

Running head: MORPHING LITERACY

Morphing Literacy: Boys Reshaping Their Literacy Practices

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Abstract

We built a toothpick thing, a toothpick cube, and we used connectors, Popsicles and puffed wheat, and plasticine and puffed wheat as connectors, and the plasticine held much more; . . . and you put a carton onto the cubes, and then you drop pennies in, and whichever one stays up the longest is the strongest structure.

As this fourth-grade boy, Anthony, discussed the science demonstration that he had done at the student-led conference a few days before, it struck us how his manipulations of real-world things was typical of how we think of boys. Yet it is exactly these types of interactions that are overlooked in terms of recognizing what literacy is for boys, or at least for some boys.

There are numerous terms for literacy in our field: school literacy, life literacy, community literacy, family literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, technological literacy, multiple literacies, and the list goes on. Despite many new understandings, the term *literacy*, in the eyes of many of our profession, still widely refers to reading and writing achievement. Although in the research literature the conceptualization of literacy has changed over the years as mapped out by Willis (1997), and there have been major shifts from “literacy as skill” and “literacy as school knowledge” to “literacy as a social-cultural construct,” current definitions of literacy remain in flux. Alloway and Gilbert (1997), for example, reminded us that “what it means to be ‘literate’ is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as we become increasingly affected by technological and informational change” (p. 51). These changes, albeit evident to many of us, are not constant or evenly felt and leave us feeling like we are standing on shifting sands.. As we reflect for a moment on the more current constructivist conceptualizations of literacy, it is little wonder that when we add to this mix issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, unequal relations of power, class, race, and ethnicity, we wonder where in all of this is the gendered nature of literacy.

In this article we will discuss what we are calling *morphing literacy*, what boys do in relation to academic and life literacy practices, and will discuss how they take up the next generation of literacy practices based on their interests, strengths, and preferences. We will explore what literacy means to early adolescent boys, how its shape is being transformed by the boys, and possible implications for language arts teaching.

Background

Over the past decade there has been an increasing concern in North America that girls are being short changed in their schooling (American Association of University Women, 1992; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1990; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). In more recent years research in Australia and England has also raised serious questions about the nature of schooling for boys (Australian Education Council, 1993; Francis, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Hall & Coles, 2001; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Millard, 1997; Phillips, 1998; Pollack, 1998). This is not to disregard the seriousness of the gender inequities in schools for girls, but rather to recognize that there are just as serious issues for boys.

Educational research in Great Britain has indicated concerns for boys in educational settings; for example, boys don't view education positively, don't like to read, and often don't read very well; and a growing percentage of boys are "failing" at school (Millard, 1997). Phillips (1998) described how British boys are faced with many pressures as they enter and progress through school. She suggested that there are few acceptable gender positions for males and that boys are expected to be tough, competitive, and independent. Connell (1998) suggested that boys construct a gendered identity through their interactions with others in the three primary contexts of their lives: home, school, and community. Societal expectations of boys direct them to be responsive in particular ways; for example, loud, witty/mocking, individualistic, self-fulfilling.

The ‘silly’ construction of masculinity, suggested Francis (2000), “which include boys’ messing about, horseplay, verbal banter and abuse, physicality, humour, and ‘cheeking the teacher’ continue to predominate boys’ behaviour” (p. 118). These behaviours often interfere with school literacy success and skew teachers’ perceptions of the boys’ abilities and willingness to engage in literacy texts.

Literacy and literate practices are central to success in schools, and these practices are gendered. The seminal work of researchers such as Shirley Brice Heath (1983) brought recognition of the saliency of gender and differentially gendered literacies. Qualitative research done over the next decade has provided us with a more comprehensive understanding of the role of gender in girls’ everyday literacy practices (Barbieri 1995; Barrs, 1994; Blair, 1998; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997; Ricker-Wilson, 1999; Wason-Ellam, 1997). Until very recently the research studies on boys and literacy have been primarily quantitative in nature and have provided a more macro analysis of achievement. These studies have raised concerns about boys’ more limited success in school when compared to that of girls (Council of Ministers of Education in Canada, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2001; Gambell & Hunter, 1999); New South Wales Government Advisory Committee on Education, 1994; OFSTED, 1993). These studies have reported that boys are performing more poorly than are girls on tests of literacy and have fueled debate in the media and in educational circles as to boys’ future success. This growing debate brings with it questions about the seriousness of these issues, whether there is any substance to the claims and validity in the methods of assessments. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggested that although there is considerable quantitative data to establish boys’ underachievement in literacy, these data may be biased and not tell the full story.

