

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Background to the Study

The goal of this study is to gain further insights into teenagers' reading practices in the digital age. Drawing on the findings from a small qualitative study involving 14 teenagers from Western Australia, this dissertation examines the ways in which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital offers a productive approach to reflecting critically on how reading is practised and valued in situated contexts. Many researchers, myself included, are drawn to Bourdieu's work as it offers a framework to help explicate how cultural practices are stratified by social class (O'Donoghue 2011, 191). This study examines how each participant's reading choices are shaped by, and shape, group "habitus", a term used by Bourdieu (1984) to describe how a set of dispositions of an individual or group, influences actions within a social space (170).<sup>1</sup>

Across cultures, there is broad consensus that it is important to inculcate a love of reading in children as it has been claimed that children who can read enjoy reading, and so read more, which consequently makes them better readers. These stronger readers also achieve academic success (De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000; Parlette and Howard 2010; Sullivan 2001; Tramonte and Willms 2010), which in turn leads to a wider range of options beyond their compulsory school years. Longitudinal studies report that children who learn how to read from an early age and are supported in their reading at home, are more successful at school (Sparks, Patton and Murdoch 2014; Stanovich, Cunningham and West 1998). Thus, in Western Australia (WA), for example, early reading practices are promoted and supported by *Better Beginnings*, a state- and corporate-funded organisation, through initiatives such as gifting newborns with a children's board book and encouraging parents to take their children

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<sup>1</sup> These questions are also addressed in the creative component of this thesis.

to rhyme-time and story time sessions that are often held in community libraries.<sup>2</sup> While there are differing opinions on how large the gap between readers and non-readers grows over time, researchers agree that rarely do poorer readers catch up with their well-read counterparts (Rigney 2010, 63). This so-called “Matthew Effect” is documented in multiple studies across disciplines concerning reading (Cunningham and Stanovich 1997; 2001; Nuttall 1996).<sup>3</sup>

In Australian primary and secondary schools, reading is regularly assessed by means of standardised tests.<sup>4</sup> Not only do students take part in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but since 2008 their reading competency is tested in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, in the National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) along with other skills policymakers deem “essential” in school and life (NAPLAN 2016).<sup>56</sup> From 2011, Year 4 students’ reading abilities have also been measured in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), a study run by Boston College, on a five-year cycle (Thomson et al. 2017, viii).<sup>7 8</sup> Individual schools can also choose to benchmark students’ reading competency by enrolling them in the fee-paying International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS) English assessments, developed by the University of New South Wales’s global branch. Since 2016, due to demands by tertiary institutions, employers and the community for

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<sup>2</sup> The five regions involved in *Better Beginnings* 2004 pilot program were Gosnells, Mandurah, Midland, Carnarvon, Halls Creek and Kalgoorlie (Better Beginnings 2017); these are socio-economically disadvantaged areas in metropolitan and regional Western Australia.

<sup>3</sup> The “Matthew Effect” is a term used in sociology to describe how inequality gaps widen. It was first used by Robert Merton with reference to a verse from the New Testament; "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (Matt. 25:29 in Rigney 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Until 2009, the first year for secondary school students in all schools was Year 8. From 2015, the first-year intake in all secondary schools in WA is Year 7. As such, some schools include Year 10 in their senior school structure. However, in this dissertation “lower secondary school” or “lower school” indicates the first year of high school to Year 10, and “senior secondary school” or “senior school” refers to Year 11 and 12.

<sup>5</sup> See also Appendix I for list of acronyms used in this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> The transition from paper-based to online testing begins in May 2018 (NAPLAN 2018).

<sup>7</sup> PIRL also includes ePIRL which tests fourth-grade students' ability to read, comprehend, and interpret online information (see Mullins and Martin 2015).

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, one class of Year 4 students in 286 schools, in all school sectors took the PIRL test. All Year 4 indigenous students in the selected schools sat the test (Thomson et al. 2017).

