Building a Reading Culture in a Singapore School: Identifying Spaces for Change through a Socio-Spatial Approach

Chin Ee, Loh

chinee.loh@nie.edu.sg

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Abstract

Research tells us that reading is correlated to academic achievement but how do we motivate students to read? How can reading cultures be developed in schools? Through the case study of a government secondary school in Singapore, I examine how attention to the *invisible network of resources* that support reading can provide insight into students' resources for reading, both at home and in school. Additionally, I explain, through the mapping of the school library as a reading space, how a socio-spatial approach that maps the physical, social and affective spaces of the library can provide a framework for strategic and focused action to cultivate a school's reading culture.

KEYWORDS: readers, libraries, Singapore, *habitus*, reading culture

Research studies have shown the correlation between leisure reading and reading achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002; Samuels & Wu, 2001). In a comparative study of the reading practices of the Netherlands, China and South Africa, Broeder and Stokmans (2013) discovered that despite cultural and situational differences between the countries, one of the most important determinants for reading was a hedonic reading attitude, or the habit of reading for leisure. What this tells us is that one key factor for success in building in reading programmes is getting students to *want* to read, and not only read when they are told to. Thus, one criterion for schools attempting to cultivate a reading culture is to know that their students have developed a desire to read, and see reading as part of their identity. In classrooms and schools with strong reading cultures, children and adolescents should "author rich literate selves" and "want the life of a reader and envision that life for themselves" (Calkins, 2001, pp. 8-9).

Through the case study of one Singapore school, this article explores how we can build a strong reading culture in our schools by examining student identification as readers and the resources they have for becoming a reader. Through a school-wide survey, the library was located as a specific area that did not sufficiently support students' development of identities as readers. Thereafter, using a social-spatial approach, I mapped the physical, social and affective space of the school library to understand how a place typically associated with reading did not in actual fact support the building of a reading culture within the school, and to identify how to rethink the space of the library to support the school's efforts at building a reading culture.

Theoretical Perspectives

Becoming a Reader

One is not born a reader. Rather, one is socialized into reading and reading practices that become part of our identities as individuals and reading persons (Hicks, 2002). Through daily interaction

with and observation of adults in the community, children are socialized into different ways of "saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing" as part of their "identity kit" (Gee, 1996, p. 127). They learn to value reading (or not) and acquire particular reading preferences and practices, including gender and class perceptions and practices (Cherland, 1994; Moss, 2007; Twomey, 2007). Identity is seen here as a social construction, relational and subject to change. Understanding the relationship between reading and identity is important because teachers make decisions about learning based on how they see their students' identities and students' identification as particular types of persons have an impact upon their response to school practices (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Examining whether students identify themselves as readers or not, and understanding why they identify themselves in particular ways may help us to reconsider how to better help students engage with reading in specific school contexts.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* explains the process by which particular practices are inscribed or sedimented (Pahl, 2008) onto the identity of individuals. The *habitus* is

> the durably installed generative principle of *regular improvisations*… a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions."

The *habitus*, or an individual's life position, is a set of predispositions acquired by individuals through early upbringing. In the area of taste, it is manifested in "the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products" (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, a person's predispositions, which includes their affective responses, towards particular lifestyles are so ingrained as to be seen as a part of the person's personality and 'natural' preferences. An individual's identification as a reader and his

or her reading preferences and practices, which is often seen as a natural part of a person's identity, is in fact learned over a period of time.

In an earlier study of the reading practices of adolescent boys from an elite all-boys' school, I made visible the *habitus* of "good" readers by highlighting the various social networks that contributed to these boys' identification as readers. The *invisible network of resources* (see Figure 1) details the various resources that contributed to them seeing reading as very much part of their personalities and habits (Author, 2013).

Insert Figure 1. Invisible Network of Resources.

The network is invisible in that the boys were unaware of the many resources that they have had to encourage them towards reading (and reading particular kinds of books) as everyday practice. Like the middle-class children in Heath's (1986) study, these adolescent boys had been exposed to print-rich environments and learned ways with words that were conducive to learning to read and contributed to their eventual acquisition of school literacies. Understanding how reading identities and practices are created and generated provides a way for educators to understand how better to encourage individual students to read and to build a genuine reading culture in schools by highlighting the various nodes where resources may be lacking or made available to students within the school context. This network is used to guide the school-wide survey in the study.

