

The Boy(s) Who Cried Wolf: Re-Visioning Textual Re-Presentations of Boys and Literacy

Jane Baskwill teaches in the Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University.

Susan Church teaches in the Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University.

Margaret Swain teaches in the Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University.

Abstract

This paper presents a narrative analysis of some current educational textual representations, including provincial documents, publisher materials, and stories from the field, that demonstrate concern for boys has become a master myth that idealizes and reinforces neo-conservative notions of masculinity. This gender binary is not helpful for boys nor girls and we offer some alternative considerations.

Résumé

Cet article présente une analyse narrative de certaines représentations éducationnelles courantes, qui comprennent de documents provinciaux, matériel de publieurs, et des histoires du domaine du travail, qui démontrent que le soucis à l'égard des garçons est devenu un mythe - maître qui idéalise et renforce les notions néo-conservatrices de la masculinité. Cette notion binaire n'est utile ni aux garçons ni aux filles et nous offrons quelques considérations alternatives.

Once Upon a Time:

A Re-View of the "Boy Turn"

Once upon a time, actually not so very long ago, feminist educators who have worked long and hard to enhance educational opportunities for girls celebrated without reservations the advances made over the past couple of decades. We considered our work a job well done when girls' achievement began to equal and often surpass those of boys, while at the same time continuing to question the assumptions underlying many of the large-scale measures of achievement.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the female educational success story has gradually been turned on its head. The dominant narratives tell stories about failing boys, who in a feminized education system are the victims of the feminist equity agenda of the 1980s and 1990s. Where most of the policy, research and practice in the area of gender and education focused on girls, now there has been what researcher Marcus Weaver-Hightower terms a "boy turn." Describing the terminology as a "double entendre," Weaver-Hightower argues that the phrase encapsulates two contradictory perspectives regarding the shift to boys. The first is that the "turn" is a turn away from the needed focus on girls, a paradigmatic shift; the second is that boys are finally having a turn. According to Weaver-Hightower, the latter is the position most often promoted by advocates for boys and antifeminist groups.

Weaver-Hightower identifies a number of factors that have contributed to the turn:

* Alarmist media headlines about "failing boys," a number of popular-rhetorical books highlighting the ways schools and society fail boys, and news events, such as school shootings, that have fueled "moral panic";

* Theorizing related to male roles, building upon feminist theorizing related to female roles, an ironic consequence of the feminist research agenda;

* Initial indicators of gender equity, formulated by feminists, which put a focus on participation rates and test scores rather than on outcomes of education. As girls made gains in achievement and participation relative to boys, arguments focused on male disadvantage and institutional inequities that create female privilege.

* Educational reforms that put a focus on school choice and accountability. As school success increasingly became constructed through test scores, those at the bottom end - in recent years, the boys, especially in literacy - receive more attention and funding through such initiatives as "boy friendly" literacy curriculum.

* Overt backlash to the gains made by girls expressed through "What about the boys?" debate.

* Economic shifts and changes in work practices that advantage women. Job creation in industrialized economies primarily in the service sector, historically dominated by women, and fewer blue collar workers; shifts to collaborative teamwork make women better suited to work environments. This has led to a "crisis in masculinity" as young men are excluded from the economy and engage in different forms of anti-social behavior.

* Concerns and pressures from parents worried about the outcomes for boys.

* Researchers' interests in a new "hot topic" through which careers can be advanced.

(Weaver-Hightower 2003)

Weaver-Hightower organizes the literature that has emerged into four streams: popular-rhetorical, theoretically-oriented, practice-oriented, and feminist and pro-feminist responses.

He goes on to categorize the streams of research that have emerged from the boy turn:

* Popular-rhetorical literature - Makes the argument for disadvantaged boys, citing the feminization of schools as the major factor.

* Theoretically-oriented literature - Identifies types of masculinity, examining origins and effects and how different masculinities are reproduced and modified within schools and broader society.

* Practice-oriented literature - Focus is on developing and evaluating interventions designed to ameliorate social and academic problems experienced by boys.