“greater assurances” of the literacy and numeracy standards of secondary school graduates (SCSA 2018), WA students who fail to achieve Band 8 in their Year 9 NAPLAN tests must pass the Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (OLNA) before they can graduate from secondary school.<sup>9</sup>

Reading, as one component of standardised testing, is thus a high-stakes activity for individual students and their communities. Although NAPLAN was introduced to ensure a more equitable education system (Thompson and Harbaugh 2012, 301), there have been unintended consequences. For example, NAPLAN results are uploaded online in a format that allows the public to compare schools’ results, which influences parental school choice (Thompson and Harbaugh 2012, 300).<sup>10</sup> As such, NAPLAN is both directly and inadvertently linked to funding because families who have the financial resources flee schools that are perceived as less desirable.<sup>11</sup> Real estate values are consequently inflated in the local-intake zones of schools that are perceived as superior (Danielsen, Fairbanks and Zhao 2015).<sup>12</sup> Critiques of standardised high-stakes testing identify it a symptom of “neoliberal logic,” where

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<sup>9</sup> Although there are alternative pathways to university, most university-track students are admitted according to their Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). The aggregate used to calculate a student’s ATAR in WA is the sum of a student’s top four scaled scores that comply with subject combination rules, plus 10% of the best score in a Language other than English (LOTE) subject, and 10% of the scaled scores in Maths Methods and Maths specialist (TISC 2017). All students must study at least one English subject, and universities require English competency regardless of entry pathways. However, each institution sets its own entry requirement for alternative pathways.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://myschool.edu.au>

<sup>11</sup> In Western Australia non-government schools receive per capita grants (Department of Education 2018a)

<sup>12</sup> Since July 2016, students from any country who are over six-years-old are eligible for entry into any Australian school as fee-paying international student under subclass student visa 500 if they have a guardian accompanying them. (Department of Home Affairs 2018). At the time of writing this thesis, there were no studies on how these additional actors in the marketised education system change or affect in school reading practices.

key infrastructure including education has been commodified and monetised (Chang and McLaren 2018, 3).<sup>1314</sup>

British researchers Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown (2014) report a strong link between frequency of reading and academic success with the caveat that not all forms of reading reap the same academic rewards.<sup>15</sup> The authors classify reading materials by genres which are aligned to a low, middle or highbrow status. Brown and Sullivan (2014) find that reading materials that are middlebrow or lowbrow do not reap the same academic outcomes as the reading of highbrow material, such as literary fiction.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, their study finds that lowbrow fiction readers and non-readers made the same progress in terms of vocabulary gain (Sullivan and Brown 2014, 18). Their study also identifies a distinction between the reading habits of elite university graduates and those from other universities, and reports that almost half of elite Russell Group graduates like to read “contemporary literary fiction” compared to only 30 percent of other university graduates (Sullivan and Brown 2014, 5).<sup>17</sup>

The value of reading has been quantified in earlier studies that find a link between reading and academic outcomes. Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich’s research on reading and academic outcomes is based on the premise that reading particular print texts exposes

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<sup>13</sup> The term “neoliberal” was first used to describe the ideas advocated by the Mount Pèlerin Society, a group of intellectuals who met in 1947 to discuss the “fate of classical liberalism” (Marangos 2009, 367). The neoliberal project had its origins in the work of economist and philosopher Friedrich von Hayek and economist Ludwig von Mises in the 1920s and 1930s (Davies 2014, 3), spreading from Austria into London, Germany, the rest of Europe and the USA over the following decades. Since the 1970s its impacts have been felt variously across the world, in all spheres of life. William Davies describes neoliberalism as “the disenchantment of politics by economics” (2014, 4); and Wendy Brown defines it as “an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life” (2015, 30). Brown also posits that in the West, in recent years, education is formulated “as primarily valuable to human capital development, where human capital is what the individual, the business world, and the state seeks to enhance in order to maximize competitiveness” (2015, 176).

<sup>14</sup> Chang and McLaren point to how, under neoliberal policies, the “social state” is replaced by a “consumer state” where “corporate reformers” control education (2018, 4).

