

Where the Boys Are—Contemporary Research Responds to the “Boys Problem” in Reading: A Review of Hammett & Sanford’s (2008), *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning*.

Karen Lind, Barbara McNeil, Valerie Mulholland, and Fatima Pirbhai-Illich

University of Regina

Abstract

A book review of Roberta Hammett's and Kathy Sanford's (2008) *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.



Where the Boys Are—Contemporary Research Responds to the “Boys Problem” in Reading: A Review of Hammett & Sanford’s (2008), *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning*

Roberta Hammett and Kathy Sanford’s (2008) *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning* is in part a response to contemporary concerns about boys’ declining performance in large-scale assessments of reading. Fuelled by “globalized moral panic” (Epstein, D. Elwood, J., Hey, V., & Maw, J., 1998), the editors observe that the general public, media, business, as well as education interests, all have opinions, questions and beliefs about the perceived “boy problem” and its consequences for the social fabric and the economy both nationally and internationally. The audience for *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning* is the academy, but others interested in the global implications of literacy education, based in research, will find in the collection valuable insights to expand their understanding. Literacy is a complex matter and one of the challenges of sorting out what is at work in the debates surrounding the “boy problem” is finding common ground for the conversation to occur productively. Not all citizens concerned with literacy and learning are researchers; therefore, some common language must be developed to engage the wide variety of interests invested in the issues in a meaningful, perhaps even useful way.

To make our stance as reviewers clear, we would like to believe that at the core, the collective interests which comprise the “we” in this debate, are all committed to equitable practices in classrooms, but also to understanding what is at work theoretically and politically in the debate. As researchers and academics working in this area, we are careful not to respond to a perceived problem that may have more to do with the myths, and our collective un-interrogated assumptions about what is at work, than with the knowledge produced through research. The editors, and most of the researchers represented in this book, quite justifiably use the gender lens to understand the binary that predetermines beliefs and understandings of the “boys” literacy crisis in the society at large.

At a recent department meeting, fresh from a break, we embarked on the collective task of reviewing the book which held our common interest, even though, like those included in the book, we represent different perspectives and experiences. While Hammett and Sanford are positioned on opposite coasts of Canada, we, the reviewers, work together in a small Language and Literacy subject area, smack in the middle of Canada. We teach courses in reading, children’s literature, and language. Formerly, we were language and literacy teachers and teacher-librarians who are now teacher educators and researchers in the field. One consistent thread uniting us in this endeavor is never lacking for things to say. Not surprisingly, we are immersed in issues similar to those raised by the editors and the researchers included in the book. Seemingly, we are all in this together. And so begins our chapter by chapter collective reading and response to *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning*.

Begin at the Beginning

In Chapter 1, “Introduction: Reading the Myths and the Panic,” Roberta Hammett and Kathy Sanford provide the context for the collection and establish the stance from which one might presume the collection was edited, namely a feminist critique of the “boys issue” and the attendant panic associated with the crisis. Many of the other authors adopt a similar theoretical positioning and recognize the binary as problematic for understanding how gender and notions of literacy intersect. The subsequent chapters are organized according to the points made in the opening essay. Hammett and Sanford do an excellent job of summarizing the current climate by explaining the impact of PISA scores on the popular imagination. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—an international study sponsored

by the OECD, which investigates the education systems of participating countries globally by assessing 15-year-old youths' knowledge and skill levels and using standardized tests—has in the last decade revealed that boys lag behind girls in their reading ability. The rhetoric surrounding this complex phenomenon has been read, misread, misrepresented, and misinterpreted by both hegemonic powers and mainstream media, creating a sense of moral panic among members of the public. Simplistic solutions are being offered for a phenomenon that requires complex investigations of intersections between sex, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexualized identities in school, and how these in turn intersect with 15-year-old's engagement with literacies. Salient questions are required, such as: Who do these standardized reading assessments serve? Who benefits? Who are the test-makers? Whose definition of reading comprehension and curriculum is being used? Whose voice is not being heard? Hammet and Sanford's edited text brings to light the various intersections of how mainstream myths about monolithic conceptualizations of gender and achievement are perpetuated in schools and in society. Fifteen authors, four reviewers: Let the games begin.

