What’s Going Down

A REVIEW OF THE
CURRENT CONCERNS
AROUND BOYS AND
LITERACY
The Issue: Boys Underperform in Literacy

Time after time in our work with inservice teachers, we have heard them describe “problem” classes with statements like, “Of course, that class has sixteen boys and only five girls . . .” The explanation need not continue, for those statements are met with nodding heads and sympathetic glances. If you have lots of boys in an English or language arts class—or so the conventional wisdom goes—you can expect to have problems. We’ve been fascinated to see teachers who would never link a troubled classroom to their students’ racial, ethnic, or social class background feel comfortable linking the problems to the relative proportion of boys and girls. It seems that gender is a category that teachers use to think with. And they’re not alone, for a wide variety of research has focused on boys’ achievement relative to girls on literacy.

There is a well-established interest in girls, their learning, and meeting their social and achievement needs in school. The work of the American Association of University Women (Bryant, 1993), Gilligan (1982), Finders (1997), and theorists and researchers throughout the United States, United Kingdom, and Commonwealth nations have provided us with valuable data and perspectives that we find very helpful to us as teachers. To take one instance, the issues of girls’ relatively low achievement in math and science has received much well-deserved attention, and as a result demonstrable improvement has been achieved in these areas.

Unfortunately, we haven’t seen the same improvement in boys’ achievement in literacy, despite the growing body of research that documents a significant problem. Without question, the widest current gender gap for learning achievement recorded by standardized measures is in the area of literacy. The Educational Testing Service, for example, reports that the gap in writing between eighth-grade males and females is more than six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning (Cole, 1997). In the 1996 National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEPs), females outperformed males on literacy measures by 25 points on a 500-point scale (Campbell, Voelkl, and Donohue, 1998). The most recent NAEPs, which were conducted in 1998, provide a bit of better news. Boys’ scores went up at Grade 4 and Grade 8, though they remained the same in Grade 12. But that same report provides
the troubling findings that the lowest-scoring boys performed at a considerably lower level than they had on the 1992 assessment and that the gap between girls and boys in Grade 12 continues to widen. Newkirk (2000) points out that the gap between the girls and boys is “comparable to the difference between Whites and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systematic social and economic discrimination in this country” (p. 295).

In 1985, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) investigated writing achievement across fourteen countries and found that “gender by itself or in combination with certain home variables was the most powerful predictor of performance, particularly with academic tasks” (Purves, 1992, p. 201). Females outscored males on all writing tasks, both narrative and expository, and this gap was particularly large in persuasive writing. Once again, the differences generally increased with age.

In a later IEA study begun in 1988 and involving thirty-two nations, girls achieved higher total reading scores in all modes. However, by age fourteen in nine countries (28 percent of the sampled countries), boys did overtake girls on expository literacy tasks, and in eighteen countries (56 percent) on workplace literacy tasks such as working with documents. In only one country at any age level did males achieve higher scores for narrative tasks (the kind most often pursued in language classes). In short, research makes it clear that as a group, girls outperform boys on overall reading tasks, though boys’ performances do tend to improve when they read for information, or when they read to do or accomplish something beyond the reading (Elley, 1992).

Again, this is not to argue that schools have not “failed at fairness” in their teaching of girls (Sadker and Sadker, 1995), nor to deny the silencing and discrimination suffered by traditionally underrepresented groups, including girls, in our schools and society. In fact, contributors to the volume *Failing Boys?* (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw, 1998) question the focus on academic achievement and testing as a measure of success in light of males’ continued leadership in the job market and earnings. They argue further that boys’ underachievement is strongly classed and racialized and that it is sociocultural factors, not gender alone, that determines who fails. Others, such as Cohen (1998), are suspicious of the political motives behind the current concern about boys given that they have underachieved when compared with girls in literacy since the seventeenth century. She believes that men feel they are losing their traditional advantages and that this is what motivates the current move to help boys, not their actual underachievement in terms of school and literacy.
Their arguments are provocative ones, we think, but they don’t explain away the statistics. Schools seem to be failing boys in literacy education. And while this failure may be rooted in a complex amalgam of issues, we believe that perceiving a problem of ANY group of students obligates us to try to understand it, so we can do something about it. And in a wider sense, if, as Thomas (1983) once maintained, “language makes us specifically human,” then we certainly have another cause for alarm.

Though the importance of literacy is seldom doubted, we think often of how Donalson (1978) demonstrated how reading and language awareness leads to developing intellectual control and disembedded, abstract thought. And of how Bettelheim (1976) demonstrated the importance of story, particularly fairy tales, to healthy psychological development. And of how Inglis (1981) showed the importance of narrative on children’s introspection and self-understanding and on their ability to understand and reflect on the experience of others. All of these abilities are clearly important to lives of health and happiness in a democratic society. They are central to our own concerns and goals as teachers.

The evidence of boys’ relative lack of literacy skills and their continuing loss of ground is consistent across studies and forceful in its accumulated detail. But we worry that the arguments based on this data take for granted that the very tests that document the gaps are not themselves gender-biased, a questionable assumption. For example, in her study of large-scale writing assessments, Peterson (1998) points out that girls’ narrative writing was privileged during the assessments. If, say, action stories are a genre that is not rewarded on large-scale assessments and if boys nonetheless write them, poor scores may be a function of evaluation bias and not actual performance. In fact, Jeff has done table reading for state assessments in three different states, and on one occasion much discussion ensued about how a particular piece written by a boy exhibited highly proficient writing but did not fit the scoring rubric. It was subsequently given a non-scorable evaluation.

