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Below the Radar: Teachers, Boys and Schools

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Table of Contents

Purpose and Objectives of the Study.....	1
Research Context.....	2
Research Context References	3
Research Participants	4
Research Methodology	5
Action Research References.....	7
Narrative Inquiry and Narrative Representation.....	8
Narrative References.....	9
Introduction to the Teacher Researchers and their Narratives	10
Anne Browne	10
Barry Gay	11
Mark Wilderman.....	12
Vicki Sommerfeldt	14
Review of ‘Boy Issue’ Literature	16
The Teachers’ Narratives	22
Anne Browne’s Narrative: “Flying Low on the Radar Screen”	22
Barry Gay’s Narrative: “The Science Guy’s Tale”.....	31
Mark Wilderman’s Narrative: “One Assignment, Two Different Reactions to Shakespeare’s Hamlet: A Way of Understanding Gender Difference”.....	42
Vicki Sommerfeldt’s Narrative: “Male Mystique, Reading, and Suicide”	49
Appendices	
1. Boys and Schools: A Discussion Guide.....	55

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This research study explored the experiences, classroom practice, and pedagogy of four secondary teachers to better understand gender construction through the lens of masculinity. Our main research question was:

How can secondary teachers identify and address the needs of boys in classrooms?

In this research project, our teacher/researchers:

- studied the existing scholarship about males in schools and society, and determined the ways they could incorporate this awareness in their teaching;
- critiqued curriculum, examined school culture, and considered their pedagogy through the lens of masculinity;
- considered the nature of the experiences of males in secondary schools and society to better understand the socialization of males and the construction of their masculinity; and
- explored the importance of this understanding for working with young men in schools.

Our report contains the following sections:

- a brief overview of the research context,
- an explanation of the research methodology,
- four narratives that represent the experiences of the teacher/researchers in this project,
- a more detailed exploration of the literature involving boys and masculinity that embeds the teacher/researchers' narratives in the larger research context, and
- a discussion guide.

Research Context

Over the last few years a growing number of educators and researchers have addressed the issue of boys in schools. The following brief synopsis provides the reader with several points of view, and a quick context on this issue.¹

Several scholars and popular writers have looked at the question of boys and masculinity, and a number of perspectives have arisen. Pollack (1998) suggests that boys are trapped by patriarchy, and what he calls the boy code, which propels them to act in ultimately unhealthy, psychologically crippling ways. For Hoffman-Sommers (2000), boys are all right; she sees their problem as a result of the unrealistic demands placed on them by feminists who often appear out for revenge, rather than understanding who boys are and how they should develop. Other writers (Boyd, 2000; Baker, 1996) believe that we need to understand boys as genetically and testosterone-driven individuals who are simply following their basic instincts in social behaviour.

Still other writers, particularly those in England (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998), argue that the boy problem isn't a problem at all; it exists because of the increased participation of girls and women in society, and from the gains of feminism. Epstein et al. (1998) note that politicians' cries for increased resources for male students do not always lead to equitable treatment; they claim that boys already have more than their share of resources, and teacher time. Others (Segall, 1999) point to confusion in the definition of masculinity, which leads to boys not completely understanding their role in modern society.

Other scholars (Gambell & Hunter, 1999, 2000; Noonan, Yackulic & Hanson, not dated) are propelled into the boy problem because of boys' increasingly poor academic performance in schools. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) provide an analysis of the socialization of males and how this socialization carries into the school context for boys. Mac an Ghaill's (1994) ethnographic study of a school in England focuses on the socialization of boys in the school context, and how the structure of schools and the responses of teachers contribute to a socialization of machismo (see also Mac an Ghaill, 2000). In addition to the research on boys at the elementary school level (Skelton, 2001) our research contributes to an understanding of the experiences of young males at the secondary level, an area of study which has remained under-researched.

¹ Please note: we have included a more detailed review of 'boy issue' literature in a separate section preceding the teachers' narratives.

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Research Participants

The research team for the *Teachers, Boys and Schools* project consisted of Jeff Park, principal researcher, and Sam Robinson, both University of Saskatchewan professors, and four Saskatoon secondary teachers: Anne Browne, Mount Royal Collegiate Institute; Vicki Sommerfeldt, Mount Royal Collegiate Institute; Mark Wilderman, Marion Graham Collegiate Institute; and Barry Gay, Walter Murray Collegiate Institute.

The researchers came together as a group, with a common interest and deep enthusiasm, to understand why boys were such a concern in schools. In a series of conversations before the project began, the teachers expressed an interest in exploring a variety of initial issues concerning boys in school, including behaviour problems, disdain for reading, avoidance of completing work, and general boredom and ennui.

All the research participants, including the university professors, had a great deal of practice teaching secondary classes, and brought a wealth of experience and knowledge to the project. It was decided that an action research project would best serve the needs and interests of the research agenda and the teachers in helping them to understand the situation, and begin changing their practice.

Research Methodology

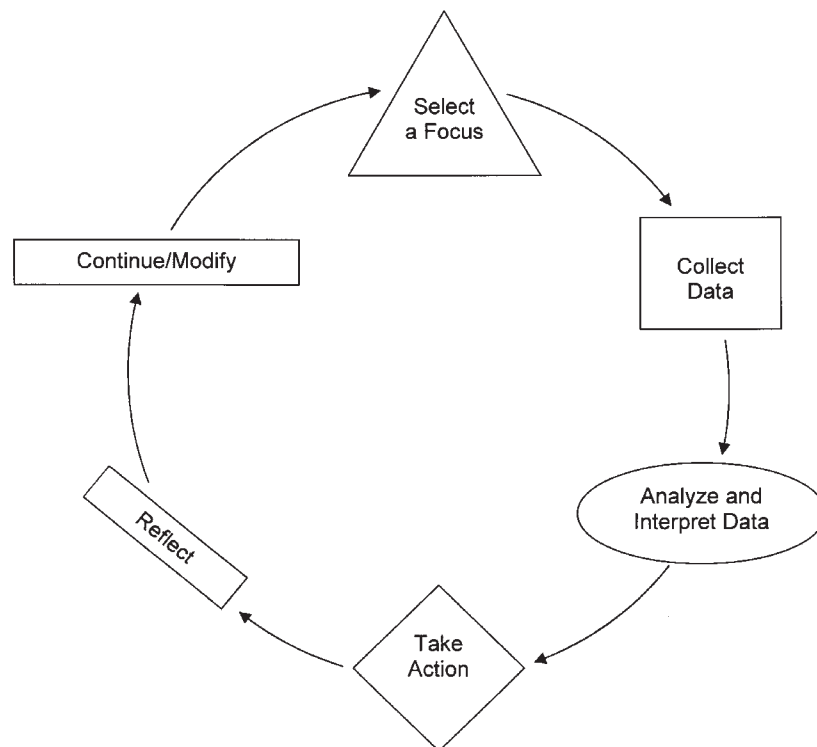
The methodology of this project followed an action research model in which the researchers and the teacher/researchers explored collaboratively the issues concerning males in secondary schools. In keeping with an action research approach, the research followed a series of cycles. In general, the action research process is designed in a cycle of four sequential steps:

1. Identify an area of focus
2. Collect Data
3. Analyze and Interpret Data
4. Develop an Action Plan

(Mills, 2003, p. 20)

In this research project, the cycle re-occurred when the teacher researchers identified new areas of focus. The cycle then looped back to begin a new action plan, which accommodated the various areas of interest. The university professors acted as facilitators and provided research articles and a forum to explore the new ideas. The following chart² shows the cyclical nature of action research:

Cyclical Nature of Action Research



Glanz (1998) cited in Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003, p. 586

² Although this model uses slightly different terminology, the overall process remains the same.

At the beginning of the McDowell project, all participants came together for a group meeting to discuss the goals of the project and to identify areas of interest. The group meetings were audio recorded and transcribed for future reference, as were all the individual meetings and interviews. At the initial meeting the four teacher/researchers looked at a series of articles and topics that were introduced by the university researchers. The initial stage of the investigation included a review of the relevant literature regarding gender issues and the construction of masculinity, as well as articles considering classroom practices around gender.

After the initial meeting, future topics and articles were directed by the interests and decisions of the group. The four teacher/researchers were involved in a series of group discussions and individual interviews with the two university professors that investigated and examined the teachers' interests. The use of action research methodology ensured that participants were actively engaged in all decisions and initiatives of the project.

The participants first identified and considered issues and concerns, and then carried out a series of observations and activities in their classrooms. The participants came together again as a group to consider the effects of their activities, and to define further questions and activities for the next cycle. We originally anticipated going through this research cycle as a group four or five times; however, in practice, we found it more advantageous to explore each teacher's interests individually instead of working with the entire group. In effect, we created four discrete action research cycles.

All issues and topics researched and examined were co-generated by the participants, and therefore, the individual interviews are probably best understood as personal discussion sessions; there was no strict interview protocol, or pre-set list of questions. Instead, the participants themselves generated all topics and issues of concern. Participants were asked to reflect on their teaching experiences to identify concerns regarding masculinity in the classroom. All discussions, both individual and group, were based on this model, and because of the voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality was not a concern. The teachers decided to use their own names, and to let their ideas stand on their own.

Because Action Research is becoming a very popular methodology for studying school practice, we have provided a short list of references, both to help understand this research project and to facilitate future research in schools.

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Narrative Inquiry and Narrative Representation

We decided to utilize narrative as the dominant form to present our findings because of the diverse and individualistic nature of the research project. Consequently we tell four separate narratives that express the views and observations of the individual teacher researchers. At no time did we attempt to impose a consensus on the group.

Stories are one of the fundamental ways of knowing for human beings (Bruner, 1986) and often provide a means for readers to gain an understanding of complex situations, in part because “narrative gives us a way to absorb past events on an emotional level as well as an intellectual level” (Fulford, 1999, p. 38). Fulford suggests that “[s]tories survive partly because they remind us of what we know and partly because they call us back to what we consider significant” (Fulford, 1999, p. 7). Narratives allow a reader to enter the world of the teachers to gain an understanding of the complexity of the researching ‘boys in schools.’

For this research project we had a vast range of possibilities in creating a final report. For instance, we could have summarized the research observations and written up the report from the standpoint of the university researchers. Instead we encouraged each teacher to create his or her own narrative as a means of expressing the diversity of interests that were explored in this research project. The four narratives, collected in a section that follows the introduction and initial summary, are the individual voices of the teachers speaking for themselves.

We have included several references for narrative inquiry in case other teachers wish to pursue this form of qualitative research. We do not refer to all these sources in final report of the project, though all were considered in the process. Our intention is to provide a list of resource so that others will be able to use them, both to understand our methodology and to provide resources for their own work.

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Introduction to the Teacher Researchers and Their Narratives

It is our belief that the narratives stand alone, and do not need to be fully summarized and coded for this report; however, we offer this section as a brief overview of what the teachers identified as concerns, and to quickly summarize some of their suggestions. One possible source of frustration for readers of this report is that there are no easy and complete solutions to 'boy issues' in schools and educational practice. Yet, this report offers several, though diverse, perspectives that present a number of hopeful and practical suggestions for addressing these issues in teaching.

One of the most important conclusions one can draw from this work is that the situation can not be defined in binary terms. The educational situation is not one of girls versus boys, males against females, or even teachers in opposition to students. Rather, educational contexts are multifaceted and paradoxical spaces that demand a variety of perspectives, certainly in the study of the reality of boys in schools.

This study offers a series of suggestions that will work for different people in different situations; there is often no one magic solution for complex educational situations. Teachers need a palette of possibilities, not a dogmatic agenda or a series of dictates imposed from above.

The teacher narratives are a central component of this report. The reader of this report will learn much from the teachers' connection with this research project, and their perceptions of the classroom 'through a masculine lens.' The changes the teachers make in their day-to-day practice and their overall pedagogy varied greatly because their perceptions and experiences were very different. Yet the diversity of the narratives and their findings is important in itself, and offers a great variety of possibilities for future research and shifts in teaching practice.

ANNE BROWNE

Anne was an English and drama teacher at Mount Royal Collegiate in Saskatoon during this research project. She has since moved to Alberta, and is currently not teaching. Anne was an extremely valuable member of the research team – she kept a personal journal, researched various journal articles, and often interacted with her students, constantly questioning them about their viewpoints and perspectives. Anne almost immediately began 'going beyond the binary' to question which boys were being talked about in regards to 'boy problems.' Her story helps us see the complexity of the issue, and that although we can never privilege one gender over another, it is also important to not assume that each gender is a single entity. All girls are not the same; all boys are not the same.

Anne Browne's narrative, "Flying Low on the Radar Screen," shows the complexity of what it means to be a boy in modern society. She makes us aware that not all boys are equal; not all boys have equal access to power and prestige and status. She asks a very simple, yet profound, question: What boys

are we talking about? She asks us to consider the 'other boy,' the quiet boy one does not immediately notice – he is not a trouble-maker, and spends much of his day-to-day life being careful not to be noticed.

After Anne started this study, she began to really notice the boys in her classroom, and how they interacted with the overall school culture. Her report is both her story, as well as the story of some of the boys in her classes. She discovered an interest in the disaffected boys, who, as one student put it, are the ones “flying below the radar screen.” Anne’s story is about the “other” boys, those boys who don’t fit or buy into the masculine stereotype. These boys are not part of what some have labeled as dominant, or hegemonic, masculinity. The boys in Anne’s story find ways to escape the ‘jock’ stereotype and other dominant male roles that permeate the school. These boys find ways in school to express themselves differently from most boys, and they sometimes believe that the best way to exist in school is to do as little as possible, without making waves. In many ways, these boys become invisible because they are ‘below the radar.’

Anne’s story prompts the reader to think more deeply both about boys’ success in school, and how they live within the school. The boys in her stories are non-achievers, not because they can’t, but because they don’t. Their test scores, if we had them, would be mediocre, or less, because they find no real reason to connect with school. As research has suggested, doing well or doing the ‘school thing’ has no meaning for some boys. Anne noted that they are all trying to survive high school. They act dumb as one way to survive.

Anne’s focus is extremely important. A few boys give teachers the most trouble in school; they are often the least compliant. Sometimes there are five or so boys in the classroom who demand about 75 per cent of a teacher’s time. Understanding the other boys, as Anne has done, leads to more helpful ways of dealing with different types of boys in school. All boys are not the same, and it is important to understand this. Just as all girls are not passive or ‘mean girls,’ boys should not be looked at as a single entity – such as aggressive, dominant, or disruptive – with one magic formula to cope with them all. A teacher needs a deep understanding of gender issues, and a vast array of tools to deal with the various situations and contexts they will encounter in their classrooms. Anne’s story suggests that we consider not only gender issues in the classroom, but also the over-all culture or, more accurately, cultures in modern secondary schools.

BARRY GAY

During this study, Barry Gay was a biology teacher at Walter Murray, and has since retired from teaching. Early in the project Barry stated that he believed that boys’ behaviour was different from girls’ behaviour in his classroom and in school in general. He expressed an interest in exploring the different ways these behaviour differences manifested in the classroom, and the implications for teacher practice. Using his biology and scientific background, Barry explored the possibility that boys are genetically ‘hard-wired’ much differently from girls. Because of this, he believes that teachers would be foolish to think that all gender issues and differences are socially constructed. Barry did a great deal of writing on this issue and initiated a number of research components on his own. His narrative expresses his personal ideas on gender in the classroom, and provides educators with several practical applications.

Barry's story, "The Science Guy's Tale," looks at the boy issue from a biological and social history perspective. Barry suggests that educators are not paying enough attention to boys' physical and social needs. Although it may be true that genetics is not destiny, as one of participants stated, it may be somewhat naïve for educators to ignore genetic, hormonal, and possibly even brain differences in education. Gurian (2001)³ suggests that educators need to teach differently to girls than boys. At the present time, educators try to control boys rather than to understand and to accommodate them.

Barry suggests that educators need to "make schoolwork active, interesting and connected to the realities of both boys and girls. It can be done if we are willing to take a few more risks and be unafraid of allowing a little 'controlled wildness' in our classrooms. Becoming comfortable with that solution could be the answer to addressing the gender gap we are facing in North American schools today." Barry is not suggesting that we allow inappropriate behaviour in our schools and classroom; however, he does suggest that we need to be aware of why this behaviour sometimes occurs. In doing so, teachers can be better prepared and able to deal with more physical activity, and to create a space that allows active and meaningful engagement with what is being taught. As both a teacher and a coach, Barry dealt with boys differently from many teachers in that he always acknowledged them as physical beings – boys as active bodies, not just passive minds meant to keep quiet under tight control.

MARK WILDERMAN

Mark has had a great interest in researching the issue of 'boys in schools' for several years. He had already been involved in a previous research project looking at how males construct a sense of masculinity in schools and society in general. Also, he constantly explores classroom practice and questions his own pedagogy. Often he worked with Al Luciuk⁴, at the time a social studies teacher at Marion Graham, to pilot class projects that both linked English Language Arts and Social Studies, and incorporated gender differences.

For our research, Mark looked at gender issues in how male and female students responded differently to a unit of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In his narrative, "One assignment, two different reactions to Shakespeare's Hamlet: A way of understanding gender difference," Mark noticed differences in what interested boys and girls, and how they engaged with text. Boys "tend to gravitate to scenes with strong action (fencing matches and subsequent deaths), gloomy monologues ("To be or not to be"), or macabre subjects (gravediggers' scene.). Boys want texts that entertain with action or humour, or offer something "practical for use in 'the real world'." Girls seemed to have more engagement and interest with written texts, and appeared to have more experience in reading. Mark suggests that pre-reading activities are especially important for boys and that we sometimes need to invite readers into the text.

