

C O M M E N T A R Y

## The Problem of Boys' Literacy Underachievement: Raising Some Questions

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**B**oys' literacy underachievement continues to garner significant attention and has been identified by journalists, educational policymakers, and scholars in the field as the cause for much concern. It has been established that boys perform less well than girls on literacy benchmark or standardized tests. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (2009), female students consistently score higher than boys on average in both reading and writing. This trend is supported by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results. In 2006, the largest gender gap was found in reading. Girls on average outperformed boys in this area in all of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2007). Test scores and achievement gaps such as the ones described here have been used to create a sense of "moral panic" concerning boys' literacy skills and engagement (Hall & Coles, 2001; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002).

In this paper, we express some concerns about the ways in which boys' literacy underachievement is defined and taken up within a context that continues to represent all boys as victims or as the "new disadvantaged" (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Rowan et al., 2002). We argue for the need to engage with literature and analytic perspectives that are capable of addressing the complex interplay between various social, cultural, and institutional factors—such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality—that affect both boys' and girls' engagement with literacy (see American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2008; Martino, 2008a). We also draw attention to the implications associated with movements to reclaim schooling as a masculine domain and suggest pedagogical rather than structural reforms (see Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Hammett & Sanford, 2008; Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009; Martino & Kehler, 2007).

## Beyond the “Boy Crisis”

Although alarmist voices claim that boys as a homogeneous group are victims of the “war against boys” (Sommers, 2000), and populist explanations of boys’ underachievement in the literacy classroom rely heavily on the biological make-up of boys and a lack of male role models, it is important to understand that not all boys are at risk and that their poor performance is not inevitable. Alloway and Dalley-Trim (2006) pointed out that the gender gap varies in size from country to country, as reported by PISA 2000, suggesting that some countries are doing a better job of addressing boys’ literacy underachievement than others; however, as argued by Hall and Coles (2001), the “boys’ literacy crisis, as it is framed, diverts attention: away from curricular and assessment issues, away from the social and cultural background of family, peer group, class and ethnicity” (p. 220). Gurian (as cited by Jayson, 2009) admitted that “a lot of boys are succeeding very well” (n.p.) in school. So, in addition to asking why boys are failing to achieve as literacy learners, we must also ask which boys and which girls are at greatest risk for failure (see Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002) and consider how other critical contributing factors influence boys’ engagement and achievement.

Collins, Kenway, and McLeod (2000) found that “socio-economic status makes a larger difference than gender to Year 12 performance even...where girls generally do better than boys” (p. 4). Indeed, an “analysis of the data from PISA shows that there is a significant relationship between the results from the student assessments and the students’ SES [socio-economic status]” (OECD, 2004, p. 162). These data clearly suggest that gender is by no means the only factor affecting literacy achievement and that the way that gender intersects with other social and cultural factors such as SES must be further investigated. In fact, other literature highlights that “when racial and economic gaps combine with gender achievement gaps in reading, the result is disturbingly low achievement for poor, black and Hispanic boys” (Mead, 2006, p. 9; see also AAUW, 2008).

Alloway et al. (2002) expressed that the way teachers and parents understand constructions of masculinity and femininity also needs further attention

(see also Martino, Lingard, & Mills, 2004). These understandings seem to be aligned with media representations and common-sense understandings of traditional or dominant notions of masculinity. Alloway et al. recommended that “schools and teachers acknowledge and explore the varied social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that boys bring with them to the literacy classroom, paying particular attention to the ways that constructions of masculinity influence boys’ behaviour and learning in literacy” (p. 7).

Finally, Martino and Kehler (2007) argued that research-based evidence confirms that hegemonic masculinity is central to many of the struggles boys face as literacy learners. Claims about what it means to be a man are used to police boys’ behavior in school, and these “truths” seem to be at the core of the boys’ crisis. One of the boys in Martino’s (1995) study explained it this way: “English is more suited to girls because it’s not the way guys think.... Therefore, I don’t particularly like this subject. I hope you aren’t offended by this, but most guys who like English are faggots” (p. 354). Clearly this boy asserted his gendered identity by positioning himself in opposition to femininity and homosexuality. Reluctance to participate in English, as expressed above, which stems from an understanding of what is acceptable masculine behavior, must be challenged and deconstructed if we hope to improve boys’ achievement. As we have suggested by referring to a few key factors, the complexities surrounding boys’ literacy underachievement are multiple and interwoven and cannot be explained solely by gender (see White, 2007).

