

Beyond Crisis Narratives: Literacy, Gender Identity, and Boys' Wellbeing in the Digital Age

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Reimagining Boyhood Conference, January 2026

2. Reframing the 'Boys and Literacy Crisis'



BOY'S CAN'T READ
BOY'S FALLING BEHIND
BOY'S FAILING AT READING



Boys read differently across contexts
Statistical trends ≠ individual boys
Identity and engagement are contextual
Digital spaces shift the landscape

Key message

The "crisis" framing is part of the problem—it naturalizes deficit views that become self-fulfilling prophecies

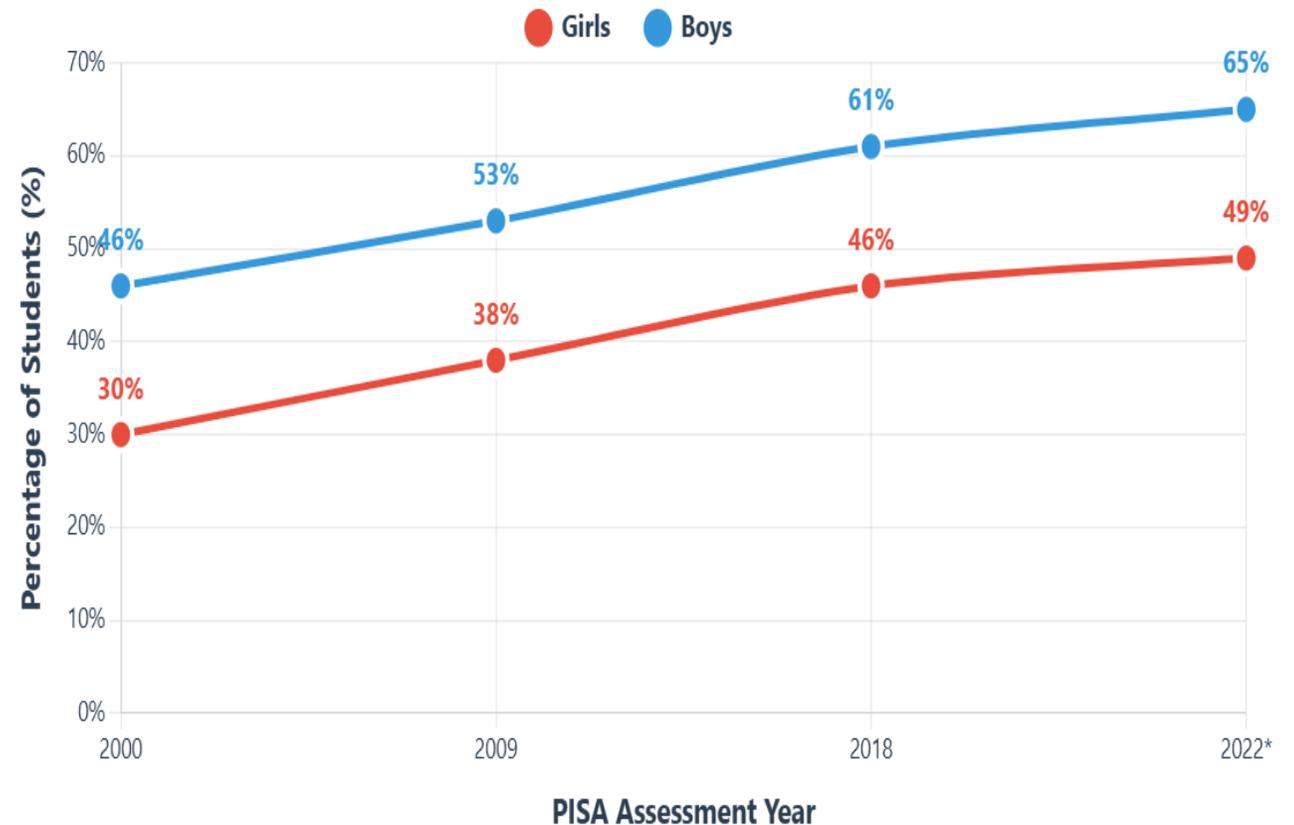
PISA data shows the decline in Australian students' reading achievement has occurred alongside a decline in their enjoyment of reading (OECD 2023).