Barrs (1993) makes a similar argument with regard to reading, wondering if boys only underachieve relative to girls on certain kinds of tasks, like narratives, and excel on others that are not on the assessment radar screen. She argues that girls’ generally higher levels of achievement in reading may reflect the nature of the reading demands made of them, and may in fact mask substantial under-achievement in some areas of reading, which, for a complex of reasons, are less carefully monitored in schools, such as the reading of information texts. (p. 3)
It is well documented that various schooling and testing practices discriminate (consciously or unconsciously) against various groups (e.g., against children from minority groups or lower socioeconomic levels). Children from various groups are also sometimes labeled as deficient because their home communication styles are not understood by teachers. See, for example, Gee (1989) or Michaels (1981). The same may certainly be true of many boys.

To summarize, the available quantitative data establish boys’ underachievement in literacy. But there are concerns that the data may be biased and do not tell the full story, at least not a full enough story to help teachers. We believe that our own research design allows us to fill in some of the considerable holes in the existing data and to examine the various issues raised here in ways that can help us think about our teaching, and practice instruction in new and more powerful ways.

During the rest of this chapter, we will review three important strands of the existing research on boys: discussions of boys’ psychological health; discussions of their learning in general; and discussions of their literacy learning in particular. In our review we will examine powerful theoretical lenses for approaching and understanding these issues. Though we’ll show how this theory and research is important to us as teachers and how it helped us think about our study, some readers might want to skip ahead to the interchapter preceding Chapter 2. By doing so, you can immediately meet some of the boys with whom we worked and immerse yourself in what they revealed, and then go on to our subsequent chapters to see what we learned from them. You can then return to this review later.

Current Framings of the Issues

The “New Boys” Movement: Concerns for Psychological Health

The perception that boys are in trouble, both in school and out, has led to an increased attention in our culture to boys. One manifestation of this concern is the explosion of books in the popular press on the plight of boys and their general psychological health. The general concern is so pervasive that it has been dubbed “The New Boys Movement.” The authors of these books generally refer to boys’ in-school problems and sometimes to their low literacy scores (without ever exploring these issues, as we will do here), but their focus is more generally on helping boys navigate the tricky waters of adolescence and move into the oceanic challenge of manhood.

Though the authors generally agree that boys are in trouble, they have widely differing explanations for why this is so, and they bring different theo-
Kimmel (1999), a gender historian, argues that these recent books provide very different understandings of gender. He lays out a continuum that begins on one end with biological determinism. According to Kimmel, books from this perspective argue that the way sex roles are played out in behavior is biologically determined. This view holds that boys' problems stem from individuals' and institutions' inability to understand masculine biology.

On the other end of the continuum are books that offer socially constructed notions of gender. In this view, sex and gender are fundamentally different. Gender is not determined by the biology of one's sex but by social constructions in the social worlds in which we live. In this view, boys' problems stem from society's inability to understand how it has shaped them with various communications about what is expected of them.

**Views from Biological Determinism**

As we've noted, one side of the debate includes authors who articulate arguments based to some degree on biological determinism. The two most popular authors in this group include Biddulph, author of *Manhood* (1994) and *Raising Boys* (1997), and Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys* (1997), *A Fine Young Man* (1999), and *How Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* (2001). Kimmel (1999) also places these two authors on the biological determinism end of the scale, though we personally feel that Gurian makes moves toward recognizing some social influences on the formation of gender.

These authors and others like them have been immensely influential, as are their arguments that males' propensity for many behaviors is genetically influenced (at least to some degree). They argue that the testosterone geysering through boys' bodies propels them toward activity, risk taking, and more overt forms of aggressive behavior. Biology mandates that "boys will be boys," they claim, and those who interfere with boys' natural behaviors are subverting natural male behavior and doing untold damage. Schools, they argue, are among the cultural institutions that contribute most significantly to that damage. These authors propose that society needs to celebrate who boys are (determined as it is by nature) and give them a wide berth to explore their natural inclinations and guide them gently in healthy directions.

We agree that biology does have a role in the development of boys. This makes obvious sense. However, we are compelled by the weighty evidence that gender is a historical and social construct that changes with time, culture, and situation (ideas we'll explore more fully). Just as important, we find this idea and its consequences more powerful for us as teachers.
The Case for Social Constructionism

According to Kimmel (1999), on the other side of the debate are those writers who see gender as a social rather than biological construction. West and Zimmerman (1991) provide a succinct statement of this position:

Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: as both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (p. 13)

This position informs many of the most popular books that take up the issue of the trouble with boys. For example, Pollack’s *Real Boys* (1999) explores the “boy code” that governs male behavior through culturally created and perpetuated “myths” of masculinity. This socially constructed code, according to Pollack, harms boys, so society, which defines and enforces social definitions of manhood, must actively interrogate and redefine masculinity. Kindlon and Thompson’s (1999) *Raising Cain* also talks about the cultures of masculinity, such as the nefarious “culture of cruelty” that is perpetuated through various cultural means, including popular media and peer relationships, and acted out in schools and classrooms.

We think that this second perspective is a more useful one for us as teachers. In the first place, it jibes with our experience. In our own social worlds, we see many ways of being male. Different families, cultural groups, religious affiliations, extracurricular associations, and so forth with which we are familiar all have different expectations and offer different possibilities for being male.

For instance, Jeff has a friend in whose orthodox religious tradition it is expected that the man will be the sole breadwinner in the family, that he will be the first served at dinner, and that he will be the one who makes all decisions of import that affect the family outside of the home, down to arranging and approving the marriages of his daughters. This authority is symbolized quite concretely by the way his family must follow him when they are out and about. Neither his wife nor his children are allowed to walk beside him or in front of him.