## Reclaiming Schooling as Masculine

It has been said that “Essentialist arguments generally share a belief that boys are biologically different to girls and that this biological difference is the cause of behavioural differences” (Rowan et al., 2002, p. 34). Boys and girls are seen to have inherent or fixed characteristics that define who they are and determine their natural interests and behaviors. Because these qualities that define boys and girls—masculinity and femininity—are understood to be innate, educational success rests upon acknowledging and accommodating them (Rowan et al., 2002). This school of thought has been picked up by the media and educational

policymakers as a common-sense approach to boys' underachievement. It appeals to the tacit belief that "boys will be boys" and lends itself to traditional definitions of what it means to be a boy, facilitating "quick-fix" solutions. If boys are *naturally* interested in sports, action, and technology and need to be given clear goals and feedback that will challenge them but also make them feel competent and in control (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), then to improve their achievement in literacy we simply need to cater to the way boys are "hard-wired" (Gurian, 2002).

We are not suggesting that the biological make-ups of boys and girls are not important factors in determining who they are, but we contend that the way gender is socially and culturally constructed must be given greater consideration. As Titus (2004) pointed out, "some learned behaviours can be deeply ingrained and difficult to modify" (p. 155), but they are still learned—not innate—behaviors. It seems foolish to suggest that gendered identities are not affected by cultural and societal influences, yet dominant discourses repeatedly silence these influences that contribute to boys' understandings of schooling and affect their engagement in literacy activities. Moreover, such common-sense understandings ignore a substantial body of international research on masculinities and schooling that highlights the ways in which societal norms and expectations governing what it means to be a "normal" boy continue to impact significantly on students' lives and engagement with learning (see Francis, 2000; Hammett & Sanford, 2008; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino, Kehler, & Weaver-Hightower, 2009; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005).

Titus (2004) also pointed out that "Gender inequality in wealth, power, and status is rationalized as personal choice and innate inequitable human nature, thereby creating 'the no problem' problem" (p. 155). If boys outperform girls, a taken-for-granted "order" is achieved. When girls outperform boys, rhetoric is used to spin a tale of victimization and feminization, which in turn creates moral panic because boys cannot be the "second sex" (p. 148); that is "a threat to the social order itself" (p. 145).

Tales of victimization that currently frame the boys' literacy crisis are saturated in antifeminist backlash, gender binaries, and issues of power. A quick

perusal of mainstream media and educational policies indicates clearly that the feminization of schooling is, at least in part, to blame for the underachievement of boys. It is argued that boys are being disadvantaged by the feminized teaching styles and resources of their female teachers (see Martino, 2008b, for a critique of this position). Conceptualizing the crisis in this way as a win-lose dichotomy is both dangerous and misguided because it positions boys and girls in opposition to one another or as "competing victims" (Rowan et al., 2002, p. 16). When boys' test scores are presented in comparison to girls', schooling becomes much like a sporting venue in which male and female students compete (see Kimmel, 2000; Sadker, 2002). Some will win and some will lose, but proponents of essentialist thinking decry that the feminization of schooling gives girls a distinct and unfair advantage that must be rectified. The panic about boys' underachievement that has been allowed to dominate current literacy policy initiatives on an international scale has worked to divert the public radar away from concerns about girls. The performance levels of some girls remain unexamined largely because the response to boys' declining achievement revolves around helping them to compete with girls as literacy learners. More boy-friendly strategies and resources, the recruitment of more male teachers, and the creation of single-sex classes are presented as logical solutions.

These so-called logical solutions argue that schools simply need to cater to boys' natural learning interests and strengths; however, Younger and Warrington (2005) described "no significant correlation between gender and preferred learning styles" (p. 77). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also cautioned their readers about "essentializing" and "over-simplifying" boys and losing sight of boys as individuals, while Brozo (2005) pointed out, "To propose broader gender specific recommendations for reading literacy improvement is to risk another form of sexual stereotyping" (p. 18). Despite these concerns, boys' literacy underachievement continues to be attributed to female teachers' failure to accommodate boys' interests and learning styles.

Male teachers as role models, particularly in elementary school and in feminized or "soft" subjects such as English, it is argued, are "better equipped

to maximize boys' attention and to develop particular relationships with boys to effectively enhance their participation in school-based literacy practices" (Martino & Kehler, 2007, p. 409). Again, we are not suggesting that attracting more men into teaching should be discouraged. We believe that both boys and girls would benefit from a more diversified teaching profession, not only according to gender but also by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on (see Martino & Rezai-Rashti, in press). However, we do contend that simply recruiting men that embody idealized constructions of hegemonic masculinity will likely do little to address boys' underachievement. Lingard et al. (2009) introduced three male teachers from the study that they conducted for an Australia Research Council Grant. What comes across in their stories is an assumption that the male teachers who are desired as role models are those who do not disrupt "normalize[d] hegemonized constructions of masculinity" (p. 142). These male teachers reported that they were expected to be athletic, straight, Anglo-Celtic, and disciplinarians. We assert that teachers' qualifications must be given priority over their sex. Lingard et al. highlighted the quality of caring, the ability to challenge students intellectually, the desire to connect the classroom to students' worlds, and the ability to encourage students to value and engage with differences as desirable. Lingard et al. suggested that male teachers who are able to disrupt hegemonic notions of masculinity may have the most potential to positively influence the lives of boys and girls (p. 144).