<sup>15</sup> This longitudinal study is part of the multidisciplinary *1970 British Cohort Study* (BCS70) which has been collecting data about participants since they were born in one particular week in 1970.

<sup>16</sup> The origins of the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” are controversial because these were used in phrenology, a late nineteenth-century practice that involved the measuring of head shape and size to infer brain size and intelligence, a practice that later led Nazis to develop their racist theories (Meisel 2009, 3).

<sup>17</sup> See Russell Group Universities (2018).

students to infrequently used words not found in “lexically impoverished” oral language (2001, 139). The study used existing indices that measured a text (both oral and written) based on its lexical and syntactic complexity. This form of assigning a value to texts has since been developed, commercialised, and renamed a “Lexile value” which has been promoted to educators as a tool to “personalise learning”, “measure student growth” and report to parents (“Understanding Lexile measures” 2018).

Underlying much existing reading research and many programs are what Canadian-Australian education theorist terms “folk theories of literacy” (Carrington and Luke 1997, 97; Luke 1995); the simplistic belief that reading will improve one’s life opportunities, and that a successful reader is one who achieves set benchmarks in “decoding, summarising and comprehending ‘large chunks of text’” (Alvermann 2001, 680). These presuppositions are problematic because they fail to acknowledge newer understandings of literacy and reading as a socio-cultural practice. Literacy no longer indicates one’s ability to decode and write words, but a broader set of situated social practices (Freebody and Luke 1990; Luke 2012).<sup>18</sup> The definition of literacy has shifted from the concept of basic literacy, the ability to read and write short simple sentences about daily life (UNESCO 2004, 12), to functional literacy, the idea that literate societies provide opportunities for the free exchange of information and lifeline learning (UNESCO 2006, 159), and critical literacy, which is linked to mastery of a skillset that facilitates the claim to and extension of human rights (UNESCO 2006).<sup>19</sup> Not achieving some degree of competence in literacy, of which reading is only one element, also limits one’s ability to participate in the social, economic, and political development of a nation (UNESCO 2006) and contribute to civil society (Cullinan 2000). Therefore, reports of “aliteracy”, those

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<sup>18</sup> James Freebody and Allan Luke were part of the 1990s “New London Group”, a collective of educators whose work on multiliteracies challenged existing understandings and teaching of literacy.

<sup>19</sup> See United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948).

who can read but choose not to (Brinda 2011; McKenna et al., 2012; Merga 2014; Pitcher 2007), have much wider implications beyond an individual's academic performance.

The definition of reading itself is contested due to the digital revolution of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which has changed the way we now consume and produce texts. Laura Singer and Patricia Alexander (2016, 1060) express their disappointment in the lack of explicit and implicit definitions of reading in their systematic review of reading comprehension across both print and digital formats. They suggest that the lack of explanation of what digital reading is in these studies reflects researchers' perception that the difference between traditional and digital forms of reading is due to the "context of the process" rather than the "reconceptualization of the basic construct" itself (Singer and Alexander 2017, 1060). Many earlier studies on reading in digital formats explore the possible implications of these newer reading practices. Some studies predicted that digital formats might lead to even more fragmented forms of reading (Liu 2005, 700) and others argued that the disruption to traditional reading practices would lead to more superficial ones and a dumbing down of society (Baurlein 2008). However, other researchers predicted that print based reading would still exist as they believed that in-depth reading would still require paper texts (Liu 2005; Sellen and Harper 2003) and that in an increasingly complex world people would continue to read in paper format (Liu 2005). Yet others argued that traditional reading practices would be limited to an elite minority and most people would only read for functional purposes (Griswold et al. 2005). These early twenty-first century studies, however, predate the invention of the Amazon Kindle in 2007, the smartphone in 2008, and the iPad in 2010.<sup>20</sup> More recent studies report that traditional book reading practices co-exist with digital reading practices (Perrini 2016; Zickhur et al. 2012).