In Chapter 2, "Masculinities and Critical Social Literacy Practices: The Read and the Misread Bodies of High School Young Men," Michael D. Kehler, working around the rhetoric on the supposedly poorer reading results from the PISA assessment instrument, questions the validity of educational institutions' conceptions of literacy, literacy levels, and identity (bio-determinist), in particular notions of normative masculinity that are being used to initiate interventions to support "boys" literacy practices where conceptions around their identities have been constructed as victims and losers (p.28). Kehler states that initiatives by various departments of education have included directing funds for male-centred books, bringing in male athletes, and hiring more male teachers. These initiatives both endorse re-masculinizing schools and significantly reinforce a monolithic approach to masculinity that overlooks differences across men's experiences, leaving dominant and authorized readings of masculinity unchallenged and operating from a narrow definition of literacy (p.24). Moving away from a hegemonic one-size-fits-all curriculum and an autonomous model of literacy to an ideological one (Street, 1984) where literacy is seen as a social practice and out-of-school literacy practices are seen as valuable sources not acknowledged or valued by schools, Kehler proposes, "a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural context" from which to look at the ways in which young men in high school "read and/or misread the bodily texts of their male counterparts" (p.22), and how these contexts affect the ways young men read the textuality of their lives and their engagement with academic literacies. Kehler goes on to explore and describe the social practices involved in the complexities of reading masculinity and various aspects of bodily performance as a text that young men take up in their daily engagement with high school masculinities and how these in turn affect their willingness to engage in doing school.

In Chapter 3, "Through the (Feminist) Looking Glass: Feminism, Education, and Feminist Responses to 'What about the Boys?,'" Laura Rattner addresses themes raised in the editors' introductory essay, specifically, how "the boy's debate" is taken up in education, public policy, and media (p.42). Specifically, she discusses three dominant discourses that frame public debate on the issue suggesting that the furor may be a thinly veiled "backlash against feminism" (p.43) in response to which one reviewer penciled "exactly" in the margins. Rattner's section entitled, "Bit of Feminist Educational History" offers a context for the larger issues considered in the entire text, but also a context for many individual essays. We draw attention to the chart Rattner created that represents the ideological stances and effects on research of various feminisms (p.46). The critical analysis of Liberal, Radical, Socialist/Marist, Black/Postcolonial/ Realist and Post-structural Feminisms is recommended as a primer for those in need of a theoretical and paradigmatic refresher course on feminist

theories. This succinct summary reminds the reader that Feminism, however virulent the backlash, is not a monolith, anymore than gendered notions of what constitutes literacy. Rattner writes, “For boys and men, what is at stake in clearly addressing gender equity is challenging to patriarchal and hegemonic order of society at large. Thus, this ‘debate’ obviously goes well beyond schooling to illuminate the chasm between the sexes with regard to feminism” (p.61). The essay closes with a reminder of the global implications associated with the “moral panic” engendered by the boys’ turn which is code for “because *some* girls are doing better, it will have a direct impact on their earnings” (p. 63). Follow the money. As Feminist researchers, we are reminded to, “continue [our] work for boys and girls” (p.64). Essentially, the first three chapters set the stage by providing historical and contemporary context for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 4, “Boys Reading American Girls: What’s at Stake in Debates About What Boys Won’t Read,” Elizabeth Dutro looks at the intersectionalities between race, gender, and homophobia in the fevered media and policy discussions of gender and reading that made headlines at the dawn of the new millennium. Drawing on research she conducted in a fifth grade classroom comprised of African-American children, Dutro expertly punctures and flattens the tires that carry one of the static, essentialist myths that the editors attempt to tackle in this book: the notion that boys will not read materials they perceive as girls’ books. Like other authors in this valuable monograph, Dutro challenges the unreflective and uncritical calls for a more masculine curriculum. Through this challenge she reveals homophobia, heteronormativity, the reification of conventional masculinity, and the racially narrow premise that undergirds calls for more masculine texts, genres, and approaches suggested for addressing boys’ underachievement in reading. Working from an anti-essentialist framework and drawing on Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of performance, Dutro uses her research to document that it is possible to challenge normative ideas, discourses, and practices that simplify and occlude the many ways of being a boy and that restrict possibilities of doing gender differently. To this end, all students in the classroom in which Dutro was a research participant for a year, were given the choice of reading highly gendered historical fiction from the popular *American Girls* series. Although there was vocalized initial resistance based on the boys’ normative performance of gender, Dutro observed that the majority of the boys in the class enjoyed the books and made connections based on race and history to the plot and characters featured in one of the books—the story about an African-American girl who escaped slavery and fled to the north.