However, another friend, from a different ethnic and religious group, stays at home to take care of his children. He jokingly calls himself “The Houseman.” His wife is the sole breadwinner. He does the cooking and cleaning, and since he serves the morning and evening meals to fit his family’s schedule, he is always the last to eat. His wife earns all of the money, keeps the financial records, and makes all of the major financial decisions.
More personally, both of us have taken on very different gender roles than those of our fathers, and what we found out during this research project itself emphasized to us that boys today experience different cultural expectations than we did as young men thirty years ago. For instance, the boys in this study expressed radically more liberal attitudes toward homosexuality and feminism than we expected and that our social groups possessed in the late sixties and early seventies. Whether we fully believe the authenticity of these attitudes or not, it is clear that the boys in our study feel the weight of different expectations on their attitudes and behaviors.

Overall, the social constructionist position seems more useful to us as teachers. Social constructivism emphasizes that changing instructional environments, methods, and expectations can change the experience of kids. It can also change how they act, behave, learn, and interact. Therefore, focusing on how society and school influence gendered behaviors like literacy seems to us to be a fruitful and promising avenue for educators.

We think that books from this perspective offer more potential for helping boys than those from a biological one. Nonetheless, we would critique both the work of Pollack (1999) and Kindlon and Thompson (1999)—and others like them—because of the data on which they are based. Pollack derives his ideas at least in part from his therapeutic work. It’s not surprising that boys in therapy talk about their problems. But we worry that Pollack infers the trouble with boys from troubled boys. Kindlon and Thompson write from data gathered in an elite prep school. The boys with whom they worked do not represent boys in general in terms of class, cultural background, or school experience.

**Boys and Violence**

Other books that look very specifically at the cultures and definitions of masculinity and how these lead to violence also come from a social constructivist perspective. They are of interest to readers exploring the link of cultural constructions of masculinity to violence.

Though studying violence is not the purpose of this study, it is a growing problem in our schools. And although girls are certainly involved in school violence—both as perpetrators and, perhaps especially, as victims—boys are at the center of the maelstrom. While statistics differ somewhat, available databases suggest that boys are four to six times more likely to commit suicide than girls; more than twice as likely to get into physical fights; three times more likely to be suspended from school; four times as likely to be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, depressed, emotionally isolated, or suffering from Attention
Deficit Disorder; up to fifteen times more likely to be perpetrators of violent crime (statistics cited variously in Bushweller, 1994; Pollack, 1999; Ravitch, 1994; Silverstein and Rashbaum, 1994).

One well-respected book that explores this issue is James Gilligan’s Violence (1997). The author, the former mental health director for the Massachusetts state prison system, argues that the socially constructed privileges, status, and social positioning men enjoy can also be the very things that harm them, ultimately frustrating them and encouraging and enabling them to inflict harm on others. He explores the causes of violence and how a failure to meet cultural expectations brings on the shame and humiliation that incites and perpetuates violence. Likewise, Garbarino’s (2000) Lost Boys explores case studies of “kids who kill” because they are in search of attention and love. Miedzien (1991) takes a feminist perspective on the issue in her Boys Will Be Boys. She critiques how males use physical oppression and violence to construct and express their male identities in various venues like gangs, sports, sex, business, and warfare. She argues that the only way to change the cultural landscape significantly enough to modify the pervasive association of masculinity and violence is to adopt a national policy of zero tolerance that condemns all forms of violence and oppression of others.

Miedzien’s book lines up with other books from the social constructivist perspective that take issue with biological arguments that see certain male behaviors as natural. These texts express the necessity of culturally redefining masculinity using feminist theory. For example, Kivel’s (1999) Boys Will Be Men argues that creating sensitive and healthy boys requires parents and significant others (like teachers) to love and care for boys, to come to know them and attend to their needs, to communicate that loving is important, and to help boys deal with their emotional life. He argues further that these significant others must address harmful social and behavioral issues. They must do this by honestly confronting and exploring with boys issues influencing their behaviors and responsibilities, refusing to let boys—or society and social institutions like schools—off the hook to unquestioningly accept cultural conceptions of maleness.

**Battle Lines over Boys and Learning**

Books like Miedzien’s, Kivel’s, and others such as Silverstein and Rashbaum’s The Courage to Raise Good Men (1994) all propose transforming the meanings
of manhood by using the principles of feminism. They have therefore drawn a firestorm of the most politicized response.

Perhaps the most famous and vitriolic of these responses is Hoff Sommers’ (2000) *The War Against Boys*. This attack from the right argues that boys are so oppressed by feminist ideology, typically expressed through schools, they have in fact become “victims” and “the second sex.” Sommers calls into question the research of influential feminist scholars such as Gilligan and calls efforts to “feminize” boys misguided. Echoing many arguments also expressed in Faludi’s (1999) *Stiffed*, she argues that boys have become ostracized and marginalized and that this state of affairs, a failed promise of a fair shake, is leading to frustration, depression, and many other obstacles for boys.

As we’ve already maintained, this “war” between boys and girls is not one that needs to be fought. Though many battle lines have been drawn and skirmishes conducted, we are convinced that school and society can help boys and girls at the same time, and that helping boys in the ways we will propose will in fact benefit girls in important ways.