As part of his *Hamlet* unit, Mark allowed students to create a video to creatively explore a specific theme or idea identified by the students. Mark allowed students to work in small, single-sex groups that the students arranged

³ Michael Gurian (2001). *Boys and Girls Learn Differently: A guide for teachers and parents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Al Luciuk was originally involved in the *Teachers, Boys and Schools* research project but had to drop out because of time constraints.

themselves. He had noticed that “schools provide few opportunities for young women to talk about ideas that matter most to them. In mixed-gender groups, if girls speak at all, those who speak frankly or honestly are often labelled as ‘aggressive’ or ‘bitchy.’ Situations for girls where they are not concerned about what boys think can be productive, if not liberating.” In this case, Mark has found that allowing students to work in single-sex groups is liberating and productive for all.

One video project that Mark focuses on in his narrative is a production called *Always Ophelia*, created by a group of girls. In this short, compelling video, the girls explored the character of Ophelia, partly to explain why this character has had such a fascination for so many people over the years.⁵ The girls who created the *Always Ophelia* video made Mark question the “stereotype of digital technology as the domain for, and strength of, boys.” Mark’s female students approached the project from a much different perspective from the boys in his class, and yet created very strong work.

The majority of Mark’s male groups were very concerned with audience, and how the rest of their class would receive the videos. They approached the project as if they were already established movie-makers, agonizing for hours on creating logos and designing sets, costumes and intricate camera angles. The boys tended to focus on the action within the play – fights, arguments, murders – and the humour, including the gravedigger scene. The videos included elaborate dueling scenes and elaborate murder plots, and paid attention to costume and minute details.

For the video project, Mark extended the English Language Arts curriculum to focus on ‘representing’ and ‘viewing’ – two language strands in the Saskatchewan curriculum. In doing so, he found that males and females approached the project in different, yet equally significant, ways.

VICKI SOMMERFELDT

Before Vicki began her teaching career, she was heavily involved in feminist political and grassroots issues. Her perspective as a feminist was invaluable in seeing her students and classroom practice through a ‘masculine lens.’ In her narrative “Male Mystique, Reading, and Suicide,” Vicki shows us how there are sometimes simple solutions to seemingly complex problems. By allowing her students, both males and females, to bring in outside reading material, she was able to link home literacies with school literacies, and in doing so increase the students’ interest in reading. By allowing her students to read such non-academic books as *The Guinness Book of Records*, *The Book of Lists*, various how-to books, as well as magazines, Vicki accessed both efferent and aesthetic reading functions for the students. Aesthetic reading, as described by Rosenblatt⁶,

⁵ It might be interesting for the reader to consider how many songs, poems, paintings, etc. have been created about Ophelia. An internet search helps one to understand the importance of this character, and how extensive this fascination really is.

⁶ Louise Rosenblatt. (1938). *Literature as Exploration*. New York: D. Appleton Century Co. Louise Rosenblatt. (1978). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literacy Work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.

Louise Rosenblatt. (1988). *Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory*. Technical report No. 416. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

is for enjoyment of the story, and allows the reader to enter the world created by the writer. Efferent reading has a different function. When engaged in efferent reading, a student does so with the purpose of extracting information, or learning something. Often in schools we have students engage in aesthetic types of reading, and yet test them on efferent reading and what they take out of a text. Vicki's use of outside materials in her reading time allowed the students to engage in reading for their own purposes, without confusing the two reading functions.

Another literacy area Vicki explored in her teaching was the reading of what are sometimes called comic books, but are more accurately referred to as graphic novels. Vicki noticed that many boys were attracted to graphic novels, and she began examining them in more detail, both in content, and in terms of how to read them in a meaningful manner. She found that the reading process is different for graphic novels, and does not follow the typical linear direction of most traditional reading. Instead one engages in a cyclical, recursive process, moving from the text to the image, and back again, to get the full meaning of the graphic novel. She was surprised at both the complexity of this process and the sophistication and intelligence of many of the texts. This insight suggests that literacy is perhaps shifting in focus recently in order to be more inclusive of our highly visual and graphic-oriented society.

CONCLUSION

The boys and school question is exceedingly complex, and the answers are not simple and straightforward. There is no quick fix. An educator can't simply find the right book, or curriculum, or program to deal with "the boy question." The boy question is not an isolated factor separate from the rest of society. The problem is certainly bigger and more complex than the issues of males' achievement on test scores and inappropriate male behaviour. Rather, the boy question needs to be considered in the context of social equality, and understanding how gender roles affect the lives of both males and females. The socialization process of learning gender roles and "doing gender" has as much impact on achievement scores as the right curriculum, the right textbook, the right method of instruction – or of single sex schools.

Finally, we need to be aware of how serious the stakes are when considering gender in the classroom and schools. We ignore gender issues, both male and female, at our peril. Vicki writes about a young man who committed suicide because he could not live up to the image he created of himself. This image, though largely based on success in sports, was also shaped by school and the larger society. When he was diagnosed with diabetes, he felt he had nothing to live for, despite the fact that diabetes is a manageable disease. Without sports and the adulation that he found in high school, he felt desolate and completely empty.

As educators we need to start listening to both our fellow teachers and our students, to understand the links between school practice and the world in general. As Vicki states, "The ethics and the morality of sports, the idea of 'team' and the drive to win is repeatedly pounded in. Yet, no one considers what happens after high school, when this identity and self worth are often lost." She concludes her narrative with both an observation and a possible solution:

I don't see a way to change it. I suppose talk in the classroom would be a start. Classrooms are not often a place where fresh thinking is encouraged, but I see new and vital teachers who are unafraid of gender issues. Maybe some talk like this would have helped a young man to see his value beyond football, and he would still be alive.

Perhaps research projects such as this one can begin to provide a space for both teachers and students to voice their ideas. It is important that educators begin to listen.

Review of ‘Boy Issue’ Literature

We have embedded this McDowell research project in the issue of boys in school, and narrowed our focus as much as possible to boys in secondary school. To provide a context for this study, we considered what others have said and written about boys in schools. In this section, we provide a brief overview of this literature to place this McDowell report in a larger context.

To focus the main issues for the purposes of this study, we have classified the literature in this area into two categories: concern about achievement and test scores, and discussions of the socialization of boys and boys’ culture. The work that emerged from our McDowell action research has zeroed in on issues of socialization and culture, and this is how we focus our short review of the literature.

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND IN MEN’S STUDIES

The backdrop or foundation for understanding the socialization of boys in school is found in the field of men’s studies or the study of masculinities. Scholars working in this field have placed men within the concept of gender and point out that men are gendered individuals. That is, they learn their role as men through social expectations, beginning in the cradle and continuing throughout their lives. As sociologists would tell us, masculinity is socially constructed and embedded in male discourse or language.

As persons, then, men have to live up to role expectations: to be stoic, competitive, aggressive, the provider – and above all not to be feminine. As feminist scholars have pointed out, men have a privileged role in society just because of their gender. This dominant role for men has been labeled as hegemonic masculinity, a term to define the inherent power in being male.

Robert Connell’s work is typical of this scholarship about understanding the male role. His book, *Masculinities*,⁷ provides an account of men and their socialization. Connell explores the question of knowledge about masculinity, examining Freudian theory, social psychology and sex roles, and history. He moves into current areas of resistance to the stereotypical understanding of masculinity, or what he calls sexual politics. Connell finished this book with this observation: “[T]here is surprisingly little discussion of the role of education in the transformation of masculinity” (p. 238). He wrote further:

But there is little discussion, informed by research on masculinity, about education for boys in modern mass school systems; let alone the principles that would include girls as well as boys in an educational process addressing masculinity. (p. 239)

⁷ R. W. Connell. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: The University of California Press.

Connell's next book, *The Men and the Boys*,⁸ takes his readers into the world of boys, set in an understanding of masculinities. In this book, he wants boys to develop a positive self understanding that would include a questioning of their hegemonic relationship with girls. Connell repeats his admonition: the need to understand gender as it affects both males and females.

How we understand men and gender, what we believe about masculinity, what we know (or think we know) about the development of boys, may have large effects – for good or ill – in therapy, education, health series, violence prevention, policing, and social services. (pp. 4-5)

Connell gets us into the world of School^{PLUS}, the need to understand boys and masculinities as part of integrated services. Issues around boys are not isolated to schools and achievement. This issue extends into the community and all social services, for example, in considering the recent focus on bullying in schools.

WEAVER-HIGHTOWER'S REVIEW OF BOYS AND MASCULINITY

Marcus Weaver-Hightower has written a comprehensive review of the research literature on boys, masculinities, and education.⁹ The double entendre in his title, "the boy turn," captures the complexity of this issue. He notes at once the belief of some writers that it is now the boys' turn in gender research, and simultaneously the turning to boys in gender research, after decades of research on feminist issue. Weaver-Hightower classifies the work done on boys into four areas: a) popular-rhetorical literature, b) theoretically oriented literature, c) practice-oriented literature, and d) feminist and pro-feminist response (p. 473). We have included a table from his article to quickly summarize the work done in the area of boys and masculinity.¹⁰

⁸ R. W. Connell. (2000). *The Men and the Boys*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁹ Marcus Weaver-Hightower. (2003). The "Boy Turn" in Research on Gender and Education. *Review of Educational Research*. 73(4), 471-498.

¹⁰ We reproduce this table with the permission of the journal, *Review of Educational Research* and the author, Marcus Weaver-Hightower.

Major categories of boy turn research literature

Category	Representative examples	Characteristics	Strengths	Weaknesses
Popular-rhetorical literature	Biddulph (1998); Pollack. (1998); Sommers (2000)	Generally argues that boys are disadvantaged or harmed by schools and society and that schools are "feminized."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible language • Widely available • Responsive to public concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequently essentialist • Prone to antifeminism and conservative politics • Prone to biological determinism
Theoretically oriented literature	Connell (1995); Crotty (2001); Mac an Ghaill (1994); Willis (1977)	Concerned with cataloging types of masculinity and their origins and effects. Examines how schools and society produce and modify masculinities. Largely uses the tools of qualitative research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuanced understanding of gender • Uncovers subtle processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often ignores public concern and practitioner needs • Less accessible language and less availability • Often focuses on most visible masculinities • Tends to neglect academic side of schooling
Practice-oriented Literature	Bleach (1998b); Browne & Fletcher (1995); Head (1999)	Concerned with developing and evaluating school- and classroom-based interventions in boys' academic and social problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive to practitioner and public concerns • More accessible language • Addresses academic side of schooling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prone to "quick fixes" • Often atheoretical or undertheorized • Fails to address feminist concerns about funding and the question "Which boys?"
Feminist and pro-feminist responses	Epstein et. al. (1999); Lingard & Douglas (1999)	Critiques the boy turn, moral panics over boys, notions of "underachievement," and popular-rhetorical backlashes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tempers heated debates • Maintains a focus on social justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prone to economicist arguments • Prone to overlooking "good sense" of boys' reforms

Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 474 Reproduced with permission of the author, February 7, 2005. Further reproduction prohibited.

GENDER STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA

Much of the work on boys and schools has been done in Australia. Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli's¹¹ book is representative of this writing. Using narrative as their research method, or way of knowing, the authors provide stories of adolescent boys in Australian schools, giving readers the storied lives of males. They do not see boys as the "new disadvantaged," as some of the hysteric work in the area has done; nevertheless they engage the reader with issues of gender and how males deal with these issues at school and in the wider society. They have a particular interest in boys who don't fit the dominant masculinity: the diverse array of boys who are "positioned on the margins in terms of their cultural backgrounds, sexuality, indigeneity, disability, and socio-economic status" (p. xii). They also consider the experiences of boys at the centre, the white, Anglo-Saxon boys who are privileged as a result of gender. And, important for us, they show how schools subconsciously support hierarchical views of gender, legitimizing a form of masculinity that is not favourable to young women and some males.

LITERACY, BOYS, AND MASCULINITY

Scholars in the area of masculinity have given particular emphasis to issues of literacy. We introduce three of these books here.

Thomas Newkirk¹² questions traditional ways of literacy practices for boys. Grounding his work in popular culture, Newkirk suggests that teachers take into account boys' need for action, their interest in media, and the need for physical learning. Newkirk invites us as teachers to widen the circle of interest to include the world of most boys.

Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm¹³ explore the particular world of adolescent boys. These authors, like Newkirk, question school practices, in particular the canonical hold of classic literature in the secondary curriculum. They ground their explanation of boys' literacy experience solidly in students' response. Interestingly, they show that boys' literacy practice is ideally social; boys like to work together. They call up for scrutiny the icons from pop culture that many teachers scorn, such as computer games, and show us how boys do and can engage with more contemporary forms of literacy.

In another book from Australia, Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum, & Colin Lankshear¹⁴ push Newkirk and Smith and Wilhelm's thinking further, moving thinking about gender and literacy into the realm of multiliteracies. They argue that school curricula need to embrace the digital world, and more

¹¹ Wayne Martino & Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli. (2003). *So What's a Boy? Addressing Issues of Masculinity and Schooling*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

¹² Thomas Newkirk. (2002). *Misreading Masculinities: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

¹³ Michael W. Smith & Jeffrey D. Wilhelm. (2002). *"Reading Don't Fix No Chevys": Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

¹⁴ Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum, & Colin Lankshear. (2002). *Boys, Literacies and Schooling: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

enthusiastically include information technology in the way they connect with both boys and girls. They warn, for example, of the danger in linking computers with boys, expecting boys to become literate if only they are working on computers, which does more to reinforce hegemonic masculinity than it does to improve boys' literacy abilities.

Vicki Sommerfeldt, in this study, has discovered this changing world of literacy. Her awareness has prompted her to include graphic novels in her program. Similarly, Mark Wilderman's narrative shows how he has incorporated the digital, visual world into his English Language Arts curriculum, illustrating the use of viewing and representing in his work with grade-twelve students.

CANADIAN STUDIES

Several Canadian scholars have studied masculinities and boys in schools. The studies we note are representative of Canadian scholarly work and reflect themes that appear in our action research project. Blye and Kehler's¹⁵ research connects with Anne Browne's story in this study, which looks at disaffected boys and their school experience. Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford¹⁶ have studied boys in middle school and their interest in multiliteracies. Mark Wilderman, in this study, has provided an account of grade-12 students presenting a video essay based on *Hamlet*, exploring how both the males and females encountered literacy in the digital world. Where Blye and Kehler and Blair and Sanford have looked at the boys in classrooms by examining their experiences, Browne and Wilderman have come to this experience through their own stories as teachers.

Park and Robinson¹⁷ have presented at conferences on the conflict and confusion that is created for boys when the 'boy code' (as defined by Pollack) engages what Park and Robinson call the 'school code.' Often boys are confused in how they should behave because acting one way and adhering to one of the codes creates conflict with either peer groups or school authorities. In effect, boys get trapped in what they believe to be a no-win situation, and therefore often just opt out.

Blye Frank, from Dalhousie University, has studied masculinity as an equity issue. He defines the traditional, normative understanding of the male role as restrictive of men. He resists the idea of "man-made men"; he argues for men

¹⁵ W. Frank Blye & Michael Kehler. (2003). Boys and Masculinities: Negotiating the contradictions and tensions of the practice of masculinities in schooling. Hawaii International Conference on Education Proceedings. January 7-10, Honolulu, HI.

¹⁶ Heather Blair & Kathy Sanford. (2003). Boys demonstrate literacy in ways the current curriculum doesn't assess. Retrieved February 7, 2005, from <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=962>

¹⁷ Jeff Park & Sam Robinson. (2003, May). *Boys, Schools and Literacy Practices*. Paper presented at Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference, Halifax, NS.

Jeff Park & Sam Robinson. (2001, May). *Male Secondary Teachers' Stories of Themselves and Their Students: On Constructing Male Masculinity*. Paper presented at Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference, Laval, PQ.

Jeff Park. (2000, May). *Constructing Masculinity: Stories of Male Secondary Teachers*. Paper presented at 2000 CASWE International Institute (in conjunction with Canadian Society for the Study of Education), Edmonton, AB.

and boys to understand themselves in relation to others and their environment. Blye Frank and Michael Kehler (2003), explore the experiences of boys in high school. Their interest lies in the lives of boys who don't buy into the macho image of boys, what the authors call "the difficulties of resisting hegemonic masculinity" (p. 1). Their research indicates the complexity of the roles males play in high school, and that not all males live in a jock, macho world. For the most part, boys are expected to act typically male – tough, aloof, typically sexist behaviours. Kehler's research has focused on males who resist this stereotype, who are not like the rest of the boys. He sees that boys either take up or resist "hegemonic masculinity" (p. 4).

Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford have examined the literacy experiences of early adolescent boys in middle level classrooms. They found that many boys did literacy differently from girls. In doing literacy, boys were social, working in groups, wanting to develop personal identity and maintain friends. Boys were pragmatic in their choice of text; they went to text for a purpose – to find something, to learn how to do something. They liked to be active and physical, talking with each other, gathering in groups around a game or computer. This approach to literacy stands in mark contrast to classroom or academic literacy. They suggest that teachers, who have been successful in a school-like literacy, don't understand the changing nature of literacy as demonstrated among the boys in their study. Blair and Sanford go on to argue that the way boys do literacy is more attuned to real life and workplace literacy than are school practices, and that perhaps girls are the real losers in the literacy race.