* Feminist and pro-feminist responses - Constructs a critique of the boy turn, and notions of under-achievement; contests popular-rhetorical backlash.

Among these four streams there are many disjunctures and contradictions. Theoretically-oriented research and the problematizing of the "boy problem" through feminist and pro-feminist analyses potentially could help practitioners to construct more complex conceptions of gender and schooling. The issues and concerns of practitioners and parents regarding the performance and behavior of many boys (and girls) in school could help to inform theories of gender and schooling through critical examination of the interrelationships among gender, the curriculum and teaching practices. Currently, however, the streams run their own courses with few intersections, primarily, argues Weaver-Hightower, because they have different units of analysis: "Theory literature looks for meso- and macro-institutional explanations; practice literature looks for individual, interactional, and pedagogical explanations and solutions" (2003, 483). Further, both theory and practice literature reproduce gender binaries and dualisms.

Feminist and pro-feminist critiques of the boy turn challenge the assumptions upon which the boy turn is based. Australian researchers Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas (1999) provide a particularly cogent and thoughtful argument about the need to examine the complexities of multiple forms of femininity and masculinity that impact on gender and schooling. This critique also focuses on "which boys" and "which girls" construct a multi-faceted conception of advantage and disadvantage that includes social class, race, sexual orientation, and urbanity vs rurality. Such conceptions contest simplistic boy/girl comparisons. Further, feminist and pro-feminist researchers question the reliance on test scores as determiners of success, pointing to the advantages white males still enjoy when they move into the job market. Canadian researchers Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford, for example, suggest that;

It is our contention that boys are engaging in literacy events outside of the classroom that, although not ensuring academic success, may be better preparing them for the world beyond school. The abilities to navigate the Internet, experiment with alternative literacies, and "read" multiple texts simultaneously - morphing their own literacy practices to take up new literacies - will perhaps be more useful workplace skills than the ability to analyze a work of fiction or to write a narrative account.

(Blair and Sanford 2004, 459)

Examination of employment trends in Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada 2001) over the decade of the 1990s suggests that there is reason to be concerned about girls' life prospects. The statistics show that females' participation in science, trades and technology increased only slightly in some occupations and actually decreased in others. When we reflect on these trends and on our own work as feminist educators we see no happy ending in sight. We were more optimistic about the possibility of sustaining positive and equitable narratives of gender relations in school ten years ago than we are now.

We wonder how it has happened that over the past few years we have experienced an increase in the number of examples of gendered practices as reported to us by those in both our graduate and undergraduate (BEd) classrooms. We are also concerned that these practices go relatively unchallenged. We have selected three by way of a representative sample:

1. In a discussion about choosing read-alouds for the classroom, a grade four teacher with more than ten years' experience in the public school reported that her teaching partner chose read-alouds from a provincial list of recommended books boys like. She went on to explain that she thought this was a great idea as "girls will listen to anything" and it wasn't the girls she was worried about.

2. During a discussion about student motivation and engagement in another graduate class, a relatively new grade six teacher offered that her school was concerned about the high numbers of boys not achieving at their potential and being disruptive in the classrooms. One solution they were implementing to try to address this was that the boys were given class time during

English Language Arts to do their writing in the computer lab. When asked what the girls did, she said they remained in the classroom. She was also asked what the girls thought about this arrangement, to which she responded that the girls liked having the more disruptive boys out of the room so they could concentrate.

3. A BEd student was uncomfortable with the fact that the books in the classroom library in her grade eight English placement were segregated by gender. When the student asked her teacher why this was, he responded that the books in the boy section had a lot of boy appeal. He also told her that boys don't like the girls' books in the other section. When the student raised her concerns about the sexism underlying the categorization, they were dismissed as unwarranted. We have since become aware of examples of dividing books by gender in classrooms at grades two, four, five and eight.

We are concerned by this seemingly growing trend in gendered classroom practices and the seemingly open reproduction of inequitable practices we thought we had contested years ago. We wonder how it can be that this notion of "the boy turn" has become so embedded in the everyday experiences of our BEd and graduate students. How is it that schools seem to have so easily and rapidly taken up the discourses of the boy turn that reproduce these inequitable practices?

