okay. Let's put aside the cultural identity issue. Those women who give me the weird looks on the train don't even allow me to have a gender! Well I'm quite obviously not male, but am I a woman? Physically yes I would be considered as one, but how could they ever accept me as an equal, as a modern woman? To them I represent everything that they have been trying to fight. Well let me tell you a little bit about my life as a woman of Islam. Who knows, you may actually think a little differently of me by the end of this.

Glossy magazines recount tales of 'honour killings and female circumcision,' often wrongly identified with the Muslim faith. So there's a fine line that exists between Islamic culture and Islamic religion. It's where these two merge that we often get the stereotypical portrayal of Islamic women. In Australia the two are not identified as being different by the mainstream media. Islamic religion and the holy book, the Qu'ran, and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed need to be examined as it is without its corruption by culture.

Many educated, Australian born and raised women like myself strongly argue that male-dominated Muslim culture has polluted the true teachings of Islam and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). The ways in which women's rights are affected by religious doctrine is a direct result of who's in power.

'This Is What A Muslim Girl Looks Like'

Karima Moraby

Lost Soul

I might be white
I might be dressed in their clothes
I might live in Australia
But my soul is not with them ...

I might be Lebanese
I might be Muslim

I might be their daughter
But my soul is not with my parents
What is my culture?
Where is my soul?

I think it's important to ask if Muslim women are aware of their rights and how they can find out about these rights. It is Islam that enables me to achieve all my goals as it teaches me that a Muslim woman should not be Submissive or Aggressive but rather Assertive. I have never felt disadvantaged in any way, quite the opposite actually, growing up as Muslim girl.

I was born in Adelaide to an Australian Catholic Mother and a Lebanese Muslim Father ... My parents brought us up with the best of both cultures and disregarded any parts of either culture that would affect us negatively. ...

I think my first realisation that I was actually different was when at eight I was told to stand in front of the class and my teacher said, 'This is what a Muslim Girl looks like'. I was not wearing a hijab and was in school uniform. So I looked just like everybody else. But that day changed my life as I realised that even though I might look like everybody else, and feel like everybody else, this did not mean that everybody else saw me as the same.

From about 14 years of age, I denied my religion that made me different from everybody else. Wanting to be like my school peers, I'd consciously make an effort to look and behave like them. At home, though, I still prayed, fasted and performed what I saw at the time as 'Duties' that I felt I had to do but did not want to do ...

But I began to ask questions about my religion. Was being 'Muslim' really the reason why in so many 'so-called' Muslim families the Muslim boys could basically do what they wanted yet Muslim girls were not allowed to leave the house or otherwise no one would marry them? Was being 'Muslim' the reason why female circumcision occurred? All these I was to later discover were completely 'un-Islamic' and in complete contrast to the teachings in the Qu'ran. The minute I realised how you should never judge Islam by a few people I realised how misunderstood 'true Islam' was and still is. It is shielded by this male-dominated cultural interpretation of Islam that is so damaging as it is in complete contrast to what the religion not only preaches but what it stands for:

I began to ask my parents to teach me more. I would now sit in amazement and contentment and became spiritually satisfied. I realised here that it was not Islam that created the inequality between Muslim boys and Muslim girls, it was the culture.

I found myself rejecting all my non-Muslim or Australian friends. Little did I realise that once again I was denying who I was, but to the opposite extreme. I felt the wider community would never understand me or my religion. I went through a period of just staying home. However, cutting myself off from my life in the wider Australian world was not a solution. I came to the realisation that there is no point blocking ourselves from the world, in hiding who we are as Muslims and who we are as individual women ...

I am an Australian
I am a Woman
I am a Muslim
I am a Muslim Woman
I am an Australian Muslim Woman ...
I am me ...

(Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998, pp. 205–209)

Other girls and young women in *Girls Talk* write of the impact of knowing about their parents' struggles as refugees and migrants, or as young women growing up under oppressive political regimes, understanding the results of such experiences on family members.

Example D

Sometimes I think a big reason why people are prejudiced against migrants and refugees is that they don't really know what they've been through and so don't feel compassion and admiration for them. Let's hear from some girls about the kinds of traumas they've been through and survived with strength. I wonder how I'd survive something so awful as what the next two writers tell us about.