For example, a counterargument to Sommers’ comes from school and learning-oriented literature about boys in Australia and the United Kingdom. Using a social constructivist perspective, scholars such as Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), Alloway and Gilbert (1997), and Mac An Ghaill (1994) make powerful research-based arguments that boys are not suffering from feminist initiatives, but are rather suffering from definitions of masculinity that are hegemonic, culturally embedded, and harmful to both boys and girls. According to these authors, existing conceptions of masculinity and alignment with particular male groups undermine attitudes toward many kinds of learning and achievement in school. Gilbert and Gilbert, in *Masculinity Goes to School* (1998), and Salisbury and Jackson, in *Challenging Macho Values* (1996), provide classroom methods for questioning and disrupting the kinds of masculine-defined attitudes and behaviors that Gurian (1997, 1999, 2001), Biddulph (1994, 1997), and authors from a biological orientation believe we should accept and even celebrate.

One reason the battle lines are misdrawn is because there are boys and girls on both sides. Though people often must necessarily think in generalizations and categories, these are always too simple, and this study has led us to believe that the cost of this oversimplification is too high when it comes to boys and literacy. Many girls excel in math; many boys love to read. We categorize for the sake of argument, clarity, and for ease of thinking, but sometimes our categories cause problems and keep us from seeing the students before us.
Boys and Literacy
When we began this study, we found that it was eagerly anticipated by the teachers with whom we work. A Native American teacher who works with Jeff told us that her “prime concern” was “her boys.” She asked Jeff, “Who is going to help me with these boys [who won’t read]? Who cares enough to help me help them?” A veteran twelfth-grade English teacher echoed her remark: “If you can help these boys, it will be worth more than I can say.”

Their concerns are in line with the research documenting the achievement gap between boys and girls. It is also in line with a well-established research tradition that focuses on more specific differences between boys and girls, which is partly why the battle lines are drawn where they are.

A Summary of the Research on Gender and Literacy
We’ve warned against overgeneralizing, yet we realize that research that identifies characteristics of groups can provide a useful starting point for teachers by alerting us to issues we might encounter in our work with individual students. There is a long tradition in educational research that examines the differences between boys and girls on literacy tasks. Rather than discuss this huge body of research in depth, we’d like to present a quick statement of the findings we believe are most compelling:

ACHIEVEMENT

• Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do.
• Boys read less than girls read.
• Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do.
• Boys tend to be better at information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks than girls are.

ATTITUDE

• Boys generally provide lower estimations of their reading abilities than girls do.
• Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do.
• Boys have much less interest in leisure reading and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes than girls are.
• Significantly more boys than girls declare themselves “nonreaders.”
• Boys spend less time reading and express less enthusiasm for reading than girls do.
• Boys increasingly consider themselves to be “nonreaders” as they get older; very few designate themselves as such early in their schooling, but nearly 50 percent make that designation by high school.

CHOICE

• Boys and girls express interest in reading different things, and they do read different things.
• Boys are more inclined to read informational texts.
• Boys are more inclined to read magazine articles and newspaper articles.
• Boys are more inclined to read graphic novels and comic books.
• Boys tend to resist reading stories about girls, whereas girls do not tend to resist reading stories about boys.
• Boys are more enthusiastic about reading electronic texts than girls are.
• Boys like to read about hobbies, sports, and things they might do or be interested in doing.
• Boys like to collect things and tend to like to collect series of books.
• Poetry is less popular with boys than with girls.
• Girls read more fiction.
• Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor; some groups of boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy.

RESPONSE

• The appearance of a book and its cover is important to boys.
• Boys are less likely to talk about or overtly respond to their reading than girls are.
• Boys prefer active responses to reading in which they physically act out responses, do, or make something.
• Boys tend to receive more open and direct criticism for weaknesses in their reading and writing performances.
• Boys require more teacher time in coed settings.

These findings were drawn from the following studies: Abrahamson and Carter, 1984; Barrs, 1993; Children’s Literature Research Centre, 1996; Dunne and Khan, 1998; Hall and Coles, 1997; Kelly, 1986; Maybe, 1997; Millard, 1994, 1997; OFSTED, 1993; Equal Opportunities Commission and OFSTED, 1996; Shapiro, 1990; Whitehead, 1977; Wilhelm, 1997; Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998; Wilhelm and Friedemann, 1998.
As we noted before we presented the summary, we believe that this research is important because of the way it can alert us to some of the issues we might be facing in our work with boys. Yet at the same time, we worry that the tendency to compare boys and girls means the pitting of one gender against the other. Moreover, teachers have been shown to use this research in ways that emphasize traditional socially constructed notions of maleness and to reinforce boys' current general tendencies rather than to expand on or redefine them (Millard, 1997; Telford, 1999).

**Literacy and Masculinity**

Another issue is that these studies leave the critical question why unanswered. Fortunately, other scholars have taken up that question in their research. Among the most provocative is that of Martino, an Australian scholar. Martino's work (1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1998) bluntly argues that hegemonic versions of masculinity are not consistent with being literate, and are in fact militant against and undermine literacy and literate behavior. Boys see literacy as feminized, he argues, and since males define their maleness as “not female,” literacy must be—and in fact is—rejected.

Martino’s work builds on that of Walkerdine (1990), who was among the first to argue that boys are pushed by culture toward certain conceptions of masculinity and associated behaviors that run counter to literacy, which is presented culturally as a passive and private act that is feminized. And it resonates with other research as well. Cherland (1994), for example, studied images of reading presented in various media, including library and reading campaigns, and found that the images were almost entirely of females reading in private situations or with other females. Osmont (1987) found that what children observed adults reading out of school had a far-ranging effect on their conceptions of reading as a gendered act. Millard (1997) cites the case of a boy who suddenly stopped choosing fiction at age ten and began to read exclusively the farm journals that his father read (from Minns, 1993). When he had to read fiction, he began to respond to different features because of his new orientation toward “finding out” and “gathering information,” which he had adopted from his father.