James Gee reminds us that literacy "is always part of a larger set of social norms, attitudes and behaviours" (2001, 138). Thus literacy is more than language and words (or what Gee refers to as discourses). It is enacted by/through multiple sociocultural practices (or what Gee refers to as discourses), practices that shape our actions and interactions. In classrooms, as well as in students' homes and communities, beliefs about what literacy is, as well as how it is learned, are embedded in cultural norms transmitted through the larger discourse(s).

Disturbed by stories from the field like the examples we have included, we have been examining the discourses of gender and literacy in the Nova Scotian and Canadian contexts in which we live and work. Adding to the cautionary tale regarding the "boy turn"

articulated by other feminist and pro-feminist researchers, we offer some examples of how boys and literacy are being constructed through textual representations including provincial documents, publishers' materials and media texts. We also consider the implications for our work as researchers, writers and teacher educators.

Crying Wolf!: Textual Representations in Educational Literature

For analysis we chose a representative selection of professional books on the topic and publisher's catalogues gathered from publishers' displays at a recent international literacy association regional conference, an Ontario Ministry of Education document that was featured in handouts and major addresses, a recent national news article, and a Nova Scotia Teachers Union article. Although not exhaustive, they are representative of the larger corpus of texts on boys and literacy, particularly those that fit within the Popular-rhetorical and Practice-oriented literature as described previously. We narrowed our focus to texts typically accessible to and marketed towards those in schools and aimed at those with whom we work (parents, teachers and administrators) and asked several questions of the documents:

- How are boys positioned in this document? Girls?
- What is said about boys and literacy? Girls?
- What are the dominant discourses in the text? Minor discourses ?
- What is omitted altogether from the text?
- What is surprising in the text?

These questions are informed by Gee's notion that "[a]ny Discourse is a theory about the world, the people in it, and the ways in which 'goods' are, or ought to be, distributed among them" (Gee 1990, 191), as well as our concern that these artifacts reflect a growing trend in education in Canada (and the world); a trend that both concerns and inspires us.

Our questions of the texts and the resulting analysis is also influenced by the work on intertextuality. According to Julia Kristiva, "...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986, 37).

Therefore, every text intersects with and is informed by other texts the reader (and, as in this case, the author) has read, along with the reader's (author's) own cultural context. In addition, within the framework of postmodern social theories, the boundaries between what is "real" and what is "representation" (Stanley and Morgan 1993) have been blurred. All texts, in this view, are textual fabrications (Baskwill 2003) and as such are subject to deconstructive re-writing and re-reading. Considering such writings as textual representations provides another way of thinking about them in terms of the type of knowledge they contribute and how this knowledge effects the formation of the literacy identity/ies of boys and girls as gendered through educational discourses and practices.

Analysis of the Documents

We used the following as our working definition of each discourse theme:

- * *Manly Man*: often expressed as "boys will be boys," refers to the heterosexual, hegemonic male, with distinct dislikes and attributes.
- * *It's Our Turn*: based on the assumption that too much attention has been paid to girls, disadvantaging boys, and that the education system is "getting it right" for girls.
- * *Boys Don't Like*: applies generalizations regarding boys' preferences, behaviour and attitudes to all boys.
- * *Failing Boys*: points to the achievement gap between girls and boys as measured by high stakes tests; includes discourse of blaming schools.
- * *Boys in Crisis*: constructs male violence, alienation, and confusion as a crisis in male identity

We applied these definitions to each of the texts we selected and looked for words/phrases representative of each definition. Although most of our examples contained elements of other discourses, we have focused our discussion on the dominant discourse theme represented in each. Table I indicates which discourse theme we found to be most dominant in each text and is followed by a summary of our analysis.