Analysis of PISA data shows adolescents' enjoyment of reading is a predictor of reading achievement. Enjoyment of reading can predict as much as 18% of variation in reading with the biggest links evident in Australia (Cheema, 2018).

In countries like Spain, the Czech Republic, Israel, Malta, and Iran where there are no significant differences in achievement between boys and girls, according to the PIRLS 2021 report (Mullis et al., 2023).

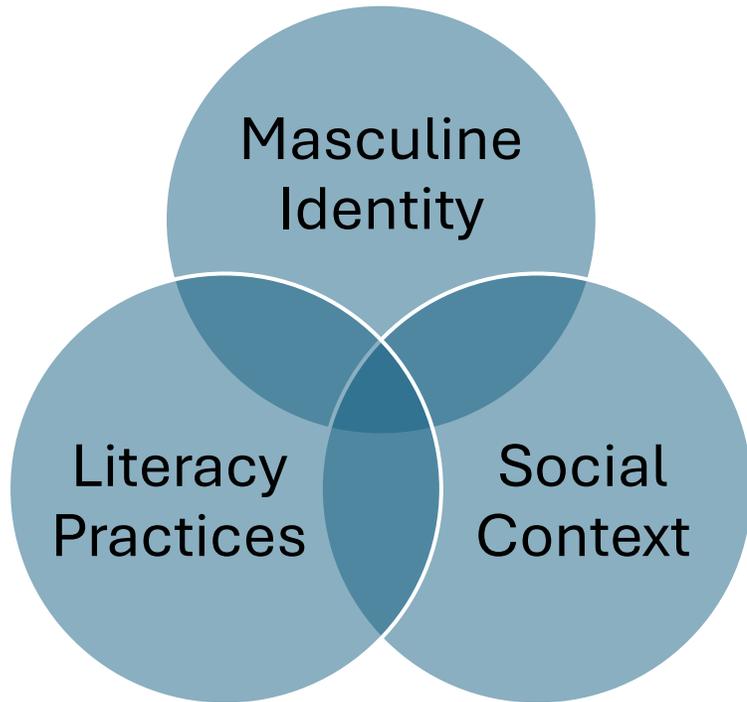
Declining Reading Enjoyment in Australian Students

Percentage who agree: "I read only if I have to" (PISA Data) | *2022 estimated from trend



3. How Gender Identity Shapes Literacy Practices

Reading as Identity Work



Masculine Identities → Literacy Practices → Social Contexts

Two of my best friends love reading, Matthew loves, Alex loves reading, Johnny loves reading. Jason loves reading. Most of my friends that are friends love reading. (Jack, Year 4)

Most of the kids in our class they are not big on story books, because they're not about gaming, because the libraries don't have much about gaming, they just read about gaming. (Connor, Year 6)

Key message

Boys often read extensively but in ways schools don't recognize or value.

4. The Digital Shift: Opportunities for Boys' Literacy Engagement

Digital texts show potential for narrowing the gender gaps in reading (Clarke & Picton, 2019).



Gaming



eBooks



Graphic novels



Social media



Forums

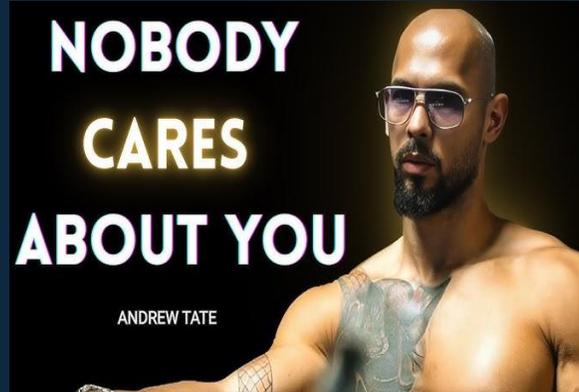
Key message

Digital contexts disrupt traditional gendered literacy patterns—creating new entry points for engagement

5. The Dark Side: Online Influences and Masculine Ideologies

Positive Digital Engagement

- Productive digital literacy spaces
- Collaborative learning communities
- Educational content
- Supportive gaming forums
- Interest-based reading (TikTok)
- Digital literacy skill development



Harmful Online Content

- Manosphere content (Andrew Tate)
- Incel forums
- Misogynistic messaging
- Conspiracy theories
- Violence/extremism
- Radicalization

After only 5 days of TikTok use, there is a fourfold increase in the level of misogynistic content being presented for boys on the “For You” page where algorithms privilege more extreme material, and through increased usage, users are gradually exposed to more misogynistic ideologies (Regehr et al. 2024).