Phillips (1993) and Barrs (1993) argue that while most girls arrive at school with a secure sense of gender, most boys do not. As a result, boys are more susceptible to peer pressure as they attempt to ascertain and enact what it means to be male. Clark’s (1976) and Bissex’s (1980) studies indicate that there is less room in schools for boys to pursue their interests and tastes. Voss
(1996) has gone so far as to suggest that school structures unconsciously discriminate against many boys. They may be denied the very chance to be male and literate. This may lead to a poorer attitude, less interest in reading, less time spent reading, and lower achievement.

These commentators and others (Chodorow, 1978; Paley, 1984) have posited that boys will go to great lengths to establish themselves as “not female” and follow what their peer group establishes as gender-specific behavior. If reading or other literate activities are perceived as feminized, then boys will go to great lengths to avoid them. This is particularly true if the activities involve effort and the chance of failure, for incompetence and expending effort are also seen as unmasculine. Achievement, for men, is supposed to be attained with ease. Boys will avoid feminized behaviors or responses as a form of “pollution.”

These researchers use this argument to explain why boys are reluctant to respond to reading or talk about feelings. Such discussions go beyond the rule-bound safety of many of their exchanges, are exploratory and tentative, and make them vulnerable to being “shown up” or “laughed at” for breaches of male protocol. It may also expose some of their thinking or feelings as feminine.

The Explanatory Power of Critical Theory:
The Work of Millard

Critical theories add an important dimension to the discussion of boys and literacy. These theories provide lenses for examining and critiquing the status quo and for providing alternate visions of social worlds such as schools and classrooms. Critical theories can provide us with perspectives for seeing our social practices in new ways, for making the familiar strange. They can help us see the way our social worlds (family, sports team, book club, classroom) and the ways we act in them are constructed and nonnatural. They give us a vantage point as an outsider who can evaluate underlying purposes, assess intended and unintended effects, and see alternative visions and ways of doing things. Critical theory can therefore make the ways we are gendered, our social attitudes, and how we consider and use literacy as part of our classroom project something to be examined and explored. Specifically, it can help us see three things: (1) how we are positioned (how society, parents, our students, and our school define teaching and learning, our role as teachers,
the role of curriculum and testing, the role of students, and the purpose of education); (2) the consequences of this positioning; and (3) the possibilities of a repositioning. As such, critical theories can also help us understand and begin to transform teacher and student attitudes and behaviors that we may find to be limiting or counterproductive.

Millard (1997) demonstrates the power of critical theories in her compelling work. She draws on this perspective to argue that general changes in reading habits occur because of environmental influences (in the home and the school) and media access. She finds that there are “marked differences in access to literacy that are directly related to gender” (p. 156). This access causes boys and girls to construct their ideas about reading, what it is used for, why it is important, what it means to be a reader, and how this all relates to gender in very different ways.

Millard suggests 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 urges teachers to get to know the field of contemporary children’s and young adult literature and to get to know their students so that they can help them choose appropriate books and learning projects. She also found that choosing books that match stereotyped views of boys’ interests and capacities may perpetuate those stereotypes and deny alternative interests. As well, Millard emphasizes the changing nature of literacy and the role of technology. She suggests that boys’ underachievement in literacy may have something to do with the huge mismatch to how they practice literacy with electronic technologies outside of school.

**Masculinity in School: The Notion of Gender Regime**

One argument that we found especially important for our current study is Millard’s use of the notion of “gender regime,” an idea so important we think it’s worth quoting her at length:

Harris, Nixon and Rudduck (1993) suggest that the concept of sex role modeling is lacking in sufficient complexity to account for the contradictory aspects of gender relations and the competing views given to adolescents by schools, parents and the wider community. As a way into interpreting their own data relating to schoolwork, homework and gender, they proposed instead adapting the framework of gender regime (Kessler, et al., 1985) to describe the ordering of the practices that construct various kinds of masculinity and femininity in schools. They explain that their “data led us to see young people as caught in overlapping gender regimes—
the regime of the community, the regime of the peer culture and the regime of the school” (Harris, Nixon and Rudduck, 1993, p. 5). They further suggest that although challenges were offered to each external regime by the school, to some extent the residual effects of the other influences were still strong. Perhaps the most powerful influence of all was the pressure of peer culture, particularly that of the gender appropriate peer group. Actions performed in similar contexts on a daily basis have the effect of reinforcing the dominant (patriarchal) structures of society and uniformity of gendered behavior. (p. 21)

In other words, the various social influences or “regimes” interact to instill and reinforce unconscious habits of behavior and in turn lead to enduring patterns of conduct and motivation. Also worth noting is the paramount importance of peer culture. Using popular and peer cultures to help us as teachers is a theme we follow up on in later chapters.

Overcoming the Traditional and Accepted: The Challenge of Habitus

The theorist Bourdieu (1990) also accounts for this residual influence of traditional cultural practices with his concept of “habitus.” Habitus, according to Bourdieu, uses past historical practices to produce new historical practices:

It ensures the active presence of past experience, deposited in each organism in the forms of schemes of perception, thought and action, and tends to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54, cited in Millard, 1997, p. 22)

Millard (1997) writes that “what the habitus creates, in effect, is an unexamined common-sense or practical way of proceeding within any repeated social routine that rules out, as extravagant or unconventional, other kinds of behavior” (p. 22). The concept of habitus helps explain the resilience of masculine attitudes, including those toward literacy, and it offers a challenge to teachers who want to invent more progressive and helpful forms of instruction for students. Given the evidence that Millard presents that boys who act like girls are considered more deviant than girls who act like boys, the challenge to help boys is particularly great.