Park¹⁸, in his recent work on gender in the classroom and alternative forms of literacy, suggests that students, especially males, are 'doing' literacy differently, and that educators need to consider the importance of technology and the dominance of visual images in today's society.

CONCLUSION

The teacher narratives, which follow this section, explore several aspects of the research literature on boys in schools. It is perhaps helpful for educators to consider the literature section when reading the individual narratives to see the links to the research. Both Vicki and Mark explore the issue of alternative literacies and gender. Barry's ideas on boys in school echo the ideas of many scientists in considering the effect of socialization and genetics on male behaviour. Anne invites us to consider the marginalized boys in our schools and society.

Taken together, these four teachers provide a diverse perspective on the issue of boys in schools, and an invitation for others to consider a deeper understanding of a very complex situation.

¹⁸ Jeff Park. (2005). Gender and Alternative Literacy Practices: 'Doing' Literacy Differently. *English Quarterly* 37(2), 46-51.

The Teachers' Narratives

ANNE BROWNE'S STORY: "FLYING LOW ON THE RADAR SCREEN"

Anne Browne was born in England and emigrated to Canada with her parents, both of whom were teachers, in 1966. She completed her BEd at the University of Alberta in 1977 and immediately began her teaching career. She taught in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. Her 26 years of teaching experience span Kindergarten to grade 12 as well as lecturing at the University of Saskatchewan in the College of Education. She completed her M.Ed. in 1996. She is currently on leave from teaching and living in Lethbridge, Alberta.

"I'm part of a research project and we are trying to understand what it is like to be a boy in school," I tell my Enriched English Language Arts 10.

"Boys?" said one. "You mean us?" said another boy. "Are we boys?" Rumbblings erupted.

"Well, you are not men."

More rumbling complaints.

"Young men, well, 'guys,'" I said.

There was awkwardness.

"They're not doing so well in school," I blurted out.

"Compared to?" was Eric's question.

My answer was hesitant. "Girls!"

"Oh," Eric's sarcastic tone set off boy rumbblings, while the girls sat complacently smiling. "That's because of the sexist teachers," Kevin declared. There was a chorus of assent.

"What?"

In answer to my confusion, Kevin continued with a backup of boys chiming in. "The male teachers prefer girls, and the female teachers can relate to them better."

There was general agreement among the males, and they congratulated Kevin for his outspoken opinion. The girls were laughing quietly; some were shaking their heads at the outrageous notions the boys were voicing.

The boys in my grade-twelve English Language Arts class also looked puzzled by my research topic. I flattered them. "You are bright, articulate young men."

Maybe you can write something for me. What's it like to be a boy in school? What are the pressures?"

Snickers rippled through the two banks of boys.

"I'm not talking about sex," I said.

"Oh, we could tell you some stories." Adam grinned knowingly.

Somehow the topic got on to the school Pow Wow, and Adam told a story about his shoes catching on fire at a Pow Wow. That wasn't the teachable moment I was looking for.

SURVIVING HIGH SCHOOL

Undaunted, later at home, I asked my son, a grade-twelve student, the same question, and told him that I wanted to know, from boys themselves, about the culture of boys in school.

His reply was, "That's an important study. It's about time somebody asked those questions."

My burning question then came out almost involuntarily. "Why do boys act so dumb, even really smart boys?"

"It's because there is so much pressure on us to be funny."

The next day my son asked his smart friend Frasier about my question and the reply came back: "Frasier says he is cynical and sarcastic often when he is asked a question in class to protect himself from ridicule."

There are all kinds of boys in our large, comprehensive school. Some look like men; some look like timid little boys; some look like "gang bangers"; others, like geeks. Where do I begin to examine the culture of boys in school? There are so many sub cultures. One thing unites them all: they are all trying to survive high school.

TODD – FLYING LOW ON THE RADAR SCREEN

I was struck by one particular piece of writing from a grade-ten boy in Enriched English language arts. Todd sat quietly complacent near the door of my classroom. He was late arriving and the first one to leave and remained quiet throughout our discussion about the wrongs boys suffered in school. What Todd wrote haunted me and made me think about the experiences of certain boys in school and the culture into which they were thrust. Todd explained quite plainly: "I have to go low on the radar screen not doing anything so as to save bugging. I have to be cool all the time. One slip and I might get a nickname. But the cool kids don't ever look like they have to try."

Although the wording of Todd's response was compelling, he was not unique. The fear of ridicule and desire to fly below the radar was a subtle, consistent theme.

JOE – LOSING IT IN GRADE NINE

Sometimes boys appear older than their years. Unfortunately they find few rewards for acting with maturity in my grade-nine drama setting. I observed this problem one day when I saw a young boy realize that he was out of step with the dominant culture of the class. I'm not sure where Joe's delight in learning went, but I observed that spirit leaving him. Joe, a quiet, smart, interested grade-nine student, changed from a shining star to a surly, disinterested nonentity. I remember a time when Joe would be the first student to get out of his seat in the auditorium to go down to the stage to warm up. He offered creative, original, intelligent performances to me and his audience. He answered questions thoughtfully and appeared genuinely excited about my drama class.

The day he turned, I saw him jump up from his seat to go down to the stage, then stop, and sit back down again. He waited, to be the last to saunter lackadaisically down and plant himself close to the wall, arms folded, head down, and a scowl on his face. That became Joe's demeanor for the rest of the mercifully short five-week drama module. Something wore him down. It wasn't the enthusiasm, kindness, and sensitivity of the intern who was teaching my class at the time.

Joe did not seem to fit into a class dominated by boys and girls who liked to look like "gang bangers" and who regularly made references to drugs, sex, and rap music. Their drama offerings were poorly done copies of Disney, Jackass, music videos, and sit comedies. Their ideas seemed to reflect some of the baser, crass, anti-intellectual, meaning-bereft influences from television. The dumber the response or the sloppier the performance, the more entertaining it was for this class. I watched a bright young boy deal with this situation by fading into the scenery and adopting a detached air. He flew low on the radar screen.

FRANCIS – OPTING OUT

I talked with Francis's parents. Professional people, they were concerned about him. He's opted out of everything. He sat on the couch or in front of his computer all day long. He now is in university studying math. He hated high school. He hated the social scene. He liked some teachers; he was good at math and thought the math teachers were very good. But school was appalling for him. His summation: high school, "it's just a big joke." His approach to high school: grin and bear it. If you're a jock, if you fit the mold (the mold of a lot of male teachers), you survive. But when I think of Francis, he was a very quiet boy. He had talent. He had intelligence and he had insight into how people were feeling, and he was gentle and sweet. But he was not happy in high school. There was no place for him, except maybe a teacher like me who attracted the disaffected boys. I worry about the boys in high school who are not the hale fellow well met sort of fitting in kind of guy.

ACTING DUMB

I found a second theme in my grade-ten boys' responses, not in what the boys said, but in the flippant, sarcastic, comic tones of some of their responses. You see, some of the boys were acting dumb.

I had a chance to observe this dumb demeanor in my grade-nine Fine Arts class, when my class was working with an intern. I had time to see and think about what was happening.

There were six boys in the class: four were Aboriginal, one was white, one, Asian. The Aboriginal boys were cool, wore baggy pants with zippers and tags, hats, bandanas, baggy silky basketball shirts over long-sleeved t-shirts. They had a “rap” look.

Generally the boys acted out and spoke out in an advance-and-retreat manner. Steven, despite his uniform declaring him to be cool, looked afraid, yet showed off. Yet, when it was time for him to participate in a drama exercise, he cowered. Or, another example, Aaron ran onto the stage, danced, sang, laughed, then ran to the back of the auditorium and sat quietly in a dark place. Coaxing, on the intern’s part, brought him down to play the hat game. “I know this game,” Aaron spoke cockily. Indeed, he did because he had started in another module of drama until timetable changes had caused him to be switched. “I’ll explain how it’s played.” His garbled explanation sufficed and the game started. He did badly at this concentration game declaring, “I’m a retard!” This got huge laughs.

The intern began a more sophisticated acting exercise, and Shane was very shy about participating. “You need to concentrate,” the intern coached the class. “Pay attention to Shane. He’s doing it right.” “The kiss of death,” I thought. But Shane smiled, nodded, and preened subtly. What is this behaviour? It seems so inconsistent, but then grade nines are only children.

DRAMA CLASSES

In drama classes, I have had everything from the boy who just wants to be with me because he’s my friend to the highly talented, committed boy who wants to go into acting – and everything in between. When I look at boys in a drama classroom, I see them loose, not confined to a desk or a book. Very often this lack of physical structure drives them a little crazy. A few, who have been incredibly kinetic, have nearly destroyed the place. They race all over, not understanding that drama is a disciplined art. I have many instances of boys who just love being loose in a room.

They tend to be louder than the girls. They tend to be less well prepared, more willing to wing it, more vocal in class. They run the gamut, and I’m generalizing here awfully, but as a group they take chances of not being fully prepared.¹⁹

My senior drama classes often contain boys who are passionate about drama. This interest sets them apart from what seems to be the dominant culture of our school: sport. Nathan was shy, mousy, and geeky, but put him on stage and he sparkled. Within our drama culture, he was a very much revered, valued individual. The girls declared, “He’s really, really funny.” However, after some probing on my part, they told me, “He’s not got a girlfriend and he never goes on dates.” Nathan knew he was a drama geek. It seemed strange that a boy who commanded so much attention on stage, and had such an immense presence as

¹⁹ The girls would mostly be a bit more fastidious about their preparation for a performance.

a performer, slinked around the hallways staying close to the wall. His breaks and noon hours were spent with his little group in a kind English teacher's classroom.

DRAMA FOR EXPLORING SELF

In drama classes, students are invited to create and reflect upon a make-believe world in which they examined very real issues and problems. It is a unique way for students to learn about themselves and others. This experiential learning is made possible through improvisation. Within the make-believe world of improvisation, students have opportunities to explore their feelings, to hang their hearts on their sleeves, to be in motion, to be funny. These other worlds that they explore in the improvisations present interesting possibilities for boys.

I see them experiencing at life speed, within the safety of pretend situations, two worlds that appear to interest them: the feminine world and the masculine world. Grade-ten boys, in particular, like to do scenes in which they play thugs, slobs, and most often drag queens or gay men. I have seen countless improvisations in which two boys play gay lovers. I usually have to stop these scenes, mostly for the sake of art, and, pardon the pun, make them "play it straight." I say, "Hold the bus here! You can play his lover, but I'm not having you mincing around the stage. I want you to play this love story truthfully, honestly. I'm not having any stereotypes here." So, the boys play out the cross dressing and the gay sexuality in a safe place.

These boys are going to a frightening place for them because at our school the worst thing a boy can be called is "a fag" and the term "gay" now seems to have found its way into the teen vernacular to refer to everything poor, weak, or stupid. Playing out the gay scene happens with such frequency with grade-ten boys that I think they are exploring their sexuality in my drama class. They like to dress up in women's costumes and flit about the stage. Some boys will even do a scene with the girls; for example, a pajama party scene, in which they play a girl. They tend to think that playing these scenes is hugely funny, and they get big laughs. Because assumptions can be challenged in drama class, I encourage boys to examine their stereotypes. The girls are only too happy to jump in while we are critiquing scenes with statements like, "I know a gay guy, and he doesn't act like that." "You can't always tell a gay guy by looking at him." This often leaves the boys wondering.²⁰

The drama class represents a sub-culture within the macho school culture. A drama class as seen above can represent a safe place for boys to examine the seemingly tangled world of their own sexuality. In my school, I see drama and drama classes as a relatively safe place for disenfranchised boys. For these boys, it represents a sub-culture where they can think and behave differently.

There are other safe places for boys who want to escape the pressure to be accepted by the dominant cultures. There are those teachers who do not fit with the male hegemonic masculinity.

²⁰ The girls explore their sexuality too in drama class, but they don't very often explore lesbianism. They explore the extremes of their own sexuality, pushing it to hookers, to the quite outrageous limits within their own heterosexuality.

MY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

I usually have my regular classroom visitors. This year three boys came to see me at breaks or during preparation time. They were not what you would classify as popular boys. Their style was punk. Our awkward conversations would go something like this:

“You’re Irish aren’t you or English?” Cory asked.

My accent puzzled them. “Do you like the Murphy’s?”

“The who?”

“They’re an Irish punk rock band. You should listen to them.”

“Do you know the Pogues?”

“What are they?”

“They’re an Irish punk rock band. They’re ‘old school.’”

“You’re funny,” said Sandy, “You said ‘old school.’”

“I’ll bring you some Pogues and you bring a Murphy’s CD. OK?”

“OK.”

Noticing my large movie poster cut out of Tigger at the back of the room, Brian asked, “Is that Tigger?”

“Yes. Leave him alone.” As Brian runs out of the room, I cry, “Bring him back!”

On Tigger’s return, Cory asked, “What are these?”

“Fruit Loops.” I thought that was pretty self explanatory.

“Why do you have a box of Fruit Loops on your desk?”

“They’re a prize.”

Sandy’s response was, “Are they for me? Can I have them? Why can’t I have them?”

“Leave them alone. Bring them back!”

This was our regular pattern. They annoyed me. They laughed. I couldn’t wait for the bell to ring.

These boys must not have had much else to do but bug me. They were not jock, hale and hearty as so many of the more popular boys are. I was not a jock hale and hearty teacher. I guess I was a geek, an artsy middle-aged teacher. I did not represent the teacher “in crowd,” so us different types stuck together. We were all trying to survive high school.

BOYS' STORIES

MICHAEL

There were boys who appeared to embrace the dominant male culture. For these boys to flourish within this group meant to be disdainful of those feminine, artsy type of endeavors. Michael, blond, good looking hockey player, liked to think that he could get by on charm. He got by, particularly with women teachers, with his compliments. Although he was genuine, he was noisy, ill-prepared, took drama class as a joke, an easy mark. But he didn't get the artistic process. Nor did he appear to exhibit the kind of self-knowledge you need to think about characterization. For him, it was important that I give him a decent mark. At one point he told me he needed a good mark for a hockey scholarship. But I knew from talking with other teachers that I was giving him one of his better marks.

I recall one incident in class. I became tired of him, of his effusiveness, of his banter, his lack of commitment, his thinking that he could get by on charm alone. I called him on it. He became very, very angry.

I decided that I wasn't going to let him bamboozle me, to give me shoddy work. As he was doing scene work, I walked around and said, "Work harder, Michael. Make that character believable. I don't believe that. There's no honesty, no authenticity in your work." I pushed him for a few days. He got grumpy and left the class a few times, walked around the halls. But he came back. "Why are you being mean to me? Why are you picking on me?" he asked.

There were other things going on in his life. The hockey scouts weren't thrilled with him. He finally put it all into a personal monologue that was not written or performed brilliantly, but it was heartfelt. He finally managed to funnel feeling into a piece of art.

I wasn't going to let him goof off. I wanted him to produce something. I can't say the world turned completely around. Michael stayed pretty much the same. Most of his teachers couldn't stand him; he's a bit hard to take at times. But, we became friends and he had engaged in the artistic process for once.

THE FONZ

I worked with another individual in drama class, Jason, a very unusual individual. Very, very quiet, he didn't seem to fit into high school at all. He looked older, like one of our adult students, but he wasn't. I found out later that he was going through considerable hurt in his life. His little sister had cancer, and he was struggling with that. Along with being extremely quiet, Jason was odd, geeky, and very gentle. The other boys did not befriend him, but seemed to like him, and called him the Fonz, Fonzie, because he looked tall, string bean, a Fonzie kind of guy from a different era, a different culture almost.

He hung out with two, unpopular, overweight, unfashionably dressed girls and did most of his group work with them. He tried hard and produced conscientious work. His theatre repertoire was limited to the angst-driven dramatic characters. Although he played only one note as an artist, he played it well, doing truthful work.

He did do a pretty spectacular monologue. Most students use my monologue books to find their pieces. Some go to the Internet to find monologues from

movies and try to emulate the famous actors who first did those monologues. Jason found his in a book with which I was not familiar, and performed a monologue that was outside the range of skills of many of the students in the class. He played a man who was looking back on his childhood with his abusive father, who had been an SS officer during the Second World War. Fonz blew the class away. He had obviously rehearsed well because the monologue was polished, and more importantly it moved the students to give him a standing ovation. Michael was the first on his feet.

SCHOOL CULTURE AS JOCK CULTURE

As I see it, the male jock culture dominates our high school. From the principal to the smallest boy, it's a loud, confident, competitive, aggressive culture. It's almost anti-feminist, where feminine things aren't really valued. You can direct a play, or have drama students like you, but you are not a superstar unless you belong to the football program. And boys who don't fit into this culture seem to have a tougher time. It's pretty silly, really. We can't all be guffawing and slapping each other on the back and talking about football.

Exceptions do occur. One of the gentlest, most thoughtful boys I ever taught was a very fine jock and a talented football player who was a star at Mount Royal. One day he responded to some literature I asked the class to read. "Will you quit stereotyping football players as macho beasts who want to subjugate women. I'm a football player, but I'm not that kind of young man." The literature selection was a story of an artsy guy and a football player guy. He objected to the way each was stereotyped – one as gentle and sweet and the other as a brute.

