

GENDER-BASED LITERACY REFORM: A QUESTION OF CHALLENGING OR RECUPERATING GENDER BINARIES

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In this article we offer a research-based response to and critique of approaches suggested to address boys' literacy and pedagogical reform. Our aim is to open up a dialogue by examining the conceptual limits imposed by casting boys as particular sorts of literate subjects. We argue against officially sanctioned literacy practices that fail to engage with research-based literature that raises serious questions about gender reform initiatives. We suggest caution and further informed dialogue in response to media generated public concerns and educational policies aimed at remasculinizing schools rather than interrogating gender binaries.

Key words: masculinity, gender reform, literacy practices, essentialist frameworks

Dans cet article, les auteurs offrent, à la suite de leurs recherches, une réponse aux approches suggérées pour s'attaquer à la littératie chez les garçons et à la réforme pédagogique. Tout en formulant des critiques, les chercheurs visent à ouvrir un dialogue en examinant les limites conceptuelles imposées lorsqu'on considère les garçons comme des types particuliers de sujets quant à la littératie. Les auteurs s'opposent aux pratiques officiellement sanctionnées en matière de littératie, mais faisant fi de la littérature qui, fondée sur la recherche, soulève de graves questions au sujet des initiatives de réforme selon le sexe. Ils suggèrent d'être prudents et de poursuivre un dialogue éclairé en réponse aux inquiétudes du public suscitées par les médias et aux politiques de l'enseignement visant à remasculiniser les écoles plutôt qu'à remettre en question la vision binaire des genres.

Mots clés : masculinité, réforme selon le sexe, pratiques de littératie, cadres essentialistes

The aim of this article is to raise questions about taken-for-granted approaches to addressing gender-based literacy reform for boys in schools. In fact, the issue of boys' failure and under-achievement relative to girls on literacy benchmarked testing measures has generated considerable debate and concern in a media and policy driven context, which has not only identified the source of the problem, but has also advocated certain strategies to improve boys' literacy skills (see Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Greig, 2003; House of Representatives Standing Committee, 2002; Kehler & Greig, 2005; Lingard, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002). The problem is often identified in terms of the failure of schools, and more specifically teachers, to accommodate boys' interests and learning styles (see Newkirk, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). This accommodation is often attributed to the impact of feminization because elementary schools are dominated by female teachers. Furthermore, there is a sense within the context of media-driven debates that boys' motivation to engage in school-based literacy practices is impeded by an approach to teaching English Language Arts that provides more for girls' interests in terms of text selection and content (see Mitchell, 2004). The consequence of attributing boys' failure at literacy to the feminization of schooling and the curriculum, we argue, has resulted in advocating specific strategies to address this problem that ignore the impact of race relations, economic disadvantage, ethnicity, sexuality, geographical location, and other factors in terms of their capacity to impact on school performance (see Brown, 2006; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002; Martino, *in press*). These include:

1. the need for a more boy-friendly curriculum, which is considered to be inclusive of boys' distinctive interests and learning needs (see Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2004, for a critique of such approaches);
2. the need for more male teachers who, as a consequence of being male, are supposedly better equipped to relate to boys and to address their learning needs (see Martino & Kehler, 2006, for a critique of this approach);

3. the need for single-sex classes in English where boys do not have to worry about girls and where teachers can more easily cater to boys' interests and learning styles (see Greig, 2003; Lingard et al, 2002; Martino & Frank, 2006; Martino, Mills & Lingard, 2005; Martino & Meyenn, 2002 for a critique of the assumptions underscoring such initiatives).

Given these sorts of concerns about a reform agenda committed to recuperating gender binaries, this article provides a more informed research-based knowledge about such approaches to addressing boys' literacy and pedagogical reform, as a basis for interrogating the mindset informing these proposed solutions. We also provide a critique of the *Me Read? No Way!* document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004), a guide for educators produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education to improve boys' literacy skills, as a basis for reflecting on the conceptual limits imposed by casting boys as particular sorts of literate subjects. It is only by interrogating assumptions about boys, masculinity, and schooling, and by adopting a sophisticated conceptual or analytic framework that attends to the social construction of gender, we argue, that a more informed basis for pedagogical reform can be established and justified to improve boys' literacy skills (see Martino & Berrill, 2003; Rowan et al, 2002).