Even Hockey Players Read (Booth 2002)

Canadian literacy educator and widely published author David Booth draws upon stories about his own son to shape the argument that there is a need to "examine the factors that appear to affect boys in our homes and our schools in their development as readers and writers" (2002, 8). Booth offers a number of caveats regarding the need to ensure that attention to boys is not at the expense of girls and to avoid adding to the stereotype of "classifying all boys' behaviors, tastes and attitudes into one single frame"(11). Booth assures the reader that he does not want "to reinforce the generalities that are often applied to boys," yet this book reproduces those generalities quite powerfully through the discourses of "boys don't like."

A bulleted list of "Literacy Behaviors in Boys and Girls" (22) provides "research snippets" that construct generic boys and girls, with identifiable attitudes, behaviors, strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes. In what one can speculate was an effort to make this book accessible to its audience of teachers, and perhaps parents, the author included a one-page list, which over-simplifies and de-contextualizes the research from which it is drawn. Such a list contributes to the reproduction of the very stereotypes and generalizations that the author himself critiques. Further, the title, *Even Hockey Players Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning*, and full-color cover photo of a husky male hockey player reading a book about goalies construct all hockey players as male and all boys both as lovers of hockey and as readers about hockey.

To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader (Brozo 2002)

William Brozo's book mobilizes the authority of psychology and sociology to argue that there is a need to "...become reacquainted with positive images of masculinity in a culture that has done much to tarnish those images and saturate popular consciousness with perversions of manhood (2002, 25)." Based on Jung's theory of archetypes, Brozo presents teachers with ten positive male archetypes "...to help teachers guide [adolescent] boys through the archetypal world of the male psyche (26)." The list includes: Pilgrim, Patriarch, King,

Warrior, Magician, Wildman, Healer, Prophet, Trickster, and Lover. The book invokes and reinforces dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity while raising the spectre of increased male violence, sexual disorientation, and alienation as evidence of the current crisis. Boys' needs are privileged over girls, being seen to be more pressing and urgent for adolescents' good and the good of society: "What the future holds for adolescent boys' literate lives depends in no small part on the recognition by teachers and parents that boys' literate health is virtually important to all society" (2002, 156).

Gender Gap: Boy's Own Story (Ormiston 2003)

Media texts do not describe truth. They are narrative constructions representative of one particular world view (Hall 1997); thus they are culturally loaded and situated. In this news feature, boys are positioned as the newly disadvantaged (Alloway 2000), whose time has come for equitable treatment. A "respected principal" is quoted as saying: "It's great what we've done for girls, but boys, we're not doing what we need to for boys in school.' Trimble says. '[It's a] common fact. People can't debate that one.'"

An example of the "backlash" (Weaver-Hightower 2003) against perceived gains made by girls, the quote exploits the rhetoric of the "common sense" position that "everyone knows" it should be the boys' turn. Girls are positioned as clear winners, while boys are the "unequivocal losers" (Alloway 2000), reproducing the myth that all girls are successful and all boys are disadvantaged. "[For] girls, spelling, reading, writing is so easy for them. [They] just snap their fingers and read well. The same guy who was willing to take a risk a minute ago won't because there's a girl present."

This article contributes to and is reflective of, popular (Canadian) claims about boys and literacy and the growing gender gap that is disenfranchising boys.

Are Schools Failing Boys? (Burgess-MacCoul 2003)

This article positions schools (and teachers) as failing to teach boys to read. It

admonishes that school "may not be a friendly or favourable learning environment for boys as it may not address their learning styles." It typifies schools as "reward[ing] those who pursue quieter modes of learning," states that "some experts" (implied as school-based) "believe boys are being over-diagnosed with having ADD" and indicates that boys are seen as discipline problems more often than girls. It concludes that schools are "system[s] that [do] not understand them [boys]" (2003, 5).

Much of the article is directed towards what teachers should be doing, asserting that competition and structure are necessary to support boys and their learning style and implying these are missing in most classrooms. It "relies heavily on a 'tips for teacher' style that provides simplistic strategies for extremely complex problems..." (Weaver-Hightower 2003, 483) and also fails to ask the question "Which boys?" since the all-important high stakes test scores do not support that schools are failing all boys.