It's all very complicated, the culture of boys in our school. Some boys buy into the school's dominant culture blindly, some consciously, some try to embrace more than one culture, some opt out of the dominant culture. I'm not saying that the dominant culture in our school is a bad one. Many positive values can be learned through sports. After all, my daughter was a very successful athlete in high school and beyond. I'm just saying that not all boys in our school fit that mold and if they don't, they sometimes feel disenfranchised, less valued for their contributions. Then of course there are cultures within our school that I wish we didn't have – those that place too much importance on drugs, alcohol, and opposition to authority. Recently we see the culture of street gangs encroaching into our school life. These are all sub-cultures that I would like to see our boys avoid. Unfortunately they present themselves as options for some of our disenfranchised boys. If fear of ridicule is as much a motivating factor for boys' behaviour, then a culture that is tough or has an "I don't care" attitude would be attractive to some.

SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Some scholars have classified school subjects as masculine or feminine. Sciences are masculine; English, drama, and music are feminine. Boys who do not perform well in the masculine subjects face a double stigma. Do boys turn to drama as an alternative, or do they choose it because they value it?

In my experience, drama doesn't fit this mold. I suspect that boys move into drama because they are attracted to a class where they can engage in

improvisation. They want to be improvisation artists, and they suspect that they are probably as good as a lot of people on television. I see this kind of theatre sport improv as masculine. And I have been told by boys that they value those who are funny.

Those boys, however, who take drama because it appears to be an outlet for their creativity and those boys who are part of extra curricular drama, are different. Many of them are aware that they are part of a less popular sub culture. Some say they see through the whole high school thing and don't want to buy into it. Drama, perhaps, represents an alternative for them.

THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Did my year thinking about the boys in my classes and in my school make a difference? I think so. You can't look closely at someone without changing the way you think about them. The heightened awareness of boys and the culture of boys in my school led me to wonder and ask questions I hadn't asked before. I had the opportunity to look at both boys and girls through a different lens. Having my own son in high school at the same time that I was doing this research made me really want to focus on the experiences of boys in high school. As I write this final draft, my son is in university doing a BFA in visual art and new media. And, as I always have, I ran the ideas from this research by him. He tells me that the culture of boys seems to have carried itself into at least undergraduate level in university. He explains that the Business guys give the best parties, but he is comfortable to be with boys who are not afraid to speak up about their passion for art and to express their feelings. He's much happier where he is.

This research did turn my gaze onto the disenfranchised boys in my school. I have always had time for these boys. Many of them come to drama; I've always known them and appreciated them, but I hadn't really thought about them. These are the boys who attached themselves to me and with whom I shared some kind of kinship. This may have been because of our interests in literature or drama. In particular, we found ourselves to be neither embraced by, or embracing, the dominant culture of our school. Thus my own experience helped shape the lens through which I viewed boys in school and sharpened the focus for my part of this research. I can say that I came to learn a little about some boys in school

Did this research change my teaching? Yes, I think I am better able to step back from the boys I deal with and say, "Okay, let's watch this. Let's think about this." I'm less likely to react to behaviours that annoy me and more likely to observe before making a decision, and that's a much smarter thing to do. The story about Michael, which I presented above, provides a good example of my changed thinking about boys. Michael dropped classes; he fought with everybody. I just stepped back. Our confrontation over his inappropriate behaviour in drama class could have been very nasty. I could have said, "Either my way or the highway, Michael." But I didn't. I said, "I think we can have more honesty from you, more effort, more believability as an artist." I don't think he wanted to do that. He wanted to stay in his comfort zone and treat drama as a bit of a laugh; at the same time he wanted a good mark. When I considered boys, and their lives and their experiences, I didn't confront him because I was beginning to understand that many boys want to act dumb, be funny, to protect themselves from ridicule – to fly under the radar.

BARRY GAY'S STORY: THE SCIENCE GUY'S TALE

Barry attended schools in Whitehorse, Yukon, Prince George, Quesnel, and White Rock, British Columbia, Winnemucka, Nevada, Anaheim, California, and Salem, Oregon. Barry graduated from Semiahmoo Senior Secondary in White Rock, BC, and the University of British Columbia's Secondary Education teaching program.

Barry first taught in a junior high school in Surrey, held a principalship at a band controlled school in Bella Bella, BC, and taught in three high schools in Saskatoon: Mount Royal, Evan Hardy and Walter Murray Collegiates. He was seconded by the Saskatchewan provincial government for a two-year period with the Department of Cooperation to provide seminars and coaching to school staffs on Cooperative Teaching methods. He was very active with student sports and school clubs during this time: soccer, volleyball, basketball, badminton, and cross country.

Barry Gay, a biology teacher in a secondary school system, stated that he believed that boys' behaviour was different than girls' behaviour in his classroom. He expressed an interest in exploring the different ways these behaviour differences manifested in the classroom, and the implications for teacher practice. Barry believes that boys are genetically 'hard-wired' much differently from girls, and that teachers would be foolish to believe that all gender issues/ differences are socially constructed.

Jeff first approached me to work on the "Teachers, Boys and School" project during my last year of teaching. During the previous 29 years I'd taught roughly an equal number of each sex, unless you count the three years in a British Columbia junior high where I taught half science and half 'Boy's Phys Ed.'

I nearly quit before Christmas that first year when I was thrown into a class of 41 grade-10 boys and told that the class was called "Health 10" and I should help them develop a career plan. When one of the boys, Gary, 6'3" wearing a black jacket, told me that this would be a great chance to explore the career of drug dealing, I knew that it was time to re-evaluate my career choice. It was more the menacing look he gave me when he told me than the shock of his topic choice. It said, "Lets' see you try to set me straight, teach."

My principal was no help at all. Instead of decisively suspending him from school for the rest of his life and delivering him directly to prison, as I was sure he would, he actually laughed and told me to mark him on the merits of his research paper. I was allowed to fail Gary on his paper if I wanted to. Once the clerical error that had delivered 41 adolescent males into my care had been corrected and we were down to a class of 23, things became bearable – just, and by the time Christmas arrived, I'd decided that I would stay on. By the end of my year, I didn't care what they paid me: I would have taught for free, just to be allowed to teach.

It was interesting that it was boys and not girls who nearly chased me away. It's not that girls haven't ever misbehaved in my classes. In fact some of the most memorable discipline challenges have involved girls and I shall likely never forget the girl who chose to be so obnoxious over my mispronunciation of her last name that I was left with no choice but to insist that she go to the office and get her

name on some other lucky teacher's Biology 11 class list. That was in the first five minutes of the first class of the year! Not really the positive introductory lesson that I'd hoped for...

No, it's been boys who've provided the predictably constant resistance to the civilizing influences intended by education, for they provided the most reliable challenges to my attempts to maintain the good learning environments I studied in Ed. Methods 110.

When Jeff asked if I had noticed that boys seemed to be lagging behind girls in academic success, I agreed that I'd been watching it happen for more than ten years. I eagerly agreed to join the research group, and looked forward to hearing what other teachers had to say about the issue, and better yet, what we might be able to do about the problem.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PROBLEM

When I arrived at the meeting of the committee to solve, once and for all, the slow decline of male achievement in our culture, I was delighted to see a group of competent educators assembled and all highly interested in our topic. I remember thinking, "Wow, if we can't get to the bottom of this problem, nobody can."

Instead of getting right to the topic, we reviewed some literature. I was surprised to discover our committee wasn't the first group to consider this topic, and that a lot of work and thought had already gone into the problem. Places as far away as Australia had already taken tangible steps to remedy the male slippage phenomenon. Suddenly I felt less confident about being able to identify any solutions, and definitely felt as though we were no longer pioneers embarking on a trip to uncharted lands. The Australians, of all people, had been there first.

My impressions of Australian education were mainly unfavorable, formed by stories of repatriated colleagues who had taught there on exchange. It sounded like a regressive, oppressive system, with strict old-British school overtones, but I was re-educated after looking at some of the ideas they had tried. Separate the boys from the girls in academic classes? I could see a lot of positive reasons for doing that, and can imagine several more advantages by applying our own unique Canadian spin.

Once the research portion was over (for that session anyway), we began to discuss our own ideas. There seemed a strong belief that curriculum could be a major force in turning boys off. Novels were mentioned where the protagonists were female doing female type activities. Supposedly this was the reason that boys couldn't read as well as girls. The solution was easy then: find novels that excite the interest of boys and they'll become good readers. That seemed simple enough. One alarming suggestion was that we look through lots of different curricula for lots of different grades and 'fix' them by introducing male interest items. Having written a couple of biology course curricula, I was not at all interested in revisiting those unending pages of tables indicating how the learning outcomes should be linked to the CELs. In a nutshell, these are areas that teachers might want to be aware of when they plan activities for a lesson, so they could be cognizant that their lesson included such things as Literacy or Numeracy, or any of the other five, which I've temporarily forgotten.

Once I arrived home and my wife questioned me about our deliberations; she offered what I think might just be the real reason for falling male grades. “Look at what adolescent boys (and many post adolescent males for that matter) spend their time and energy on,” she said. “What topic do they talk about excessively with other boys?” I went to school next day, and sure enough, she was right. Of course, ‘sex’ came to mind immediately, but you’ll have to forgive me, I am male after all, and apparently that topic springs to mind instantly whenever someone offers us the chance to think about any ‘topic.’ No, it wasn’t sex they were talking about – though I’m sure that if they were anything like me at that age, they were thinking about it. It was E-Games – those games that are played on computers or on X-Boxes, Game-Boys and other E type machines. You’ll note that none of the machines are called Game-Girls? There’s a reason for that, and it is that most girls don’t like to spend their time shooting monsters with ray guns, chasing down evil people in mazes and chopping them to death with machetes, or stealing cars on the E-streets of L.A., driving like a crazed drug addict and shooting at the cops chasing them. No, this is the domain of boys, and it can absolutely consume them. They can hardly wait to get home after school and take up the chase where they left off at 7:45 that morning when their mom dragged them by the ear away from the computer to come down and eat their toast and jam.

A QUESTION OF FOCUS

As I eavesdropped on conversation after conversation, I discovered a vast network of young men sharing ways to beat game programs. “You know the part on Level 3 where you’re trapped in the room in the second floor of the castle dungeon?” “Yah, how do you get out of there?” “Easy, I found out last night. You just press SHIFT as you jump and try to hit your head on the 3rd dungeon stone, and suddenly a portal opens.” “Wow, I’m gonna try it!”

About then I say to the class, “Today, you lucky students, we’re going to learn about fertilization in bread mold!” It’s no wonder I’m met with a blank stare as the boys contemplate what they’ll do with their newfound knowledge about escaping the dungeons of Castle Wolfenstein. This new knowledge is not only practical and useful, but it could have been applied immediately if only their darned biology teacher would let them go home instead of watching mold cells divide. It’s a sad day, I tell you, when electronic games outdo a boy’s interest in sex – even if it only involves bread mold.

When the test covering bread mold reproduction comes ‘round, guess which sex’s scores are better? It wasn’t because the girls are smarter – research has shown that each sex has its strengths and weaknesses as compared to the other, but overall, the IQs of males equal that of females. It mainly has to do with focus. Boys focus on boy things which involve action and physical manipulation which explains the fact that the majority of pushing, shoving, chasing, hitting, pinching, punching, and other unacceptable classroom behaviours are done by one sex more than the other.

But is the solution to blame the teacher for not providing enough stimulation of the ‘right’ kind to interest boys? Are we to condemn teachers for not providing an appropriate motivational set – one that hooks the males into the lesson and holds their rapt attention for the hour? Is it the fault of the curriculum writers for not creating captivating examples and stories or good enough chapter ending review questions? Not at all!

I have taught highly motivated boys as well as boys labeled 'advanced and academically talented.' They do well for various reasons, from pressure at home to succeed to self imposed pressure to succeed to just being so smart that sitting in the classroom allows them to absorb every nuance of the subject. There are very few who would rather sit quietly and read than to have fun playing at almost anything. There are exceptions, of course. In my last Advanced Biology grade-12 class there was a boy who stated that he would never be caught dead climbing a tree and that he simply lived to study. Furthermore, he stated, he enjoyed just sitting talking about feelings. I accept that there is a complete spectrum of interests out there, but I hope that the reader understands that I am attempting to describe the norm, or maybe even the average. You stats people, leave that alone.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND GENETIC DETERMINISM

Back to the research team. Several meetings ensued in spite of the difficulties of getting seven busy people to be available at the same time. It became evident to me that I was a minority member of a group who felt that the environment or 'nurture' was the sole, or at least most important, determiner of academic success rates between the sexes. My biology background led me to believe otherwise. There is sound research to indicate that some of our behaviours are as much as 60 per cent determined by genetics, whereas others are less. It seems that, to some extent or another, our behaviours do have more or less of a genetic component. In elucidating my theories – and Charles Darwin's – on the evolutionary necessities of being a male, I was met with polite resistance. To their credit, nobody actually rolled their eyes, and some even listened as though there might be just a little difference in male vs female behaviours as a result of 60,000 years of hunting, gathering, and scavenging to keep a family and tribal group alive.

The boys who sit before us in desks in rows in our classrooms have had to submit to that sort of constraint only for a few generations. They would have been busily employed from the moment they could walk, searching for sustenance or gathering raw materials. They would have been very busy learning, but not in the manner they are now forced to. Not in quiet contemplation of problems, but in active ways; coached by older boys and men in the ways of survival. That generally requires physical activity: demonstrations and practice. 'Showing and telling' falls just a little short of that, but it's still more appropriate than 'thinking and doing,' ad nauseum, out of a workbook.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PROBLEM

The root of the problem is simple. Boys, and girls to a lesser extent, are suffering from a clash of cultures. We live in a world that requires different attributes from the ones we've acquired over millennia of environmentally mandated behaviors. Our needs were predictable and our problems consistent over the past 57,000 years, and only with the birth of civilization – larger organized communities with specialization needs – did our cultural environment begin to slowly change. The problem for us today is that we are facing change at unprecedented rates. Our genetics is unable to keep pace. We have a clash with the current culture, our reality of today, butting up against the culture of our nature. It took many thousands of years to filter out the needed genetic

behaviors that led to our immense success, and our very success has caused the changes that we can't adapt to.

Just ponder a question or two. Picture a group of humans, say 15,000 years ago before organized cities came about. They are completely recognizable as humans, but they are completely on their own in terms of having to provide all the necessities of life. What would the boys be doing? Would a boy be valued who only wanted to sit by the fire as much as a boy who scampered up trees or cliffs to warn of coming food supplies or of dangers? Would a boy who showed no interest in throwing objects – rocks, sticks, spears – be as valuable to the group as one who was constantly honing his skills? There must have been great pressure on males at that time to bring home food, and doing so meant being physical. Those who didn't show those propensities didn't get to produce offspring – mostly because they didn't live long enough to become fathers.

We are asking boys who are genetically programmed for activity to sit still, behave, and write stuff, based on activities such as reading, listening or watching – all contra-active behaviours. Yet, our society has needs that demand the kind of knowledge that can be acquired only by intense concentration, study, and mental practice. All those behaviours that had not been appreciated for thousands of years in males are now suddenly obligatory. A hundred years ago, in 1905, very few of our citizens graduated from high school, let alone universities. They didn't need to. Boys, in those times, could be out of school by age twelve or so, and already engaged in active work. That is not possible today, and it's illegal to boot.

Six years of schooling must have been hard on individuals programmed to throw, run, fight, chase, and get dirty, but twelve is really unnatural. AND, we haven't even talked about why our vet colleges and medical schools are 85 per cent female, and why high schools in the United States are staffed so infrequently with males. It's not just an adolescent phenomenon.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Think about it: boys HAVE to be different from girls; they operate in an internal environment filled with completely different hormones, created by one of their two sex chromosomes, the relatively tiny 'Y.' It has been long established that our hormones have a tremendous influence, and even control our state of mind, and therefore some of our behaviours.

The politically correct way of thinking is to proclaim that all persons are equal in every way, and to maintain that position in spite of overwhelming evidence that we are not. The fact is, girls are different from boys, not only in the obvious external ways in which we separate the sexes, but internally as well. If females possess a womb and ovaries, why would it be such a difficult jump to imagine that their brains and thinking patterns are constructed in ways different from males? Modern investigative technology allows researchers to pinpoint structural differences using MRI machines, and other approaches indicate the manner in which thinking pathways differ between the sexes.

Ask any grade-nine teacher which of the two sexes is more easily kept on task, more quickly able to settle down and behave in a 'socially accepted' manner, and they will all say that it is the girls. The counter argument will be that boy

behaviour is cultural and that boys are expected, or taught, to act less cooperatively than girls.

People worry at the suggestion that we humans may not be in total conscious control of our actions if our hormones (proteins constructed from our genetic codes) have an influence in how we feel and in how we behave. I believe that humans have the ability to overcome those ancient hormonal instructions by understanding them and deciding whether or not they are to be heeded. No other creature is capable of this kind of decision making. People may rebel at the idea of our genes as determiners of behaviour, but it is those genes, selected vigorously by the environment, that have brought humanity to this place and time. The reason we have our current set of genes is because they worked for us for millions of years: food had to be found daily, the tribe had to defend itself, and shelter had to be maintained. For most of human history, there was likely little time to worry about needs higher on the index than those. We can't suddenly deny this genetic influence just because 100 per cent of our genes have not remained useful in the context of the times and culture we find ourselves in.

Over the course of a few hundred years, our situation has changed relatively quickly; yet in this new reality we continue to hold instinctive behaviours that may not be as appropriate as they once were in the past. We have changed our environment at a rate that surpasses the ability of our genes to match.