THE PROBLEM WITH ESSENTIALIST FRAMEWORKS

Rowan et al. (2002) claim that a major problem with the gender-based literacy reform agenda is that it tends to treat boys as a homogenous group and, hence, relies on explanations that are grounded in a belief that some *essential* or *natural* differences exist between boys and girls (p. 29). Such a mindset imposes certain limitations in terms of conceptualizing both the problem of boys' under-achievement in literacy and how it should be dealt with. For instance, they claim that this framework for thinking about boys and literacy necessitates that literacy classrooms be masculinized to accommodate boys' natural interests and skills. This thinking is reflected in the detail provided by Rowan et al. about a minister of education who believed that boys were being *sissified* and that schools needed to "to get back to celebrating masculinity"

through providing a more boy friendly curriculum (p. 31). Although this approach involves providing texts that cater to typical boys' interests, it also often includes advocating for more male teachers who are considered to be integral to counteracting the apparent inimical effects of the feminization of schooling and literacy. Male teachers are perceived to bring a different perspective to the classroom, both in terms of how they relate to boys and in terms of their teaching in the sense that supposedly they are able to cater more effectively to boys' interests.

The sense that masculine interests or behaviours are somehow devalued in schools, and more specifically in literacy classrooms, has been taken up significantly in media-driven debates about boys' education (Froese-Germaine, 2004, 2006; Lingard, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002) and relates to broader anxieties about the emasculation of boys and men in what has been termed in Canada as the "age of the wuss" (see Gillis, 2005, cover page). In the United States, du Toit (2003) refers to the same phenomenon as the "pussification of the western male" (n.p.) (see also Foster, Kimmell, & Skelton, 2001; Martino & Kehler, 2006; and Titus, 2004, for a discussion of *moral panic* within the context of debates about boys' education and the perceived threat of feminization). Such concerns, which are fuelled by essentialist notions that boys and girls are naturally suited to different kinds of learning activities, are also at the basis of calls to return to single-sex classes for boys. In such classroom contexts, advocates believe that competition can be fostered more effectively and that boys' interests, learning styles, and assessment preferences can be more readily accommodated (see Martino & Meyenn, 2002; Martino et al., 2005, Rowan et al., 2002, for a critique of such approaches). There is a sense that simply catering to boys' natural interests – i.e., allowing boys to focus their reading on traditional male interests such as sports or the outdoors – will enhance the development of necessary literacy skills. Hence, the role of the male teacher in facilitating such a gender-based literacy reform agenda is often emphasized because, as males, men teachers are better equipped to maximize boys' attention and to develop particular relationships with boys to effectively enhance their participation in school-based literacy practices.

Such a mindset fails to take into consideration other differences among boys that impact significantly on their participation in school,

such as socio-economic status, sexuality, ethnicity and race, and how these intersect for individual boys to position them differentially in relation to their peers. For example, Alloway and Gilbert (1998) confirm that not all boys are failing at literacy and that other factors need to be considered vis-à-vis students' experiences of schooling and under-achievement. In Toronto, for instance, students born in the Caribbean, Central or South America, or East Africa, as well as those students who speak Portuguese, are twice as likely to drop out of school as their peers from China, Korea, or Japan (see Brown, 2006). This "gap in learning," Brown (2006, p. A01) indicates, cannot be attributed to lack of ability, but is related to questions of access to cultural and financial resources needed to stimulate and support learning. As Francis and Skelton (2005) point out, socio-economic class or home background, as well as factors such as ethnicity, have an impact on achievement in exams in significant ways. Thus, although boys, overall, do not achieve as well as girls in literacy, middle class boys are still doing better than working class girls. Moreover, Francis and Skelton stress that more complex issues are elided in politicized discussions and debates concerning boys' under-achievement in literacy. These relate to (a) the explanatory frameworks used to account for their poor achievement; (b) how literacy is defined and what literacy practices are being tested; (c) the gendered significance of boys' lower achievement in literacy for their participation in the world beyond school; (d) participation in a hierarchical curriculum organized around the valuing of perceived hard or masculine subjects and a corresponding devaluation of perceived soft or feminine subjects (see also Alloway et al., 2002; Griffin, 2000). In this sense, Rowan et al. (2002) claim:

that 'being a boy' relates not only to experiences of a male body, but also to factors associated with race, ethnicity, economic status, physical ability, sexuality, religion, first language, physical appearance and so on. In other words, many factors combine to determine the ways in which an individual boy will be ranked within a particular gender hierarchy. (p. 43)