A Socio-Spatial Approach to Reading

What is thus clear from research is that home and school are complementary ecologies within which there are various dynamically interacting parts that contribute to the development of the student as a reader. Yet, much reading intervention research tends to locate the student-as-problem, usually through the lenses of deficit theory (see Gorski, 2006; cf. Payne, 2005) rather than examining how the environment may or may not contribute to the building of a reading

identity. Instead of focusing on functional reading intervention strategies such as phonics and comprehension instruction, locating spaces for change within the school context may be a more fruitful or complementary strategy for rethinking reading intervention. Taking a socio-spatial approach, I suggest that attention to the social and spatial within individual school contexts can better help educators identify how the school's environment and affordances are helping students to learn and to want to become readers or not. Mapping specific spaces within the school becomes a way to examine the dominant discourses that shape space and the use of space to provide insight into previously invisible spaces of practice that may hinder the cultivation of reading identities within the school.

Spatial arrangements mediate social relations, and the way space is used and organized signifies the importance of particular spaces and the social relations within that space.

> Everybody knows what is meant when we speak of a 'room' in an apartment, the 'corner' of the street a 'marketplace'… These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish, but not to isolate, particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. Their interrelations are ordered in a specific way. Might it not be a good idea, therefore, first to make an inventory of them, and then to try and ascertain what paradigm gives them their meaning, what syntax governs their organization? (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 16)

Drawing on Lefebvre, a socio-spatial approach requires attention to the design and organization of space to understand the rationale that governs their organization, and understand how the organization may affect social relations in a specific space. Just as political, cultural, and economic forces shape school practices and school practices are connected to networks of practices outside schools (Nespor, 1997), the organization of the physical, social and affective spaces within the school has much to say about the organization of the school and of knowledge.

Being attentive to how space affects social relationships and vice versa allows for insight into how space can be better organized to facilitate the construction of reading identities within the school.

Using the school library as an example in point, I map the organization of the physical, social and affective space of the library over a period of time to provide insight into how and why the library in this particular instance serves to encourage reading within the school or not. Mapping the *physical space* of the library highlights the resources that are available as well as the organization of the resources. Mapping the *social space* of the library requires attention to the kinds of social behavior observed in the library, and mapping the *affective space* requires a commitment to understanding how students feel about the library. Taken together, this three-dimensional snapshot of the school library can reveal effective spaces as well as spaces for improvement within the specific school context.

The Research Context

The Singapore Context

In Singapore where English is the official language of business and education (Silver, 2005) and the only subject required for entry into institutions of higher learning, schools are expected to help students acquire English proficiency for higher education and work purposes. Though there was a lack of focus on reading and writing instruction in the 1990s (Cheah, 2002), since there has been renewed focus on helping students build reading habits to develop "a strong foundation in the English Language" (Ministry of Education, 2008-2014), especially at the primary level with STELLAR (STrategies for English Language Learning And Reading) introducing policies and strategies to improve reading in schools. This attention to reading has been slow to filter up to the secondary school level where schools or teachers often rely on their own individual

knowledge and efforts to attempt to improve the reading culture within their own schools. More research is required to help schools identify areas that they can work on to encourage and improve student reading.

The School Context

This study is set in Tembusu Secondary School (pseudonyms are used throughout the paper), a co-educational Singapore Secondary School. It is a typical government school in that most of its students are from the district, with students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) to middle SES families. 40% of the students come from English-speaking homes and the rest of the students come from homes where their Mother Tongue such as Chinese or Malay is the dominant language used.

In 2009, the newly appointed Principal to the school pledged to raise the dipping academic scores of the students and enlisted the help of her newly appointed English Head of Department (HOD) to set up a reading programme. In 2011, the Extended Reading Programme where students were given time to read fiction and non-fiction during school hours was instituted across all levels to improve students' literacy skills through acquisition of "information capital" (Neuman & Celano, 2012). The books for the Reading Programme were rotated on 6-weekly basis, and students had 20 minutes every Thursday set aside for reading in school to supplement their reading of the book at home. Students were taught to and expected to write reflections when they completed reading each book. In addition to the reading programme, every Monday was dedicated to the reading of and discussion of articles from the *Straits Times*, a daily newspaper. Other initiatives such as inviting writers into school for assembly talks were organized to build a reading culture that would support academic achievement.