Can you speculate what behaviours would have lead to success (survival) in a primitive environment? From archeological evidence it appears that humans devised a division of labour approach to tribal existence, whereas another species of human, the Neanderthals, apparently did not. Evidence suggests that Neanderthals may have involved every individual in every activity including hunting, gathering, and travel. Which approach has been the more successful? Ours — evidenced in the fact that we're here and they are not.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

So, how was this division of labour accomplished? To achieve survival, all members of the tribe had important roles to fulfill. The tribe needed individuals who were strong, could run quickly, have an innate understanding of three-dimensionality so as to throw accurately, and be able to spot the tiniest of movements over great distances. Mentally, these individuals should have a propensity for physical risk-taking and non-avoidance of danger. These characteristics would have benefited the tribe when it came to providing food and defense against danger from other predators and from other human groups. These attributes became embodied in a tribal specialist called 'the male,' and these characteristics are still found in males alive today. Because our survival strategy was one of specialization and division of labour, other tasks would have fallen to the females of the tribe. In prehistoric times, the tasks taken on by the females would have been every bit as important as the males' and just as crucial to the survival of the tribe. In our modern era as we strive to achieve equality for both sexes, it may seem contrary to suggest that males and females would have traditionally been responsible for different tasks. Such comments appear to be a step backward to times when female talent was restricted by society. Our new reality, created by our new environment, finally makes it possible for equality to come of age, and both sexes – no longer tied by necessity to roles that were imposed by an ancient reality – are free to achieve self-realization as never before. So what's in our way and why aren't we there yet?

THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

We find ourselves in an environment that has new demands at the same time as we are equipped with old genetic instructions that worked well mainly in our old reality. We have not been able to adjust our genes to the new reality because evolution takes millions – not hundreds of years to accomplish. The good news is, that in appreciating that our feelings and behaviours can be between 40 and 60 per cent genetically inspired, we can make choices about ignoring the less useful instincts. The most civilized among us do this every day, and it has become criminal in many instances to act upon ancient genetic instincts.

Now let's put a group of young humans together in a classroom. They have yet to fully master which of their instincts are to be avoided and which to be followed. The males are programmed for a drastically different set of activities than are required by school work. The females' behaviours are somewhat more conducive to sitting still for long periods of time and concentrating on finer tasks. Which sex will be more successful in making the teacher happy and/or in producing neater, more complete school work? It is not amazing that girls are beginning to best the boys in school achievement. It's more amazing that the boys are doing as well as they are doing, given the amount of nature they have to suppress in order to be successful.

Why did boys do so well compared to girls in the past? In other words, is this recent phenomenon of girls surpassing boys in school achievement due to boys doing worse than before, or is it because girls are finally reaching some of the potential that was previously repressed due to societal pressures? I think it's more the latter, but the entire answer is not so simplistic as to be credited to one force alone. It's likely that several pressures are at play: some old familiar ones and some relatively new ones, but all of them influential in tugging at male genetics in ways that would lead to lower male academic success.

Here's a fast review of the old forces before a discussion of some of the new ones. First, pressure on boys from other boys not to shine in areas that the group feels are 'co-operative with authority' is still with us. In thirty years of teaching my personal experience has been that this particular pressure on boys has decreased somewhat, and it has a tendency to decrease in older grades, but it is still a factor with some peer groups. Within this overriding pressure are several sub-pressures such as an appreciation for rebelliousness and for disruptive humour, all of which detract from getting schoolwork done.

Another continuing pressure on boys is the nearly complete distraction due to the presence of girls in the same room. This can begin as early as grade six, peaking in grade nine and ten and diminishing a little each year through to grade twelve. It can remain a potent distracter long into a male's life, but we're limiting our discussion to the school years. I'm sure that girls may be affected by the boys' presence, but it seems not to be as intensely disruptive as it is for boys.

BOYS AND TECHNOLOGY

A recent force has come upon boys in our modern technological society and that is the lure of computer-driven games. The games create the old familiar primitive environment of kill or be killed, providing thrills and survival by using skills of combat with the kind of target accuracy skills needed to drive

racing cars, snowboards, weapons, and spaceships. With few exceptions, girls are not consumed by these games, or even vaguely interested, while boys experience addiction levels. Understandably so! All nature's old, programmed behaviours, rejected by society, suddenly become acceptable in the computer realm, and boys will spend hours each day in front of the screen. Meanwhile, the girls are doing other things, and in some instances, it's even studying and doing homework. Not only does the fascination with gaming take time away from boys' assignments, it consumes time thinking and talking about the games with other boys who are equally hooked.

The focus in science classes over the past ten years has been to encourage girls to consciously have faith in their ability to do science. Textbooks and curriculum materials have been modified to include as many 'hers' as 'his,' and feminine examples of scientists are frequent entries. Teacher expectations have increased for girls and as a result, they have responded with better grades – something they were always capable of. Societal expectations have changed as well, and it is now perfectly acceptable for a female to study in areas that were exclusively populated by males. Several fields still remain nearly exclusively the domains of one sex or the other, while other fields are in flux.

An example of a profession in flux is teaching. This became apparent during a conversation with a teacher from California who was amazed when she discovered that my science department currently consisted of seven males and three females. She informed me that virtually no males were teaching in the high schools in her area. On the other hand, it was a first for me in twenty years of teaching, when in 1992, our all-male science department in an upscale neighbourhood of Saskatoon received its first female science teacher. Since that time, it has been normal to be in departments where the ratio was always around half and half. The school in which I encountered my first female science colleague currently has a science department with only one male teacher out of seven. My American colleague's story is approximately the reverse, with the disappearance of males from the teaching scene. If this becomes a Canadian trend, it too will have an impact on male student achievement, if only from a lack of role model availability.

The forces arrayed against male achievement are many, with as many exceptions as there are rules. The cumulative effect of outdated genetic programming, working along with the manner in which society manages schools, conspires to make educating males a greater challenge. Lower achievement has implications that are far reaching if we operate a society in which the main criterion for employment is highest academic achievement. A society in which all positions are filled by females may be just as much an error as a society in the past which was filled exclusively by males. If we've made mistakes in the past, let's not repeat them with the opposite gender.

What are some solutions? Here are some of my suggestions:

1. Segregated classes in some subject areas, co-ed in others.
2. Make teaching an attractive enough profession so that it becomes the primary career in a family and not just the add-on career.
3. Ensure that there are as many female and male physics teachers, and that the numbers of home economics teachers are represented as equally as possible by both genders.

When males working together with females apply their minds to a problem, the best solutions are discovered – better than those derived by an all male or an all female team. That's because the different mental processing that each sex brings to the work can guarantee a better coverage of the issues than one or the other would bring working alone.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Given the fact that teachers face incredible differences in the two genders, what strategies can we employ to recognize that fact? If we are willing to address these differences in a world that seems to demand everyone be treated the same, we could ameliorate the potential problems that arise daily. Our current attempts to stuff a barbed peg (boys) into a round hole (the order and structure required in a classroom in which significant learning is to take place) is lowering the average achievement of North American male students.

I believe that it is necessary to validate boys' need for action, movement, and interest in the physical, just as it is to recognize girls' need for social interaction, peace, and harmony. I make these apparently sexist categorizations, not as a definitive description of the behaviour of the genders, but rather as a generalized description of the average behaviour of a large number of members of either group at any given time. It should be clear to all but the most argumentative that within that large group there will be individual exceptions: girls who are fighting, even physically, and boys who are contentedly and co-operatively playing a game involving family relationships, but overall, there are behavioural trends that characterize each group.

Not allowing room for gender differences can result in a sense of alienation for boys, and having them act out against schooling. I know of many bright, capable high school boys who have not bought into the school environment due to the fact that their experiences in school have not been enjoyable. They were forced to stifle their behaviours – for the good of the class, and for learning – and as a result came to feel unwelcome in that environment. This alienation has led to their not achieving as well as they might. A classroom in which male dominated interests are exclusively in charge would be no more effective than classrooms where predominantly female oriented expectations are the order. One sex, or the other, ends up short-changed. My opinion is that we are leaning more and more toward the latter, and I base that opinion on the fact of falling male achievement. A human characteristic dictates that when we are happy, when we enjoy something, when we buy into it and experience feelings of belonging, we will excel. The average boy is not excelling. Girls are doing better in school than boys are. Not too long ago, girls' achievement was below boys, so you can imagine how badly schools used to accommodate their needs! Schools and teachers should be commended on how well they have changed to make girls feel welcome to achieve. In doing so, boys have been left out. I'm not saying that schools changed to make boys unwelcome – I don't think schools were ever that welcoming a place for boys. Thankfully the changes of the past 15 years or so have at least made schools a better place for girls to inhabit.

A tiny digression is in order so that the reader does not class this article as just another author attacking the schools as the cause of all the evils in society or as unfair places where kids are subjected to daily deprivations that destroy their spirits. I actually believe the opposite of schools. I know, beyond any doubt, that schools are the reason our society is as well off as it is, and I see schools and

teachers as the most significant bulwark standing between us and anarchy, poverty, and chaos. I recognize that teachers are over-burdened and vastly under-appreciated, in addition to having an inadequate amount of time to effect changes even in their own teaching strategies, let alone in the cumbersome systems in which they are tangled. Recognizing that, what small but significant changes can a teacher make to accommodate boys and help them feel a welcome part of their educational process?

I suggest that we allow boys some space to be boys and to do 'boy like' activities. I was once strapped for catching a binder thrown by another boy before a grade-eight history class began. (So, by the way, was the thrower of the binder.) This goes to illustrate how unfriendly schools were to students in the 1950s. Boys do those kinds of things, but most girls wouldn't be interested in throwing large objects in the classroom. What's needed is a change in how we view these so-called 'anarchistic behaviours.' Young males do not intend their behaviour as a preliminary move in overthrowing the school, nor is it meant to undermine their teacher's authority. It is not a 'misbehaviour' – it is simply a 'behaviour'. Teachers too often incorrectly imagine that student behaviour is directed against the teacher, and that is RARELY true. In my instance where the binder was thrown and caught – and then thrown back and caught, the behaviour was more indicative of what boys would be doing in a natural environment, before the days of formal schooling. In fact, throwing and catching would be an important part of the schooling of boys before books and classrooms. Maybe throwing and catching could be something to include in our classroom structure. If we were to select objects that would not 'put an eye out,' male students could have fun, learn something, and satisfy their natural needs. An activity that requires talking in turn could involve a beanbag thrown to the next speaker in a circle. A successful catch means they get to speak. Although there is some small potential for injury, the inherent dangers involved are attractive to the risk-taking element in boys and will tend to keep their attention longer than a lack of throwing in a discussion might. Inappropriate, dangerous throwing designed to harm others would mean that teachers would have to deal with a disciplinary issue that they would not have to deal with otherwise, but that is the price of taking a risk in allowing an activity that welcomes boys.

What other activities are boylike? What things do boys do when they are not being controlled? They run, climb, push, test each other, yell, and throw things, chase, tease, trash talk, joke, laugh, and act boylike. How can these things be incorporated into daily classroom lessons? Most of these behaviours make teachers cringe at the thought, let alone the consideration of encouraging them. These behaviours structured, allowed, and somewhat controlled, remove the need for subterfuge on the part of the male students. If these natural behaviours are sanctioned, there's no necessity to hide their expression.

All these activities and more can be included in your academic lessons and not just left for Phys Ed or Automotive classes. For example, while you take attendance, select pairs for an arm wrestling contest. Keep no track of winners and losers, and select a different pair for the next day. Include any girl who wants to be a part. You might imagine that the resulting chaos generated by the event would lead to a class that could not be settled down, but the opposite is true; given the chance to spend some boylike time, students will trade that time for well behaved co-operation. I recommend that you lay the whole contract out and expose your motives and your expectations for any of the activities you present. What I mean by that is, tell them that you expect quality hard work on the reading they're going to do today in exchange for the chance to have some fun

with the sanctioned activity. Tell them that they will be expected to settle down immediately when it is time to start the day's work. To your surprise, they will!

As a biology and science teacher, I was fortunate in that the curriculum demands a certain amount of activity in the form of labs and activities. I was successful in supplementing these with frequent field trips and excursions. Getting students out of the regular learning environment and into diverse learning environments satisfies the natural urge to explore, see new places and things, and allay the suspicion that they're missing the real world out there. Of course, the relatively uncontrolled conditions of field trips are often a concern of teachers, fearing a massive loss of control. The effort needed to structure and arrange events such as these may appear daunting, and let's face it: it's just easier not to do them. Once you have generated a system for travel, and then conveyed it clearly to your class and their parents, the problems are over. It's a matter of anticipating every problem that could possibly arise, and having a counter plan, but I've found administrators and parents to be strongly in favor of trips to places like university and tech school labs, as well as business and city works facilities. Excursions make classroom work come alive and give meaning to the otherwise strictly academic work of the classroom. Seeing adults applying their education can put validity into work which many boys see as being passive, uninteresting, and disconnected from reality.

Our constant quest as teachers has not changed: make schoolwork active, interesting and connected to the realities of both boys and girls. It can be done if we are willing to take a few more risks and be unafraid of allowing a little 'controlled wildness' in our classrooms. Becoming comfortable with that solution could be the answer to addressing the gender gap we are facing in North American schools today.

MARK WILDERMAN'S STORY: ONE ASSIGNMENT, TWO DIFFERENT REACTIONS TO SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET: A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING GENDER DIFFERENCES

Mark Wilderman has taught high-school English for over thirteen years, with the Saskatoon Public School Division, and overseas in Wellington, New Zealand. Recognized by the Saskatoon Preschool Foundation and by the Governor General's office for teaching excellence as well as awarded the 2003 Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, Mark is passionate about kids, language, and learning. In addition to his current work on a team-taught, integrated approach to grade-12 English and Canadian history, he has facilitated many accreditation seminars, co-authored teachers' guides, led the scoring of the province-wide Creative and Critical Thinking Assessment of Grade 11 students, and presented at numerous "best practice" in-services for teachers around the province.

I have read about and heard arguments for boy-friendly texts as a way to bring young men into English Language Arts, but I have also begun to realize that the problem of disengaged boys is far reaching and that any solution is more complicated, if not always incomplete. After all, if success for boys were simply a matter of offering male protagonists, "male-friendly" topics, or male authors, boys would already be very successful. For the bulk of what ELA teachers have offered in past, and in the present, tends to be about, for, and from men. As a male language arts teacher for the past fifteen years, I have been mindful of certain boys: boys who have been placed in the hallways for misbehaviour; boys who repeat the same English class two or three times; boys who find little pleasure in or purpose for the subject; but especially the even more worrisome boys who find no meaningful connection to school or learning.

My own research journey has been not about improving boys' performance to surpass that of girls but rather to understand better how gender differences influence learning styles and motivation. Finding success for boys is not an axiomatic proposition. In fact, in the study of boys I have come to better understand girls, for in and outside the scope of this research project, I have listened to students in interviews and conversations as they have directly and indirectly addressed the issue. I have experimented with content and delivery within my classroom to locate effective strategies that attend to gender differences. I have specifically sought insights from girls, as they understand boys from outside "male" but inside a co-educational classroom, quickly realizing that they inadvertently reveal much about their own learning styles and interests too. Indeed, gender differences have implications for curricular and pedagogical decisions made daily by teachers. But perhaps for me, the greatest guide to understanding has been not in what students have said, but rather in what they have done well.

No other text that I have taught speaks as well to both girls and boys as does William Shakespeare's Hamlet. For boys, the disaffected central character's inability to communicate, self-destructive behaviours, and general melancholic ruminations appeal if not resonate. As an introduction to the tragedy, I often start by playing Three Dog Night's, One. The memorable opening line, "One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do" is the anthem of Hamlet and judging by the male students' reaction, the anthem of many boys who, too, feel alienated from others and themselves. If the character Hamlet and opening line

speak to boys, it is Ophelia and the second line of One that speak to girls. Identification with the iconic Ophelia, a troubled, voiceless girl who is defined and confined by her relationships with her father, brother, and boyfriend is often immediate. For Ophelia, “two can be as bad as one” because her strength is drawn from outside herself. To her, what others think matters most.

Most successful for both genders has been an assignment that is a creative response to the play where students have choice. After an intensive, structured study of the play, students are given an opportunity to revisit a part of the play that they wish to explore in even greater depth. Their study may interpret text through conventional forms of expression such as writing or speaking, or conversely, through a less conventional means such as representing. Representing, one of the six literacy strands of Saskatchewan’s ELA curriculum, values art forms such as film or music as a way to understand something. A documentary, for example, on the development of Canadian English is as effective in learning about the subject as is a written paper. Written and spoken language, and the language of symbols used in representing, are all similar vehicles: they are a means through which humans come to better understand. Over the years patterns of and for success have emerged for me but more recently, a careful study of the processes and outcomes of single-sex groups to the same assignment has proved useful in planning, executing and assessing beyond the study of Hamlet or even the subject of ELA.

Perhaps the obvious difference between the sexes is in what they often attend to within Shakespeare’s text. For boys, they tend to gravitate to scenes with strong action (fencing matches and subsequent deaths), gloomy monologues (“To be or not to be”), or macabre subjects (gravediggers’ scene). For girls, although some are attracted to the Nunnery Scene (Hamlet confronts Ophelia), most gravitate to Queen Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death. Although boys focus largely on action, external conflict, and the solitary world of Hamlet, girls attend to Ophelia, inspired not so much by her actions or words but by language others use to describe her descent into madness and eventual death. Girls will often comment on the beauty of the language, explicitly and implicitly, through songs, journal entries, drawings, poems, and film that respond to Ophelia’s watery end. Theirs is part aesthetic response to written language, part empathetic response to Ophelia’s situation.