Dutro (2008) provides compelling evidence that showed that,

Challenging boys’ own assumptions about what they will read seemed to allow the boys to rethink some of their own assumptions about what texts they could and would engage with. Any increased acceptance for masculinities that challenge the norm in this particular classroom potentially allowed all of the boys, regardless of social group, to voice choices and interests that they could otherwise risk expressing...It is important for socially dominant boys to be given opportunities ... to lead the way in challenging gender norms, and it is important for boys ... to be able to participate in the new kinds of conversations that such a safe space can create. (p. 83)

Identifying an “underlife of masculinity” in the classroom in which she conducted the research, Dutro (2008) offers a timely reminder that a language arts curriculum that “enacts a static notion of masculinity ignores and potentially reinforces the complex ways that masculinity is lived within the literacy classroom” (p. 84). Furthermore, the strong connections the African-American boys felt towards the African-American female protagonist from the books selected, revealed to Dutro that gender cannot be seen as the sole

or even dominant factor in text selection. She made it clear that boys are raced, classed, and gendered and these among other aspects of students' identities need to be considered in text selection.

In Chapter 5, "The Politics and Crisis of Boys' Literacy: Beyond Essentialist Mindsets and the Boy-Friendly Curriculum," while similar to Chapter 4 which highlights the social and political context of boys' achievement in school literacy, the focus shifts north of the 49th parallel to Canada's most populous province—Ontario. Anchoring his work in relevant literature from the field, Wayne Martino uses Chapter 5 to pay particular attention to what might be described as a rush to print, simplistic, and essentialist-type publication from the Ontario Ministry of Education that authorizes and offers uncritical "approaches to addressing the problem of boy's engagement with school based literacy practices" that reifies and recuperates conventional masculinist ideologies (p. 91). According to Martino, the government document, *Me read? No way!* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006) promotes "a regime of normalization that supports culturally validated versions of hegemonic masculinity through an erasure and active denial of the very limits that are imposed by binary hierarchal constructions of gendered identity" (p. 91). A primary purpose of this chapter is to expose the "incompatibility of gender normalization and gender justice for boys" (Martino, p. 104).

Along with his critique of the ill-advised, gender-normalizing publication from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2006), one of the strengths of Martino's chapter is his critical analysis of Newkirk's (2002) *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy and Popular Culture*. Along with many other educators, I had bought this work and soon discovered that it was an accusatory, neoliberal, essentialist work that highlighted teachers' (read females) misreading of boy's innate need for physical activity, action, and violence and, hence, their under-engagement and under-achievement in literacy were due to misguided attempts to deny them a literacy curriculum that would meet their immutable masculine characteristics. Ha! Says the feminist and progressive humanist in me!

Martino (2008) is troubled by the biologically determined, essentialist mindset, and hierarchical binaries on which the strategies and approaches recommended by Newkirk (2002) as well as the publication from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2006) are based. These include a call for more male role models to counterbalance the feminizing proclivities of schooling and literacy pedagogies, calls for the use of boy friendly texts such nonfiction, more boy friendly approaches such as competition, the use of information communication technologies, and single-sex classes in English language arts classes to free boys from the scrutiny and duress of working with their more overachieving counterparts in school literacy. Like Dutro in Chapter 4, Martino's Chapter 5 is important for calling out the ways in which significant non-gendered differences experienced by both boys and girls such as race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and sexuality are side-stepped and even omitted in favour of promulgating undeniable heterosexist and masculinist discourses that are unlikely to lead to any meaningful changes for those boys and girls most at risk for underachievement in school literacy.

Similar to others in this remarkable publication, Chapter 5 equips readers to challenge the data (see p. 95) on which the politics and crisis of boys' literacy is based. Martino invites us to question the common sense approaches authorized by the provincial government for teachers in *Me read? No way!* and shares carefully thought out strategies that could be operationalized by educators' gender justice for boys in literacy. One of the strategies suggested by Martino involves boys broadening their repertoires of practice both as learners and as gendered subjects" in and beyond the classroom (p. 98). Drawing on the work of Alloway et al. (2002), Martino emphasizes the "need for teachers to encourage boys to extend

their repertoires of the self to move beyond the narrow confines dictated by the limits of hegemonic and hierarchical masculinities” (p. 98).