Method

The research utilized a mixed methods case study approach. The case study approach allows us to "understand complex social phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 2). Situating it within a single school context allows for detailed examination of the reading practices of students, to explore how reading within the field of one school is valued and practised. The research questions are:

1. What are the reading identities and practices of students in one Singapore government school?
2. What social networks, affordances and opportunities are students given at home and at school to support the development of a reading identity and encourage reading as habitual practice?

The first part of the study consisted of a school-wide descriptive survey of the reading practices of students, and how they perceive themselves as readers and attention. The survey used the various nodes in the *invisible network of resources* to understand the *habitus* of the students. A total of 1,l13 students answered the survey, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions, during class-allocated time. In the second part of the study, a reading map of the school was constructed in line with the socio-spatial approach towards reading. More specifically, I focused on the school library as an area of interest, and visited three times over a period of two months to map out reading spaces and usage (e.g., doing homework, using the computer) over the day and over two months. Finally, I also conducted close analyses of 12 students from two different classes, and interviewed them three times over a period of six months to understand their reading habits and practices.

Survey Findings

In this section, I work through the survey results to understand how students perceive themselves as readers, and identify, through the invisible network of resources framework, possible spaces for reading intervention at school level.

Students' Identities as Readers

The survey results showed that while the majority of students said that they liked to read (66%), fewer students were eager to identify themselves as readers (40%). However, in line with much current research (Gabriel, Allington, & Billen, 2012; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), students' qualitative answers suggests that most students (even those that did not identify themselves as readers) see reading as a viable leisure activity *if* they find a suitable book, and that interest is a key motivator for reading. In addition, students saw the value of reading whether they liked to read or not, demonstrated by the 79.3% who agreed that reading was important to them. This desire to be a reader may be motivated by the fact that reading is perceived as an approved leisure activity within the school context, and that it contributes to the display of an academically-inclined self.

The students were probed further through an open-ended question (Q5. Please explain why reading is important to you). Students tended towards a functional (78.5%) rather than aesthetic view of reading when asked to explain why reading was important to them. The term functional suggests a pragmatic, instrumentalist view whereas an aesthetic view towards reading suggests reading for pleasure rather than obtaining information (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Insert Table 1. Sample responses for functional and aesthetic views towards reading.

Clearly, the students had absorbed the official discourses of reading as an important activity for academic achievement, whether through the school, teachers, parents or peers. Ultimately, this also meant that students measured the efficacy of reading on their academic grades by how well

they did in terms of their language skills (e.g., improvement in vocabulary and presentation skills) and/or examinations (e.g., writing better compositions) rather than how much they enjoyed reading. Students had clearly internalised the school's functional discourses towards reading, and were persuaded of the value of reading, even though they may not find the motivation to engage in reading themselves.

Home and School Resources for Reading

Family and Peer Reading Practices

Studies of socialization also demonstrate how children pick up attitudes towards texts and different ways of reading through their interaction with family members who serve as role models for their own reading and literacy practices (Cherland, 1994; Heath, 1986). Since it is really the implicit norm (e.g., observing parents reading, visiting the library) rather than explicit norms (e.g., parents telling child to read) that counts for encouraging reading students (Broeder & Stokmans, 2013), the survey questions focused on what kinds of reading practices students observed at home to understand their home reading practices.

54.6% of the students saw their parents reading at home, though they mostly reported seeing parents read the newspapers. Fewer students reported seeing their parents read "how to" books such as cookbooks and photography books, magazines, religious books, biographies and novels, both Chinese and English. Some students elaborated and wrote that they had never seen their parents read. 49.4% saw their siblings reading, and this was mostly fiction. 36.2% reported seeing extended family members such as grandparents and cousins reading.

The presence of these implicit norms of family reading that contributed to the cultivation of a "good" reader came out strongly in my previous research (Author, 2013) where all six readers shared examples of observing parents and siblings or extended relatives reading, or engaging them in reading-related activities (e.g., visiting the library, reading children's books to

them on a regular basis). This snapshot provided by the descriptive survey showed that less than 50% of the students at Tembusu Secondary were socialized into reading at home through the examples of their family members. Additionally, students' functional approach towards reading may also have been implicitly influenced by their parents' reading habits that gravitated towards the reading of newspapers for information.

Students who are readers tend to talk about books (Strommen & Mates, 2004). As such, book recommendations can serve as markers of social activity around books, and are used in this study as an indication of whether the students are immersed into the culture of reading in their various social networks at home or in school. What stood out in the data was the fact that while 78.5% of the students agreed that they saw their friends reading, only 32.4% had recommended books to friends or vice versa. Additionally, only 21.4% reported recommending books to family members or had family members recommend books to them.