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<sup>20</sup> Tablets such as Samsung's GRiD, IBM's ThinkPad, Apple's Newton and the Palm Pilot were available to consumers in the late 1980s, and early to mid 1990s (Nield 2016). Arguably, however, it was the Apple company's iPad that popularised the use of tablet technology.

As traditional definitions of reading do not adequately encapsulate contemporary reading practices, reader advisory researcher Laurel Tarulli (2014) argues for a new definition of reading. Tarulli’s definition—and the one that I adopt in this thesis—conceptualises reading as a practice that involves not only digital versions of traditional texts, but a “mash-up of formats” (2014, 297), including audio books, computer games, and online articles. Tarulli defines reading as the “interaction with text in a variety of formats for a variety of purposes” (2014, 297) and challenges the idea that reading is on the decline (298), pointing out that digital technology has enabled more people to access reading materials they would otherwise have not been able to afford. All books, including texts books, are cheaper in digital format and more easily accessible to populations who did not have the resources to buy or access books (Baron, Calixte and Havewala 2017, 591; UNESCO 2014). Technology has allowed greater access to previously inaccessible texts and this has resulted in significantly increased international literacy rates both the developed and developing world (UNESCO 2014).

The impacts of reading have also been examined and measured in contexts outside of the field of education. The reading of narrative fiction has been linked to increasing one’s empathy and imagination (Kidd and Castano 2013; Mar et al. 2005). American academics Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith (2016) point out that when Year 8 students read books that lie outside of the school curriculum, they experience genuine pleasure and gain a sense of psychological well-being. Similarly, Canadian researcher Vivian Howard (2011) reports that teenagers who read for pleasure have enhanced self-awareness, which helps them resolve issues in their own lives, and an increased awareness of the wider world.<sup>21</sup> Reading has also

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<sup>21</sup> Studies that do examine the teenage reading habits include Merga’s (2014) West Australian book reading study involving students in Year 8 and 10; Howard’s (2011) Canadian study on pleasure reading practices of twelve to fifteen years old ; Parlette and Howard’s (2010) study on the reading habits of undergraduate students, aged 18 to 20-years-old, and academic outcomes and Sullivan’s 2001 statistical study on reading as a cultural capital focuses on GCSE students, who are mostly fifteen or sixteen years old.

been linked to better physical health outcomes (De Walt et al. 2004); and, more specifically, book reading has been linked to longevity (Bavishi, Slade and Levy 2016).<sup>22 23</sup>

### Research Focus

Many studies of reading and reading practices adopt an instrumentalist approach and examine measurable outcomes. There are fewer empirical studies on reading that conceptualise reading as a complex and contested concept and practice. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on the reading experiences of older teenagers who are in their final years of secondary schooling. Existing research on teenage reading habits tend to focus on participants in their early to mid-adolescence or undergraduate students.<sup>24</sup> This dissertation seeks to address this gap and to further understandings of how older teenagers, those in their final three years of secondary education, value different forms of reading by exploring how each participant engages in this multifaceted cultural practice.

The study presupposes that all participants engage in multiple forms and approaches to reading in school and at home.<sup>25</sup> The central questions this study seeks to address are:

- 1) How do participants evaluate the different reading practices they engage in?
- 2) In what ways are reading preferences shaped by an individual's disposition and the influences of their socio-cultural situation?

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<sup>22</sup> This study finds that those who read books had a 23-month survival advantage over those who read other types of materials such as newspapers and magazines.

<sup>23</sup> For a witty and richly ambivalent exploration of the value of reading see Debra Adelaide's short story "The Ministry of Reading" (2014).

<sup>24</sup> It is probable that this is in part due to the difficulties of recruiting willing participants in this age group, but also because the focus of many of reading studies is on school-based academic outcomes, and those in their later teens have already chosen or been streamed into either a university (academic) or non-university (vocational) pathway.

<sup>25</sup> Although "reading" can be used to indicate the reading of multimodal texts, I conceived this project with a working definition of reading as the decoding of written text in all formats and contexts, and allow for participants to articulate their conceptualisation of reading, so that their evaluation of various reading practices can be examined.