Martino’s critique of the essentialist perspective that fuels the interventionist project of masculinizing curricula to stem the perceived achievement gap between boys and girls in school literacy in Ontario is crucial reading for all educators. He convincingly points out that there are alternatives to the normalization of hegemonic masculinity in order to achieve pedagogic and gender justice for boys. It is difficult to resist Martino’s suggestion that what is needed is “some interrogation and disruption of gender normalization in boys’ lives which is informed by a deep knowledge of the links between hegemonic masculinities and boys’ investment in certain literacy practices” (p. 111). In other words, the broadening of boys’ repertoire of practice in areas of school literacy is linked in part to disrupting the hegemonic masculinities that function to limit boys’ participation in school literacy practices.

In addition to implicating hegemonic and stereotypical masculinity in the precarious literacy situation in which many boys are to be found, Martino names and unsheathes the sexist and oppressive nature of stereotypic masculinity for boys, girls, women, and society. It is a pity that the government of Ontario had not thought to consult this knowledgeable scholar prior to the publication of *Me read? No way!* It is my hope that the Toronto District School Board and others planning to implement all boys and all girls classrooms and schools will consult with scholars such as Dutro and Martino (2008). Gender justice for boys and girls in school literacy requires it.

In Chapter 6, “Mythos, Boys, and Literacy: Adolescent Boys and Their Leisure,” Julie Hamston and Kristina Love, in contrast to Chapters 4 and 5, do not explicitly or implicitly concern themselves with social justice. The authors base this chapter on a mixed methods study in which they investigated the leisure reading culture and habits of capable middle class [white] boy readers attending an elite private school in Melbourne, Australia. The research participants are described as being “well resourced in terms of the forms of cultural apprenticeship available to them” (Hamston & Love, p. 132). Perhaps intended to be read contrapuntally to the papers that came before it (Chp 1-5), Hampton and Love (2008) are concerned with offering a “different perspective,” one that eschews ideological or partisan positioning over “the myths of boys and literacy” (p. 116). The researchers wish to avoid the myths/truths binary suggested by title of the book; rather, they focus on mythos. Drawing on work by Gee (1992), Hamston and Love (2008) define mythos as “speech acts that convey the same subject matter—in this case, about boys and literacy—but which alternatively foreground some elements about boys and literacy over others” (p. 116).

Building on the work of Moss (1988) and Power (2001), the aspects of the discourse about boys and literacy that are foregrounded in this chapter are about which boys and which reading practices. The foregrounding of these two questions is not dissimilar from the explorations by other scholars in this volume (e.g., Dutro and Martino) and is useful for reminding us that there is no generic boy reader. Therefore, when looking at achievement in literacy, researchers:

Have a key role to play in the construction and perpetuation of mythos about boys and reading, particularly in how they identify, both across and within demographic cohorts, groups of boys who differentially “take up” from their communities the available linguistic and cultural capital that is valued in school assessment regimes. (Hamston & Love, 2008)

With the preceding in mind, Hamston and Love (2008) set out to “hear the voices and experiences of different group of boys...within one community” in which they had already acquired the practices and values of their social group (p. 120). To be more explicit, the

researchers were asked to investigate the reasons behind the resistance to reading of some boys who attended an elite private school in Melbourne, Australia while others boys from the same community chose to be “committed” leisure time-readers.

From what the authors share in this chapter, social class was a predominant feature of analysis. And, although Australia is a racially diverse country, the race of the boys is never explicitly discussed; this important dimension is not revealed and readers are left to the default assumption that this was an all white, elite high school. But why the silence about race? Although the knotty issue of race in Australia is not presented as relevant to the study, the latter offers some interesting findings. For example, the researchers point out that although the term “leisure reading was generally understood by the parents and teachers ... as prose fiction in hard copy print form, the boys offered a much more varied view of their reading patterns” (Hamston & Love, 2008, p.127). They read a variety of texts in multiple modes. Additionally, the researchers explain that there was “little recognition even in this educated middle-class community, of the complexity of the reading demands in processing electronic texts, reflecting a lack of awareness about the complex decoding, semantic, pragmatic, and critical practices involved in reading electronic texts...” (Hamston & Love, 2008, p.127).