Key message

We can't ignore risks, but panic responses don't help—we need to equip boys with **critical thinking tools**



6. Critical Digital Literacy as a Wellbeing Strategy

1. Source Evaluation (credibility, bias, authorship)
2. Algorithmic Awareness (how content is curated/personalized)
3. Multimodal Meaning-Making (navigating text, image, video)
4. Identity-Conscious Reading (recognizing how content targets/shapes identity)

Young people urgently need literacies that go beyond simple 'skills', as they require evaluative approaches to knowledge to filter social messaging laden with gender ideologies (Cho et al. 2024; Currie & Kelly, 2022; Scholes et al. 2025).

Key message

Critical digital literacy is both academic skill and protective factor for mental health/wellbeing



7: What This Means for Practice

For Educators

Recognize diverse literacies (gaming, online forums, multimedia)

Teach critical digital evaluation explicitly

Create identity-safe reading spaces

Connect texts to boys' interests and lives

For Leaders & Policy-Makers:

Move beyond standardized print-based assessments

Invest in digital literacy curriculum

Support teacher professional learning in critical digital pedagogy

Challenge deficit narratives in policy documents

Key message

We have evidence about what works—we need implementation and support.



8. Moving Forward

We need A Research-Informed Agenda

Current State: Crisis narratives, binary thinking, deficit approach

Research Evidence: Gender as identity practice, digital opportunities, critical literacy as wellbeing strategy

Future Directions:

Intersectional approaches

AI and emerging technologies

Teacher education reform

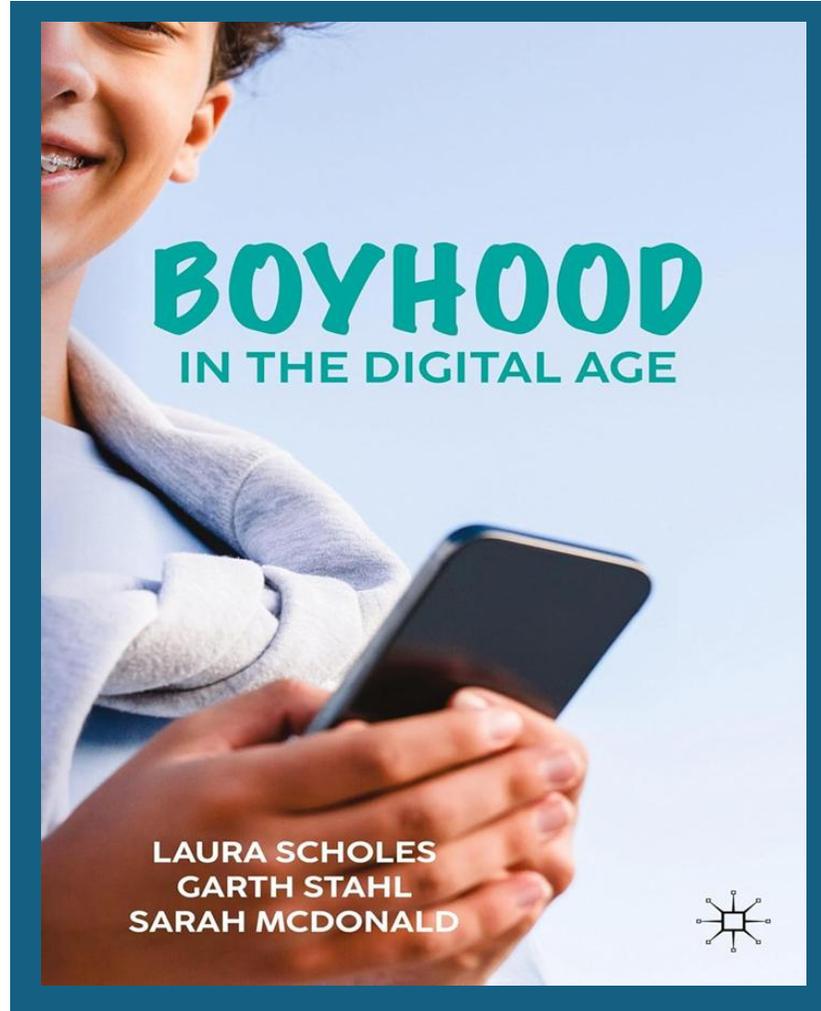
Policy transformation

Key message

The evidence exists—now we need collective will to reimagine how we support boys' literacy and wellbeing