The problem with essentialist frameworks is that they resort to prescribing quick-fix solutions and one size fits all approaches to gender-based reform in schools that are limited in their capacity to deal with the

complexity, and, hence, the multi-faceted dimension of the boys and literacy polemic. As Rowan et al. (2002) argue:

essentialist accounts of boys, masculinity and literacy abound in educational literature. These encourage us to believe that there is some best way to teach literacy to boys based on the nature of literacy and the nature of boys and that to make advances in this area is a matter of pursuing ever closer approximations to the final solution. The fact that different views of the right approach or solution exist does not undermine underlying essentialist beliefs and assumptions. It merely shows that people can be mistaken about *how* things really are, yet correct in assuming that they really are *some* way, and that there *is* a way to solve a given problem. In this context it is worth noting that essentialist positions are associated with 'solutions' of the 'easy', 'quick fix', 'off-the-shelf' and 'one size fits all' variety ... , most essentialist positions enable simple causal relationships to be made which either justify inaction or support simple reactions. (p. 198, emphasis in the original)

In fact, Francis and Skelton (2005) raise serious questions about the effectiveness of approaches that rely on invoking biological sex differences as a basis for making sense of issues related to gender and achievement in schools. What is needed, they argue, is more informed policy formulation and whole school reform initiatives to address gender and achievement that are committed to socio-cultural approaches. This solution requires a commitment from policy makers to reconstruct rather than reinforce dominant masculinity. An adherence to essentialist mindsets, which emphasize sex differences, means that opportunities are lost to address the detrimental impact of dominant constructions of masculinity and the significance of the complexity of gender relations for specific groups of boys and girls in relation to under-achievement (see Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000). For example, Francis and Skelton (2005) argue that if an under-achieving boy needs to embrace dispositions and learning behaviours considered to be the domain of girls to raise his academic performance in school, simply accommodating traditional masculinity in the classroom is not going to produce better educational or social outcomes for boys. In fact, sufficient research-based evidence confirms that hegemonic masculinity is at the heart of many of the problems that boys are experiencing in schools (see Alloway, Gilbert, P., Gilbert, R., & Henderson, 2003; Connell, 1996; Dorais, 2004; Epstein,

Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Frank, 1993; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kehler, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005; McCready, 2004; Mills, 2001; Sanford, 2006; Skelton, 2001). As Francis and Skelton (2005) claim:

The feminine/female continues to constitute a point of scorn. Yet, what many underachieving boys need to raise their achievement is to read more, listen and attend more to teachers and other pupils, work harder (greater diligence), be more conscientious and take more pride in their work, work collaboratively, and articulate themselves better in all aspects of communication. Evidently, these are all aspects of learning/working which are constructed as feminine, and which are stereotyped as adopted by girls. (p. 129)

This quotation recognizes that the education policy agenda for boys has tended to operate at the level of treating symptoms, as opposed to dealing with the root causes of the problem of gender identity and structural inequality (see Bernard, Falter, Hill & Wilson, 2004; House of Representative Standing Committee, 2002). This policy has resulted ultimately in endorsing boy-friendly approaches to addressing boys' under-achievement as a basis for gender reform, which amount to accommodating or rather reinforcing stereotypic or traditional masculinity. Francis and Skelton (2005), in fact, advocate the need for teachers to build a deeper knowledge and understanding of gender construction that must involve some critical reflection on their own assumptions about boys and girls and how these inform their pedagogical practices (p. 142). In this sense, they advocate the need for educational policy to engage with analytic frameworks that move beyond a fundamental essentialist mindset about gender differences. In addition, they advocate a reform agenda that acknowledges the need for teachers to build knowledge and understanding about the social construction of gender identity and its impact on their own lives, the lives of their students, and relations within the school community. This understanding is particularly important, given their assertion that a commitment to diminish gender differences is closely aligned to facilitating achievement and the quality of schooling for both boys and girls (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005). In fact, Francis and Skelton (2005) document research that "has shown conclusively that it is in schools where gender constructions are less accentuated that boys

tend to produce higher attainment” (p. 148) (see Younger, Warrington, & McLellan, 2005).