### Researcher's Perspective

As with all qualitative studies, this one is shaped by the researcher's positionality. The questions specific to this qualitative study are borne out of my lifelong fascination with the contextually and temporally sensitive nature of the cultural capital attached to reading and other literacy practices in different social contexts. As a Hong Kong born child growing up in Greater London, and later in Perth, Western Australia, I spoke a hybridised form of Cantonese Chinese with my grandmother and mother, English with my older sister, and a combination of both with my father. In my working-class diasporic Chinese family, reading was an activity that was highly valued and explicitly linked to academic success. My screen time was restricted, so when I professed boredom I was instructed to read or “duk sheu” (读书) words that can also be used in place of “study” or “school.” When my family migrated from England to Australia, the only possessions my parents shipped were our books, notably, thirty leather-bound gold-edged volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Despite growing up in a household where reading was highly valued, I was aware that being well read or educated was not always an advantage in life. I knew that my illiterate maternal great-grandfather thrived in French colonial Vietnam as a merchant in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, but that my paternal grandfather, a graduate of the elite Nanjing University, struggled to provide for his family when he sojourned to British Malaya in the early twentieth century. However, I also knew that my paternal grandmother was able to raise her six young children after she was widowed because she was educated and qualified to teach in schools run by the Chinese community in post-war Malaya. Although her salary was low, it was enough to raise her six young children.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> My paternal grandmother had the opportunity to attend teacher training college in China because the missionaries who converted her family to Christianity advocated female education.

I continued to read books when I entered high school because there was little else to do in my leisure time. I had been introduced to classical literature in primary school by my father and sister, and through my classical-music education, which included learning about various Western art periods.<sup>27</sup> This knowledge, however, was not of any obvious value at school outside of the music lessons, and was only relevant in the senior school English literature classroom. In the schoolyard, there was kudos attached to reading fiction with adult themes, such as Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), books from Virginia Andrew's *Flower in the Attic* series, or teen pop-culture magazines such as *Dolly* or *TV Hits*.<sup>28</sup> I did not disclose to my friends that I still enjoyed reading children's novels such as the *Anne of Green Gables* series, except when it was framed within the context of the television series which featured Jonathon Crombie, the Canadian actor who played Gilbert Blythe, who had a cult following. I instinctively understood what was acceptable in the different social spaces, or in Bourdieusian terms *fields*.

**One Christmas**, I acceded to my father's request that I ask one of my music teachers if he read *Reader's Digest* (a general-interest magazine whose parent company also published condensed books), because he wanted to buy the teacher a gift subscription. I recall the look of disgust on my teacher's face as he said something to the effect of "No, not that doctor's waiting-room rubbish. Why do you ask?" My face flushed red with embarrassment and I lied that I was conducting a survey for an English project on reading habits. That Christmas, I presented the teacher with a coffee table book on French Impressionist art, which might not

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<sup>27</sup> The piano playing Chinese prodigy has become somewhat of a caricature in Western culture and one Amy Tan explores in the phenomenon in her fiction, and Amy Chua, in her non-fiction books *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) and *The Triple Package* (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Although *Flowers in the Attic* was published in 1979, it was still popular when I was at high school in the late 1980s and early 1990s, possibly because of the 1987 film and subsequent novels in the series were published in the 1980s.

have been what he was interested in but given that I took lessons at a music conservatorium was perhaps considered more appropriate.

Around this time, I was streamed into an advanced English class taught by a woman made in the mould of Robin Williams' character in *Dead Poets Society*.<sup>29</sup> She fulfilled the requirements of the quintessential English teacher as she allowed us to think for ourselves, fostered creativity and instilled in us a love of reading and writing, while also teaching us the skills we would need in senior school such as essay writing and practical criticism. The following year, however, the English classroom experience was very different as I advanced into Tertiary Entrance Exam (TEE) Literature at a new school.<sup>30</sup> I chose to study Literature over TEE English because I enjoyed book reading, and because of my view that only the reading of serious literature was a legitimate subject of study. I also chose Literature because I had an aversion to multiple-choice tests, then a key component in the TEE English exam, and because I knew that my marks would be scaled up if I chose Literature over English.