Furthermore, the middle class subjects in the research challenged the notion that reluctant readers are academically disadvantaged readers. The boys interviewed did not perceive a direct connection between reading prose fiction in their leisure time and academic success ...” and were not perceived as struggling readers (Hamston and Love, 2008, p. 31). Another interesting finding that emerges from the study is related to the importance of male role models in the reading practices of the capable committed and reluctant readers; the boys “voiced...strong affiliations with their fathers and other male role models in terms of reading. The researchers explained that this affiliation can be explained in terms of the shared interests inherent in the reading materials, particularly in magazines, newspapers, websites, biographies, and other factual texts” (Hamston and Love, 2008,p. 135). Overall, this chapter contributes to the ongoing complication of the construction of boys as particular kinds of readers. And as the authors state, the “methodologies for eliciting the voices of parents and boys in this middle-class context offer a means of informing others of the depth and breadth of the enculturative processes around reading” (Hamston and Love, 2008, p. 137).

In Chapter 7, “Learning the Right Way Round? Carnavalesque Social Spaces, Gender, and Literacy Learning,” Lynne Wiltse draws on research conducted in a middle-years classroom. One of the impressive strengths of the chapter is the combination of diverse sensibilities in play: the ethnographer, the theorist, and the writer. The ethnographer shares excerpts from the research data that approximate the students’ conversations that capture the flavor life in the classroom; the skilful use of theory illuminates the data set. Concomitantly, the writer makes both the theory and the findings accessible. No small feat. What the reader is first led to see by the ethnographer is complicated by the second look of the theorist, the researcher’s turn. All is not what it first seems. Of course, the ethnographer, the theorist and the writer are one. Wiltse describes first how the students are excited to complete the medieval project planned by the teacher as a culminating activity of a novel study. The children made costumes, participated eagerly, and yet ... something did not seem right. Wiltse disrupts the *teacher as hero* story by expertly destabilizing our first reading of the apparent successful engagement of the students in the class activities as represented in the first report of the ethnographer. Despite the appearance that the social order of the classroom had been disrupted by the successful redistribution of social power, upon reflection, using Bakhtin’s vision of carnival to take apart and reconstruct the experience, Wiltse sees that the distribution of social power was an illusion. In fact, the social order of the classroom was

intact—Those who had power, continued to have power. The potential of carnival to “turn life inside out” may not be what it seemed; Wiltse asks, was it really “learning the right way round?” (p. 160). Her point is profound. Written beautifully, with sophisticated theory and accessible language—this looks to the reviewer to be “learning the right way round.” Implicit is the lesson we appear to need to relearn constantly—the importance of re-reading perceptions and assumptions. The chapter ends with a call to researchers to make theory and its uses accessible, which is precisely what Wiltse has demonstrated in the chapter’s construction and execution. Everyone with a stake in the “boys problem” can read this chapter and potentially get what they need. The key is to re-read your own first impressions, and not be satisfied with the first flush of accomplishment. As Wiltse so skillfully shows, power will find its balance.

In Chapter 8, “Opportunities for Critical Literacy in Boys’ Video Authoring,” Jamie Myers begins with an intriguing question: “What is community?” Initially, the question is posed to a group of Grade 8 boys who were instructed to create a 3-minute video with intentional use of images, text, and music as their collective response to the question. The concept of a “critical literacy practice by [which] the authors consider different perspectives and values on an idea...to generate a critique of the different perspectives and some new reflections on that issue of community” (p.167) is further detailed in the chapter. In multi-literacy circles, the recursive nature of composition, whether conventional writing or digital literacy is widely recognized (Bruce, 2009). Interesting to me were the questions posed: “What makes up community? What strengthens and weakens a community? What five words describe a community? How are communities formed?” (p.169) Responding to these questions, students were able to determine a theme or focus for their video production which culminated into a movie festival and reflective writing on the experience.

“What is community?” is a compelling question for the study with the added value of creating diverse interpretations through multi-media images. However, the link from this research question and its purpose to “initiate thinking about aspects and issues of community belonging before reading a novel, *The Giver*, seems a remote connection to the research question(s). Somewhat predictably, the students identified the following as elements of community: friends, pizza project, cultural diversity, crime/haters, schools and students, what’s it like fun and cool, the environment and transportation. These elements reflect the diversity of each group’s interpretation of community and provide many points for discussion—with or without the benefit of a shared reading experience. The videos themselves are the value not necessarily the missing link in establishing community among readers. Myers concludes that, “The authoring of video projects provides an important context for students to negotiate their identities through the multimedia texts of their lives” (p. 180). The students’ research, in the end, seems to be more compelling as a source of discussion than simply one book by Lois Lowry.