The article ends with the admonition that "It is important that educators become as aware of the voices of male students, as many have become of female students" (Burgess-MacCoul 2003, 6), implying that schools and teachers have failed to address the needs of male students. It also suggests that schools need to make more effort in prescribed ways and teachers should take the time and care to actually listen to boys' voices, and be less quick to blame poor behaviour as the cause of boys' learning problems.

Boys and Literacy (Knowles and Smith 2005)

Promoted as "practical strategies for librarians, teachers and parents," this book provides lists of genres that boys are most likely to read, supported by suggested titles and discussion questions. The authors establish credibility of the recommendations through reference in the introduction to a "surprising amount of research (that) has appeared in the last five years about boys and what is happening to them academically at school, especially in the area of literacy" (2005, ix). After a brief section "What does the research say?" in which the authors cite a few scholarly studies, a number of titles from the practical

literature and standardized test results, the book consists of a number of chapters devoted to boys' preferred genres. The descriptions of the eleven genres (humor, adventure, information/nonfiction, fantasy/science fiction, horror/mystery, sports, war, biography, history, graphic novels, realistic fiction) reproduce hegemonic masculinist constructions of the "manly man." Several of the genres themselves, for example, adventure, war, and sports, perpetuate stereotypes of what it is to be a man. The section on sports opens with the statement that "Being good at a sport is very important to most boys" (43), and thus reproduces the stereotype of the successful male as sports hero, one version of the "manly man."

The introduction to the section on "war" is a particularly vivid example of the unproblematized celebration and perpetuation of the violent and war-like "manly man":

Many boys are happiest when they are in some sort of pretend military combat. They see more than enough fighting in the news, on the television, in the movies, and in video games. So it is logical that they would be interested in war diaries and books about the armed forces, special forces, military jets, aircraft carriers, and submarines. (Knowles and Smith 2005, 53)

Instead of contesting the violence that is endemic across the world today and helping young males to explore alternatives to violent male behavior, the text naturalizes the relationship between fighting in the world around them and boys' "logical" interest in war.

BOLDPRINT; POWER (Thomson Nelson 2005); *X-ZONE* (Scholastic 2005)

Another example from the Manly Man category illustrates the approach some educational publishers are taking in order to fill the market niche created by the boy turn. There is an increasing number of magazine-style resources for instruction aimed at struggling and reluctant readers and especially boys. Not only do the titles and the content of the series (*BOLDPRINT*, *POWER* and *X-ZONE*) promote the strong, aggressive, in-control, action-oriented male, but the covers visually display these same features. Marketing is

aimed at capitalizing on boys' preference for manly pursuits such as snowboarding, espionage, hip hop and cars. Boys are positioned by the discourse(s) as naturally daring, adventurous risk-takers who get their thrills from living on the edge. According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education Print Resource Inventory (2005) sets of POWER magazines have been distributed to Grades 4-6 in Nova Scotia, as part of the Department's Active Young Readers Initiative, while sets of X-ZONE magazines are part of the "Active Readers Eight Infusion" (http://ayr.ednet.ns.ca/arwia_print_inventory.htm). Images of hegemonic masculinity, through the infusion of literacy materials such as these that are marketed to and sanctioned by departments of education as good for boys, reinscribe the Manly Man discourse within everyday classroom literacy practices.

From Popular-Rhetorical and Practice-oriented Literature to Provincial Policy

We also examined *Me Read? No Way!*, a publication of the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME 2004). This document is an example of how policy documents institutionalize discourses and set direction for educational institutions. As characterized by Stephen Ball, "National policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalizing theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work" (Ball 1998, 126).

Although Canada, through its *Constitution*, vests control of education with provincial governments and therefore does not set educational policy nationally, organizations such as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) contribute to a process of "bricolage" that results in policy alignment across provinces. As described on the CMEC Web-site the organization, "...is the national voice for education in Canada. It is the mechanism through which ministers consult and act on matters of mutual interest, and the

instrument through which they consult and cooperate with national education organizations and the federal government." Heather-Jane Robertson argues that this body that meets "behind closed doors" outside government accountability structures gives direction to education through its deliberations. Thus, "When the same educational reform turns up in several provinces, what may look like coincidence is better understood as a well-orchestrated alignment" (Robertson 1998, 28).