Although boys are not incapable of aesthetic responses to written texts, they are more comfortable generally with texts that entertain or inform. That is, written texts that are the most palatable are either texts that entertain with action or humour; or that offer something practical for use in “the real world.” Girls mostly appreciate written texts; they do not seek “usefulness” in the same way or to the same degree; they tend to tolerate ambiguity; they often enjoy non-linear stories or stories told obliquely. Inner conflict is more interesting to them than is external conflict. Certainly, girls are generally more comfortable if not more experienced with written texts. Boys tend to be reluctant readers who require invitations into texts. These pre-reading invitations, part of good pedagogy for all students, are teases to show relevance, pique interest, or explain value. Because boys tend to be less familiar or comfortable with reading, a written text’s organization, sentence structures, and vocabulary level are points for consideration. Non-fiction as well as textbooks with practical application and “real life” examples are generally easier sells. Historical accounts of Second World War battles and a chapter on perpetual motion or the energy of a car in physics generally appeal to boys. Whether a teacher assigns an article from a science journal or a chapter from a history textbook, the gender stereotypes about reading must be considered in the planning of the lesson.

The most successful results on the creative project have come from, more often than not, single-sex groups arranged by students. For girls, schools provide few opportunities for young women to talk about ideas that matter most to them. In mixed-gender groups, if girls speak at all, those who speak frankly or honestly are often labelled as “aggressive” or “bitchy.” Situations for girls where they are not concerned about what boys think can be productive, if not liberating. In one of my classes, a group of four young women produced a short film, *Always Ophelia*, that was formative to my thinking, and therapeutic for them. Having just finished reading *Reviving Ophelia*²¹ as part of my reading for this research project, one female student commented that she would like to borrow the book from me. As a kind of invitation to the book, I explained that I was perplexed by a pattern of attraction to the character of Ophelia by female students. Too, frequent allusions to her in popular culture suggested something more than I could see. Ophelia has inspired several dozen painters and musicians. For example, singer Natalie Merchant’s most recent album title and first released single is *Ophelia*.

I invited the young woman and her all-female group to read the book together and explain for them and to me, Ophelia as a popular, perennial icon. What they produced on film was nothing less than impressive. For the first time, I heard Ophelia’s voice, and by extension, the voices of many girls. Paradoxically and fittingly, they persuasively appropriated the voice of Ophelia without words. Too, they singularly challenged the stereotype of digital technology as the domain for and strength of boys. They worked collaboratively and organized effectively. They proceeded with less of a sense of audience and more with a sense of personal quest: to understand the iconic Ophelia. For them, motivation was in their personal connection to the character and in their commitment to each other. The intrinsic reward of self-awareness replaced the concern for the extrinsic reward of a grade.

The experience has shown me evidence of the value of group projects organized according to gender, especially where the benefits can prove important beyond the study of a book or concept. It has reminded me of the need to allow girls to define topics and change assignments in ways that can be meaningful to them. An all-female group may wish to present a symposium on breast cancer for a biology class. Young women would not only research from books but also locate those strong women within their communities who could speak to such a challenge. Finding opportunities for girls to seek powerful female role models or voices can prove empowering. The group sought answers within the group but ventured outside to speak to their peers, to their mothers. For them and to me, the discourse generated by their quest was as exciting as the end result. Process, for girls, is important.

For single-sex boy groups, the product is, at least superficially, often more important than process. Boys such as the trio that produced the sophisticated video, *To the Unknowing World*, proceed always with the expectation of some narcissistic fame that might come from the public screening of the film. Their motivation, then, came from some sense of public publication, where success would be authentically measured by the audience’s reaction to their short film. Unlike the girls, they benefited from clearly defined boundaries, a well-structured timeline for production, and an outline, explicitly describing contributions each member would make. A contract, in a sense, that explicitly

²¹ M. Pipher. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Putnam.

and comprehensively defined goals, expectations, and consequences ensured their success. Although they collaborated to honour Hamlet's last request to tell his story "to the unknowing world," they acted competitively. At first they wished to be better than any other male group before or after them; however, with some prompting, their point of reference for competition became themselves. No doubt, most boys are competitive, a competitiveness that can be both unhealthy and healthy. Certainly, the group's willingness to spend many hours filming and editing was about producing something better than what they had before accomplished.

But it is more complicated than this. Film making and other forms of representing have proven the most exciting to me because students tend to judge their success not on numeric abstractions assigned by teachers but rather assign merit because of self-evaluation. Yes, their investment is personal. Too, the investment by young people is considerable not because of the novelty but rather because they have been sophisticated users of technology and heavy consumers of music and film; theirs is not so much a book culture but rather a technological one. They have a film grammar, for example, that is an unwritten knowledge base gleaned through extensive exposure to television, computers, video/DVD, and film. It has shown them how each medium can communicate. Given the chance, the students can use a familiar vehicle to navigate unfamiliar ideas. Further, the process of performing or filming is action-oriented, and for boys this is especially appealing. To illustrate, a teacher's valuation of this kind of literacy begins with something familiar, especially to boys, but promotes a kind of meta-language, a healthy, symbiotic relationship of film language with film-making language. Unfortunately, ELA teachers often fail to value representing as a form of literacy, not acknowledging that forms like film require considerable skill and are effective means through which to understand or explore an idea. Such a narrow sense of literacy limits students because the book culture of my generation is not the culture of some girls and many boys. We place boys at a disadvantage in our classrooms when we serve only the traditional meal of reading and writing, when the written word is largely the exclusive currency of our classrooms.

When I first started teaching English, it was not uncommon for me to assign five significant literary essays within a semester. My goal was to ensure that all students would write excellent papers in university, even if many were not planning for tertiary education. My students grew frustrated and I grew tired, for more did not prove to produce better. The almost singular focus on writing of my early classroom was born out of my own experience; I taught as my teachers had taught, and figuratively speaking, I was a good student. Reading and writing was English, was school. Now in a different time, removed from my own high school experience of being entertained by Olivier's' 1948 version of *Hamlet*, students require more, given the preparation needed for successful living in a far more complicated time if not complex world. I quickly surrendered my fears of not knowing about technology, my anxiety around my unfamiliarity with the highly specialized language of film and filmic techniques for example, because my guidance to students around process, and critical questions regarding their decision making in representing are the same as those employed when teaching writing or speaking.

I attempt to ask critical questions of students regarding their essays, their films, and their songs, and those students who move on to university are not limited because the focus has always been on what matters most: thinking. Literary scholar and essayist Northrop Frye argued that an individual does not understand an idea until it is wrapped in language because language is the

vehicle through which to think. He argues that such a statement as “I know but just can’t put it into words” really means the idea is not fully understood. For teachers, when we allow students to use language in its broadest sense, we know, whatever the vehicle, when students *truly* know. And students know.

For the boys, *To the Unknowing World* is their most sophisticated and ambitious production. It opens in darkness with Hamlet’s impassioned commandment to Horatio: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, /Absent thee from felicity awhile, /And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, /To tell my story.” Immediately following, the narrative begins, like a pair of opening eyes to images that are the exposition to this tragedy. For those familiar with the play, it is recognizable but different, for the camera faithfully becomes Horatio’s eyes. Darkness and voiceovers are pauses for Horatio as he struggles to continue to the approaching and inevitable end of the tale. When Hamlet’s death finally arrives, the camera pans the loss, then shifts gently to the clear, blue sky. The camera, presumably, is seeking confirmation from Hamlet and the Heavens that the story has been told completely and accurately, at which point the eyes close for the last time.

The boys have made so many careful decisions, responding to so many perplexing aspects of the play. They struggled to be the expert on a character who seemed aloof and enigmatic to even his best friend, Horatio. Although I also ask students to complete an essay on the play, showing how to reference primary and secondary sources, incorporate quotations, and develop topic sentences and a thesis statement, their lasting connection to the play stems from 25 minutes of carefully produced video. Most boys keep their videos; few value returned essays in the same way. The act of writing is comparatively passive, less social, and for some boys, the punishment often imposed by teachers with unruly classes. Want to control especially difficult boys? Take the corrective measure of assigning plenty of reading and writing, without invitations, explanations, or relevance.

Relevance invited the girls into *Always Ophelia*, and therefore it ensured that the result was no less powerful, no less thoughtful. *Always Ophelia* is not a narrative but rather a portrait, even a documentary. In this carefully edited and comparatively shorter film, the girls weld hundreds of artfully framed images to represent aspects, sometimes contradictory, of Ophelia, indeed of young women. As the tempo of the instrumental music builds, so too does the pace of image delivery whose cumulative effect, a visual drowning, is overwhelming both for Ophelia and for us. The girls show, the boys tell; that is, the girls offer a *writerly* text, the boys provide a *readerly* one. *Always Ophelia* requires more of us, intellectually and emotionally, because as one of the young women commented: “Just because Ophelia isn’t talking doesn’t mean she can’t be heard if you listen hard enough.” One last point that is interesting to note: the boys tended to rely upon a stored knowledge of filmic technique drawn from exposure and in some cases repeat exposure to the same films. In contrast, the girls’ filmic techniques were borrowed more from a sense of the literary texts as being cinematic. For example, their use of rain as a sympathetic background and universalizing technique of the thematic character is drawn from a familiarity of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Yet their ability to visualize the written word may say more about the reading competence of girls and less about thinking patterns that define and divide boys and girls. After all, visualization of the written text is a characteristic of many of our best readers.

Often the best video responses produced by boys have begun with elaborate introductions that identify their created corporate name and symbol, much like

MGM's roaring lion which prefaces that company's works. In the beginning I believed the significant amount of time dedicated to naming the group and finding an appropriate symbol was time misspent. If the goal is just optics, that is to look like other professional company markers, could this not be done simply, allowing more time for the content? Like Gertrude's criticism and demand of Polonius for "more matter, less art," it seemed an appropriate charge; yet it failed to acknowledge the notion of team or community as valuable among boys. Although boys are generally more independent than girls, they also desire to belong to some fraternity. Successful sporting teams, for example, rally around a name, a uniform, and sometimes even a mascot and, too, there is also conduct that is associated with belonging. Tempering good for self with good for others, focusing collectively and working collaboratively, defining and believing something as obtainable and worthwhile together, sharing joys of success and sorrows of failure are positive aspects of belonging. When I see non-communicative, disconnected boys in my classroom, I wish for them a sense of positive belonging. They need to belong to something. I notice the boys who wear pants below the waist; it is a badge of brotherhood. I laugh as I remember my own adolescent badges of belonging from the decade of the 80s: the pastel cotton, Miami Vice jackets, and Tom Cruise tinted Raybans. More profoundly, I understand that gangs exist to connect disconnected boys; in fact, they rely on it. Moreover, although gang or drug cultures are bad, the price of not belonging to anything seems worse, for the extremes of Mark Lepine of Montreal and the 14-year-old boy of Taber, Alberta are illustrations. Without doubt, attention to creating positive cultures for boys is essential.

Creating such cultures seems extremely difficult. Education is often viewed as a female domain, for the message is in the absence of male role models in areas beyond physics, industrial arts, physical education, and administration. If elementary education is important in formation, then predominately female staffs establish reading, writing, and learning as the work and world of women. Embracing something that is viewed as feminine is, not surprisingly, threatening to some young men as they struggle with their community's constructed and often contradictory sense of masculinity. Even though we have come a long way, we seem stubbornly dedicated to celebrating male athletic accomplishments and female scholastic accomplishments, or even worse applauding girls for beauty and permitting boys (as well as girls) to underachieve. The celebration and acceptance of less comes from outside the school as well. Perennial favourite comments at parent-teacher interviews include: "as long as he gets through," "well, he doesn't plan to go to university," and "I was never good at English either." In each, the author sends a message. The challenge, then, for teachers and parents is to create positive boy cultures around learning, where learning and especially literacy are part a shared and valued masculine enterprise.

In a team-taught class, using an integrated approach to ELA A30 and History 30, my colleague and I separated students according to gender for particular units of instruction. Part of Canadian history examines the intense and imaginative campaign by women for the right to vote. The young women in our classes staged *Mock Parliaments*, reviewing why men should receive the vote. Scripted portions revealed their understanding of rhetorical irony, of arguments made by well-known activists of the day, of the value of this creative approach to public awareness. Unfortunately, the unscripted portions revealed more about traditional roles and values. When each member was given an impromptu introduction, it almost always included an adjective relating to beauty and charm. I found myself clapping with the others, but I was mindful that this outcome, one of hundreds within our classrooms every day, too often goes

unnoticed, unchallenged or even applauded. The girls, too, deserve our attention and assistance in creating critical, thoughtful environments.

Although numerous teachers in earnest have asked me about conclusions or findings of this research, I feel hopelessly inadequate in this, or in any offering. Still, one assignment, with two different reactions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has provided a way to crystallize some of the understandings that have come to guide my curricular and pedagogical decisions. I have proceeded by focusing on students' success rather than failure, by making sure all conclusions are born out of practice. Teachers have a wealth of practical knowledge best gained when we "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."

VICKI SUMMERFELDT'S NARRATIVE: MALE MYSTIQUE, READING, AND SUICIDE

Vicki Summerfeldt teaches English Language Arts and Creative Writing at Mount Royal Collegiate Institute. She has been heavily involved in curriculum committees and language arts initiatives, at both the local and provincial level.

I was involved with this project [Teachers, Boys and Schools] for over a year, and it gave me time to talk and think about things that are important to me. I have been involved in women's issues since 1972 – women's groups, women's help organizations – working with gender equity, both in grass roots organizations and local politics. Gender issues have always been of great interest and importance to me.

The first day I taught was when I was a 36-year-old intern. I walked into the classroom at the west side collegiate, Mount Royal, knowing that there were differences from the other collegiates in Saskatoon; Mount Royal's philosophical climate was a little dated. I was going to challenge their 1950's ideas about boys and girls, and now years later, I am given another chance to look at these issues again.

I've always practised non-sexist language in the classroom and had students do various reading and speaking exercises to challenge the obvious sexism in the students' language. To this day there is defensiveness about and a reluctance to practise gender-neutral language. The boys, especially, will ridicule and belittle the very idea by making broad statements like, "I guess we have to change the word 'woman' because it has 'man' in it." Even in my own English department I have confronted an unwillingness to change. I offered the other teachers an article on how you can use 'their' to replace 'his/her.' Many of them stated that such a change did not sit well with them. As a teacher you should talk about things, challenge the words, play with the language, but sometimes nothing at all happens in the classroom to create change.

When I first went into the classroom, I was determined that I would not lose sight of who I was, but I would also not pontificate. My goal in the classroom is not to lecture. However, when gender and ethical issues come up, I challenge them. For a while I was trying to introduce more stories with a strong female presence and Aboriginal context in my curriculum, attempting to offer students a broad picture of alternative realities. My male students are still very reluctant to read a story with a female protagonist. Any novel with a main female character is often criticized and called "chick lit."

To make my point, I have been trying to understand what boys are reading and to balance the male and female experience in the classroom material. We read *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver in grade 12, and many (not all) of the boys just hated it. They despise the characters and claim that "nothing happens" in the book. Yet many of my female students just loved the book; they actually loved it to the point of seeking out and reading the sequel, *Pigs in Heaven*.

Given a choice, boys will pick *Lord of the Flies* to read in spite of its challenging nature. *The Bean Trees* deals with the emotional and social aspects of single motherhood. It also delves into racism. In *Lord of the Flies*, you have nasty boys on an island, and even with the British language, boys will choose this book that promises violence against pigs and each other.

This study has deepened my involvement with gender issues in schools, and has given me time to think about boys, and to voice my ideas. I've even had people ask about the project at the school. Not many, but some, are interested, and it's kept alive in me the truth that things have not totally changed. It is true that our world, academic and beyond, is not fair and equitable. And so by opening myself to the idea of what boys are reading, and watching the boys more closely, I found this study important because boys are having some problems with reading and writing.

BOYS AND WRITING

Creative writing is very interesting. I've always noted the topics students liked to write about and how they would put their story into motion. Inside, my feminist soul often aches. The girls often write such boring stories about the boy with blue eyes and how love was in the air and the pain of it all!

The boys write things that are more exciting: ripping off an arm, or flying a helicopter up the side of a mountain. Characterization is often lost to action. A strong story would include feelings, action and characters. With my girls I find myself saying, "Can you offer me a different ending that isn't a stereotype? Can you offer me a female character who isn't a stereotype?" Unfortunately the stereotypes are strongly embedded with the girls. The boys are more interested in action. I've always been aware of that.

Right now I'm looking more closely at emotional expression in the writing from both genders and noticing an opening up, especially with some of the younger boys. They're not just writing about their stereos or skateboarding. Of course they still adhere to their classic interests, cars, movies, sports, and such, but recently some boys have been expressing their emotional side. They talk about the importance of love and loyalty.

READING GRAPHIC NOVELS

Over the last couple of years I've looked at text in a different way than how I used to in my teaching before this project. For instance I have learned about graphic novels. I thought graphic novels were simply like the comic books from my childhood. How misguided I was. What I've learned is that over the last 20 years there has been an incredible growth of novels that use detailed visuals. And we call them graphic novels.

I've started to incorporate graphic novels into my classroom by bringing them in and hoping some of my male readers will be drawn to them. What I find is boys are more likely to pick them up. Although a few girls have shown interest in the material, the graphic novels strike a chord with male readers.