Questions also arise as to which boys are the subject of concern, whether it is all boys or just some boys. Young (2001) provided us with a note of caution as we think about the statistical analysis reported in these studies, and she suggested that we “consider the situated nature of assessment and question whether school assessments are the best way to gauge boys (and girls’) literacy achievements” (p. 319). Citing Reed (1998, 1999), Young continued, “We need to examine the rhetoric and the reported achievement data on a national level and look for intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and social class” (p. 319). This caution was supported by Davison, Lovell, Frank, and Vibert (2002), who suggested that “while gender achievement rates are reported, these data do not take into account differences across race, ethnicity, or socio-economic class” (p. 2).

Hall and Coles (2001) observed that current debates about the teaching of literacy are often unhelpfully polarized around gender issues. They further suggested that “the debate is often crudely formulated to suggest that boys’ reading is a major national and international problem, and boys themselves are therefore to be seen as deficient and in need of remediation” (p. 212). Headlines in North American newspapers over the past few years supported this claim: “Test Results Show Lag in Boys’ Literacy” (Staff & Agencies, 2000); “Boys and Literacy: We Can Do Better” (1999); and “The Trouble With Boys” (2000). However, Barrs (2000) would argue that “what is happening now is mainly that girls are doing better within the system, rather than that boys are doing less well” (p. 287).

The reasons behind the differences for boys have been discussed and numerous suggestions put forward (Abrahamson & Carter, 1984; Barrs, 1993; Dunne & Khan, 1998; Hall & Coles, 1997; Millard, 1994, 1997; Wilhelm & Friedemann, 1998). These claims include that (a) current societal constructions of masculinity don’t include literacy; (b) boys’ slow

development is the reason for their failure as literacy learners; girls have a head start; (c) boys' preferred learning styles don't suit literacy learning; they need to be active and out of doors; (d) boys are not as practiced in talking or writing about feelings; they don't feel comfortable sharing their writing, reading/writing narrative, writing in journals; and (e) materials that schools encourage students to read don't suit boys, including fiction, plays, and poetry. Although there is some evidence for each of these, we feel that they are in and of themselves incomplete arguments and, as we will discuss in this article, are not born out in our own research. These arguments do not present the complexity and depth required to understand the gender issues surrounding literacy.

Although there is evidence to support these claims for some boys and documentation of gendered differences in achievement, attitude, choice, and response for some (Barrs, 1993; Hall & Coles, 1997; Millard, 1994, 1997; Wilhelm, 1997), there is also considerable observable evidence to suggest that such is not the case for all boys. Wilhelm (2001) supported this idea, stating that the boys he studied were "more different than alike, and that statistics lose sight of individual differences" (p. 60). As teachers and researchers we need to be very careful not to essentialize "boys" and "girls" into rigid, gendered categories in which there are more exceptions than not, while at the same time recognizing the genderedness of literacy practices and that our expectations for boys and for girls might be different. We need to be cautious of "conventional wisdom" (p. 60) and popular "beliefs" (Davison et al., 2002, p. 2) about boys' interests and abilities, not underestimating boys' desires to read about new ideas and substantive issues. Such thinking might cause the perpetuation of stereotypes and reinforcement of traditional notions of gender and gender preferences. As Davison et al. reminded us, *some* girls and *some* boys do very well at mathematics, science, reading, and writing (p. 3).

Our increased awareness of the polymorphic discourses (Gee; as cited in Knobel, 1999, p. 22) as we see them in play with boys and our concerns with getting below the superficial levels of gender and the gendered nature of literacy have led us to consider the issues from the multiple perspectives of the boys in our study.

Methodology

Our discussion is based on a two-year qualitative study with early adolescent boys in three distinctly different communities and schools: one rural-community school, one inner-city school, and one suburban school. The schools, although predominately Anglo Canadian, do include children from a diversity of backgrounds. In this research we are looking at the boys' perceptions of literacy in relation to their literacy practices as evident in their "in school and outside of school" activities. As women researching boys, we have had to recognize our own gendering in this research. Although not the topic of discussion for this paper, we believe it is important to recognize the role of gender in qualitative inquiry and analysis and how it may shape our methodology and subsequent findings.

We began our research in five upper-elementary and middle-years classrooms taught by male teachers. Our observations focused on boys, although primarily in language arts, also included social studies, math, and science. We recorded their selection of texts, writing topics and practices, and use of media and technology in the classroom; and generally their literacy practices. We surveyed all of the students in these five classrooms about their literacy practices and interviewed 29 boys from Grades 3 through 6. We also met with the (male) classroom teachers to get their perception of these same boys' practices. In the second year we followed 15 of these boys to new classrooms and some to new schools. We had discussions with the boys in the project in which they talked about their "out of school" computer and technology

experiences. We conducted backpack literacy digs with a cross section of the boys in which we went through everything in their packs and analyzed each item to ascertain what purpose it served for them. We did this to better understand the functional nature of their everyday school texts.