When a large and influential province such as Ontario produces a policy document such as *Me Read? No Way!*, it reverberates well outside the borders of the province creating effects across the country and beyond. Downloadable from the Ontario Ministry of Education Web site, the document is accessible to a wide audience of bureaucrats, administrators, teachers, parents, and the media. Documents such as this have an impact on funding priorities, signal directions for further research, give direction to both scholarly and practical educational publications, and ultimately influence expectations of classroom practice. This particular policy document draws upon multiple texts from all four of the strands of the "boy turn" literature identified by Weaver-Hightower (2003), reproducing all of the discourse themes identified in texts analyzed earlier.

The text begins with "failing boys," citing test results from a number of provincial, national, and international assessments in which girls are outperforming boys in literacy. The focus then moves to identifying gender differences, drawing upon theoretical and practice-oriented literature to describe boys' attitudes and preferences through discourses of "boys don't like." The impact of feminist and pro-feminist responses to the "boy turn" is evident in the short paragraph at the beginning of the document with the heading "What about the girls?" Here, readers are cautioned to remember that gender is not the only factor that has an impact on achievement, that differences among members of the same gender are as great, or greater, than between genders, and that practices recommended for boys may be just as effective for girls. Since the remainder of

the document focuses on "strategies for success" for boys, the fleeting mention of girls at the beginning constitutes little more than a footnote to the dominant message of the document: Boys, it's your turn now.

The "strategies for success" are an amalgam of the advice offered regarding effective literacy instruction for boys in the practice-oriented literature. Threaded throughout are "quick facts" and "Insight" text boxes that highlight research and offer quotes from literacy experts that echo and re-echo the dominant discourse themes of the "boy turn." The "boys in crisis" theme is revisited through recommendations regarding the use of positive male mentors for boys and the choice of texts with positive male role models. Further, there is a section on critical literacy that focuses on the importance of exploring masculinity with boys. Discourses of the "manly man" are evident in the identification of boys' preferences for action-oriented topics and other manly pursuits. The text also contests those images of manhood, however, by suggesting that boys be involved in the arts in order to tap into their emotions related to texts.

The discourses of the "boy turn" dominate in this document, yet, reading it as experienced and knowledgeable literacy educators we recognize many "best practices" for all learners that we have used in our own teaching and promoted through teacher education and professional development. As is stated in the document, "Although the strategies contained in this guide focus on engaging boys in reading and writing, they also represent practices that will enhance the learning environment for both boys and girls" (OME 2004, 6). By producing and disseminating a policy document focused on boys and literacy, the Ontario government names a problem to which the document provides solutions, thus institutionalizing the discourses of the "boy turn."

According to Carol Bacchi (1999), critical policy analysis should focus on examining how problems are represented and exploring the implications of those representations. This form of analysis poses questions about how some social conditions come to be taken up by the state as problems

needing policy responses, about how those problems are constituted in discourse and about what effects seem to follow from particular representations. Further, this kind of analysis considers how it is that other social conditions are not taken up by the state as problems. Why, for example, is the social class gap or the racial gap in literacy achievement not constituted as a "crisis" when there is substantive evidence (Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Lingard and Douglas 1999) to show that both factors have a more significant impact than gender on academic performance?

Taking an encouraging departure from the boy turn in popular rhetorical literature, Carl Rivers and Rosalind Barnett (2006) write in the *Washington Post* about "The Myth of the Boy Crisis." The writers remind readers that boys have been "in crisis" before, for example, in the early 1900s when it was argued that "young men were spending too much time in school with female teachers and that the constant interaction with women was robbing them of their manhood." They point to the research that the crisis, if it exists, is among inner city and rural boys. The enrollment of males and females in American colleges is pretty well balanced; men still outnumber women in Ivy League colleges. The authors contest the "peculiar image of the typical boy" that has emerged in the media and argue against boys only classrooms. We applaud their conclusion: "Obsessing about a boy crisis or thinking that American teachers are waging a war on boys won't help kids. What will is recognizing that students are individuals, with many different skills and abilities. And that goes for both girls and boys" (Rivers and Barnett 2006).