ME READ?: TAKING GENDER DIFFERENCES INTO ACCOUNT

In light of these concerns, we now turn to an analysis of the *Me Read? No Way* document, produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) as “a practical guide to improving boys’ literacy skills.” As we will demonstrate, it represents an exemplary instance of recuperating gender binaries as a basis for pedagogical reform designed to facilitate boys’ engagement with literacy in schools. This document has been widely distributed to school boards and Faculties of Education in Ontario. Noted in the introduction is the Ministry’s statement of intent in producing such a guide. It is designed to “stimulate discussion” while also “provid[ing] practical and effective strategies that teachers across the province can put to use” (p. 2). Of the thirteen “strategies for success” they promote, nine of them are exclusively intended “for boys,” “to get boys,” “tools for boys”, and aimed at “understanding boys,” “appealing to boys,” “relevant to boys,” and useful for “influencing boys.” On page two of this document, the Ministry explains “how to use this guide” and indicates the “strategies sections attempt to distill for educators *the most important research* on how boys learn to read and write and the most effective instructional approaches and strategies for helping boys enjoy learning to read and write” (p. 2, emphasis added). Although clearly of significant import for teaching practices, the Ministry nonetheless suggests that teachers use this document in a fairly piecemeal manner to respond to “immediate needs and read the rest as time permits and need dictates” (p. 2). However, an apparent tension occurs in the opening pages in which the Ministry suggests “stimulating conversation,” while at the same time providing “effective strategies” that would seemingly end dialogue or debate. In short, the effect is not to encourage debate but rather to incite teachers to adopt particular pedagogical interventions designed to take gender differences into account.

Although the *Me Read?* document acknowledges that gender is “not the only factor at play in determining performance in reading and writing,”(p. 6), it fails to acknowledge what the Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2004) reported as the overwhelming fact that “socio-economic difference is the strongest single factor associated with performance” (p. 6). Moreover, on page six of the document in a section with the heading, *What about girls?*, the Ministry acknowledges that “differences among boys and among girls are greater than those differences between boys and girls” (p. 6). However, although apparently cautioning against a focus on “gender differences between students” (p. 6), the document proceeds to undercut such claims by asserting that there is a need for certain approaches to literacy instruction that cater specifically to boys’ learning styles and particular needs: “Consequently, educators must be careful not to focus on the gender differences between students, but rather to recognize that the effectiveness of certain approaches in literacy instruction may be tied to gender” (p. 6). Thus while cautioning against a focus on gender differences, the Ministry advocates an approach to literacy instruction that is designed to accommodate such gender differences vis-à-vis boys’ supposedly distinctive learning styles and needs. This slippage or contradiction points to the ideological platform from which the Ministry launched its approach to improve boys’ literacy skills: one that is committed to recuperating and reasserting gender differences in the classroom through pedagogical interventions and curriculum reform designed to cater to boys’ particular orientations to learning.

What is never made explicit is the particular conception of masculinity and boyhood that informs the Ministry’s construction of a boy as a particular literate subject endowed with certain predispositions, interests, and orientation to learning that are understood in terms of an active/passive binary oppositional framework for inscribing gender difference. This essentialized notion of active masculinity is also reflected in the images of boys represented on the cover of the *Me Read?* document. A reception regime is already in place for representing boys, despite their race or social class, as particular sorts of gendered subjects who are inscribed through active involvement in sport or participation in some sort of movement associated with the stereotypical male. For example, although the images of boys on the cover include visible minorities, for the most part they invoke the discourse of boys as active subjects. There are images of boys playing hockey, rollerblading,

standing with a skateboard, holding a toy plane, sitting on a bike, leaping into the air, or running. Although two of the nine photographs do not present boys in these terms (one is standing with his school bag, the other listening to music with his headphones on), the overall cover invokes a particular conception of masculinity that is constituted in terms of an active/passive binary oppositional framework to attribute gender difference and to inscribe boys' interests in essentialist terms on the basis of their gender.

This conception of masculinity is further reiterated throughout the entire document which is structured around thirteen "strategies for success" (p. 8). These are replete with a particular discursive framing of boys and girls as distinctly separate learners, readers, and writers. "Designed for browsing" (p. 2), the document provides a series of strategies that rely on an essentialist understanding of gender and learning more broadly. This assertion is reflected in unquestioned and authoritative distinctions that are made throughout the document to differentiate boys' reading and writing practices from girls' participation and engagement in these activities. For example, on page 6, the document refers selectively to research or literature in the field to present boys as essentially different in terms of their participation in literacy practices. Using Smith and Wilhelm (2002), the document presents the following truths about boys, while failing to engage with other research that raises questions about the taken for granted assertions about expressions of masculinity vis-à-vis boys' engagement with literacy (see Alloway et al, 2002; Martino, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003):