In order to efficiently manage the quantity of data we were gathering, we used NVivo, a data-management software package, to assist with the organization and coding. Participant observer field notes and interview transcriptions were coded into nodes (categories) in the NVivo software. As data were constantly coded and contrasted, categories emerged that were used to describe the nature of the boys' literacies. These categories were used to frame questions for subsequent interviews. As in many interpretive research endeavours, we began with our working theories and looked to describe and understand what this culture of boyhood was for these early adolescent boys and what role literacy played. We threw our net widely and began our observations, in their classrooms, around the schools, and on the playgrounds. Some of the expected images, almost stereotypical, began to emerge.

Findings

These boys were very active and did seem to prefer physical activity to more sedentary activities such as reading and writing. When they went to the library to select reading materials, they tended to migrate to the nonfiction sections; they were reluctant to write stories, at least when compared to their female counterparts; and in our initial interviews, few described themselves as good readers. Even those who did qualified their comments by saying things such as "But I don't really like to read" or "If I have the choice I would rather . . ."

Our initial findings were seductive and fit with common beliefs supported by the meta-analysis research in the Canadian context that schools are failing boys and fit with the folk theory

that “boys will be boys,” they don’t like to read and write, and they don’t interact around literacy; yet this wasn’t true for all of the boys and didn’t seem to provide us with any depth of understanding of what they *were* doing. We went back to our data to look for descriptors, themes, and a way to better understand what was happening. We reproblematicized the emerging gendered trends and wondered if there were shapes of these boys’ literacy configurations that we were missing. We went back to the boys and interviewed them again. These interviews combined with ongoing observations and analysis of literacy artifacts provided further evidence of their literacy perceptions and practices.

The Social Nature of Literacy for Boys

The social nature of these boys’ literacy practices started to become obvious to us. Sometimes it was in the form of loud and boisterous sharing of comments across the entire room and other times the clustering around an activity that engaged them. Gathering around a computer was a common example of this. One day at recess four or five of the Grade 5 boys asked their teacher if they could stay in the class and play a computer game rather than go outside. They clustered around the computer on the teacher’s desk. One boy took the controls, and the others coached him and gave him suggestions, words of encouragement, and praise at a move well executed. Two more boys joined them, and then a couple more, all becoming intently focused on the play on the screen. After a few minutes, the (male) teacher joined the group, engaging in a conversation with them about the progress of the game and sharing ideas about how best to progress.

In another classroom it was library exchange time that caught our attention. The students all entered the open-area library, and five or six boys immediately rushed over to the sports area, quickly picked up a variety of sports books (a hockey information book, golfing), and signed

them out on the computer scanner. They then proceeded to cluster around one book, and all read it together, exclaiming over the illustrations and pictures. The girls went to the paperback novels, selected more carefully, found spaces on the couches to read, and then sat clustered on the comfortable furniture and read their books. At a surface level it appeared that the girls were *really* reading, whereas the boys were “goofing off.” Looking a little further, we saw the boys using these texts as a point of connection through which they communicated their interests and expertise to one another. Their communication consisted of exclamations—“Look at that!”—and gestures as they pointed at different parts of the page. Their group engagement was much more visible and loud than that of the girls, whose engagement in the texts seemed more sustained and whose communication consisted of whispered conversations.

Alvermann and Heron (2001) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) have also noticed the importance of a social community with which boys can connect. Hall and Cole (2001) talked about how the boys’ “vernacular” literacies are very often focused around Gee’s (in press) affinity-identity concept, in which boys’ affinity-identity is formed “through experiences that are shared within the practices of ‘affinity groups’” (Alvermann & Heron, 2001, p. 119). Newkirk (2002), referring to the high school boys in Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) study, suggested that “literacy as these young men practice it is intensely social—literacies grow out of relationship” (p. x) and that boys are likely to read material that can be transported into conversations with their friends.

Literacy is a dominant social practice through which the boys in our study shaped their identities and developed and maintained close personal relationships, and often their literacies gave greater emphasis to taking *from* the text rather than poring over it, in order to share information with their friends. The boys’ use of literacies to shape their identities and develop

shared interests with friends connected to the themes that have emerged from our data. Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) cited an example of a boy who regularly checked the Internet or newspapers to keep up with hockey scores because his friends expected him to know this information

Why Boys Engage in Literacy

Although many of these boys struggled to make meaning of their school literacy experiences, they referred to their literacy practices outside of school. Five themes arose repeatedly in their comments about their literacy practices: (a) personal interest, (b) action, (c) success, (d) fun, and (e) purpose. These boys were using what they had learned in school and were transforming it for their own purposes, purposes that fulfilled their needs of positioning themselves in the world and of supporting relationships with their peers. They were transforming academic literacies into their own life literacies in order to stimulate their real and imaginary lives that included challenge, risk, excitement, and opportunities to win. These themes, as supported by Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) findings, with older boys are interlocking pieces of a larger literacy picture and are instrumental in supporting their developing gendered identities, and their attitudes shape the effort and focus they give to different literacy experiences. As Millard (1997) commented, "For many boys, knowing how to read is important, but reading itself is not" (p. 46).

