WESLEY IMMS
OCCUPYING CURRICULUM AS SPACE

University of Melbourne

INTRODUCTION

Learning environment research is gaining previously unachieved sophistication as it develops beyond 'post occupancy evaluation' towards socio-cultural examinations of how students and teachers occupy and utilise space. This chapter argues that knowledge gained through previous research can be 'mined' for such spatial implications. The overlap between gender studies and curriculum is one such field. Curriculum remains an effective tool for implementing macro-policies of government and articulating wider socio-cultural agendas in schools. However, for all this success there exists a very limited understanding of its lived impact on the student – that is, how curriculum is actually inhabited by an individual. A doctoral study was conducted in the late 1990s to address this paucity of knowledge. When published, the study advanced thinking on this topic, but now is open to further examination. The purpose of this chapter is not to repeat what was found, rather to re-interpret its findings *through a spatial lens*. Time is a great teacher; academic activity by the PhDs author in the intervening eleven years, particularly in the area of learning environments research, has allowed a different perspective on how curriculum is actually occupied and manipulated by its inhabitants.

A BRIEF RE-VISIT OF THE PHENOMENON OF MALE GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN SCHOOLS

As a teacher in the mid 1990s I became disillusioned with how school structures allowed so little opportunity for intellectual exploration of issues I encountered each day in the classroom. Excessive teaching demands, time-heavy extra-curricular duties, and a pervading sense of 'practice dominates theory' lead me to resign my role as head of a department to undertake graduate research in another country. Ironically, this created another frustration. My research originally intended to address architecture's absence in secondary art education curriculum. However, this was diverted during the early coursework components of my study. During those weeks, prescribed readings in compulsory classes such as 'gender issues in education' consistently gave descriptions of boys' experiences in schools that clashed with my own sense of reality. It was an issue I found hard to ignore, and led to quantitative (factorial ANOVA) and qualitative (ethnographic) studies that addressed in a small way this rather significant gap in the literature. Inadvertently, it also opened the door to, a decade later, fresh insights into learning environments research.

At that time gender studies in education had not progressed far beyond naively transposing feminist critiques of gender from society directly into schools. The unfortunate supposition was that what happened in society logically also applied in schools. This meant that in the late 1990s knowledge about boys' gender identities was primarily the product of psychoanalytical study (Terman and Miles, 1936), rooted in sex-role theory (Bem, 1974), which had created monolithic and categorical gender definitions (Skelton, 1997). Thus, the literature treated boys as a homogeneous group that enacted a singular, hetero-normative, hegemonic masculine gender identity in classrooms (Skelton, 1996). In short, during the late 1990s virtually all education research on this topic assumed young males to be misogynists in the making (Connell, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Reay, 1990).

This body of research conspicuously failed to account for the reality of boys' relationship experiences in schools (Jackson and Salisbury, 1996) and the myriad of masculinities being enacted there (Imms, 2000). Connell (1996), whose work epitomized the accusation of male collective guilt mentioned previously, inadvertently provided the theoretical structure for a deeper understanding of male gender construction in education. By arguing that a range of masculinities existed where the hegemonic dominated the marginalized, Connell opened the door to the argument manliness was owned by the individual male. If so, it was actively constructed through development of personal values and beliefs, not through some ill-defined social conspiracy. Schools and curriculum, it could be argued, assisted boys to build positive individual gender identities.

Research was required that examined the scope and nature of the *multiplicity* of masculinities that existed within boys' cultures in schools, and the nature of curriculum that facilitated their acceptance in those cultures. This was the predominant aim of my research at that time, attempting to isolate qualities of curriculum that allowed boys to explore functional egalitarian masculinities within the schooling system (Imms, 2003). Unrealized at the time, the research also uncovered a spatial element to this phenomenon. The curricular and socio-cultural factors that impacted the creation and occupation of multiple masculinities in schools required a spatial home in which to operate. It is such an added dimension that I wish to explore further in this chapter.