I discovered for myself that reading the text in these books was different from reading the text of a regular novel. When I began to look at these graphic novels, I had to teach myself how to read them because I'm text driven. By that I mean that when I first read them I read the words only, and I read in a very linear fashion – start to finish, in order. Then I realized I was missing part of the story, the visual part. So I had to train myself to read and then stop, and then read the picture. I had to look at the picture to take in the drawing and the visual, and

then add it to the text. There are certain things going on when you read like this. It is not a simple matter to read these books. If anybody says we're somehow lessening the ability to read when we use graphic novels, then they are wrong. Allen Moore writes some very strong stories with very strong characters...like his graphic novel *The Watchmen*.

A woman at my school, one of the resource room teachers, did her study for her masters on graphic novels. According to her, graphic novels were first used with reluctant readers who had not been reading before. I learned this when I attended some workshops on graphic novels. I was amazed at how many kinds there are. One of the most famous is the story from Nazi Germany, Speilgelmann's *Maus*. We have it in our library now. Some of my students read it. I've asked the librarian to order *The Hobbit* in graphic novel and it's a beautiful book. One problem is that they are very expensive and more delicate than hardcover books.

For some students, it's almost a cult-like interest for these kinds of magazines or books. At one time, you would have had to go to little comic book stores or used bookstores to find graphic novels and comic books. But now, acceptance of graphic novels is obvious if you go into big bookstores. They now have a whole section dedicated to graphic novels because of the increased interest in these kinds of books. For many stores, their graphic novel sections are growing to meet the increasing demand for this format. Some boys have grown up reading comic books and they graduate to the graphic novels.

Boys are interested in these books because they will read the text. They read the text, understand the text, and it is almost as if they give the text a rest, and then they look at the pictures. It pleases them to look at the pictures, but it also helps them to understand what is going on if they have difficulty with a written word. It helps them understand what they've just read. So the two things happen together – reading the words, and looking at the pictures.

One thing that I have noticed is how the movie world affects what our students read. Right now the resurrection of *The Lord of the Rings* has brought it into my classroom. Grade 10 boys are reading *Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. These are massive texts, but they are plugging through these very wordy and complex novels because their imagination has been inspired by the movie. They have returned to some of these texts because their interest has been piqued by film or by pop culture.

FREE READING TIME

This year, because of this study, I've been doing a lot of reading on the topic of boys and literacy. I've bought books such as *Even Hockey Players Read* by David Booth.²² I began to think about all my students. I have female students who do not like to read any more than the boys, so I decided reading time would be given over to student interest. I wanted something that would work for everyone. I used to say to my students, "This is the course we are studying so you will read a book that fits the theme." This year I didn't do that. Instead I said, "You have 15 minutes of reading time for the pleasure, the simple pleasure of reading. You are

²² D. Booth. (2002). *Even Hockey Players Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.

allowed to read whatever you like except for Playboy, that kind of thing. You can bring in car magazines, fashion magazines; you may bring in graphic novels.”

I bring books to class as well. For example, *The Guinness World Book of World Records* and the *Ripley's Believe It or Not* are fantastically popular. My books are falling apart because all the kids have them off the shelf constantly. I buy dog magazines and bring them in. I found dogs have a universal appeal. Boys and girls just love dogs. I'd bring books from the library, like a huge dog encyclopedia. Boys would run into my room to get first chance at the dog books, and they'd read them very carefully. So I try to get that human factor, you know. Boys aren't interested just in machines; they love dogs and all sorts of things.

Another thing I do now is bring in the newspaper every single day. After reading my paper in the morning, I take it to school and the students fight to get to the newspaper. Many of my boys go for the sports section, but I have girls who do that as well, especially if they are involved in school sports. They want to see the write-ups. Boys will often go for the sports section, front page, comics, and job ads. It is interesting what has happened. Bringing in the paper, by opening that up every day, I watch my students, both boys and girls, to see what they are reading. I thought when I said they could bring a magazine there would be this great flurry of them bringing in magazines. Some of them do. I have some boys who read car magazines or snowboarding magazines. *Maxim* and *Stuff* magazines are very, very popular with boy and girl students in high school.

I found girls often love magazines like *Seventeen*, *Young Miss*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Both boys and girls love *People* magazine. The love of gossip seems inherent to both males and females. As I said before, there are wild fights over *The Guinness Book of World Records* and my *Canadian Book of Lists*. It seems that the males in particular love these books because of the little details and mini facts, those instant moments. If you think about it, we've been reduced to mini-bytes even in education. I think much of what we read in school has been reduced; our vocabularies have been reduced, as has the students' ability to sit for a long time. Even our curriculum encourages movement and asks teachers to never make the children focus for too long. The truth is that when they read, they want something immediate. It's like immediate gratification – a funny little detail of two or three sentences. If you pick up one of these magazines to look at, go to the middle and they will have jokes and little details – who-would-have-guessed-it kind of facts, the surprise details. Kids love those. And it doesn't take any intellectual strife to read them and they are amusing. Boys love humour. It is important to them.

I've opened wide the content in reading, and then I watch to see what they read. I have students bringing in Grisham, Dean Koontz, and Stephen King. So you get your creepy stories, or your lawyer stories, both of which are very popular. There are plenty of speculative fiction and fantasy stories. A quaint love right now, particularly with boys, is the Japanese animation books (Manga). These are very popular with a certain group of boys.

If students begin a book for pleasure and they hate it, I tell them to change it. “You don't read a book you hate.” I'm lucky. My room's across from the library. However, when we are studying a book together in class, that is a different situation. There is more to the study than pleasure. But if they are reading a book for pleasure and they are getting no pleasure out of it — I tell them, “don't read it.”

A DIFFERENT WAY OF READING

When reading, we have people who are looking for the little amusing details of life or those snapshot moments. I wouldn't necessarily say it is male or female. I would say it is more a cultural or societal thing than attention spans have been reduced. These children spend their lives in front of movies and videos that have very fast clips. The scenes change rapidly, and so if boys do have more problems with language than girls do, this kind of reduction of thought, this hyperactivity of visuals and small details, will not be good for these kids. To read one must sit still, one must be silent, and one must focus. As a result, reading becomes a nightmare for some students.

One male student of mine went to the library and he brought back a book of visual illusions. He sat there, read some material, and then focused on the images. He would sit there, focused on that activity. He didn't talk to his neighbors for at least fifteen minutes. Within that activity, he needed to switch from text to visual. He picked up a new book from our library a few days later, on clowns. There were words but there were visuals as well.

Graphic novels and visual books are not simple. In traditional print text, the progression is linear, but then, graphic novels integrate visuals and text. These graphic novels do an amazing job with the whole idea of time because in a novel, yes you have flashbacks, but actually with these graphic novels, especially with an author like Alan Moore, you can have two things happen at once and the text can be opposed to the visual.

I have one student who went to McNally Robinson [local Saskatoon bookstore] and picked his next book, a Batman graphic novel. There's a lot of learning going on with these books. For example, during the week, I have all the kids do independent vocabulary studies. Students have to choose ten words through the week from music, from me, or from their reading – ten words that they have read, and don't know what the words mean. He had a list from his Batman book. I said, "Isn't it incredible the words that you noticed? These are brilliant words. I love this." And he picked them all from a graphic novel. Never do I say these are simplistic at all. It's just a different way of reading a story.

Not all boys like this. Some of them just want to sit and read *The Lord of the Rings* or their Grisham book. I have one boy in grade 12 reading *Animal Farm*. I have another fellow who wants to know something on Nietzsche. So I have these kids, and then I have a boy who reads books on clowns.

The big question is this: do boys practice literacy right now differently from the print way we typically do with them? I have boys who are learning to read by getting many things happening at one time, print, visual, video, sound. Reading for many is not a linear process; it's dialogic and recursive.

MASCULINE MYSTIQUE AND SUICIDE

This year a former student of mine committed suicide. He shot himself to death. While in high school he was in enriched academic programs, he was an honored football player, and he was an accomplished wrestler. He was one of the 'cool' kids around the school, a very popular jock type.

He ended his life at twenty years of age because he could not maintain that athletic 'high' he had in high school and because he had been diagnosed with severe diabetes. All his friends were football players at the university, achieving great things. He could not cope with the fact that his glory days had passed and he became progressively more depressed. Diabetes is a difficult disease, but it can be managed. He died, however, because he no longer fit the image he created of himself.

I really do believe that boys in high school need more loving than the girls. The girls seem to nurture each other, which doesn't mean they don't need support from their teacher. I can't see the world in black and white when it comes to teenagers. After this boy's suicide, I had a string of these big football players coming back to see me at school. My classes were in session, and still the boys came. They stood outside my room crying, needing reassurance and hugs, all the while my grade tens were acting out because no one was watching them. They were very upset, these recent graduates, these men, and they came back to the school to talk. I had no female students stop by to talk, not one until several weeks later.

The funeral was a celebration of that which killed him. The whole football and wrestling teams were there with their team jackets on. Two friends from football did a eulogy for him, that I had proofread at the school earlier in the day. In the eulogy they praised him over and over again for his prowess as an athlete, and by celebrating this, his mourners didn't recognize this was why he died. Nobody recognized that he was a young man with diabetes, working at Sears, living a life without glory.

He had a lack of insight about himself. In high school, he had a powerful masculine essence. Now, because he believed he had lost it, he could not live. His friends loved him, mourned him, but they didn't understand either. I saw through the week and at the funeral this remarkable outpouring of grief, and yet, on the red, tear-stained faces of these young men, you could read their total lack of comprehension. "Why would he shoot himself to death?" They simply could not see it.

This is not surprising. Schools, high school in particular, are run with a 'sport' mentality. To deny this would be foolish. The ethics and the morality of sports, the idea of 'team,' and the drive to win is repeatedly pounded in. Yet, no one considers what happens after high school, when this identity and self worth are often lost. I don't see a way to change it. I suppose talk in the classroom would be a start. Classrooms are not often a place where fresh thinking is encouraged, but I see new and vital teachers who are unafraid of gender issues. Maybe some talk like this would have helped a young man to see his value beyond football, and he would still be alive.

Appendix 1

BOYS AND SCHOOLS

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

BRIAN NOONAN AND SAM ROBINSON

JUNE, 2005

Adapted from Saskatchewan School Boards Association
Research Report #03-02 Boys in School (2003)

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INTRODUCTION

We have provided this guide to facilitate discussion and reflection among teachers, parents, and perhaps students themselves on the issue of boys and school.

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

In this guide, we have explored gender differences in academic achievement; however, we recognize that academic achievement is only one measure of school success. And, because student attitudes toward learning or personal and social skills are also part of school achievement, we have also addressed gender and school success from the perspective of socialization of boys in school.

Specifically the discussion guide:

- provides information about the gender gap in academic achievement
- provides information about socialization as a way to understand the achievement gap and boys' school experiences.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Differences in academic achievement between boys and girls are well documented; however, we also acknowledge that other dimensions to gender differences in schools exist. The following list provides examples of these differences.

1. There are gender differences in *special education programs*. Many more boys than girls are receiving special education in Canadian schools (*Education Quarterly Review*, 1999, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 7-22). Why this is so has not been well explained or documented by researchers.
2. Gender differences are also evident in institutions and work life outside the school setting. For example, the *unemployment rates for 15 – 24 year olds* (i.e. those who recently left public education) are higher for males than for females as the following table shows.

Table 1. Unemployment rates for young adults in Canada

Males years	Unemployment Rate	Females	Unemployment Rate
15 – 19	20.2%	15 – 19 years	15.3%
20 – 24	12.1%	20 – 24 years	9.3%

(Source: Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 282-0002)

3. Gender differences are apparent in *post-secondary education* enrolments. For example, for the past five years about 55 per cent of the full-time enrolment at the University of Saskatchewan has been female. In the 2001-2002 academic year females out-numbered males in every college except for dentistry, medicine and engineering (Student Information System, University of Saskatchewan, Statistics 2002, p. 2.10).
4. Gender differences are characteristic of the education system from a number of perspectives. For example, one response has been to establish *single gender schools*. Reports on such schools are varied, and it is difficult to conclude that separating boys and girls in schools reduces the achievement gap. Some studies claim that achievement for both genders improves in single gender schools; other reports claim that there is no difference in achievement. Questions about single sex schools are further muddled in that factors such as classroom interactions, student self-concept, or attitude toward schools may be the reason for establishing single sex schools, and not academic achievement. The following publications are indicative of the examination of single gender schools as a response to gender differences
 - i) H. Blair and K. Sandford,
<http://www.education.ualberta.ca/boysandliteracy>,
 - ii) A. Datnow and L. Hubbard. (2002) *Gender in policy and practice*. New York: Routledge Falmer Press.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

The guide is organized into the following sections, each of which provides a way of looking at the question of boys and school.

1. *The Achievement Gap*: Data about school achievement indicates that girls are outperforming boys. In this section, the information about boys' achievement prompts a simple question: *What is this gap and why is it so?*
2. *Context of Gender*: The second section addresses gender and masculinity. Boys inherit their sex, but they are socialized into their gendered behaviour. *How are boys socialized?*
3. *Socialization – Schools, Sports, Media*: This section examines schools as gendered institutions that prompt teachers and students to develop an orientation to masculinity. It also considers how other institutions (sports and the media) in our society are powerful influences on how boys develop their understanding of their gender. *How do schools, sports and the media socialize boys?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We have prepared this list of questions to encourage personal reflection and dialogue among readers before getting into the content of this guide. The first three sets of questions are based on sections of the guide; the last section introduces general concerns, which might motivate general discussion.

You can use these questions to start thinking about the issue of boys in schools, or as a guide for your reading of the sections in the guide. You can also use these questions to reconsider the teacher narratives in the McDowell report.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

- What is a school's responsibility to know about and act upon "the achievement gap"?
- Are the achievement differences important? Why or why not?
- What factors (biological? classroom? school? society?) might help explain these differences?
- How might schools implement programs to help boys raise their achievement level without disadvantaging girls?
- What is the difference between these terms: sex and gender?

THE CONTEXT OF GENDER

- How are boys and young men socialized in school and society? How do they acquire their gender role?
- How can a concern for males in schools support the goal of gender equity for both female and male students?
- Do you agree that patriarchy (male dominance) is a dominant force in our society; that it governs the lives of both men and women?
- How are young boys inducted into the world of patriarchy?

SOCIALIZATION: SCHOOLS, SPORTS, AND MEDIA

- What have been your experiences with patriarchy, or male dominant role?
- What are your thoughts about the impact of patriarchy on the lives of boys and young men?
- What are the consequences of patriarchy in the lives of boys and young men?
- What is your reaction to this statement: The expected aggressive, competitive behaviour of males (i.e. patriarchy) comes at the expense of their emotional and social well-being?
- Rob and Pam Gilbert transfer the issue of patriarchy from society to schools. They label this situation as "the boy question." Pollack suggests that boys have to learn a "boy code." What might they imply by this?
- Do issues of patriarchy define the lives and attitudes of all boys?
- Think about the phrase "some boys." What does this phrase mean for teachers and schools who are interested in understanding male socialization?
- What value do you see in sport and media in your community? In what ways do sport and media reinforce one version of masculine behaviour: patriarchy?

GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT GENDER AND SCHOOLS

- How will a study of boys in school and boys' lives help to improve the lives of girls in school, and support the goal of gender equity for girls?
- What ought to be a school's concern about issues of males and schools? Are there concerns about the achievement gap, classroom practices, masculinity studies, or current practices (e.g. sports and extra-curricular activities)?
- Is there now a policy that expresses your school's expectations with respect to gender e.g. is there a concern for gender equity policy?
- Does your school have adequate information on the topic of males and schools? What do parents, staff, and students know about gender issues? Is their knowledge based on reactions to media headlines, or a thoughtful consideration of the issue?
- How can your school use Saskatchewan Learning's policy on gender equity to include boys in school policy and practice?

1. THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

One of the main reasons for the current interest in boys in school – discussion, debate, and research on the achievement gap – is due to large-scale test results reported over the last decade. This has prompted the question *what evidence is there that girls are out-performing boys in school?* Following is a brief overview of a range of test results that have reported evidence of “the achievement gap.”

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Although there is much information about the achievement gap, this section focuses on academic achievement results at three levels: international, national, and provincial. Interestingly little information exists on the achievement gap at the school or school division level. We reviewed four sources of information on academic achievement measures:

1. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001)
2. School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) (2001, 1993, 1994)
3. Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP), (Saskatchewan Learning, 1996-1999)
4. Saskatchewan Department of Learning Indicators Report (2002).

Following is a brief description of each of the student assessment programs with the Website for each program.

1. **PISA** (2001) is a set of three tests (literacy, mathematics, and science) involving fifteen-year-olds in 32 countries. The first tests were administered in the year 2000, with the first results for literacy reported in December 2001. Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) produced a preliminary report, *Measuring up: The performance of Canada's youth in reading, mathematics, and science (2001)*. The tests were administered under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/>
2. **SAIP** tests in reading/writing, mathematics, and science are achievement tests developed by the CMEC in cooperation with provincial/territorial ministries of education. The tests were administered to samples of 13 and 16 year old students across Canada (mathematics, 1993; reading and writing, 1994; science, 1998). <http://www.cmec.ca/saip/indexe.stm>.
3. The **Saskatchewan Department of Learning** has conducted a regular large-scale provincial assessment program since 1993. The Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP) involves large-scale tests in mathematics, language arts, and science. The tests are administered to samples of students across the province, typically at grades 5, 8, and 11. The results of PLAP are also used as information for curriculum evaluation. <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/ae/plap.html>.