When they had the opportunity, the boys in our study chose reading selections that helped inform their personal interests, feeding their quest for their individual and collective identities and social communities. Often the boys reported choosing texts that connected to events that involved their relatives and friends, such as grandfathers in WWII, and fathers in the RCMP. One boy reported:

A couple of months ago I wrote a letter to the Oilers because my friend, he has cancer.

He's still in the hospital. I asked them if they could send him something, and they did. So they wrote me back, and they sent me two pictures, autographed pictures.

Repeatedly, the boys reported interest in reading texts that involved action and violence, games/competition, and challenges. In terms of school-based activities, their creative writing often featured superhero characters, gang members, or fantasy figures that exhibited particular traits of strength or power. These had a particular appeal. One boy commented:

You can make your characters anything you want, not like in the real world where you are limited to just everything a human can do. . . . Your character can have all these adventures; every character can have their special magic that nobody else has.

The popular "Animorph" adventure series for pre-adolescents successfully combines boys' desire for challenge with action and excitement. The inside cover entices readers with the claim that "Even the book Morphs! Flip the pages and check it out!" and the back cover speaks directly to potential readers:

We can't tell you who we are. Or where we live. It's too risky, and we've got to be careful. Really careful. So we don't trust anyone. Because if they find us, . . . well, we just won't let them find us. The thing you should know is that everyone is in really big trouble. Yeah. Even you.

Then it continues with a description of the story: "It was really bad when Jake found out his older brother was one of them. It was even worse when Tobias stayed in his morph too long. But nothing compares to the horror the Animorphs are about to face. Nothing" (Applegate, 1997, cover).

Boys' personal interest in text is connected to the active emotional, mental, and physical engagement they experience and to the amount of success they experience in the engagements. They reported interest in "scary movies like the Blair Witch Project," "action reading and magic and stuff," and "war games and people in battles." Not only do they like to read and write about action, but they also "really want to get into the action" themselves, to "do stuff, and they "don't want to have to wait." These themes are also supported in Smith and Wilhelm (2002), who reported adolescent boys' desire for visible and immediate signs of accomplishment, but their lack of sustained interest if they don't see progress. The early adolescent boys in our study also wanted to be challenged, but in contexts in which they feel confident of success or at least improvement. Often their success was measured in relation to what their friends were doing: "I look at other kids' work, and I'm doing way better than them" "I know I'm good because Stephen, he thinks he's good, but he doesn't do any of the campaign because it's too hard for him." They could also measure their success based on what their teachers told them: "The books I read are fairly advanced, and I know most of the words"; I'm way ahead in math: I've got a Grade 6 book at home that I work from, and I'm still in Grade 4." They also determined their success by the rewards that they received: "We have to finish the reading medal, and we get to go somewhere like Pizza Hut. . . . We had a lot of fun trying to get the reading medal because it makes you feel really good once you finish."

Many of the writing activities completed in their language arts classes were teacher directed, including handwriting, copying notes, and completing spelling lists and tests, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, and teacher-prompted journal entries. These did not particularly engage the boys' interest; however, when the writing was connected to their personal interests or to an aspect of school that was interesting, such as science experiments and reports or mind-maps in

preparing for discussions, there was more engagement. Science was a popular subject for many of these boys, because, as one boy commented, “You get to interact with what you’re doing”; and in doing experiments, “There’s nothing that’s holding you back—you can do anything. . . . We built rockets and then had a contest to see whose went furthest.”

Their choices of reading materials also supported their reported interests. The students were regularly required to take books out of the library, and some of their common reading choices included “how-to” books; for example, drawing and chess; informational books about such topics as hockey, reptiles, and weather; cartoon books such as *Far Side* and *Dennis the Menace*; puzzle books and “whodunit” puzzles; and fantasy such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Redwall*, and *Harry Potter*. One Grade 3 boy commented:

One time I read *Mossflower* in less than a week, five days, something like that. A really thick book at 430 pages. So when I’m actually in a reading mood, I read quite a bit. But it depends on how much I want to read and how much I like the book.

The out-of-school reading selected by these boys often supported their personal interests, such as sports magazines (hockey, golf, skateboarding), computer magazines telling them how to win at the computer games (“cheats”), superhero comic books, and other graphic texts. These texts were a contrast to their in-school selections, often because they were not seen as appropriate for in-school reading. In fact, in one school the boys were not allowed to bring their much-loved *Pokémon* cards to school. These richly textured literacy artifacts played a major role in these boys’ out-of-school literate lives. They read and reread the many morphing characters and knew their transformational histories; similar to the boys in Vasquez’s (2001) study, these boys demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of this genre. At this school *Pokémon* had been

banned. However, there were often overlaps in the texts the boys chose to read in and out of school, such as fantasy, action novels, and information texts.