The study

From 1997 to 2000 I undertook an ethnographic study of year 7-12 boys on this topic. This included a full academic year of fieldwork in a single-sex school in Canada using a participant-as-observer design (Hamersley and Atkinson, 1995). The research utilized a Connellian multiple masculinities theoretical lens as its analytical framework. Visual Art curriculum was its unit of measurement, prior evidence indicating it provided the wide range of curricular, pedagogical and transactional approaches to curriculum necessary to elicit the data required. Data collection included hundreds of classroom and general school environment observations, around fifty layered interviews with boys, school administrators and teachers (that is, initial interviews with one, two or even three follow-up interviews), and documentary analysis. Data was analysed using Atlas.ti software following the now standard qualitative analysis techniques of coding, thematic identification, triangulation, model building and theory linkage (leCompte and Priessle, 1993). These data provided a rich, layered, and sophisticated account of boys' perceptions of their experiences in this educational space.

Results

The purpose of this chapter is not to reiterate what is already well documented (Imms 2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b) but to leverage from that study some previously unexamined spatial aspects. A brief summary of findings is needed to place that discussion in context.

Participants' responses created a four-layered model of boys' engagement of masculinity, provided in Figure 1. They allowed the research to describe and analyse a complex hierarchy of forms of such engagement that ranged from a superficial level comprising a predictable picture of stereotypes, to an almost inaccessible layer of "individual" masculinities. This final layer, described by boys as separate from their culture and constructed of their personal values and

Figure 1. Boys' layered engagement with masculinity

research.

Six barriers that limited boys' access to this final layer were identified in the school. They included the dominance of cultural stereotypes, a lack of a safe forum for the exploration of gender identities and an emphasis on a school curriculum that failed to facilitate expression. Additional barriers were related to the lack of freedom within classrooms, curriculum that generally came short of accommodating boys' unique ways of learning, and very limited opportunities to develop egalitarian relationships. Five of these six characteristics combined to create a model of 'boy-friendly' curriculum, illustrated in Figure 2, which boys claimed allowed them to freely explore a range of masculinities.

Figure 2. Model of 'boy-friendly' curriculum

These findings held considerable significance for masculinity research. They indicated that many boys already owned the impetus to explore egalitarian masculinities. However, boys required 'space and place' in which to conduct this exploration. The study found that mobility between the types of masculinities existing in this school, represented in Figure 1 by the vertical arrow, was regulated by transitory socio-cultural factors, characteristic of and embedded within the mores surrounding boy behaviors. The study identified that in this culture, where stereotyped definitions ruled, to be mobile towards more egalitarian layers of masculinity boys intentionally used particular subject curricular, summarised in Figure 2. This chapter will argue that the physicality of the school setting was an important additional aid to boys' negotiation of multiple masculinities. In other words, gender negotiations were frequently site specific. A review of the data indicates that physical affordances of space were notable agents in boys' negotiation of masculinities.

EVALUATING CURRICULUM FROM A SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

Engaging curriculum spatially

Located in these results and at times explicitly stated was the school's built environment. Boys consistently identified spaces that facilitated certain encounters - activities that were later analysed to constitute negotiation of masculine concepts. Boys' own comments indicated that 'preferred' classrooms were those that allowed freedom of movement, informal groupings, conversations while working, and ready access to materials and learning resources. These spaces did not, through spatial organisation, treat students as a homogeneous mass but provided a spatial environment where different 'types' of boys were allowed equal access to each other. Summarised in the project's findings, one of the five characteristics of boy-friendly curriculum was 'curriculum that provided boys freedom' (see Figure 2). This contained three subsets, academic freedom, intellectual freedom, and physical freedom. The latter remains largely under-researched, and requires further 'teasing from the data' of this study.

Student use of physical space in gender negotiations

Eleven years after publication, a review of the study suggests it contained an overly simplistic treatment of space. In the late 1990s classrooms were simply that – classrooms. With only a few exceptions (as discussed by O'Donoghue, 2006) there was little research that included spatial factors within critical-social analyses of education. This study mirrored that trend. It mentioned, but left unresolved, space as constituting a physical site for gender negotiations. However, on review, the data clearly shows the socio-cultural/curricular/spatial aspects of boys' masculinity negotiations frequently overlapped.