'Memories of Loss and Sadness'

I have been living for two years in the warm sun of this peaceful country, Australia. My name is Iris and I am fourteen years old. Around four years ago I left the country I was born in, a country I loved but a country I don't really want to talk about anymore, Yugoslavia. There are so many

terrible memories for me. Memories of loss and sadness. It was the most wonderful place until the early 1990s when it was destroyed by a pointless fight which seemed so stupid and childish to me. To fight over land! It was unbelievable! I still can't believe it. It was something that three-year-olds do and not grown up, mature people.

Millions of children died and millions of people were left homeless. Everything they had been working for, was destroyed. Their homes and families were gone.

I left Sarajevo with my mother after a year of suffering there, watching my friends and relatives die but not being able to help. I remember my last day at school. I was walking home wondering if I would go to school tomorrow. It was the beginning of the war and on the television and radio we kept seeing and hearing stories about people leaving Sarajevo and the possibility of the war:

I thought that it was a terrible mistake. I thought it couldn't be happening to us. I was wrong. School was cancelled. I was only ten years old. A few days later the school was bombed. I remember standing in a queue waiting to buy food when my best friend was hit by a bullet in her shoulder. I still remember her white shirt with blood streaming. People weren't taking much notice. They were getting used to seeing such things. I didn't have time to think or cry. I just ran for help. Help was too late. My friend Maya was only nine years old when she died.

As we were leaving we watched the city which was now a desert of glassless boxes with smoke everywhere and the blood of innocent people. We went to Germany and we discovered a country that didn't welcome us at all. People hated you just because of your background, not caring who you were inside.

In 1994 we moved again and this time we came to Australia. I feel safe and secure here. Not once has anyone hated me because of my background. Everyone at school and the community in general has been kind and respected me for who I am. They have shown me love and helped me to erase the dreadful memories of my past.

My friends come from many different backgrounds. I was not used to such diversity. I have not experienced any racism at all in Australia – it is almost like Paradise. I have access to good quality, free education here. I have been on interesting excursions and camps and these have helped

me get to know this country and they have helped me feel I belong here.

Even though I wasn't born here, I love Australia and I love being Australian. In many ways people in Australia do not know how lucky they are to be living in a country full of natural, environmental wealth and peace. I wish that everyone would realise how lucky they are to be an Australian.

Iris Radovic 14

Talk Tracks for Your Girls Talk

Questions for NESBians (or wog-girls)

What do you love about your cultural background? What really bothers you about it? Does it bother you because you're told that it's wrong, inferior, dorky by friends, magazines, TV, etc?

Who are some of the women from your culture that you admire, such as family members, media personalities, writers, actors, etc

What sorts of rules does your culture have for girls? Does your family follow them? What can you do to challenge the rules you are unhappy with?

Talk about the times that people from outside your culture have made assumptions and comments about what you're like because they think they KNOW your culture.

If you think you're being overprotected and sheltered by your family, is this to some degree because they are living in Australia?

Find out about the women in your family history. What do you find out?

Does your school encourage you to talk about, write about and be proud of your culture?

Do you see your situation as one of 'culture clash' between two worlds or is this how other people view it?

If you do, in fact, experience 'culture clash' what do you think are some of the reasons?

Can you be confident and assertive, challenging sexism, broadening your career choices, and still value your home culture?

(Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998, pp. 242–245)

Other examples from *Girls' Talk* include Escaping by Thida Min (pp. 243–244). Examples from *Boys' Stuff*, such as the following text written by Haseeb 21, a young Pakistani Muslim man, could be used alongside the above texts:

It's strange being in Australia

Sometimes I feel it's very strange being in Australia. I'm from a Pakistani Muslim village culture where men live very differently and women live very differently. Sometimes if you talked to a girl in the countryside they'd get offended. Girls in Australia don't really understand this was where I came from. When I came here and I saw the girls going out when they're 16 or 17, I was always thinking how different it was for girls here. I wondered how they felt but now I'm beginning to understand the reasons for the differences.