Insert Figure 2. Peer Reading Practices.

What the data suggests is that the school-wide reading programme has been effective in ensuring students read and read widely. However, it did not necessarily mean that students embraced a culture of reading outside of school-imposed reading. A large number of students continued to view reading as procedural engagement (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) where they were required to read for school purposes.

From the qualitative responses, it was clear that many students appreciated the fact that the school's reading programme encouraged them to read more, to read a wide range and gave them time to read in school. However, many students suggested that there should be choice. Their request for choice can be understood when we examine their primary school reading practices where quite a few of them had already read the books in primary school, especially for the 56% who had reading programmes in their primary schools. The survey highlighted the range

of students that came to Tembusu Secondary, including their varied exposure to reading prior to joining Tembusu Secondary.

Media impact on reading

More than 25% of the students reported reading a book prior to or after other forms of media engagement. For example, while *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010) was on the reading list for Secondary 2 students, many students from Secondary 1 to Secondary 5 (between 13 to 17 years old) listed books in *The Hunger Games* series as books they had read in the last six months. The popularity of the book can be attributed to the movie adaptation, and the amount of press the novel and movie received. Visits to bookstores saw the books prominently displayed, and a check on the National Library Board in December 2013 reserved list showed a long waiting list for the books. Reading these books provides for something to talk about with their peers (Gabriel et al., 2012), and was a form of social capital among peers. The positive hype about the movie also aroused students' interest, as Sharon shared in her reading log.

> *Lydia asked me to watch the first movie [of the Hunger Games series], and after I watched it, I wanted to read the book. I started on the first book and finished the series during the school holidays. I really like it.*

Students also reported that they went online to get more information about characters in books or movies, wrote fan fiction, and played games that were movie-related. What this demonstrates to educators is that reading is very much tied up with other multimodal practices, and that attention should be paid to the inter-textual dimension of the reading experience. Given the power of popular culture and media, educators should draw on popular culture and multimedia to engage students in reading as one aspect of literacy learning (Duff, 2002; Power, Wilhelm, & Chandler, 1997).

Libraries and bookstores

A large number of students (68.8%) visit the public library, out of which 33.8% visited regularly (at least once a month). This is reflective of the well-equipped public libraries run by the National Library Board strategically located in all housing districts in Singapore. However, in contrast, only 40.9% visit the more accessible school library, out of which 21.8% were regular visitors.

Insert Figure 3: Public and School Library Visits

Additionally, more students borrow books from the public library but seem to perceive the school library as a place to do their homework and chat with their friends more than a place to read and borrow books.

Because of the proximity of the school library, I had expected more students to access the school library. The results from the survey highlighted the need to explore why the school library space was utilized less than the public library, and also why it was utilized differently.

Mapping the Library as a Key Reading Space

Based on the analysis of the survey data collected, it was clear that more information about reading within the school needed to be collected. Taking a socio-spatial perspective, I decided to map the physical, social and affective geography of the school's reading spaces to further understand and define areas where the school could work towards encouraging the construction of students' reading identities. I focus on the school library as place which is typically associated with reading but under-utilized in the Tembusu school context to explore how the space of the school library can be better utilized to build a reading culture.

I focus on the school library as a microcosm of interconnected practices and ideologies (Nespor, 1997). The attention to the *physical, social and affective spaces of practice* is an

attempt to describe, breakdown and examine taken-for-granted practices that may reveal the misalignment of official intent and actual practice, and gain insight into how and why the library was under-utilized.

Mapping the Physical Space

Organization of the physical space highlights how social relations are organized and the kinds of social relations prioritized in the specific space of this school library (Lefebvre, 1991). Tucked in a quiet corner on the first floor of the school, the Tembusu Media Resource Library is often ignored by students who walk past it on their way from class towards the cafeteria and vice versa. Lights dimmed to save electricity sometimes give the impression that the library is not opened though the occasional student that walks in reminds one that this is a space that is actually open to students.

The library had the appearances of a library with a good selection of fiction and non-fiction books which are reviewed at the end of every year. There is a single display shelf with copies of magazines such as *Reader's Digest, Newsweek, National Geographic* and *Present Perfect*, a locally-produced current affairs magazine for students beside a sofa. Although the library is called "Media Resource Library", the space is mainly occupied by print material with some media resource located in cupboards behind the librarian's desk. Laptops were kept under lock and key, and could only be drawn out for class use when teachers brought their students to class to use the library. There were tables and chairs for students to do their work, and the arrangement of these tables and chairs could be shifted depending on what the library was being used for that day.