Millard (1997) also makes use of French psychoanalytic theorists Lacan, Kristeva, and Foucault. She notes that all three of these theorists examine the ways in which the gender differences of a particular cultural group are inscribed in its language, so that the “habitus” is reinforced and positions created within discourse appear more “naturally” available to one gender.
than to the other. Authority, it is argued, is located within male culture; on the other hand, the creative process may be inscribed within the feminine, particularly in its most expressive and experimental forms. (p. 28)

Since English teaching, and particularly the teaching of reading, is dedicated in large part to the development of the individual through language, boys may be particularly disadvantaged and undermined by cultural attitudes, structures, and institutions that promote the status quo. This may be especially so when the focus is on narrative, emotional response, expressivity, and creativity, as is often the case in English classes, which are, perhaps importantly, most often taught by females. This deprives boys of male models who embrace the life of the mind, the emotions, and the various forms of literate creativity.

**How Can We Help Boys: Examining Social Constructions**

Millard does an excellent job of setting out the problem facing teachers. Other important research uses critical theory lenses both to examine aspects of the problem and to explore potential ways to address it. Such studies include the research of Young (2000), who worked in a homeschool environment with her two sons and two of their male friends. Her work explores how versions of masculinity can be articulated and interrogated in an alternative environment. She worked with these boys to inquire into the socially constructed nature of their tastes, interests, and masculine identity, and into the constructedness of various popular culture texts, such as magazines. In this way she helped the boys examine how their very sense of maleness was constructed for them by others, including the media. Young, too, found that competing gender regimes impacted on the boys' participation in these critical literacy activities.

Martino (1994a, 1995c, 1998) has also explored how teachers can actively intervene during the use of certain texts and assignments in ways that may help open spaces for examining and debating certain “accepted” attitudes toward masculinity. Martino maintains that this examination and debate is a necessary step toward the awareness and critique that are requisite precursors for changing these actions and their attendant consequences.

**Historical Notions of Literacy and Gender**

Although habitus creates a common sense that constrains the choices individuals have available, historical studies have established that the common
sense can change. The history of literacy and what it means to be literate has changed considerably over time (see, for example, Hunter, 1988; Willinsky, 1990, 1992). Willinsky (1990) argues that literacy was taught and practiced by the working classes of mid-nineteenth-century England as a way to achieve better working conditions and political power, and that this was actively discouraged by the elite. The workers set up their own “Sunday schools” so that workers and their children could learn to read on their one day off, despite the unavailability of public schooling. The elite, worried about the political power the working class was gaining, were able to undermine the political value of literacy by establishing compulsory public schools (a long-time goal of the working class) and then subverting the Sunday school’s focus on literacy as power, changing the focus to the study of literature!

According to Willinsky, this is one reason why literature has never been taught as part of socially transformative social projects in school; the tradition of teaching literature since its inception in British and American schools has essentially been a conservative venture in maintaining the status quo. We’ll explore how to do otherwise in our final chapter.

Reynolds (1990) describes fears from later in the nineteenth century, when many believed that British working-class boys were reading too much popular fiction and therefore wasting their masters’ time and resources. She cites a commentator from 1891 arguing that the libraries were full of “loafing office boys or clerks... using their masters' time for devouring all the most trivial literary trash.” According to Reynolds, though the purpose of controlling literacy for the ends of the upper class is the same, the perceived problem has changed. Instead of worrying about political danger from a literacy-empowered lower class, the elite expressed anxiety that reading among the working classes was a frivolous waste of time and energy that should have been spent working.

Times and ideologies have continued to change. It is now accepted as a truism that participants in a democracy and a technological era of electronic information must be highly literate, and that they should use their literate power to exercise personal power and choice. Not being literate is unacceptable; not using literacy for personal ends is now the danger.

The History of Gender

Gender also has an evolving history. Gender historians such as Kimmel (1996) and Rotundo (1994) explore the history of manhood in America and how various social forces have shaped what it means to be a man; how males
are allowed to relate to each other, to their families, and to women; and how men feel about various tasks like literacy.

It can’t be emphasized enough: changing definitions highlight that gender is a socially constructed concept and that the systems of belief and gender roles are susceptible to transformation. If boys are in trouble in the area of literacy because of gender, then our systems of belief both about literacy and about gender can be changed in ways to help them. As McCormick (1999) writes:

The recognition of historical difference helps us in the present to question the apparent naturalness and universality of our own points of view: We come to see that there are changing beliefs and assumptions behind even such everyday activities as wearing jeans to class. Why, for example, does our manner of dress differ so dramatically from the dress of only one hundred years ago? What larger values and beliefs are revealed by the clothing that we wear? (p. 4)

McCormick recommends explicitly studying with students how the meaning of cultural concepts and texts evolve over time due to shaping by powerful social and cultural forces. Such a project foregrounds the choice and agency of students, which in turn gives them a sense of their agency and an opportunity to see possibilities for choice and transformation since things as they are is not how things must be.

If gender is a powerful social construct, then this is because of habitus. But because gender and other concepts are socially constructed, then they can be examined and transformed in the ways McCormick suggests.

**Three Worries**

Although all of the research and theory that we’ve cited has informed our thinking, we have three major related concerns about the existing research base that we wanted to address in our own work.