The boys continually shaped and blended their literacy experiences to infuse their personal interests, active engagement, and success. Multiple levels of computer games sustain interest and challenge those who play to compete, often against their own previous best scores or against the computer. One boy stated, "Once I start playing, if I start a file, I just play there for two hours." And they are encouraged to "cheat" in order to get better: Most of the boys reported reading cheats in magazines or getting them from their friends to improve their performance in the games and be successful. It was as if that was also part of the game. Multiple and rapid Internet screens also help maintain boys' interest and encourage their reading of complex print and visual texts. As one boy commented:

If you don't follow the game and you miss something, like what a guy says, it might not work later on in the game, because if he tells you you need something and you don't read that part and don't get it, then you might not be able to be one of the bosses later."

Although few boys in our study reported owning their own magazines, perhaps due to their age and limited financial resources, they observed older siblings and parents engaged with these texts and were able to borrow them. One boy reported, "My dad goes to Dot's Hardware and reads articles about computers and stuff." Another reported looking for secrets to the games from magazines that can be found in "any kind of store, like Roger's Video or Winks." Hall and Coles (2001) argued that magazines form a substantial portion of boys' reading, often "dense statistical and biographical information" (p. 217) about favourite sports, sporting figures, results, and computer games developed from these interests. These magazine texts tend to be "information rich and analytical rather than narrative in style; . . . boys' social interactions

around these literacy practices tend to be focused on memorizing facts and figures, rehearsing arguments, comparing and ranking performances and identifying procedures” (p. 218). It appears that this kind of material that these boys read was used as currency to maintain their social connections with friends, and by doing so, they continued creating their identities; as Barrs (2000) suggested, reading themselves into being. “Reading,” she said, “is one of the main psychological tools available to us in the process of becoming a person because of the access it gives us to other and wider ways of being” (p. 289). One boy in our study admitted, “I do quite a bit of reading on the Internet, so I can tell my friends”; and later, “It shows you all the games, different secrets, and how to break the codes.”

Across all of these themes lies that of fun, which can be achieved in a variety of ways that centre around the boys’ personal interests, active engagement, and success. Fun can be found in many situations, such as in interactions with teachers: “My kindergarten teacher always read to us, and we always had great fun”; “My teacher explained stuff to us in a funny way. . . . He told us stories about his life; it was so fun”; in activities in class: “During the experiment we’ll really have a lot of fun, and the teacher always finds something fun to help us and help us do it and make us focus on it”; and in out-of-school activities: “We can go places on the Internet, and it’s really fun.” The idea of fun also connected to the boys’ reading selections. These boys often selected visual, humorous, and active texts such as comic books, *Far Side* anthologies, and more recent series such as *Captain Underpants*, with titles such as *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies From Outer Space (and the Subsequent Assault of the Equally Evil Lunchroom Zombie Nerds)*, offering “Even More Flip-O-Rama! the world-famous cheesy animation techniques that lets you animate the action!” (Pilkey, 1999, back cover).

The most dominant theme, however, that impacts all of the others is the need for purposeful engagement with texts. As Smith and Wilhelm (2002) maintained, readings that the high school boys enjoy have a purpose, whether it is getting information, figuring out how something works, keeping track of sports statistics, or staying connected with their friends. Our elementary and middle school boys reported the necessity of reading while playing video games “because most of the video games that I have, you have to read what the instructions are, and you follow exactly the instructions or you fail the level.” They read newspapers, “about Napster dying. We have Napster on our computer, so that really got me”; “for entertainment stuff, and if there’s any concert coming”; “what’s on TV”; “I go to the hockey section and the sports section, and I read what’s new in the sports section so I’ll know. That’s where I get all my information.” They read to connect to friends and family: “My older brother, he’s seventeen. He has to read all this stuff from his homework . . . on the computer. We’ll go on the Internet lots and read.” And they read because they know it’s important for their future lives:

You have to know how to read and write to go anywhere in life, because if you can’t read anything, you’re not going to get a very good job. And if you can’t write anything, you’re not going to be able to really do anything. You’re not going to be able to have a desk job or anything; you’re going to be working at McDonald’s.

Why Digital Literacy?