Spaces *afforded* certain practices, which in turn afforded certain interactions. In visual art, studios provided spaces within which boys gravitated to specialist activities. For example, the ceramics room facilitated hand-building and wheelwork. Existing in the same studio these activities appeared to be simply variations of a similar medium, but not to the boys. Boys claimed they chose these activities based on the 'types' of colleagues who occupied the spaces, and the qualities of the activities they undertook there; *"I am a wheel kid – we think differently to the sculpture boys..."*. This gravitation to particular spaces allowed construction of informal 'safe' places to explore relationships, inadvertently building gender constructs; *"You can't talk like this anywhere else – other places are too public, or too restricted, not our own spaces. We own these spaces..."*

Spaces *excluded* certain practices. Learning spaces directly controlled learning activities. For example, visual art's studios were seen to facilitate open, collaborative and experimental study; *"In here, we can do what we want, with who we want, how we want. Can't do that in other places."* This was in direct contrast to the closed and insular classroom layout typical of much of the school; *"Those classrooms, you can't be part of a group. Teachers just teach to you. It sucks."* This led to particular learning styles being privileged in particular spaces. Boys identified learning environments as dictating certain learning styles, certain knowledge, thus certain level or types of engagement with learning, as well as with each other; *"In the academic subjects [always held in didactically structured classrooms] you just read from the book, you pass back that information. There is no you in that work, it's all about the stuff in the book."*

Spaces *elicited* certain practices. Embedded in study data was evidence that boys actively engaged curriculum in a physical/intellectual sense, in tandem. They chose particular places to sit, rooms to meet, and locations to do particular work, which was all part of the ‘grouping’ activity described in Figure 1. Classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, common rooms and outdoor meeting areas were physical venues that were consciously sought to help facilitate unique gender practices; “*We come here to, y’know, just talk and swap stuff. We can’t do this other places, this is our place. The other kids don’t understand what we do, so this is where we can have our own spot...*”. These spaces regulated behaviours that were both restrictive (reinforcing limiting gender stereotypes) but were also empowering – facilitating explorations of gender constructs not elsewhere allowed (O’Donoghue, 2006). Within this school’s ‘boy-culture’ particular places constituted territories of learning and territories of gender negotiation. Thus learning environments were defined by the practicalities of curriculum demands, but also by social needs, adding a complexity of meaning to what is often considered an inert educational asset - space.

CURRICULUM AS AN OCCUPIED SPACE

A review of the data from this study highlights that curriculum may be better understood through examination of how it is actually used. The ‘reality’ of curriculum lies not in its structure, but in its occupation.

This processes of ‘occupation’ is constituted of students’ actual actions as they engage within formal and informal curriculum. The original study described one aspect of this, illustrated in Figure 1, being boys’ mobility between layers of enacted masculinities, dependent on social situations and settings. On the surface boys were situated within a mono-culture constructed and enacted by the school’s structures and operation. But in actual practice, as curriculum was ‘lived’, this quickly disseminated into smaller, layered groupings. These were contested and always in a state of being negotiated between ephemeral cultural groupings, changing as boys consistently re-defined the values and practices inherent within each.

Revisiting these data through a spatial, architectural lens provides additional focus to the nature of this occupation. Occupation can be viewed as seeking identity, the *habitus*. We are inescapably linked to the places we inhabit, and this occupation, in part, defines us. We identify as habitué of the places we occupy (de Botton, 2007).

Occupation can be viewed as seeking safety, the *sanctum*. While being in a space is a ‘real’ experience, we go beyond to the illusion of what we wish for, to those heterotopia where we simultaneously live the real and through desire experience the illusionary (Foucault, 1984).

Occupation can be seen as *genus loci*, seeking the special or the unique. Space can provide a ‘special place’ that is greater than the sum of its parts, a poem rather than structure (Bachelard, 1958/1994). As such we do more than simply dwell within the structure, we physically and cognitively *engage* with it.

Original analysis of these data identified boys’ inner beliefs and values being the motivation for negotiating certain types of masculinities. But what it did not do in enough depth was to explore the lived experience within that process. Re-reading these interviews through a spatial lens illustrates boys seeking to occupy a special place within curriculum’s structure. And while cerebral, this occupation is also physical. In boys’ comments there was a realization that they were habitué of built spaces within the school, but this physicality was in alignment with the intellectual structure of the school curriculum. Within this duality they desired to access a sanctuary, a place of safety where their deeply situated concepts of fairness, equity and personal expression could be used to freely explore a range of gendered identities. They regarded this sanctuary as a type of heterotopia, a virtual space where personal values and beliefs could exist within a perceived dominant hegemonic school culture.

What architecture can teach education

This chapter began with a lament; education excels at conceptualising and designing curriculum, but arguably it understands little about how people occupy it as a living structure. This is apparent when reviewing trends in curriculum theory development over the past century.