After graduating from secondary school, I decided to go to university because that is what everyone at my school did, and I decided to study at a university with a reputable English program.<sup>31</sup> In the first week at university, a lecturer told us that we had chosen to study at one of the more progressive universities and that everything we had learnt in high school English was most likely out-dated. It was at university that I was formally introduced to critical theory. When I re-read some books from high school Literature, I thought how dull the study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* had been in high school as we examined the book with a fine-tooth comb, looking for symbolism of one man's descent into madness without any historical

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<sup>29</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, a 1989 film set in the late 1950s, is about an English teacher in a conservative elite boys' school who encourages students to think for themselves, rejecting the formal curriculum in favour of personal and creative responses to Literature.

<sup>30</sup> I changed schools after lower secondary school because I wanted to attend a school closer to home. Although my local school offered the TEE subjects that I wanted to do, I was accepted into an inner-city school where I completed Years 11 and 12 on the condition that I participate in the school's extra-curricular music program.

<sup>31</sup> In the early 1990s education was compulsory only until Year 10, so many who were not university bound left school to attend TAFE or enter the workforce.

or critical perspective, even though in Year 12 I had not disliked reading the novella.<sup>32</sup> Although I studied English at university, I no longer considered myself “well read” since I was reading fewer books than at any other stage of my life because of the nature of some of the units I studied, and also because of my online and real-life social activities. In my first year of university, I met computer engineering students who introduced me to *Baymoo*, a text-based virtual reality world hosted by San Francisco State University.<sup>33</sup> The space is best described as a text-based version of *Second Life*, that involves creative writing and basic coding skills, and one that was populated by university students who interacted with others both in and out of character. Although most inhabitants of *Baymoo* were based in the USA or Europe, I had local friends who also spent considerable time in this space, so I often signed into *Baymoo* to arrange our real-life social events.

In my final year at university in the mid-1990s, I wanted to read more books and when I expressed this to a classmate, she gave me a copy of Robert Dessaix’s “The Love List” (1998).<sup>34</sup> In this piece, Dessaix tells the reader to simply read “what you love” and not to be “put off” by those who “press their own loves on you, amazed that you’re not instantly seduced” (1998, 85). Dessaix (1998, 85) reassures readers that they do not have to read Roland Barthes, Margaret Mead, Janet Frame or Dante. Dessaix’s writing inspired me to find the time to read books of my own choosing, and so I devoured any books, articles and websites that wrote about the diasporic Chinese experience, which at the time was a very limited selection. I discovered that Chinese-American author Amy Tan had, like me, grown up in a household that received the *Reader’s Digest*, and that her father had subscribed to it for the same reasons my father

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<sup>32</sup> This “close-reading” practice is part of New Criticism, a formalist literary theory which dismisses the context of a text’s production or reception and instead focuses on the supposed ‘intrinsic value’ of a text. This “cultural heritage” approach to reading is one that dominated the WA English curriculum until the late 1960s (Dowsett 2016).

<sup>33</sup> See Baymoo (n.d.).

<sup>34</sup> The essay appears in Dessaix’s 1998 book ... *And so forth*.

had: to increase his children’s exposure to new English vocabulary.<sup>35</sup> I was at what developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) terms the “identity crisis versus role confusion” stage of my development, so these texts played a pivotal role in resolving my so-called identity crisis.<sup>36</sup> Although I could not relate directly to the stories, they were told from perspectives that were close to my own. In an era that predated online shopping, I would on occasion email my North American-based sister to source relevant books that I discovered on websites created by people with similar reading interests to mine.<sup>37</sup> While some of these books and their authors are still obscure in Australia, others, such as Tan and Maxine Hong-Kingston, are on some reading lists in schools today.<sup>38</sup>

### Structure of Dissertation

This dissertation comprises five chapters. In this chapter I have presented the focus and aims of this project, offered a small, selective overview of studies of reading pertinent to the study, and introduced Bourdieu’s ideas of cultural capital as the theoretical framework. I also presented an account of my reading experiences, and in doing so have situated my subjectivity, a process essential in qualitative research (Cumming-Potvin 2013; Powell and Truscott 2016) and highlighted how the value of reading is contextually and temporally sensitive.