Sometimes I haven't been very good in adapting to the way girls are here. For example, when we had to do project work at school in mixed groups of girls and boys, I would hardly talk to them because I was too shy and I'd type my report very quietly. I think I treated the girls very badly. If they sat with me or came to talk to me I couldn't answer them properly. I'm from a culture where boys and girls are trained very differently. We speak very little to each other as a sign of respect. That's why when I came here, this was an absolutely new culture to me and my teachers wanted me to talk to other people. This was very strange for me at first.

Another strange thing was that I never felt as if I was being stared at in Pakistan but here in Australia I feel like people are staring at me and sometimes they look back again and again. I feel really uncomfortable when I'm doing work in the library and another person is staring at me.

I don't believe in nationalism. I don't believe I'm a Pakistani, nor do I believe I'm Australian. I don't like hearing in advertisements, this is made in Pakistan or this is made in Australia and you should buy it. I've found that I have friends in Australia and have friends in Pakistan and I love them and care about them all. I find that Australian people who come from the country or rural areas are much easier to get along with because they are more like the people I remember from home. Haseeb 21

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, pp. 172 & 176)

Other useful texts that can be used to explore gender and cultural diversity in the English classroom include:

- *Bend It Like Beckham*: an English film that explores diasporic and borderland youth. It deals with young people from Hindu Indian and English backgrounds growing up in England negotiating familial, generational and cultural differences and expectations. Issues of gender and sexuality are also addressed through an exploration of love, friendships and sport in the lives of young people.
- *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta, *Wogaluccis* by Josie Montano, *Tapestry* by Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli and *Sparring with Shadows* and *The Dons* by Archie Fusillo are an example of a group of texts that can be used to focus on the familial and generational differences and similarities within what is labelled the 'Italian culture' in regard to gender and sexuality.

Addressing sexuality and diversity in the English classroom

A concern that is raised by some teachers in regard to our work is the inclusion of the voices of sexually diverse young people and the possible implications for teachers who might use these texts in their classrooms. There appears to be a silence around issues of sexuality and more specifically homophobia in schools (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, in press 2003, Pallotta-Chiarolli 2000b, Alloway 2000, Martino 2000b). This may be related to the public surveillance of teachers' sexuality through discourses of pedophilia which incites fear (see Berrill & Martino 2002). However, given the prevalence of homophobia as a mechanism for policing the boundaries of acceptable masculinity and femininity in schools, sexuality is visible in schools and permeates all levels of social interaction in the form of what has been termed 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980), the requirement to display oneself as appropriately heterosexual. It would seem that in the current climate where law suits in the United States and Australia are being filed against schools, it would be in teachers' best interests to be addressing issues of sexuality in their classrooms (Alloway 2000). This kind of work needs to be framed within a social justice framework and whole school approach to avoid the positioning of the teacher as undertaking a recruitment drive to convert heterosexual students or to implicate

teachers in any way. This homophobic resistance can be avoided, Pallotta-Chiarolli argues:

if the emphasis in the work teachers do is on broader themes such as social justice, marginality, prejudice and discrimination, and lesson plans and materials exemplify this integration through a variety of resources, methodologies and contents (1995, p. 76).

It is important to reiterate that homophobia, as a form of sex-based harassment, is unlawful under the Federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1996). In light of this, it is important to reflect on what measures schools are taking to address the sex- and gender-based dimensions of harassment both in terms of the formulation of pastoral care policies and curriculum implementation. Within this legal and social justice framework of duty of care, it is possible to address issues of sexuality in the English classroom. The following examples E and F from *Boys' Stuff* and *Girls' Talk* provide the possibility for addressing the role that sexuality, and more broadly discrimination, plays in the lives of young people within this framework.

Example E

Boys Behind the Labels

Sticky (sickly) Labels

Mason Chidney

Why do you see
what it is that you see
when I reveal to you,
a shade of me

What did they tell you,
it could make you think.
You would change your world,
within a blink.

I say a word.
You see a label.
They got you babe,
straight from the cradle.

I think, therefore I am.
What do you think?

What are the labels used to discriminate against some boys? How does a label 'stick' so that it becomes a stereotype and then some guys are only seen according to that label and prejudice? Labels can be 'sickly', they hurt and can cause harassment and violence. Where do we get our myths and labels about people from? Think about racism, heterosexism and discrimination against people with physical and emotional disabilities and how these stem from certain labels super-glued to some boys because of narrow-minded and ignorant social attitudes.