The three dominant approaches are evident. One has viewed curriculum as a method to transmit facts, skills and social values to students. In the 1920s Thorndike viewed intelligence and behaviour as innate, and students as passive beings who responded to stimuli; thus learning was a physiological mechanism. About the same time Bobbitt argued that education existed to prepare students for everyday life, thus needed to train them in activities that provided a 'well-rounded' existence. In a similar vein, during the 1960s Skinner saw behaviour as being controlled through conditioning. Schools, he argued, existed to shape and maintain certain socially acceptable behaviours. Collectively, this approach to curriculum viewed schools as a factory, the child as its product, the teacher as the worker and curriculum as its management system. From this theory it evolved a competency-based curriculum organised through specific subject disciplines as linear 'pathways of knowledge'. Curriculum was, from this perspective, an agent for constructing an acceptable society.

Curriculum has also been approached as being a process of dialogue, within which teachers and students reconstruct knowledge to affect personal meaning. In the early twentieth century Dewey advocated designs that reflected social democratic principles of negotiation and interaction. Curriculum, he believed, transmitted culture but within dynamic democratic methods. To a large degree this was based on the work of Pestalozzi in the 1820s, which viewed curriculum as a process of understanding the needs of the child and their attempts to analyse and make inferences from experience. This transactional approach to curriculum recognised learning as the organisation of internal structures that occur as a child interacts with his or her environment.

A third epistemology was that of transformational curriculum, an approach that effected social and spiritual change in an individual. During the 1910s Rousseau argued that children in their natural state were inherently good and only became corrupted through contact with society. Thus, within this framework curriculum was required to engage the student in seeking harmony between himself of herself, and his or her spiritual environment. Neill's *Summerhill* in the 1960s extended this belief to claim the school must fit the child, not the reverse. It must renounce traditional mantras of discipline, pre-programmed learning 'directions', and moral and religious training. The open education movement in the 1960s went further to lead development of open plan schools that argued each child was a self-activated maker of meaning and an active agent in her or his own intellectual development.

These transmissional, transactional and transformational genres of curriculum remain largely aspirational. Without commensurate attention to the physicality of their implementation, how they are actually lived or inhabited by students, they fail to deliver full understanding of curriculum's defined purpose, that of it being *a journey* or lived experience, as opposed to the less accurate and quite simplistic notion of curriculum being a set of prescribed learning tasks. That is not to say such critical analysis has not been undertaken. Pinar et al. (1996)'s massive anthology of post-1960s curriculum theory summarises hundreds of scholars who argue curriculum has little to do with planning learning; its effect is to marginalize and control. They say schools, like society, are corrupt and rife with injustice and oppression. They are not politically neutral, curriculum is an agent of these forces, and curriculum's 'reality' can only be understood by being viewed contextually through the lenses of the racial, gendered, religious and institutionalized political agendas that drive society. Berlak and Berlak (1981) similarly critique teaching practices, arguing the existence of a range of 'dilemmas' that confront teachers as they attempt to situate actual classroom practice within the stated goals of formalized curriculum. Critical analyses of education are rife with such attempts to explain the reality of teaching and learning, of the hidden as well as the formal curriculum. However, they fail to come to grips with the complexities of what students actually do. While many researchers, particularly those from a phenomenological orientation, have closely studied students in their educational settings (van Manen, 1988), few have attempted to understand how their day-to-day activities constitute the act of negotiating a lived experience within the curriculum. This may explain why the impact of space on student experience has received so little attention in education.

What lesson is to be learned from this study? In brief, it would be that curriculum isn't all it is cracked up to be. Education can't expect too much from what is ultimately only a piece of writing. Students have little regard for such documentation; they pick and chose elements of curriculum to use according to needs only sometimes associated with educational goals and curricular outcomes. Those who design curriculum entertain presumptions about how it will

impact student outcomes, but this rarely occurs; the reality of curriculum is not what is written, but what is done.