- Boys take longer to read than girls do. (p. 6)
- Boys read less than girls. (p. 6)
- Girls are better than boys at reading narrative and most expository texts. (p. 6)
- Boys are better at information retrieval than girls are. (p. 6)

In fact, this discourse of gender binaries undergirds many of the strategies with the call for teachers to be responsive and to attend pedagogically to the following:

- boys' reading preferences (p. 8)
- their sense of mischief (p. 8)
- fiction that focuses on action more than emotion (p. 8)
- tightly structured, well-focused lessons (p. 15)
- bite-sized, digestible pieces (p. 15)
- lessons. . .that include more active learning (p. 15)
- boys' need for social interaction (p. 26)
- action-oriented learning (p. 32)
- intellectual sparring is a way of showing their interest (p. 33)
- boys thrive on the visual language of television, cartoons, and video games (p. 40)
- the humorous responses and language play often evident in boys' writing (p. 47)
- differences in brain development and learning pace in males and females (p. 52)

Through the above outline of recommended practices, the particular conception of masculinity informing how boys are inscribed in the document as literate subjects becomes apparent. On page 8, for example, under the heading of *Quick Facts*, we are told what sort of books boys like to read. Apart from those which appeal to "their sense of mischief," these include books that "make them laugh," fiction that "focuses on action more than on emotions," the Harry Potter series which supposedly provides boys with a "sense of comfort and familiarity," science fiction, or fantasy. Once again, there are taken for granted assumptions about the nature of masculinity, which needs to be accommodated rather than interrogated in the language arts classroom, given that these sorts of texts and, hence, boys' reading preferences, are not likely to be valued at school. The implication appears to be that official school-based literacy practices disavow boys' reading preferences or interests and, hence cater more to girls' learning needs. There is no question about the need to investigate the effect of the gender system and modes of identification that inform such literacy practices in the first place in terms of how they govern some boys' desire to engage with particular sorts of texts. In this sense, such strategies are about accommodating hegemonic masculinity and thus are in the service of

reinforcing and containing gender difference, according to what Britzman (1998) terms the “imperatives of normalcy” (p. 94) or the “impulse to normalize” (p. 93).

This assumption about normative masculinity also informs unreflective assertions on page 9 of the Ontario document about the need to provide texts in which boys can see themselves or their identities as males reflected. There is never a question that not all boys might express their masculinity in the same way or necessarily subscribe to the values associated with dominant masculinity. There is a naiveté about such claims that is not informed by a more sophisticated and nuanced, research-based literature about the impact and effects of hegemonic hierarchical masculinities on boys’ lives in schools (Connell, 1996; Kehler, 2007; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; McCreedy, 2004; Weaver-Hightower, 2003) The document is replete with references to boys’ essentialized attributes and orientations that continually invoke unreflectively a normative masculinity as a pedagogical basis for driving gender-based literacy reform. On page 10, for example, the Ministry uses Smith and Wilhelm (2002) to establish a range of best practices that involve providing boys with texts that:

- Focus more on plot and action than description
- Use visual components such as movies and cartoons
- Include a focus on the role of music in students’ lives
- Draw on information boys’ can use in conversation such as headlines, box scores, jokes and cool parts of movies
- Explore a topic from multiple points of view or perspectives
- Are controversial and/or novel
- Are funny and appeal to boys’ taste for humour. (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, pp.150-157)

Although not all the above recommendations resort to the familiar tendency to normalize boys and are themselves useful instructional strategies, there is still a sense that teachers need to accommodate a certain sort of masculinity, which is taken for granted because it is treated implicitly as a natural or inevitable expression of simply being a boy. This stance is again reflected on page 12 where strategies for

helping boys to engage in reading and writing activities are similarly built around their supposed interests that involve getting boys “to nominate players for a fictional dream team by having them read about their favourite sports figures” (p. 12). Within this context of appealing to boys’ fantasy, Newkirk (2002) is also quoted to invoke familiar constructions and hence expression of boys’ masculinity as they relate to facilitating their engagement with literacy:

In one sense, reading and writing represent the choice of language over physical action, the vicarious over the actual. But writing time often provides the most open space (outside of recess) in the curriculum – a space to enact fantasies of power, adventure and friendship. And as many boys claim, when they are writing these adventures, they feel themselves physically inside the stories. Rather than denying the physical needs of boys, writing can employ that energy – if we keep the space open (p. 178, quoted in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 14).