**Essentializing and Oversimplifying Our Students**

First, it seems to us that much research simply assumes that gender has an impact. McCarthey (1998) is among those who provide a caution against that way of thinking. She argues convincingly of the danger of essentializing students’ performance based either on a conception of stable personality traits (e.g., shyness, aggressiveness) or on the application of categories such as race, class, or gender. In her study, she found that students defined as shy or helpful by their teachers were only that way in certain contexts, when engaged in
particular tasks with specific groups of others. In other contexts and situations, the students were often quite different. McCarthey's challenge to researchers studying gender is threefold: to be alert to (1) the influence of context, task, and grouping; (2) the variation within the category; and (3) the possibility that gender is not a category that is useful for teachers and researchers to think with about students.

**Losing Sight of Individuals**
A related worry we’ve mentioned is that research that categorizes or groups individuals in order to make comparisons inevitably loses sight of the individuals within the group. Telford (1999), like Millard, argues that teachers use the research findings that aggregate boys into a single group to reinforce boys’ general tendencies rather than attend to individual differences or widen possibilities by introducing boys to different kinds of texts and responses.

If teachers and schools use the research in a stereotypical fashion, they may perpetuate boys’ tastes and achievement levels. We have a personal stake in this worry, for neither of us have ever fit the portrait of boys and reading offered by the research. And if we address boys as a group defined by averages, then we will not meet the needs of many of our boys.

**Narrow Visions of Success**
A third worry is that the assessment of boys’ literacy achievement is done entirely through their success at tasks in school. Turning again to Telford’s (1999) research, we can see why that might be a mistake, for it establishes that the confidence and experience some boys demonstrated in their private home reading was at odds with negative public attitudes they adopted in discussions with peers. Heath and McLaughlin (1993), Mahiri (1998), and Moje (2000) are among the other researchers who have established that various groups of young people employ powerful literacy practices outside school that then go unrecognized, untapped, or unvalued in school.

**What This Makes Us Think About:**
**Getting to Know Our Students**
As we have noted, our primary interest in doing our research was to help us and other teachers think about better ways to meet the needs of boys. We want this research to affect how things are done in school, so we want to think hard about the implications of our research. We’ll discuss these implications at length in our final chapter, but that seems too long to ask readers to wait for what likely matters most to them. So at the end of each chapter we’ll talk
about some of the practical answers we might offer to the most compelling question each chapter raises for us.

In this chapter we’ve presented a wealth of research that talks about boys in general, but we’ve presented it with the caveat that as teachers we need also to look at individual boys in particular. One of our major concerns in doing this research was to get a close qualitative look and understanding of individual boys so we could help and teach them better. The dearth of such research has prompted a question: How can we get a close look at the individual students in our classes so we can see their strengths both in and outside of school, and so we can get beyond essentialized definitions?

**Personality Profile**

One possibility is to ask students to do a personality profile. When Jeff taught middle school, his students came from several different public and religious elementary schools. Since the kids were new to each other and to him, the first assignment was to create a hypermedia stack on the computer, with cards describing their appearance, interests, and favorite quotes, quotes from friends about them, and so forth. They used the scanner and software to edit a photograph, used an audio file to download a favorite song, provided hotlinks to favorite Internet sites, and used the draw tools to create a floor plan of their favorite place. The assignment helped Jeff get to know his kids, and it helped create a classroom community. It also taught the kids about hypermedia design, which was used throughout the year, and about characterization and making character inferences, another set of skills that was built on throughout the year. In addition, it ensured that the first assignment of the year was something they were the world’s big expert on: their personal identity. (See Wilhelm and Friedemann, 1998, for a full description of this assignment.)

**Information Exchanges: Inventories, Surveys, and Letters**

Interest inventories, surveys, and letter exchanges between teacher and student seem to be another set of good ways to exchange information about personal preferences and interests. But, as we will see, caution needs to be taken that students interpret this task as one in which the teacher honestly wants to get to know them, not as a way of perpetuating schoolish values. Letter exchanges, perhaps involving parents, hold the additional value of establishing personal relations and communication.

**Daily Student Officer**

Especially in blocked or extended classes, another effective technique is to ask a student or a pair of students to be each day’s class officer. The class officer
takes attendance and fulfills other chores. The most important chores are providing an Opening Moment and a Closing Moment. These are personal sharings of something related to ideas being explored, or something the student would like to explore in class. The chores also involve writing a class history from the student’s perspective of the unplanned and perhaps unnoticed underlife of the class. What things happened today that were not on the official agenda? That may not have been noticed by the teacher? Why are these things important? The role of class officer puts each student on stage for a day every four to six weeks and allows them to share who they are and their perspective on the class. As well, the teacher can get a lot of information about what is really going on in the class.

**Sharing Their Music**

One of the things we discovered in our study is just how much the boys valued their music. We started to think about the potential benefits of asking one student in each class to share an especially important song each day (or week) by bringing in a CD. Alternately, they could identify an MP3 file for us to download at home. Listening to a few songs might only take us the ride home from school but could pay huge dividends in terms of getting to know students and developing relationships with them.

There are countless other ways to get to know students as individuals: eating lunch in the cafeteria from time to time with different groups of students, attending student concerts and athletic events, featuring students of the week with a bulletin board display that they create themselves. The important thing is to engage in activities with our students that allow us to get to know them and that communicates our care and concern for them as whole people.

Knowing students as people allows us to relate to them and teach them as people. This in turn will assist us in creating classroom contexts that accommodate difference, a topic we will pursue in later chapters.