Here there is an informative parallel with architecture. Designers intend for a structure to be used in ways that may bear no resemblance to how people actually occupy those spaces. An example would be in Australia's Building the Education Revolution schools. This significant publically funded initiative produced innovative learning spaces across a whole country in a very short period of time. Many wonderful structures were created. They embodied a hope that their design, driven by current educational thinking on best practices, would revolutionize teaching in Australia. They were light and spacious, oozing technology, with collaborative spaces and new-age furniture. Their design accommodated multiple learning styles for students with multiple needs. The question is, have they facilitated the pedagogical changes obviously embedded in their design? Only limited evidence of any impact on teaching and learning exists, partly due to few good measurement instruments. But what is known mostly indicates intransience. Many teachers have resisted changing from established practices in these new spaces; they exhibit poor 'environmental competence' (Lackney, 2008), arguably driven by no mindset for change (Hattie, 2008).

While these structures are innovative, teaching within appears to mostly stay the same. The designers of the structure can't dictate the activities of those who inhabit it. Buildings, of themselves, are not a catalyst for change. The same can be said for curriculum. Like a building, it is just a structure to be inhabited. If it is badly designed and inappropriate to local needs, out of touch with its occupant's interests, it will stand largely under utilised.

A review of this doctoral study emphasizes that like dwellers in a building, students occupy curriculum – they become habitué of that space. They ignore aspirations of the architect (or curriculum writer) as to how it is supposed to be occupied. Students adapt the space according to their own needs, to create a sanctum to fit their own purposes. They go beyond engaging with curriculum, to occupying it like a structure, modifying and personalizing it knowing that while they must meet some curricular targets they can simultaneously build and occupy another reality within that structure – a heterotopia. Like the boys in this study, they turn the established, built curriculum into *genus loci*, the special places of their own that meets sophisticated cultural needs well beyond the designed intentions of the structure.

What does this teach us? Buildings can be impressive, but are just mechanisms for allowing teachers and students to do their work. Likewise, curriculum is just a mechanism, a framework, a document. It can't work for us – teachers must embrace it, modify it through program development to suit their particular student needs. It is within the complex and multifarious ways that teachers and students *inhabit* curriculum that lie the qualities that actually makes it 'work'.

This re-visit of a curriculum and gender-focused PhD thesis highlights that we can gain considerable insight into the lived experience of those who inhabit modern learning environments by exploring the previously hidden aspects of students occupying school spaces. In this context the word 'sophistication' was mentioned in the opening section, not to make any claim about this particular study, but to emphasise that one of the emerging discourses in learning environments research must be the socio-cultural. While we should continue to evaluate new school designs in terms of building performance, the curricular flexibility they allow, and (in rare cases) their impact on learning environments, exploring in greater detail their psychological aspects will only improve our holistic appreciation of the wonderful phenomenon of school space.

REFERENCES

- Bachelard, G. (1958/1994). *The poetics of space* (M. Jolas, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bem, S. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, (42) 155-162.
- Berlak, E., & Berlak, H. (1981). *Dilemmas of schooling*. New York: Methuen
- Pinar, W., Reynolds, W., Slattery, P. & Taubman, P. (1996). *Understanding curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

- de Botton, A. (2007). *The architecture of happiness*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Heterotopias. *Architecture, Movement, Continuity*, 5, 46-49.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles and practices*. London: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A meta-synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*: Routledge.
- Imms, W. (2000). Boys' rates of participation and achievement in International Baccalaureate Art Education. *Visual Art Research*, 26(1), 53-74.
- Imms, W. (2001). Multiple masculinities and the schooling of boys. *Canadian Journal of education*, 25(2), 152-166.
- Imms, W. (2003a). Boys doing art: Negotiating masculinities within art education. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/14907>.
- Imms, W. (2003b). Boys talk about "doing art": Some implications for masculinity discussion. *Australian Art Education*, 26(3), 29-37.
- Jackson, D. & Salisbury, J. (1996). Why should schools take boys seriously? *Gender and Education*, 8, 103-115.
- Lackney, J. (2008). Teacher environmental competence in elementary school environments. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 18(2), 133-158.
- LeCompte, M. & Priessle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Mac an Ghaill, M. (1996). *Understanding masculinities: Social relations and cultural arenas*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- O'Donoghue, D. (2006). Situating place and space in the making of masculinities in schools. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 3(1), 15-33.
- Reay, D. (1990). Working with boys. *Gender and education*, 2, 269-282.
- Skelton, C. (1997). Primary boys and hegemonic masculinities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18, 349-369.
- Terman, L. & Miles, C. (1936). *Sex and personality*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- van Manen, M. (1988). The relationship between research and pedagogy. *Contemporary curriculum discourses*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.