In Chapter 9, “The Influences of Gender on Group Interactions through Post-Typographical Text,” Marion Fey, similarly looks at the influences of gender on language use (written) within the research group composed of high school, and college students paired for online discussions. College students assumed a mentoring role in which to encourage and support the high school students’ understanding/appreciation of required reading selections for English classes. Fey speculated that written discourse through post-typographical text might reflect a more personal and informal use of language and minimize dominant trends of gender use. Fey examined the patterns of use among male and female participants in this research study. In particular, the researcher’s interest was twofold: 1) How has the language use of mentors influenced the written and oral responses of the high school students?; 2) How has post-typographical text affected quality of gender language patterns? No matter what the

composition of the groups (all female, balanced combination of female/male or dominantly male), language use aligned to Deborah Tannen's category of gender use. Females used a "language of caring" with relationship building of open-ended, tentative and personal sharing of information. Males' communication patterns were more compact, directly responding to questions or providing information—linear, hierarchical, and objective – descriptors derived from Tannen's earlier studies. This study did not uncover new truths as much as reinforce the importance of how language can be used to shape and reinforce learning: "When teachers become more sensitive to their own language use, boys and girls will be freer to develop their own voices" (p. 196).

Chapter 10, "Game Boys: Where is the Literacy?" by Kathy Sanford and Heather Blair, interestingly, was initially one reviewer's least favorite essay. Fortunately, reviewers do not "taste of chapters but once." A subsequent re-reading led to the reviewer's vigorous interest, sparked by the researcher's focus: "What will it mean to be a writer and reader in the 21st century?" Given that the definition of literacy is evolving through three stages, from literacies skills to "school knowledge to social cultural construct," Sanford and Blair suggest that the concept of literacy has been changed by technology. Their ethnographic study of 20 middle-year students, all boys, over a 3-month period from three different school regions (rural, urban, inner city) is the centre of the chapter. The boys in the study were united by their passion for digital gaming. Through the authors' data collection and analysis, several significant findings were revealed. Namely, that the three following conditions are important to boys' engagement in literacy: exciting, but also challenging fun; immediate feedback and success; and social interaction. Gaming also triggered the boys' interest in the fantasy genre with its futuristic world, superhuman heroes, and villains. The awareness gained through game structure and related discussion led them to "understand characterization, plot and conflicts that create exciting storylines" (p. 210). Playing digital games also appeared to develop oral language. In order to play successfully, the gamers' language became "engaging, exploratory and specific," often leading to the invention of new vocabulary and new uses for existing vocabulary, all in pursuit strategizing within the context of game play. Conversation between gaming partners also involved exploratory language and significant social interaction. Gaming also involves both challenges and successes at progressive levels of difficulty; repetition, risk taking, and strategizing are essential elements of mastery. Errors were not perceived as failures as much as opportunities to learn and grow. Playing games involved problem solving, strategizing, and learning from mistakes. Furthermore, the researchers summarize the conditions important to boys' engagement in literacy as with: "Knowing the affordances of modes—what they allow us to do as well as the constraints, can give us choices about how we will communicate and represent knowledge" (Bailey & Shanahan, p.116). Surely, everyone recognizes the parallels between the necessary conditions for learning to game and the conditions recommended for learning language.

In Chapter 11, "Adolescent Girls Performing Gender through Literacies: Marginalized or Resistant Youth," Barbara J. Guzzetti takes up "gendered discursive practices" in this essay that is part of a larger research set, featuring two brilliant iconoclasts, with an on-going relationship with the researcher. Corgan and Saundra, the young women at the centre of the paper to some extent, represent the boundaries of resistance determined not by marginalization but intention. "Marginalized" is used in a sense that is not commonly in use in anti-oppressive pedagogy. The researcher's purpose is "to determine adolescent girls' perceptions of gender disparity in content literacy instruction in secondary schools" (p. 218); Guzzetti could not have found more able, more inspiring participants who were more "equal to the task." The researchers spent a great deal of time with the participants "in situ" which may account for the resulting complex portraits. Despite the intellectual vigor and

fearlessness of each participant, the researchers report a familiar, perhaps predictable finding: “[G]endered power relations among students are resistant to change, even in cases where both the teacher and the students are well aware of them and their impact on learning” (p.224). In tone and theoretical framing, Helen Harper’s (2000) *Wild Words/Dangerous Desires: High Schoolgirls and Feminist Avant-garde Writing* is useful as a counter-point for those immersed in this work. Both studies emanate from similar worlds. The chapter is characterized by an urban sensibility not readily transferable to all Canadian contexts by any means; nevertheless, for sheer energy and exuberance, the chapter is recommended for its profiles of Corgan and Shaundra. To consider similar experience with a social class lens, one might look to Hartman (2006) who considers similar issues with exclusively working class participants.