Millard (1997) felt that boys are disadvantaged in academic literacy as a result of current curricular emphases, teacher text and topic choices, and lack of availability of texts that match their interests and needs. She also emphasized the changing nature of literacy and the role of technology and suggested that boys’ underachievement in literacy may not translate to electronic technologies outside of school (p. 14). Many of the boys in our study have a great deal of

expertise and interest in numerous forms of digital literacies, often much more than their teachers. These literacies are very often adapted and transformed from strategies and discourses they have used in school. Alvermann and Heron (2001) described Robert, an adolescent self-described as disinterested in reading, who in the context of a computer game, *Dragon Ball Z*, analyzed characters, made predictions about plot, and pursued multiple sources of information. Power (2001) reminded us of “the allure of contemporary digital culture for boys” (p. 52) and discussed Millard’s (1997) Yorkshire study and said that “issues of boys’ engagements with technologically generated narratives in preference to printed texts were foregrounded” (p. 52). Technological and digital literacies are sites where boys are able to find challenging texts and become actively engaged in a stimulating and purposeful situation with an ultimate goal—to win. Millard surmised that educators and parents alike have been too quick to dismiss their children’s preoccupation with

computers as a diversion from their own preferred book-based literacy without properly understanding the computer’s capacity to empower users in gaining access and control of powerful technological discourses. . . . It is imperative for teachers to be more fully aware of the impact of the world of multimedia and to be in tune with the cultural traditions of their community rather than be concerned solely with outcomes based on the amount of fiction read. (p. 46)

Boys’ practices and resistance to the Myths

Our observations of classroom activities and behaviours have reminded us of the complexity of gender as a construct in explaining academic successes and literacies of boys and girls. Although girls’ literacies seem to match better with current schooling practices, thus often providing them with more measurable school success as seen by higher grades, more attention to

assignments, and completion of class projects, there is much more going on for early adolescent boys than what is suggested by test scores. The following classroom observation provides evidence of this. A Grade 7 math class was working on multiplying positive and negative integers. One of the boys in the class had been identified as an “extraordinary” student and was given permission to work independently. Given the opportunity, in any break, he took out his book *Reptiles and Amphibians* and read it. Another boy, two seats down from him, had worked ahead in his math and spent some time engaging in a more challenging version of the math activity with two other boys. He then left his group and took his novel, *Lord of the Rings*, to sit on the couch in the front corner of the room. He was soon joined by the student with his *Reptiles and Amphibians* book. Soon after, three other boys joined them, two bringing *Far Side* books and one a *Waldo* book. The two boys reading *Far Side* found something amusing and slid the book along to the others, who read the section and slid the book back to the owners. All of the boys read silently but took several opportunities to share the cartoons. This is only one example of many in which the boys in our study displayed and discussed themselves as highly engaged in many literacy practices.

Although classroom expectations and structures work effectively for some boys, it has the potential of disadvantaging others. Although there is often a mis-connect between literacy events and expectations in school and out of school, some classroom environments provide a flexible and supportive place to learn. One classroom teacher demonstrated an understanding of the needs of some boys to prepare for literacy events. This Grade 6 teacher decided that his students would *focus* on reading for three weeks of the term, so he allotted one-and-a-half hours a day to reading books that the students selected themselves. On this particular day, they had a 15-minute period in which to read, and the teacher instructed them all to get their books and

begin reading. Most of the girls and a few of the boys complied and began reading silently. One boy in particular did not. He first walked to the back of the class, browsed in the magazine box, came back to his desk empty handed, then went to the sink at the front, got paper towels, and proceeded to clean off his desktop. He finished this task, then sat at his desk and shuffled papers on and in his desk for a few more minutes. After about 10 minutes, he finally picked up his novel and began reading. Soon after, the teacher told them that it was time to move on to the scrapbook activity, but that they could continue reading if they wished. This particular student, and four other boys who took a while to settle down, chose to read and continued reading throughout the next activity (about 30 minutes) with absolute concentration.

As the lesson described above continued, other aspects of literacy development became obvious. In their learned communication styles and collaboration, girls had learned how to be successful at meeting school expectations, and some of the boys resisted in taking these on. In one Grade 6 classroom the students were working on scrapbook assignment (consisting of locating international, national, or local news items; reading them; summarizing them; and pasting them into scrapbooks). There was a box of current newspapers located at the back of the classroom. Several of the boys had chosen to continue reading their books rather than spend this time completing scrapbooks, and there was a cluster of several girls and two or three boys at the newspapers. The girls selected sections, browsed through them, showed each other items, complained about how hard the activity was, and cut out items that interested them; and some of the students read the items silently, reading out interesting bits as they came across them. Boys working on this task each took their own section of newspaper to their desk and worked independently. Although the girls seemed not to be focused on their work, the teacher confirmed

that it was the girls who completed the assignments on time, whereas many of the boys who were working independently did not.