In this chapter, we're going to take you into the lives of some of the boys behind certain labels. You'll get to see how much of their lives is more than the simple silly label and yet you'll see how these guys are courageously dealing with the fact that other guys, girls and even some adults, who should know better, stick sickeningly to these labels.

Being Labeled Disabled

I've got a neighbour who is intellectually disabled. I stick up for him when he gets picked on because I reckon he's a really nice guy. He's 21 and he's pretty much got the mind of someone who's 12, even younger. But I don't really see him for that, I see him for who he is. (Josh 15)

I'm only two feet tall but I don't think I've really got a disability. I think that everyone in this world has disadvantages and advantages, so I can say I'm one of the people who has advantages and disadvantages.

Recently, my Mum told me to get some paper serviettes from the supermarket. When I gave the woman at the counter the money, she said 'Where's your parents?' I said 'I'm 16'. She goes to me 'You're not supposed to be here all on your own little kid'. I just got the serviettes, left the money on the counter and went out. I felt all worn out, it became a long day. But now I don't listen to any ignorance anymore. (Abdu 16)

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, pp. 159–60)

Sexual Labels: To Be or Not, or Both or Neither?

Sometimes the label 'different' is used to define someone as not being a 'normal' person. But who decides what's 'normal' and what's 'different'? How can the word 'different' be used to make someone feel they are inferior or unequal? Let's read what these boys, have to say about sexual diversity.

I think it's hard for gay people to be out in society, because they're different, different to the majority of people. I think you're only different if you're not with the majority of people. So I'm only different if I wear my collar up and everyone wears it down. Another guy's different because he likes men and all the other boys like females. Because he's different, that's why he's thought to be an outcast. That's why he's seen not to be a normal person. (Nigel 17)

If someone is gay some people cannot handle that and resort to bullying. God made everyone different for a reason! (Franco 13)

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, p. 181)

I got harassed by some of the Asian boys for being gay. I said to them, 'I'm in a minority group but so are you, so what are you talking about?' They were kind of startled when I said that. I was also abused by one group of very, very woggy boys, Greek and Italian students. I was harassed by them, and yet I kind of belong to their community as well in that I'm Italian. They said I wasn't Italian, even though I was the only one that was actually born in Italy, actually lived in Italy. But I wasn't Italian because no Italian male was supposed to be gay. I remember one Italian student saying to me, 'You're either not Italian or you're not a faggot' with that really serious look that I was making it up that I was gay. (Luciano 19)

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, p. 171)

Racist Labels

Racism comes in many forms. It's not just white versus black but more about each group picking on another group so they can be that little bit higher up some social or so-called 'racial' scale. Think about who labels whom in your school and community and why they do it. You'd think that guys from migrant and refugee families who know what it's like to experience racism, would not be dishing it out to others. Think, too, about how labels like 'wog', 'Asian', 'Muslim', 'Indigenous' and 'Australian' lump together lots of people as if they're all the same instead of allowing us to think about everyone's differences. What are the ways you are Australian, Asian, Muslim, indigenous, Anglo-Celtic and so on? Should you have only one cultural label or can you belong to two or more cultures? How does your cultural background affect your life as a boy? How did it shape the way you see yourself as a boy? What have

you learnt about what it means to be a boy in your culture from the older men in your community?

There's a kind of notion that if you're a wog you're cool. But the people from Asian backgrounds get very much picked on. People would walk past one Asian guy and slit back their eyes. I remember the public speaking competition in Year 11 where one boy who came from Cambodia spoke about the racism in our school and he won. He genuinely cried during his speech. You could actually feel his emotions and the way he'd been beaten up so badly one time by a bunch of Australian boys. Two black eyes, broken nose, missing teeth. A lot of Asian students hung around together. You got no choice but to annexe yourself off because you have to find that place called the comfort zone. A lot of them would just speak their language in the corridor, which I think is really good, but there'd be people walking past making fun of their languages. I just thought, 'If you ever go to Japan and you're speaking English and they start going *blah blblblbl*, how are you going to feel?'