The familiar binaries suffuse Newkirk’s discourse about the gendered dimensions of boys’ literacy practices and are consistent with the ideological framing of boys as literate subjects in terms of how they are inscribed throughout the *Me Read* document. There is no sense that such “fantasies of power” and modes of identification may be problematic in terms of their capacity to legitimate hegemonic masculinity with all the constraints it imposes on boys and men to develop a broader repertoire of skills and capacities that promote emotional literacy (Martino, in press). A commitment to such strategies also ignores research that supports the need to introduce strategies that are committed to interrogating constructions of gender difference with the view to minimize their deleterious effects for both boys and girls in schools (Kehler & Martino, 2007). As Francis and Skelton (2005) in the UK argue, “teachers need to develop ways of getting their pupils to reflect and critique ‘taken-for-granted but gendered assumptions of classroom/ media texts, ways of being organized, managed and assessed, engaging with learning, and so forth’” (p. 149). As we have illustrated, this is not the position advocated by the *Me Read?* document, which appears to be committed to recuperating and indeed reinstating deeply embedded cultural assumptions about gender differences as they relate to boys’

engagement and investment in certain sorts of literacy practices that are complicit with sustaining hegemonic forms of masculinity.

This position is reflected again in the literature that the Ministry uses to authorize a particular version of masculinity through imploring teachers to cater to boys' distinctive learning styles (see Martino et al, 2004, for a critique of such gender reform strategies). For example, the reader is told that "boys in particular benefit from tightly structured, well-focused lessons that have an obvious purpose and that are tied to the achievement of clear goals" (p. 15). In addition, we are informed that "in the teaching of reading and writing, highly structured, scaffolded and explicit instructional strategies are powerful tools for motivating boys and encouraging them to respond." Other research has found that endorsing such instructional strategies outside of a consideration of interrogating the social construction of gender can lead to dumbing-down the curriculum for boys rather than helping them to develop important skills and capacities considered necessary for participating in a post-industrial society (Lingard et al, 2002; Martino et al, 2004). In addition, advocating such strategies does not appear to be consistent with the research-based literature on productive and authentic pedagogy, which advocates the need to provide an intellectually demanding curriculum that is committed to develop students' higher order thinking skills (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Newmann & Associates, 1996).

In addition, Alloway et al. (2002) advocate the need for particular analytic and conceptual frameworks to inform both policy formulation and classroom interventions designed to improve boys' engagement with literacy in schools. Such interpretive frameworks require an analytic focus on three "repertoires of practice":

- *a repertoire for representing the self.* This involves understanding the ways in which boys learn to represent themselves in school as gendered subjects and how this impacts on their engagement with literacy. This requires a deep understanding about the ways in which boys learn to embody and perform their masculinities and how this in turn influences their thinking about/engagement with schooling.

- *a repertoire of relating*. This involves an examination of social relations within the context of addressing issues of power, authority and agency in the classroom. It requires an analytic focus on curriculum/pedagogical interventions and involves deep reflection on 'selection of materials, forms of tasks, organization of the work and the means of assessment' (p. 3). Ultimately, attention is directed to the ways in which masculinity endorses and authorizes particular social relations or modes of relating for the boys with the view to assessing the limits that such relations impose vis-à-vis expanding their repertoires for presenting the self.
- *a repertoire for engaging with and negotiating the culture*. This involves looking beyond school-based literacy materials to examining how boys are engaging with texts derived from contemporary commercial youth culture. It involves examining the ways in which boys negotiate 'the hyper-masculine world' and addressing questions related to what it means to be male in this broader social context of cultural formation. (Alloway et al., 2002, p. 2-3)

These interrelated modes of repertoires of practice are necessary to develop an understanding of the limits that hegemonic masculinity imposes in its capacity to narrowly define many boys' engagement with literacy. According to Alloway et al. (2002), this must involve "explicit considerations of how both popular and curricular texts, whatever else they may do, reinforce the already heavily patrolled gender borders of daily social experience" (p. 10) (see also Blair & Sanford, 2004). Thus merely accommodating boys' interests and importing contemporary commercial youth culture into the classroom as a means to encourage their engagement in literacy are not the solution. As Alloway et al. (2002) argue, the use of such texts within the context of catering for boys' literacy interests in the Language Arts classroom means that teachers are provided with an opportunity to engage with powerful discourses about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, but they are quick to assert that there is a pedagogical responsibility to "make these discourses objects of critical study" (p. 10).