And They Lived Happily Ever After:

A Cautionary Tale

James Gee says that "literacy bits" are "like a radioactive isotope that allows bits and pieces of the whole configuration to be lit up, the better to find our way." (2006, 14 para.3). The close read of "literacy bits" we have done about boys and literacy have implications for our work as feminist researchers and teacher educators. We realize we need to continue to engage pre-service and experienced teachers in critical examinations of the discourses of

gender, literacy and schooling and how they are enacted in school policies and practices. Gee says that most of our involvement in discourses is uncritical and unexamined: "When we unconsciously and uncritically act within our discourses, we are complicit with their values and thus can, unwittingly, become party to very real damage done to others" (1990, 191).

We, therefore, recognize it is important to involve teacher interns and practising teachers in projects that encourage them to examine their own notions of literacy and those of their students. We want to help them find ways to open spaces in their classrooms to engage students in discussions around what is literacy and what are the issues associated with literacy and literacy learning, such as issues of gender, culture, race, economic status. We want to initiate discussions about opening spaces in school classrooms for more authentic literacy engagements. We have chosen the term "authentic" as a descriptor, recognizing that it is a social construct that is value-laden and subject to multiple interpretations. We have used the term "authentic" to refer broadly to the nature of the learning processes involved, not to any specific learning experience or activity.

Thus, authentic literacy engagements are locally negotiated projects that engage both boys and girls in active participation in the use of multiple literacies as tools for exploring and making meaning of the everyday. To such projects we apply the following criteria:

AUTHENTIC LITERACY ENGAGEMENTS

- * draw upon students' personal knowledge, experiences, and interests (real-world knowledge);
- * bridge the gap between home and school literacies;
- * use literacy for relevant purposes and build purposeful literacy events around issues that emerge
- * move from learning within the school to the community-at-large and beyond;
- * use events to learn about sociocultural aspects of language and literacy; and
- * integrate assessment within learning processes and use self-assessment as a means to foster metacognitive awareness.

Learning in contexts such as these engages boys and girls in meaningful and purposeful ways. Literacy engagements in classrooms in which literacy is enhanced through a curriculum in which students are actively involved enable all learners to participate to the fullest extent possible in purposeful and meaningful ways.

We want to move away from either/or literacy theories and practices. From our experience as teachers, administrators, researchers and teacher educators it is evident to us that boys and girls struggle with literacy. We need to look beyond the rhetoric of failing boys and think more broadly in terms of what might be happening with respect to literacy education for all children and youth. We are concerned with the numbers of students that disengage from school literacy and suggest that we need to explore the implications of a more expanded definition, one that takes into account students' out-of-school literacy practices (Blair and Sanford 2004). Our beliefs about authentic literacy engagement are informed by theories of authentic pedagogy that underpin the work of some leading researchers in school reform. Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995) provide substantive evidence that authentic pedagogy enhances achievement for all students regardless of race, gender, or social class. Educational authorities in Queensland, Australia have focused school reform efforts on what they refer to as productive pedagogies: teacher practices that have a positive impact on student outcomes, productive assessment with emphasis on higher-order thinking and problem-solving, and rich tasks, transdisciplinary activities with a world focus and connection (Matter 2001). We believe there is much to be learned from well-conceived, research-based initiatives such as the Australian initiative.

Concluding Thoughts

It is not our purpose to create another orthodoxy. We do not believe that authentic literacy engagements will guarantee a happily ever after ending for boys and girls. But we do hope the ideas we have offered will spark further debate and open up possibilities for

moving beyond the gender binary in literacy education.