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<sup>35</sup> In interviews, Tan has often spoken about the centrality of *Reader’s Digest* in her early life. See, for example, Mandall 1991. In the *Joy Luck Club*, Jing-Mei’s mother, a cleaner, brings home magazines from work, including *Reader’s Digest*, and places them in the family’s bathroom. I could relate to this as my parents worked in a hospital and would bring home discarded magazines.

<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that books by other authors did not play a role at this important stage of my psycho-social development. Randolph Stow’s novel *The Merry Go Round in the Sea*, (1965) introduced me to ideas about belonging, and provoked me to think thought deeply about individuals who reject grand narratives about national identity, or do not conform to their imposed identities. See Pavlides’ (2013) study of Australian literature published between 1988 and 2008 that challenge traditional notions about Australian national identity.

<sup>37</sup> These websites, which could now be classified as blogs, were often manually coded websites hosted by university servers.

<sup>38</sup> Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is studied in some Australian schools and the film adaptation was until recently on the WACE General Literature suggested text list. Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior* is, at the time of writing, on the WACE Literature suggested text list (SCSA 2017). See also Helen Sykes’ (2011) recommended text list. Texts that are classified in some way “Asian” have been included into reading lists because Asia is a cross-curriculum priority (ACARA 2018a).

## Chapter 1 – The Cultural Capital of Reading: A critical and creative study

In chapter two, I define Bourdieu's key concepts—cultural capital, field and habitus—and outline how the difficulties in conceptualising class in Australia problematise the use of Bourdieusian theory in the local context. I also present an overview of studies relevant to this study, that use Bourdieusian concepts as a point of departure.

In chapter three, I identify this study as one that is both interpretivist and critical and examine where it sits on the qualitative research continuum. I detail my research design and process, including the ethical considerations in recruiting and interviewing participants who were minors at the time of the interviews. I also outline and justify my approach to data collection and analysis.

Chapter four is the presentation of this study's findings and comprises two sections. In the first section, I provide a summary of the participant cohort before presenting participant profiles. These rich descriptions of participants highlight the multitude of factors that influence how participants define and evaluate different forms of reading. In the second section of this chapter, I present the two key themes that emerged from the study: firstly, that the participants' self-identification as readers or non-readers adhere to traditional notions of reading, and secondly, that they define reading according to subjective qualifiers that have been influenced by each participant's home and school culture.

In the final chapter, I discuss the key findings through a Bourdieusian lens, and explicate how the relationship amongst individuals and institutions within specific fields generates individual reading identities. I conclude this study by considering the implications and applications of this study and make recommendations for further research on reading and reading practices.

I anticipate that this study will deepen understandings of reading as a situated socio-cultural practice and that the detailed descriptions and conclusions generated from this study will enable those with a vested interest in the reading practices of older teenagers—such as

## Chapter 1 – The Cultural Capital of Reading: A critical and creative study

parents, teachers, and teenagers themselves—to gain insights into the meaning and significance of contemporary reading practices in both individual and social terms, and to critically reflect upon their positioning of various reading practices.

Although it is not possible to present an exhaustive review of existing studies on reading due to the limited scale of this project, the select studies highlighted in this chapter illustrate the intricacies of reading and the complexities involved in attempting to settle on a stable definition for the term. Reading may be an intimate, social, pleasurable, high-stakes, recreational, study, or work-related activity that involves multiple skills and it is a socially situated practice. Each reading practice is valued in various ways, by different actors in different times and situations, and the struggle for a dominant definition of reading takes place in a dynamic social space that is shaped by geo-political forces.