This critique foregrounds the limits imposed by the *Me Read* document, with its insistence on recuperating gender differences as a

basis for pedagogical intervention and curriculum reform designed to improve boys' literacy skills. Although there is some mention on page 33 about the need for boys to engage with critical literacy, it does not connect the above analytic perspectives on masculinity to the need to address the limits they impose vis-à-vis expanding boys' repertoires of practice in the Language Arts classroom. However, the *Me Read* document does mention the need to encourage students to discuss "the underlying assumptions in texts or works of other media" as a basis for helping them to reflect on "how various texts portray individuals, groups and situations" (p. 33). Alloway's work is used to support this approach to critical literacy, which involves providing opportunities for boys to arrive at "new insights into personal and social relations and to understand the construction of their own selves as contemporary social subjects" (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p.50, quoted in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 33). *Exploring masculinity*, also mentioned on page 35, involves addressing gender stereotypes. This approach is supported by quoting research conducted by Blair and Sanford (2004). The problem, however, is that such conceptualizations of critical literacy are discordant with the pedagogical strategies that are advocated throughout the entire document, which incite teachers to take gender differences into account by catering for boys' particular learning styles and needs in the literacy classroom. In this sense, the document fails to address the extent to which employing such strategies actually has the potential to reinforce stereotypes about boys rather than to challenge them. Consequently, the *Me Read* document, as we have illustrated, needs to be understood as legitimating a particular conception of masculinity, which supports the notion that boys are simply boys and on this basis must be accommodated in the literacy classroom through catering for their particular interests and distinctive learning styles.

TOWARDS EMBRACING A RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH TO PEDAGOGICAL REFORM

Within such a policy and media saturated context that is driven by an essentialist mindset and anxiety about the status of masculinity, it is not difficult to understand the particular role ascribed to a male teacher in addressing boys' under-achievement. In fact, within the context of such

debates about boys' education, male teachers are advocated on the basis of their capacity as role models to positively influence boys' learning and achievement in school. This conclusion is in spite of any documented research-based evidence that supports such assertions. Rather than embracing a research-based approach to pedagogical reform, such educational policy agendas have been high-jacked by concerns about male teachers as a dying breed within a schooling context in which boys are being deprived of male role models (Martino & Kehler, 2006). This crisis is exacerbated by further claims about the increasing incidence of single parent families in which the father is absent (Pepperell & Smedley, 1998). Claims about the need for more male role models are thus fueled by anxieties about the lack of male representation in elementary schools and the consequence of this problem for boys' masculinity within an increasingly feminized context of elementary schooling. Such claims are often couched in terms that resort to invoking a discourse of affirmative action, and positions both boys and men as victims of systemic discrimination. What is ignored are the very significant ways in which dominant constructions of masculinity, informed by homophobia and femiphobia, have impacted on the perception of elementary school teaching as women's work (King, 1998; Skelton, 2003; Williams, 1993).

Such systemic influences of institutionalized masculinity can be attributed to how feminized attributes associated with teaching have been devalued as a form of "uncommon caring" for male teachers (King, 1998). Moreover, affirmative action discourses that cast men and boys as victims fail to address the historical basis of the feminization of teaching which was rooted in a domestic ideology that cast teaching as an extension of mothering and, hence, as low-level work, lacking in intellectual rigor (Blount, 2005). Thus the significance of the troubled connection between dominant understandings about what it means to be a man and the gendered construction of teaching is lost within the context of policy formulation that speaks to the call for more male role models in elementary schools (Skelton, 2002). Moreover, such policy discussions surrounding male teachers as role models and their capacity to address boys' under-achievement are not supported by research-based literature. No causal relationship between the gender of a teacher and achievement in schools has been empirically established. In fact,

studies conducted with students in Finland and Australia which investigated students' perceptions of their teachers indicated that the gender of the teacher was not identified as impacting on the quality of their learning experiences in schools (Lahelma, 2000; Lingard et al. 2002). More recently a study conducted by Carrington, Tymms, & Christine (2005) in the United Kingdom has also failed to support the hypothesis that male teachers have a more positive influence on learning outcomes for boys or for girls in schools.