Finally, some contend that in a single-sex classroom, teachers are in a better position to address boys' learning needs; however, Martino, Mills, and Lingard (2005) reported that teachers in single-sex classrooms have a tendency to adopt pedagogical practices that cater to taken-for-granted assumptions about how boys and girls learn as a group. They suggested that without encouraging boys to "critically reflect on gender, privilege and power" (p. 250), single-sex classes for boys are unlikely to address their literacy underachievement.

## Alternative Frameworks and Approaches

Brozo (2005) argued that "there is plenty of evidence to suggest that many teenage boys are turning off to reading because of actual and likely recrimination from classmates who associate traditional book literacy with 'schoolboys' and 'nerds' and who regard it as 'uncool'" (p. 18), and Archer and Yamashita (2003) speculated that boys' resistance to school is grounded in constructions of masculinity "outside the education context" (p. 129, emphasis in the original). Given the national and international evidence questioning current trends and strategies to "save the boys" and increase literacy achievement levels, we argue that it is prudent that educators not only look more closely at the types of statistical analysis employed in large scale reports such as those mentioned but also that they give consideration to the ways in which the boy crisis has been manufactured, mobilized, and compartmentalized for mass public consumption. If Brozo and Archer and Yamashita are correct in their comments, then we would agree that we need to look outward beyond school walls toward the dominating and oppressive societal representations of masculinity to better address boys' literacy underachievement. Boys who are at-risk in school may become resistant to labels of failure and look for other sources of power and privilege in their lives. The immediate gratification and status boys achieve by performing in excessively masculine ways are extremely appealing even if they lead to a life of underachievement beginning with academic failure. Thus, what is needed are particular analytic frameworks for making sense of the problem of boys' literacy engagement that are informed by a more sophisticated research-based knowledge that moves us beyond essentialist and simplistic notions of boys' behavior as innately driven.

We argue that it is more productive to challenge culturally and socially constructed understandings of masculinity through pedagogical reforms than to reinforce and cater to them through a boy-friendly environment. Given the influence of boys' peer groups

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and the media's exaltation of hegemonic masculinity, we argue that these understandings of what it means to be a man must be challenged and interrogated in school. Constructions of literacy as feminized and therefore a subject that "real" boys are not very good at must also be addressed if we hope to engage boys in literacy.

Rather than focusing on accommodating boys' natural learning strengths and interests, we propose expanding opportunities for "(re)presenting the self, for relating to others, and for engaging with cultures" (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 8). This pedagogical approach has the potential to make literacy learning active, purposeful, and related "directly to the social dynamics" of the classroom (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 8) because it takes into account students' backgrounds and social relationships. For example, boys may be motivated if given opportunities to discuss the ways in which hegemonic notions of masculinity influence their engagement as literacy learners and by creating a learning environment in which "students' knowledge and skills are valued and respected" (p. 9). This approach may also create greater opportunities to incorporate a wider range of literacy materials, including those with which students, both boys and girls, engage outside of school such as digital and electronic modes of expression (e.g., blogs, facebook, text messaging, popular culture texts). Alloway et al. (2002) pointed out,

With the importation of contemporary commercial youth culture into the classroom come both the opportunity and responsibility to engage its powerful discourses—about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and so on—in ways that make those discourses objects of critical study. (p. 10)

Finally, Skelton (2001) raised several key questions that deconstruct and challenge traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity at the elementary school level. These may be extended to the secondary school context. For example, teachers could more actively engage in dialogue as well as develop curricular materials with other teachers and students that interrogate the following:

- When and how students express various forms of femininities and masculinities

- The dominant images of masculinity and femininity exalted in secondary schools
- The way teachers convey and support particular versions of masculinities and femininities
- The extent to which teachers purposely promote and support initiatives/strategies/projects that destabilize normative masculinity and femininity

The need to destabilize masculinity and femininity is well supported. Teachers have the resources available to them, for example, to revisit long-standing conceptions through media constructions. Websites such as [www.genderads.com/Gender\\_Ads.com.html](http://www.genderads.com/Gender_Ads.com.html), [www.media.lit.org/about\\_cml.html](http://www.media.lit.org/about_cml.html), and [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca) provide entry points into conversations that challenge prevailing images and understandings of masculinities and femininities.

By making gender issues an integral part of the curriculum, we may generate opportunities to interrogate essentialist understandings of what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl and create learning environments in which both boys and girls are free to engage and therefore improve their literacy skills without fear of social and cultural repercussions. After all, what many boys need to do to raise their literacy achievement is "to read more, listen and attend more to teachers and other pupils, work harder (greater diligence), be more conscientious and take more pride in their work, work collaboratively and articulate themselves better in all aspects of communication" (Francis & Skelton, 2005, p. 129). As long as these pursuits are constructed as feminine, some boys will continue to lag behind some girls, not because they are boys but because social and cultural constructions of gender continue to go unchallenged.

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