9: Boyhood in the Digital Age: A Resource for Action



Boyhood in the Digital Age

Laura Scholes, Garth Stahl & Sarah McDonald

NEW DECEMBER 2025

Key features

- 8 chapters addressing digital risks & opportunities
- Evidence-based, not alarmist
- Practical strategies for educators & families
- Critical literacy as empowerment

Released alongside Australia's social media ban

Moving beyond fear toward understanding and action

Interested in Assessing Reading Cultures and Student Critical Skills in Your School?

Free online survey for your students with a report on your data delivered to you.

What you get:

What you need to do:

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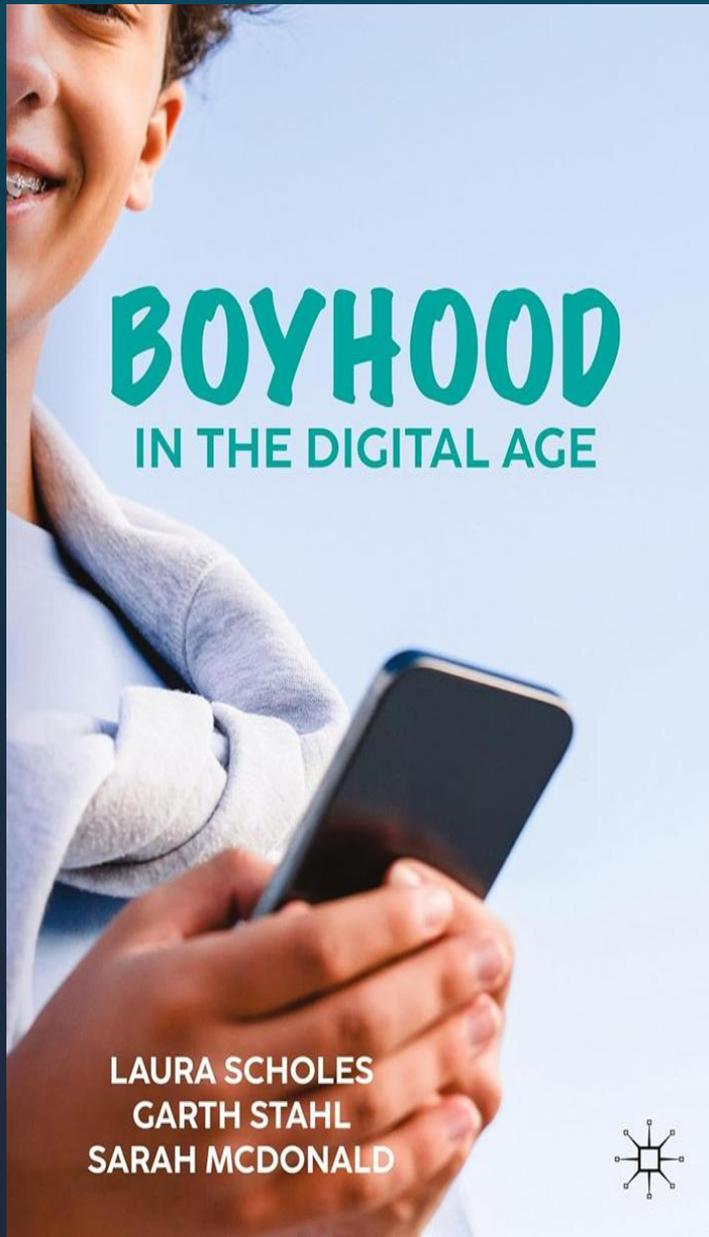
Conclusion & Questions



Key Takeaways:

1. Boys' literacy engagement is an identity practice, not a cognitive deficit
2. Digital contexts offer new opportunities for engagement when approached critically
3. Critical digital literacy supports both academic success and wellbeing
4. Evidence-based practice requires moving beyond crisis narratives
5. Collaboration and curiosity—not sensationalism—create pathways forward

Supporting boys' literacy wellbeing isn't about "fixing" boys—it's about transforming systems, pedagogies, and beliefs



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