Despite the structured nature of classroom rules and expectations regarding learning and literacy, some boys have demonstrated alternative approaches to making meaning from school texts, attempting to transform traditional school literacies into something more useful and manageable to them, with some approaches more successful than others: A Grade 7 social studies class was studying ancient Egypt. The students were given a variety of tasks during the 45-minute class, one of which was to read a page of typewritten notes and highlight five key points in the passage. One boy did not even glance at the page once during the entire reading time, but when the teacher suggested that they should be completing, he picked up a coloured marker and seemingly randomly underlined four or five sections of the text. In the same class, one boy was engrossed in drawing cartoon figures. Whenever the teacher directed the class to do an activity, he would comply, but only briefly before returning to his doodling. He had a difficult time tearing his attention away from his drawing to complete the tasks to the minimal requirements accepted by the teacher. Another boy on the opposite side of the class spent a great deal of the class drawing a detailed illustration covering a full page, shading and elaborating. His assignment was not completed at the end of the class. One boy commented, “I copy stuff from the board, and I finish quickly because I can write really fast, and then I just draw. Then I’m not too bored.”

In the past decade there has been considerable thought given to education for girls: how that education can be structured, what curricular areas need focus and attention, and how to create successful environments for girls. However, the same thought has not been given to the curriculum as it is offered to boys. As Connell (1996) stated:

The planned masculinizing regimes of the old boarding schools have been replaced, in mass public education, with a hodgepodge of practices impacting on the lives of boys, which are rarely thought through in gender terms. Such practices as school sport, discipline, and curriculum division may have strong masculinizing effects—but may be at odds with each other, or in conflict with other purposes of the school. The tendency of masculinity formation, in certain situations, to undermine or completely disrupt the teaching function of the school is particularly worrying. (p. 216)

The unexamined masculinity practices that continue in schools have a strong and often negative impact on literacy practices that boys may or may not feel able and willing to take up in classrooms and in their private lives. Their recourse to these hegemonic, constraining, masculinizing practices and to the traditional practices and beliefs about gender has been to transform their literacies in ways that are not always recognized in the context of schooling. Institutional practices and beliefs are generally slow to change and are not always responsive to the needs of those presently within the institutions

Implications for Classrooms and Schools

The theories regarding gendered differences suggested earlier, although serving in some measure to explain the challenges faced by boys and their teachers in addressing literacy, also serve to constrain efforts to change attitudes and practices. Hall and Coles (2001) suggested that “school definitions of literacy have been slow to change, and slow to acknowledge the changing nature of literacy in society.” They went on to state, “There is a shortage of practical, well-grounded work in reframing the reading curriculum and rethinking assessment criteria to promote the kinds of literacy which are required in the workplace and in the home” (p. 219). There are many real constraints to change, both external and personal, that affect the possibilities

for transformation. Externally imposed standardized testing, the increased emphasis on “covering” the curriculum, fragmented timetables, and large groups of diverse students all distract teachers from considering more subtle issues affecting the learning of their students. Schools as historically constructed institutions are entrenched in society’s collective understanding of what schooling is and should be; as such, there is considerable resistance to significant structural changes. Alternative “texts” and “literacies” are often dismissed as irrelevant to the agenda of school. Teachers are products of teacher education programs that have not provided the time or space to address broad issues of literacy, gender, power, and other social-justice concerns. Therefore, their background knowledge and previous experiences of literacy learning, along with professional development models offering brief, one-time-only sessions, limit teachers’ ability to closely examine their practices in light of intersecting factors such as gender. These external constraints also influence the types of activities generally found in classrooms, where critical literacy and the opportunities to understand the biased nature of language play a limited role in the overall educational experiences of students. Literacy is not recognized as a social practice but as either a body of knowledge to be absorbed or a tool for learning other bodies of knowledge that will be absorbed. Gender as a construct has been ignored in teacher education and curriculum, and often remains an unacknowledged factor in student learning.

Just as factors impacting boys’ literacy are being ignored in classrooms, so are boys ignoring schooling practices that they see as boring, meaningless, and passive. The boys themselves are “morphing” literacies to suit their purposes and, as our conversations with them have indicated, becoming literate in spite of school instruction. Boys and girls are engaging in literacy events outside of the classroom; however, although the literacies of girls are more

aligned with practices encouraged by school (reading fiction, writing stories and poems) and are more compliant in the face of dull, meaningless activities, boys are better preparing themselves for the world beyond school:

[Achievement] does not automatically translate into economic advantage in the world of work. One telling set of figures included in the ACER [Australian Council for Educational Research] report on reading in the junior secondary school suggests that, while good literacy skills provided a clear earnings advantage for 19 year olds in employment, the earning advantage is predominantly experienced by men rather than women. Nineteen year old women with very high literacy skills could expect to earn \$335 per week—a wage that was \$60 less per week than the wage 19 year old men with the same skills could expect. In fact, young men designated as having low and very low literacy levels were still able to earn more than young women who had very high levels of literacy achievement. (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998, p. 28)

The abilities to navigate the Internet, experiment with alternative literacies, and “read” multiple texts simultaneously are more useful workplace skills than is the ability to analyze a work of fiction or to write a narrative account.