Although such claims about the effect or impact of male role models have taken on the status of truth, no evidence exists to support the claims that the gender of the teacher actually matters vis-à-vis enhancing student achievement in schools. Simply providing more adult male role models for boys as teachers in the literacy classroom will not guarantee that boys will necessarily become more engaged in those literacy practices. Such accounts have been debunked in the literature for their reliance on simplistic notions of male role models for disaffected boys (Pepperell & Smedley, 1998). As Coulter and McNay (1993) argue: "Significant questions are begged when being male is seen as a teaching specialty, when male elementary teachers are valued primarily as role models, and when 'quality education' is defined as dependent upon the presence of male teachers" (p. 399). These Canadian researchers also claim that

a review of research concludes that claims for male elementary teachers as important same-sex role models are not supported empirically; boys who have male teachers do not have fewer problems in schools nor are they better adjusted; boys from father-absent homes do not imitate or rely more on male teachers than other boys. (p. 1)

Such knowledge raises important questions about the ideological claims that are made regarding the supposed impact of male role models on boys' learning capacities in schools. This conclusion is particularly significant in light of the assertion that their presence is necessary to ameliorate the damaging effects of feminization on boys' lives in school and that it will actively translate into positive learning outcomes for failing boys. In fact, research conducted into the conditions that are necessary to enhance high quality learning and educational outcomes for

all students raises serious concerns about the validity of such claims (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Newman & Associates, 1996). Drawing on such literature, Hayes et al. (2005) have developed a model of pedagogy that provides a useful framework or lens for reflecting on effective classroom teaching and learning within the context of improving the quality of education for all students. Elements of such a model of pedagogy include a high degree of intellectual quality, high levels of connectedness in terms of curriculum content and its application to the students' lives outside of school, supportive classroom environments where students feel valued and are encouraged to take risks in their learning, and a strong recognition and celebration of difference.

This model of teaching also acknowledges that specific teacher knowledges are needed to be able to teach effectively. These are defined as those related to subject discipline knowledge, knowledge of student development, understandings about the purposes of schooling, knowledge of educational policy, as well as a knowledge and understanding of gender concepts and their impact on students' attitudes and learning. This framework can provide a basis for professional dialogue in schools about developing curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that is intellectually demanding, engaging, and that has purchase in students' lives outside school. Unfortunately, many boys' education and literacy reform programs grounded in essentialist mindsets are not consistent with these principles for governing the development of intellectually demanding and engaging curricula. Through advocating a focus on boys' interests within the context of a more hands-on approach to literacy learning, attention to developing intellectually demanding and problem-solving tasks relevant to the demands of life outside of school have been glaringly absent (Martino et al., 2004; Martino & Meyenn, 2002). It is not enough to just select texts that cater to the stereotypical interests of boys in the English Language Arts classroom without taking into consideration knowledge about the impact and effects of various masculinities on boys' lives (see also Alloway et al., 2002). Similarly, simply creating single-sex classes for boys in English Language Arts and having more male teachers teach boys will not necessarily produce better learning outcomes for boys. Attention must be directed to an examination of pedagogical practices

that are conducive to simultaneously promoting higher-order thinking and engaging students actively in learning. In addition, any approach to dealing with boys' education must address the effects of dominant masculinity and the limits it imposes on boys in terms of preventing them from embracing a broader repertoire of valued skills required to participate in the world outside school.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have raised important concerns regarding the need to interrogate current approaches to improving boys' literacy skills, which either directly or indirectly fail to address the impact of masculinity on their participation in English Language Arts classrooms. Although literacy practices and achievement levels are a problem unevenly experienced by boys, we have attempted to draw attention to the limitations of media-generated debates and current educational policy initiatives in their failure to engage with a broader research-based literature on masculinities and schooling. The effect, we have demonstrated, is to continually resort to legitimating a reform agenda committed to remasculinization rather than interrogating gender binaries. In this sense, our aim has been to air our concerns about officially sanctioned support for approaches that seek to re-establish and re-inscribe particularly narrow versions of traditional masculinity in the absence of engaging with research-based literature that raises serious questions about such gender reform initiatives (Martino et al., 2004; Rowan et al., 2002). Thus we write this article in the spirit of encouraging further debate and dialogue about the need to engage with research-based literature about pedagogical reform, as well as that which addresses the impact of masculinities on boys' experiences of schooling, and explicitly their engagement with literacy. This knowledge, combined with an understanding about the limitations of essentialist mindsets, we believe, has the potential to assist educators in developing pedagogical interventions that will result in expanding boys' repertoires of practice, with the view to improving their literacy outcomes.

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