Table I
Texts/discourse Themes

TEXTS/DISDISCOURSE THEMES	"Manly man"	"It's our turn."	"Boys don't like..."	"Failing boys"	"Boys in crisis"
<i>Even Hockey Players Read</i> D.Booth 2002			x		
<i>To Be A Boy, To Be A Reader</i> W. Brozo 2003					x
CBC News Indepth, <i>Gender Gap, Boy's Own Story</i> S. Ormiston 2003		x			
<i>AVIS, Are Schools Failing Boys?</i> D. Burgess-MacCoul 2003				x	
<i>Boys and Literacy</i> E. Knowles and M. Smith 2005	x				
School magazines <i>X-ZONE</i> Scholastic, 2005 <i>BOLDPRINT; POWER</i> , Thomson Nelson 2005	x				
<i>Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills</i> Ontario Ministry of Education 2004	x	x	x	x	x

References

Alloway, N. "Exploring Boys' Literacy Performance at School: Incorporating and Transcending Gender," *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1.3 (2000): 333-37.

Bacchi, C. *Women, Policy and Politics: the Construction of Policy Problems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999.

Ball, S. "Big Policies/Small World: An Introduction to International Perspectives in Education Policy," *Comparative Education* 34 (1998): 119-31.

Baskwill, J. "Women Principals and Their Work: Is There Room for the 'Girls' in The 'Boys' Club'?" Unpublished PhD, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003.

Blair, H. and K. Sanford. "Morphing Literacy: Boys Reshaping Their School-Based Literacy Practices," *Language Arts* 81 (2004): 452-60.

BOLDPRINT; POWER. Thomson Nelson Publishers [catalogue list]. Toronto, ON, 2005.

- Booth, D. *Even Hockey Players Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning*. Toronto, ON: Pembroke, 2002.
- Brozo, W. *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy*. Newark: International Reading Association, 2002.
- Burgess-MacCoul, D. "Are Schools Failing Boys?" *AVISO*, 5-6 (2003).
- Epstein, D., J. Elwood, V. Hey, and J. Maw, eds. *Failing Boys: Issues in Gender and Achievement*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1998.
- Gee, J. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*. London, UK: Falmer, 1990.
- _____. "Reading as Situated Language: a Sociocognitive Perspective," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 44.8 (2001): 714-25.
- _____. "The New Literacy Studies and the 'Social Turn.'" Retrieved March 22, 2006 from www.schools.ash.org.au/litweb/page300.html
- Hall, S., ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, UK: Sage, 1997.
- Knowles, E. and M. Smith. *Boys and Literacy*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2005.
- Kristeva, J. "Word, Dialogue, and the Novel," *The Kristeva Reader*, T. Moi, ed. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 35-61.
- Lingard, B. and P. Douglas. *Men Engaging Feminisms*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1999.
- Matter, G. "The Relationship Between Assessment and Curriculum in Improving Teaching and Learning." Paper presented to the ACACA Conference. Sydney, Australia, July 2001.
- Newmann, F. and G. Wehlage. *Successful School Restructuring: A Report to the Public and Educators*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Education Center, 1995.
- OME (Ontario Ministry of Education). *Me Read? No Way!*, 2004. Retrieved January 12, 2006 www.edu.gov.on.ca
- Ormiston, S. *Boy's Own Story*. CBC/ Indepth: Gender Gap, November 25, 2003. Retrieved April 23, 2006 - www.cbc.ca/news/background/gendergap/index.html
- Rivers, C. and R. Barnett. "The Myth of 'The Boy Crisis,'" *Washington Post* (2006). Retrieved April 16, 2006 - washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/07/A
- Robertson, H. *No More Teachers, No More Books*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1998.
- Stanley, L. and D. Morgan. "Editorial Introduction," *Sociology* 27.14 (1993).
- Weaver-Hightower, M. "The 'Boy Turn' in Research on Gender and Education," *Review of Educational Research* 73 (2003): 471-98.
- X-ZONE. Scholastic Canada, [catalogue list]. Markham, ON, 2005.