Mapping the Social Space

What stood out in the organization of space in the library was the arrangement of the tables in the library in ways that were conducive to holding classes in the library. Tables were typically arranged in a square or with students seated in rows facing the teacher seated in the front. The tables arranged in a large square or in rows facilitated the impression of the library as classroom space, borne out by the observations of the social space of the library. I often observed classes come into the library during class time to complete their writing assignments. The laptops were usually reserved for this purpose rather than research work, thus suggesting the library is meant for completion of work rather than research. Moreover, the location of computers for research was not in the library, but near the front office, thus signalling that the library was not a space to look for information. The lack of a trained teacher-librarian due to staffing limitations within the school also meant that the clerical librarian could do little to help the students with their research, unless a teacher was at hand. The social activities that took place in the library seem to convey the idea that the library was a space meant for enforced written or class work rather than a space for reading or the acquisition of critical information literacy skills (Kapitzke, 2003; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005).

The feeling that the school library was under-utilized was confirmed during observations. During their breaks or after school, I typically observed no more than 10 students come into the library, usually to chat or to do their work. Some students browsed and borrowed books. Three times out of a week when I was observing, the library was used for meetings or to host visitors after school, thus limiting student access. This suggests that the space was not prioritized as a reading or research space. Instead, it was extra air-conditioned space that the school could use

for other more important purposes. It was not a space that students could ensure would be available to them on a regular basis.

Mapping the Affective Space

The way the space was used affected students' perception of the library their affective connection to the library. Desire motivates and drives actions. At the same time, space can motivate desire and action, as research on reading and motivation from both sociocultural (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) and educational psychology (Gambrell, 2013) perspectives have demonstrated. However, an examination of students' responses to the school library showed that little attention was paid to students' emotional responses to the library.

No one goes in and out of the library. There's nothing there. It's boring.

(Edward, Tembusu, reader, 14 years old)

In my interviews with 12 students, the word 'boring' occurs at least six times when asked to describe the library. Even students who liked to read saw the library as unattractive dead space. The lack of activity (people entering and leaving the library) reinforced students' perception that the library was not an attractive place to visit.

You only go to the library if you have detention! I never go to the library!

(Cass, Tembusu, non-reader, 14 years old)

It did not help that the library was also seen as a negative space, since it was the place students were sent to for detention. The *social* life of the library was constrained by the spatial arrangements and corresponding affective responses to the library.

The library needs a complete revamp, with beanbags and all.

(Kate, Tembusu, reader, 14 years old)

While functional, the library was not designed in a way to draw students into the space or to linger there. An overhaul of the space as well as the mindsets governing the perception of space would be required to change students' attitudes towards the library space.

The mapping exercise revealed that the library space could be better aligned with the reading objectives of the school. While attention has been paid to students' reading preferences with yearly revisions of the book selection in the library, less attention has been paid to the library as a social space for reading and for creating excitement about books. Given the competing demands of after-school curricular activities and students' own access to other forms of entertainment outside of the library, it was unsurprising that the library was not perceived as an after-school activity space, except for the studious or those who had been forced by teachers to stay back to complete their work. The school may thus need to think about how the library can better support a reading culture, whether through the reorganization of the library space, organization of book clubs, moving screenings and author talks, through thematic book displays or other strategies for student engagement.

Conclusion

The cultivation of a reading culture in schools requires in part student identification as readers who are able and willing to engage in reading beyond school-enforced readings. What this study demonstrates is examining reading from a social perspective through attention to the *invisible network of resources* allows for a nuanced understanding of the differentiated resources or lack of resources unique to the context of a specific school in order to effect systematic change. A socio-spatial approach that maps out the physical, social and affective dimensions of specific school spaces provides a way of "seeing" (Eisner, 1998), of gaining insight into how particular spaces within schools may be better utilized to support the cultivation of reading identities in specific school contexts. Beyond the school library, examining the spaces of school from a socio-

spatial perspective may prove productive for identifying how best to provide an environment for building a reading culture in one's school.

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Table Captions

Table 1. Sample responses for functional and hedonic view towards reading.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Invisible network of resources.

Figure 2. Peer reading practices.

Figure 3. Public and school library visits.