As literacy educators of both boys and girls, it is vital that we increase opportunities for awareness, analysis, and action regarding issues of gender for ourselves and for our students. We can do this in many ways. However, “some of the solutions proposed for redressing the gender imbalance in literacy achievement are based on stereotyped views of both girls and boys as readers and learners, and are unlikely to lead to major change” (Barrs, 2000, p.288). We need to resist the essentializing tendencies of “conventional wisdom” that suggest that there are “boys’ stories”—action-packed, lacking characterization and any sense of inner life in the characters

(Thomas, 1997). We need to be cautious of overly simplistic solutions that suggest that we can motivate boys to read simply by “using literature with positive male archetypes that will capture their imaginations” (Brozo, 2002, p. 538). As Young (2001) warned, we need to be wary of literature that serves to reinforce unwanted stereotypes for young men.

Our own awareness as educators of potential sites for stereotyped practices is a critical beginning, not allowing ourselves to fall back on essentializing arguments of “poor boys,” “failing schools,” or “boys’ nature” (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Mah , 1998, pp. 6-9), and yet recognizing how our students are constrained by the rigidities of their sex roles in school and in society. We need to become familiar with alternative literacies such as chat rooms, despite our “hesitancy to enter this different world of reading” (Alvermann & Heron, 2001, p. 120), Internet sites, and video and computer games, and recognize the potential of these as increasing students’ literacy abilities in navigating more traditional print texts. Rather than making assumptions about boys’ literacy practices, we need to be prepared to ask them how they apply literacy strategies to their in-school and out-of-school lives. As our study has revealed, it is through discussions with the boys and observations of their practices that we have begun to understand some of the complex ways in which they engage with texts. It is through their stories and explanations that we have been able to, albeit briefly, enter their lived and fantasized worlds.

Through discussions in classes, activities that require critical reading and analysis of multiple texts, and opportunities for students to create “texts” using a diversity of literacies, we will enable students to become more aware of their own literacy potential. The use of critical literacy, defined by Young (2001) as “an awareness that the language of texts and the reader’s responses to it are not neutral, but are shaped by social contexts and our experiences as people of particular races, ethnicities, genders, and social classes” (p. 5), can assist boys and their teachers

to become more aware of textual constructions. Boys can be helped to become more aware of how texts portray gender identities and inequities in stereotypical ways (Alloway and Gilbert, 1997) and through their growing awareness can discover alternative literate positions for themselves. We can help them to feel more literate and to make more explicit connections between their literacies and formal literacies of school.

Examples of critical literacy activities that incorporate personal interest, enjoyment, challenge, and purpose in meaningful and active ways include the following ideas:

- Compare the nouns and verbs used in two sports articles, one about a female and one about a male. (Young, 2001)
- Ask students to consider the following question before reading a variety of texts: “If you woke up tomorrow and discovered that you were the opposite sex from the one you are now, how would you and your life be different?”
- Present students with texts that are written in first person and ask them to assign a gender to the “speaker” in each instance. Compare with other members of the class, and discuss what this might indicate about assumptions about gender. (Martino & Mellor, 2000).
- Address stereotypes perpetuated through the everyday language of students; for example, “chicks,” “fag.” Ask students to consider the stereotypical meanings held by such terms.
- Discuss the relationship between textual representations on television, in song lyrics, and in advertising, with the students’ personal experiences of being male and female.

In addition to developing critical literacy skills, adopting an inquiry stance to texts—that is, gathering information and analyzing and organizing it in order to develop an in-depth understanding of an issue—enables boys to engage in texts in personally meaningful ways. A wide range of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, instruction manuals, Internet sites, and

charts, can be selected that allow room for choice in everyday reading. These texts should be selected to represent gender in a wide range of stereotypical and nonstereotypical ways (Young & Brozo, 2001). Teaching strategies that incorporate social interactions, opportunities for success, and personal meaning making need to be made part of classroom life.

In conclusion as has been previously noted, boys *can* read, but are selective in what they read; they use reading strategies that they have adopted in school and have morphed them to help make sense of new literacies that appeal to them. As teachers we need to transform our ideas about literacy to help boys recognize their strengths and move them beyond their own to broader, more global literacies. We need to better understand their morphing literacies, critique the arguments that would position them as failing and remind ourselves that there are multiple definitions of literacy and multiple paths to becoming literate. We need to deepen our understandings of the subjectivity of literacies for both boys and girls given the socio-cultural configurations from which they emerge. We need to encourage our students to see the multiplicities of perspective and recognize the morphing of their own literacy practices.

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