(Luciano 19)

What I would say to white people is don't be scared of us because we don't want to fight people or anything just for the hell of it, we're friendly people. We just like talking to people and being friends with them and join in activities. We're not out to cause trouble. (Sean 17)

(Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001a, p. 171)

Girls from *Girls' Talk* also wrote about the impact and effects of sexuality on their lives:

Example F

What if the school doesn't want to know certain aspects about you? If schools are meant to be safe and happy places, why is it difficult for girls (and teachers) who identify as lesbian or bisexual to be treated as human beings? Why do many girls have to put on the uniform of heterosexuality when they put on the school uniform? What can you do about it?

I know one of the mottoes of our school is like 'enabling you to find out who you are' and I'm not sure how the school would react if someone was very openly 'out'. I think the majority of people would be fine but I don't know if there would be that support base there for them

at the school and that's pretty important I think if you think you are the only one in the entire school. (Lisa)

'It was hard because my friends, including my boyfriend, repressed me and stuff ... because I didn't know ... any gay people ... I couldn't say anything to anyone ... They taught me how to poofter bash ... and they were really racist as well and I'm not Australian and I used to get angry ... but I wasn't assertive enough to the point of saying well I think this is what I am.' (Louisa)

(Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998, pp. 139–140)

In a poem 'Crimes of Existence', young Aboriginal lesbian writer Romaine Moreton explores the parallels between racism and heterosexism, and the internal familial divisions external Christian and Western condemnations of homosexuality have created.

My mother also doesn't stop
to consider,
that when Great Christian Leaders
& other vilifiers of homosexuality
call society to attention
& ask them to jail

the queers, leso's & gays,

that what they really mean

is for her
to
incarcerate
her very own daughter
& make sexuality
her crime
& place her daughter in the cell
next to
her very own son,
for they have already made Blackness his,

(Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998, p. 222)

By placing students' voices alongside one another in the classroom in this way the multi-layered dimensions of discrimination on the basis of disability, indigeneity, ethnicity and sexuality can be highlighted within a social justice framework which emphasises

that 'schools need to be places where all the ways in which people relate to each are based on an understanding of the equal worth and dignity of males and females' (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987, p. 54). These kinds of responses could be used alongside other popular culture texts such as *Looking for Alibrandi* and *Edward Scissorhands* to open up discussions about diversity and normalisation in students' lives. As Doecke and McClenaghan (1998) argue, students engage in complex and sophisticated exchanges outside of the classroom in their discussion and response to popular cultural texts and this needs to be capitalised on in the English classroom:

When students debate the merits of the latest episode of *The Simpsons*, or pass around issues of their favourite magazines or comics, much is at stake. Through such textual exchanges students test their beliefs and values and speculate about their identities. They explore a range of significant issues from their sexuality and gender to their ethnicity, social status and politics. Such exchanges presuppose quite sophisticated understandings of meaning and interpretation – far more sophisticated than those reflected in many classroom reading practices, which are often limited to reading the set text and writing the mandatory book report. When placed alongside the lively exchanges in which students engage outside the classroom, such sterile textbook activities are (at best) ludicrous and irrelevant and (at worst) very dubious learning. (p. 48)

The student voices as text included in *Girls' Talk* and *Boys' Stuff* can be used to tap into the cultural exchanges of young people and their cultural understandings of the worlds and borderlands that many of them may inhabit (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2001b). Such student texts can be used to connect students in meaningful and interesting ways to other set texts designated as part of the official English curriculum in schools.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for the use of student voice as pedagogical text in the English classroom. In our work we have produced texts written for young people as a means of placing on the agenda issues which matter to them. We have tried to open up spaces in texts like *Boys Stuff* and *Girls' Talk* so that the voices of young people from diverse backgrounds and positions can be heard, so that silences can be broken. So often, out of fear and ignorance, only certain voices get heard. Our aim has been to provide the space for young people

who are often positioned on the margins to 'speak their hearts and minds'. We believe that such voices can be used productively and powerfully in the English classroom to articulate other ways of seeing and being in the world. This is based on the premise that young people, given the powerful influences of peer group culture, are more likely to listen to other young people expressing their opinions than adults. We believe that voices of young people can be utilised in very powerful ways in the English classroom and we have outlined in this paper the potential benefits of reconceptualising growth pedagogy and youth culture within a critical literacy framework which addresses issues of diversity and the impact of normalisation on the lives of young people.

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