One of the reasons we feel so strongly about the importance of getting to know students as individuals is how much we enjoyed getting to know and learning from the boys in our study. Because we want our readers to get to know at least some of what is a very memorable cast of characters, as we noted in the Introduction, we present four profiles after each chapter. The first four in the following interchapter, *Meet the Crew*, derived from activity interviews of each of the boys.
Meet the Crew

Ricardo
Bambino
Pablo
Bodey
Ricardo

Ricardo, a European American eleventh-grade student at the private boys’ academy, did well in school, which he hugely enjoyed. His English teacher labeled him a “top rate” English student. He was involved in many extracurricular activities in the area of service, sports, and the arts. But his true love was the visual arts and the stories they can tell.

Ricardo followed movie releases both in America and abroad over the Internet. He followed the films of particular producers and directors and could talk at great length about their development, the meaning of their work over time, and the work they currently had in development. He had visited Japan and particularly liked Japanese comics and “Japanimation” movies. Ricardo was a photographer. During the course of the study he was running for a school-wide office and used his photographs in a series of election posters that poked fun at himself and that satirized issues of school life. He hugely enjoyed the satire of The Simpsons and the World Wrestling Federation, which he described as “a giant romp of a soap opera, but funny and made for fun!” He was privileged with humor and loved critiquing cartoons, jokes, and humorous scenes from movies and television, often connecting these to his reading. Ricardo helped us understand that a teacher who looked only at his school literacy would miss much of his literate life and much of who he was and wanted to become.

Bambino

Bambino, a Puerto Rican eleventh grader in our urban school, was one of our most enthusiastic participants. He kept a meticulous log and was eager to talk with us about it. We found it somewhat surprising, then, when he told us how much he disliked school. He did his work, though he resented homework for intruding on his time. But he did it in only a perfunctory way, evidencing what Nystrand (1997) calls procedural rather than substantive engagement.

Outside of school, it was a different story. Bambino was an avid wrestling aficionado. He specialized in Extreme Championship Wrestling, a less popular version of wrestling than the WWF (World Wide Wrestling Federation) or the WCW (World Championship Wrestling), which include popular culture icons such as The Rock and Goldberg. And he did more than that. He kept a notebook of all the wrestling moves he had seen, a list of more than six hundred at the time of our interviews, creating what was in essence his own wrestling encyclopedia. He sometimes offered the latest wrestling news in the
form of play-by-play announcing, thereby using forms of oral literacy to relay information and interact with his friends in creative ways. He also elaborated on his interest by keeping a list of wrestling names, including what he, his family members, and his friends might be named if they ever participated in any of the wrestling federations.

In this way, a young man who scraped by doing the absolute minimum of what was required to get by in school did much more than that outside of school, in ways that were entirely voluntary yet very schoolish (e.g., writing summaries and encyclopedia entries). We asked him about what we saw as an interesting contradiction. He explained that he was willing to work on what interested him but that little in school fit the bill. In fact, he was willing to go a step further: to work for a teacher who simply recognized his interests and expertise.

**Pablo**

Pablo, an eleventh-grade European American, was a student at the rural high school who professed to enjoy school because of its social nature and the opportunities it offered him to actively resist what he considered to be unethical or uncreative ways of being. In fact, in the classes Jeff observed, Pablo was almost celebrated by his teachers and many of his peers for his resistant attitudes. He wore an old Army jacket with various pins and patches proclaiming various causes, such as “Free Tibet” or “Your favorite aunt is a lesbian.” He deliberately chose his dress in a way that classmates would code as gay, yet he had a very serious girlfriend with whom he spent nearly every free moment. He considered himself an “activist” whose job it was to “raise people’s awareness and help them be different.”

Pablo was active in local political causes, and he was very concerned about the environment, including contamination at a local chemical site. He used his interests in art, quilting, fabric design, drama, and jewelry making not only for great personal pleasure, but to make various political statements that he was happy to propound.

Pablo played in a Christian rock band, which Jeff had the privilege to see perform at a church revival. He enjoyed viewing and critiquing musicals and dramas and traveled to New York City with his church youth group to do so. He was profoundly alive and used various nontraditional forms of literacy to define himself, for pleasure, and to communicate about what he considered to be socially significant issues.
Pablo was very comfortable and in fact seemed to very much enjoy taking on nonhegemonic, alternative male roles. He seemed abetted in this project by many teachers and at least some of his peers. Though he sometimes alluded to people’s judgments of him, he professed never to have been hassled about his style or “rebel” activities. Clearly, Pablo does not fit the profile of the male straitjacketed by “habitus” and conventional conceptions of masculinity.

**Bodey**

Bodey, a European American seventh grader from the rural school, rejected school as a “mind numbing bore.” He was failing English, refused to do much of his work, and claimed to have forgotten the rest of it at home. He loved the social nature of school so much that he would excuse himself from our interviews a few minutes early so he could get to lunch to meet his friends. He loved football and looked forward to being on the high school squad. He hung out with friends who also liked to play sports. At the same time, he was reading *Moby Dick* on his own, refusing to write about it in his school-sanctioned reading log or literary letters. “This is for me,” he told Jeff. “I’m reading the action and skipping the other stuff [e.g., the cetology sections]. And it’s damn good stuff.” When Jeff asked if he anticipated reading the whole book, he answered, “As long as I keep liking the story.” Bodey also followed favorite sports teams on the Internet and through the media and newspaper, but he refused to write about this as well, despite his teacher’s encouragement.

The passion evidenced by these four young men regarding many aspects of their literate lives beyond school and many of their out-of-school activities lay in stark contrast to the much less passionate way they engaged in school in general and school-sanctioned literacy in particular. If that passion could be tapped, school would be revolutionized. But to tap the passion, we must understand its source. Doing so is the purpose of our next chapter.
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