4. The **Saskatchewan Department of Learning Indicators Program** is an annual report produced by Saskatchewan Learning, which presents information on various dimensions of education in Saskatchewan. In general, the report provides information on content indicators, process indicators, and outcome indicators. <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/ae/indicators.html>.

The results from each of these large-scale assessments provide information from many perspectives (including information on gender) as part of those results. These results consistently show that girls outperform boys on academic achievement provincially, nationally, and internationally.

COMMENTS ON THE ACHIEVEMENT DATA

Following are examples of comments from these reports that focus on gender differences in students' achievement:

- SAIP (2002). Writing Assessment. "There were significant differences between males and females in writing assessment. Girls performed consistently better than boys at almost all levels in both age groups" [p. 2-3] (note: 13 and 16 years)
- PISA. (2000), "In PISA girls performed significantly better than boys on reading tests in all countries and all Canadian provinces." (*Highlights* p. 4)
- SAIP (1999). Science. "...there is no significant difference in achievement between males and females at most levels. There are slightly more females at level 1 or above in both age groups, and there are slightly more 16 year old males at level 4 and above" (*Measuring up...*p. 23).
- SAIP (1994) Reading and Writing. "The reading and writing assessments reveal clear gender differences. Girls demonstrated better reading and writing than boys. These results are consistent with other studies." (p. 27)
- PLAP (1998) Mathematics. "Females outsourced males in all three grades assessed. ...The achievement gap is greatest at Grade 8 but has narrowed by Grade 11." (p. 41)
- Saskatchewan Education Indicators (2002). "In all subjects shown, provincial average marks of females were higher than those of male students, consistent with findings for previous years" (p. 51).

SASKATCHEWAN INDICATORS REPORT

Some of the most interesting evidence on the achievement gap is the annual grade 12 final marks, reported in the Saskatchewan Indicators Reports. Table 53 from the *Saskatchewan Indicators: Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Saskatchewan Learning, 2003, appendices) shows the enrolment percentages and final marks for female and male students in selected grade 12 subjects.

Figure 53:
Percentage Enrolment and Average Mark for Selected Level 30 Courses,
by Gender, by Rural, Urban, and Northern School Locations, 2001-02

Registrations			Urban		Rural		North		Province	
			Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
English Language Arts A30	13,878	% enrol	50.7	49.3	50.8	49.2	63.0	37.0	51.1	48.9
		avg. mark	72.6	64.5	75.4	67.6	64.0	58.4	73.5	65.7
English Language Arts B30	13,602	% enrol	50.9	49.1	50.0	50.0	61.0	39.0	50.9	49.1
		avg. mark	72.5	64.5	74.9	67.8	67.6	61.0	73.3	65.8
History 30	7,785	% enrol	48.5	51.5	48.9	51.1	65.4	34.6	48.7	51.3
		avg. mark	71.9	66.8	74.2	69.2	48.2	46.4	72.9	67.9
Native Studies 30	1,598	% enrol	57.4	42.6	56.4	43.6	63.9	36.1	58.1	41.9
		avg. mark	69.1	62.0	68.7	63.6	68.3	62.0	68.9	62.4
Social Studies 30	4,262	% enrol	50.9	49.1	50.7	49.3	66.2	33.8	51.4	48.6
		avg. mark	71.5	64.7	74.1	68.5	61.5	58.8	71.9	65.9
Mathematics A30	12,678	% enrol	50.7	49.3	50.7	49.3	61.1	38.9	50.9	49.1
		ave. mark	67.8	63.7	73.0	66.8	60.0	59.6	69.5	64.9
Mathematics B30	9,478	% enrol	51.4	48.6	51.4	48.6	59.4	40.6	51.5	48.5
		avg. mark	72.3	69.0	74.3	69.5	60.8	67.0	72.9	69.2
Mathematics C30	6,491	% enrol	50.1	49.9	52.4	47.6	44.0	56.0	51.0	49.0
		avg. mark	74.5	71.6	76.2	72.2	74.5	67.2	75.2	71.8
Calculus 30	2,392	% enrol	47.8	52.2	50.1	49.9	66.7	33.3	48.8	51.2
		avg. mark	78.9	75.9	80.3	76.9	83.8	84.0	79.4	76.0
Biology 30	10,559	% enrol	61.6	38.5	56.1	43.9	68.5	31.5	59.6	40.4
		avg. mark	71.5	67.4	73.5	68.6	64.8	60.5	72.1	67.9
Chemistry 30	6,957	% enrol	56.1	43.9	54.7	45.3	61.7	38.3	55.7	44.3
		avg. mark	73.4	70.5	74.1	71.4	65.0	64.3	73.5	70.8
Physics 30	5,753	% enrol	44.4	55.6	46.2	53.8	63.6	36.4	45.8	54.2
		avg. mark	75.6	72.2	75.6	72.0	61.2	62.7	75.2	72.0

Source: Saskatchewan Education (2003). Student Services Data, Regina, SK.

In the year 2003 report, average marks were reported for twelve level 30 courses. Females outperformed males in all twelve courses and in some cases the differences were substantial. For example, in English B30, females' average scores were 7.5 per cent higher than those for males. The smallest differences occur among the science and mathematics scores. "In grade 12, about 52 per cent of the students were female and 48 per cent, male. For most subjects, female and male student enrolments reflect this proportion within a few percentage points. However, females are more likely than males to enrol in Biology 30 and males are more likely than females to enrol in Physics 30" (p. 51).

This information is of interest for several reasons.

- In Saskatchewan, students' marks are the final exit grades for public education.
- The systematic gender differences (across all areas) raise questions about classroom practices, curriculum, and instruction – and what these mean for boys.
- These data suggest that boys are at a disadvantage when they apply for post-secondary education.

EDUCATORS' RESPONSES TO THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP INFORMATION

Making sense of the evidence of the achievement gap is not easy. The evidence seems clear: females consistently out-perform males on almost all tests of basic skills (literacy, mathematics) internationally, nationally, and provincially. These differences raise questions and concerns for educational policy makers and practitioners. For example, why do these differences exist and can something be done to reduce the achievement gap?

Educators across Canada have undertaken a number of initiatives in response to the evidence of the achievement gap including but not limited to:

- Making the curriculum 'boy friendly', for example, teachers choosing literature that appeals to boys and getting boys into more physical activity in their literacy classes.
- Establishing same sex classrooms or schools.
- Encouraging more male teachers in elementary grades to help focus on positive role models.
- Including viewing and representing in the curriculum.
- Providing in-service for teachers and administrators on gender issues in schools.

THINKING ABOUT THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Teachers who want to take action to change or reduce the achievement gap need to think about several principles – some of which should be considered “non-negotiable.”

- Reducing the achievement gap is not a “zero-sum game,” that is, improving achievement for males does not mean reducing the achievement of females.
- Understanding and improving males' achievement is the task.
- Preferential treatment or unearned advantage for either gender is not a solution. Solutions should support both males and females.
- The achievement gap is a difference in academic performance between females and males; understanding that gap involves examining the principles and practices of educational measurement and evaluation.

When school boards consider the achievement of boys, they ought to consider the achievement gap as complex. They need to look at it as the result of a number of factors that come together to impact boys in schools and their achievement. The following sections of this guide, address some of these factors, specifically, gender role and socialization.

2. THE CONTEXT OF GENDER

In this section, we raise the question of socialization and gender in schools. For the purpose of this discussion, socialization is defined as the way social expectations influence behaviour. Schools contribute to the socialization of both boys and girls. The socialization in schools has an influence on how students behave and ultimately on their school achievement.

What follows is an examination from two perspectives of the effects of socialization in schools:

- the existence of patriarchy as an aspect of socialization.
- the provincial gender equity policy

PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy refers to the way males have privilege in our society: the social, political, and economic practices that give males an advantage over females. The feminist movement has been struggling to understand patriarchy, and to free women and men from its influence. Following is a list of words commonly associated with patriarchy that describe how men are expected to behave and what is expected of them socially.

Men and boys are assumed to be:

- individualistic
- competitive
- providers
- defenders
- action oriented
- unemotional
- fearless
- stoical, don't cry
- mechanical, scientific, mathematical

This attitude defines what it means to be male, and how males learn to define their masculinity.

Gender, Masculinity, and the Feminist Movement. The feminist viewpoint suggests that patriarchy has had a profound effect on the lives of girls and women. The work of the feminist movement to improve the lives of girls and young women in society is important because it indicates how patriarchy works in society to marginalize women. More recently, studies of male socialization, or of masculinity, have pointed out that the values associated with patriarchy are not necessarily helpful for men. These values tend to desensitize boys and young men, prompting them to become aggressive, lacking in feeling, or afraid of their emotional side.

GENDER EQUITY POLICY

In 1991, Saskatchewan Learning published a document to help school systems achieve gender equity: *Gender Equity Policy and Guidelines for Implementation*. This policy statement grew out of a concern for girls in the school system. At that time, educators recognized that schools were biased against females in the school system. Instructional methods, curriculum, materials, school policies, practices and programs tended to favour males.

SASKATCHEWAN LEARNING GENDER EQUITY POLICY

The intent of the Goals of Education in Saskatchewan is “to develop the potential of each person to the fullest extent”. In recognition of this, Saskatchewan Education encourages the achievement of gender equity with the province’s Kindergarten to Grade 12 system. Gender equity will be promoted as an integral part of all aspects of the system including: curriculum, resource materials, instructional and assessment practices, school environment, student development, the relationship between the school and the community, and monitoring.

Gender Equity: Policy and Guidelines for Implementation – a Summary. (1991, February), p. 3.

It is generally agreed that the provincial gender equity policy is desirable and it is important not to detract from advances that have been made toward gender equity for females. At the same time the discussion about males and school provides an opportunity for understanding the lives of males, and of making life better for them. It’s a question, then, of understanding gender, and gender roles, for both females and males. In studying gender equity, many scholars have focused attention on the lives of females, and their place in schools, which suggests that the males are ok – and that they have the privilege in society of being male. How can things not go well for them? This guide extends the discussion of gender equity to include males for the benefit of both females and males – a question of balance.

This guide takes the position that is important for boys and young men to understand their masculinity, their gendered lives. From a more complete understanding of boys’ masculinity, of the ways males are socialized, educators, too, can provide a better school experience for both boys and girls. In the next section male socialization is examined in more detail with the focus on school, sports, and media.

3. SOCIALIZATION: SCHOOLS, SPORTS AND MEDIA

SOCIALIZATION AND MASCULINITY

In the previous sections, two ways to look at the boys and school were presented. First, achievement data were reviewed to show girls are outperforming boys academically in school. Second, the concept of gender was examined and the idea that males are socialized into their gendered role (or masculinity).

This section considers further issues of masculinity and how boys are socialized into a patriarchal system - that is, how boys acquire a 'boy code.' In terms of socialization it is also acknowledged that there is a 'school code,' that is, expected behaviour in school. If it is true that the boy code may be at odds with the school code, it probably has something to do with the achievement gap. That is to say, girls are higher achievers because they are more attuned to the school code.

It should be emphasized that this section examines male socialization only. Other scholars are interested in the way genetic inheritance determines male behaviour: that boys act as boys because of their genes. This topic has not been explored here because its impact for schools has not been extensively considered. However, this guide provides examples of socialization effects in classrooms and how socialization is a larger issue related to society, sports, and the media.

THE BOY CODE AND THE SCHOOL CODE

Author William Pollack²³ has transposed the thinking about men and patriarchy to understand the lives of young boys. He has popularized the term 'boy code,' which showed how patriarchy plays out in the lives of boys. The following quotation outlines Pollack's description of the boy code:

Boys learn the Boy Code in sandboxes, playgrounds, schoolrooms, camps, churches, and hangouts, and are taught by peers, coaches, teachers, and just about everyone else (p. 23).

Boys absorb "strict rules...about how they must behave, rules that most of them seem to genuinely fear breaking. (p. 23)

WHAT IS THE BOY CODE?

The following phrases, adapted from Pollack, provide a summary of male role expectations.

- The sturdy oak – stoic, stable, independent, don't show weakness, pain, don't cry
- Give 'em hell – daring, bravado, attraction to violence, macho, high energy

²³ William Pollack. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York. Henry Holt and Company.

- The big wheel – achieve status, dominance, power, avoid shame, mask of coolness, everything is ok
- No sissy stuff – nothing feminine, no dependence, warmth, empathy.

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL CODE?

Just as there is a socially constructed boy code so is there a ‘school code’²⁴ (Park 2000; Park and Robinson 2001; Park and Robinson 2003), a code of conduct of what is typically expected of students, both boys and girls. In general, schools expect all students to:

- Be compliant, obedient, be still, don’t make a noise
- Achieve individually and be a high achiever, particularly in math and science
- Enjoy “sissy subjects” – art, music, literature
- Share personal feelings (write about personal reactions)
- Be dependent, warm, empathetic
- Engage in sports.

In general, it has been found that boys do not conform to the school code as regularly as girls. In the following section, the boy code and the school code are examined from the perspective of the classroom, sports, and the media.

THE CLASSROOM AND THE SCHOOL

Socialization is a process that suggests schools are gendered institutions that tell males to act one way, and females, another way. Schools reinforce patriarchal values, which all accept: teachers, administrators, and especially students. R.W. Connell²⁵ suggests that subjects in the school curriculum are governed by patriarchal values. Boys tend to distance themselves from English classes because of the focus on “expression of emotions”; they “lack a set of rule and unique answers.” English classes, in the minds of many boys, contrast with activities, such as sports, which they define as masculine and which help define their masculinity.

Gilbert and Gilbert²⁶ suggest that we need to think of “some boys” in considering masculinity. Some boys are successful; some boys are not. Those unsuccessful boys, who are not part of the macho circle, have a difficult time fitting into school culture. The Gilberts point out that boys feel that they must choose the sciences and math, which are “invested with high masculine status and power.” Boys who do not achieve in these subjects have a double sense of failure.

²⁴ Jeff Park & Sam Robinson. (2003, May). *Boys, Schools and Literacy Practices*. Paper presented at Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference, Halifax, NS.

Jeff Park & Sam Robinson. (2001, May). *Male Secondary Teachers’ Stories of Themselves and Their Students: On Constructing Male Masculinity*. Paper presented at Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference, Laval, PQ.

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²⁵ R.W. Connell. (2000). *The Men and the Boys*, Berkley, CA: University of California Press, p. 58.

²⁶ R. Gilbert and P. Gilbert. (1998). *Masculinity Goes to School*. New York: Routledge, p. 9.

Not only do they not do well in these subjects but they develop “a personal sense of failure with a male domain of achievement.”

SPORTS, MEDIA, AND SOCIALIZATION

Schools and families do not act in isolation in the formation of masculinity among boys. Sports and the media are powerful influences in boys’ socialization. Sport holds a special place in the lives of many boys and men. It is at the same time both a positive and negative force. It is a positive force because males like the action, they learn to cooperate, and they learn skills of value in adult life. As organized sport is played out in society, it reinforces patriarchal, macho values. The Gilberts²⁷ note that the values associated with sport often run counter to those associated with school and learning: the conflict between boy code and school code.

The Gilberts argue that there is not a problem with sport in schools, except it tends to dominate boys’ lives. Boys tend to be ostracized if they choose other activities: “(T)his image of the cool sociable sportsman is constantly set against the picture of the boy whose interests might be to read a book.” The values of sports for many boys are set against the values of learning.

The media play a large role in boys’ socialization. Twenty years ago, we were accustomed to seeing young women’s bodies used to sell cars. This same standard is now used in TV ads to sell beer, but now the media use the bodies of young men. Connell²⁸ says this about the media: “Media research documents what we know intuitively, the mass media are crammed with representations of masculinities – from rock music, beer commercials, sitcoms, action movies, and war films to news programs.”

In summary, Gilberts²⁹ point out that the media and sport present a conflicting message about masculinity. They point out that sport and media often “compound understanding of masculinity and gender with violence and pressure”. These forces so dominate society that they leave little room for boys to choose other ways of “being men and doing masculinity.”

²⁷ R. Gilbert and P. Gilbert. (1998). *Masculinity Goes to School*. New York: Routledge, p. 63.

²⁸ R.W. Connell. (2000). *The Men and the Boys*, Berkley, CA: University of California Press, p. 151.

²⁹ R. Gilbert and P. Gilbert. (1998). *Masculinity Goes to School*. New York: Routledge, p. 80.

4. SUMMARY

This guide considered two issues of boys and schools: i) achievement scores that show males are not performing as well as females on academic achievement measures and ii) socialization of boys in society.

For the first issue, the discussion guide reviewed recent and current evidence that showed girls academic achievement was higher than boys in many assessment programs.

For the second issue, the discussion guide considered the socialization of males, where it was noted how many institutions in society, not just schools, are instrumental in the socialization of males. Boys and school is a gender question and in this respect, this question is linked to issues of equality for both females and males. We cited the Saskatchewan Learning gender equity policy as a framework for guiding discussions on boys and school.

Gender and schools is a complex matter and there are perspectives other than achievement and socialization that ought to be studied and discussed. The following are examples of issues related to boys and schools:

- Culture, race, and/or social class
- Parents and family involvement
- Classroom or school climate
- Curriculum and instruction (e.g. achievement in specific subjects)
- Teacher role models

These issues may well form the basis for a continuing discussion on boys and schools.

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