Chapter 12, “Fictional Boys Defying Patriarchal Expectation: A Feminist Critical Analysis of the Young Adult Novels of Karen Hesse” by Wendy Glenn concludes this collection. To some extent, the essay is built on the premise that reading does influence identity construction—therefore providing readers, in this case, particularly boy readers with alternate role models. The author clearly has great affinity for Hesse’s work, in which she sees that, “Hesse criticizes and patriarchy and poses alternative for readers” (p. 236). Glen draws upon “authentic realism,” specifically its four fundamental features which include an anti-theoretical stance, the potential of fictional characters to influence self-image, the importance of biographical knowledge of the author, and the importance of finding pleasure in a text. Glenn uses “authentic realism” to illustrate three male archetypes in the novels of Hesse, namely, “the abusive, the victimized, and the nurturing” (p.239). It would appear that the essay was a reason to re-read the novels and present a rationale for including the theory and the texts for a pedagogical purpose. The primary value of the essay to those not specifically interested in Hesse is the model for using theory and literary text to support a pedagogical positioning that is in line with the overall purpose of the collection. In Chapter 12, the reader finds a pedagogical antidote to some of the social ills which are lamented in earlier chapters.

Conclusion

In recent years, the issue of the “boy problem” has been taken up in a variety of ways, by a variety of interests, with problematic outcomes. Much energy has been devoted to arguing about whether or not the perceived gaps in achievement are real, or whether the perceived differences in performance are rooted in biological differences that must be addressed with differentiated approaches and materials. Bozina White’s (2007) article, *Are Girls Better Readers than Boys? Which Boys? Which Girls?* confronts the problem with a review of existing research, an analysis which allows her to provide “some assistance to allow educators to move beyond the existing parameters of gender-specific strategies, and to move towards more productive discussions regarding how reading achievements might be improved for all students” (p. 558). It is in this spirit that the majority of the chapters in *Boys, Girls & the Myths of Literacies and Learning* are situated. Hammett and Sanford’s book is successful in identifying the theoretical landscape of the ongoing debate and the responses of current research to the issue. Although there may be some who imagine, and possibly believe, that the centre of the debate is about how boys perform in large-scale literacy testing, what the chapters in the collection show is that the issue is infinitely more complicated than a single focus on gender could ever conceive. Overall, it is a topical, timely and important book.

References

- Alloway, N., Freebody, P., Gilbert, P., & Muspratt, S. (2002). *Boys, literacy and schooling: Expanding the repertoires of practice*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Bailey, N.M., & Shanahan, L.E. (2008). Using digital media to interpret poetry: Spiderman meets Walt Whitman. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43(2), 112-143.
- Bruce, D. L. (2009). Writing with visual images: Examining the video composition processes of high school students. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43(4), 426-450.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Epstein, D., Elwood, J., Hey, V., & Maw, J. (Eds.), (1998). *Failing boys? Issues in gender and achievement*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1992). *The social mind language, ideology, and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Harper, H. (2000). *Wild words/dangerous desires: High schoolgirls and feminist avant-garde writing*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hartman, P. (2006). "Loud on the inside": Working-class girls, gender and literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(1), 82-117.
- Lowry, L. (1993). *The giver*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Children's Books.
- Moss, G. (1998). Cultural reproduction: Mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling. In M. Grenfell & D. James (Eds.), *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory* (pp. 55-71). London: Falmer Press.
- Newkrik, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Me read? No way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills*. Toronto: Queen's Printer.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: CUP
- Power, S. (2001). Reading and the mismatch: Differing perceptions of boys' reading practices. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 24(1), 49-60.
- White, B. (2007). Are girls better readers than boys? Which boys? Which girls? *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30(2), 554-581.