

INTRODUCTION

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Before launching into this special issue a bit of context might be helpful to set the stage. The *Canadian Journal of Education* (CJE/Rce 25[2]) published an issue that brought together a collection of researchers investigating masculinities. The articles in this current, special issue reflect our concern to move more deeply to the core of the issues intersecting masculinities, literacy, and schooling research. With an abundance of submissions from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada, we are satisfied that this special issue reflects the international scope of concerns expressed through media outlets and government agencies that have fuelled a new gender crisis.

In January 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Education sponsored the Boys' Literacy Symposium in Toronto. In concert, the Ministry launched its initiative to guide and document effective practices for improving boys' literacy skills. We present the articles in this special edition as counter-narratives to such official stances vis-à-vis the status of boys' literacy attainment and as a more critical examination of the gendered dimensions of literacy and schooling. In fact, the issue of failing boys has garnered considerable attention across OECD countries culminating in what has been described as a "moral panic." The Ontario Ministry of Education, like some other provincial governments, has identified boys as an object of concern and as being at risk. Particular "truth claims" about boys and girls differentiated learning styles, grounded in essentialist discourses, continue to proliferate, particularly with regards to proposed gender reform strategies such as single-sex classes for boys, more male role models, and a more boy-friendly curriculum. The implementation of these strategies, however, fails to engage with

research-based literature regarding the limits and possibilities of such initiatives (see Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002; Martino et al, 2004; Martino & Kehler, 2006). Many concerns and questions not attended to in the current round of approaches and strategies that invoke so called boy-friendly strategies are captured in the articles included in this special edition. In this sense, this special edition addresses the limits of what Griffin (2000) describes as a process that has cast an inverted gaze on an undifferentiated group of boys who have become victims in a newly emerging narrative of gender and schooling.

For the most part, official documents such as *Me Read? No Way!* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004) have not drawn on the analytic perspectives and empirical work reflected in this special issue, often critical of governmental interventions. Largely absent, unacknowledged, or marginalized at the policy level informing approaches to “help the boys,” these perspectives nonetheless bring to light evidence-based research that contributes significantly to provide a deeper understanding of boys’ literacy needs and the erasure of race and class from policy-related discussions and concerns pertaining to gendered achievement levels.

In our article, we draw on research-based evidence to interrogate the pedagogical approaches aimed at addressing concerns for boys’ literacy underachievement. Our primary focus is on providing a more sophisticated and nuanced analysis of the reform agenda currently operating at the level of treating symptoms, as opposed to dealing with the root causes of the problem of gender identity and structural inequality.

Through their examination of adolescent boys’ literacy practices embedded in video gaming and creation, Kathy Sanford and Leanna Madill question why there continue to be contradictory stories of literacy success among adolescent boys. Their research provides insight into a broadening definition of literacy not currently being fully embraced by strategies to help the boys.

Susan Jones and Debra Myhill raise concerns about the widely accepted understanding of gender differences or similarities in linguistic competence in writing. Grounded in emerging and ongoing concerns in the United Kingdom, the authors address the debate of boys and girls as

being “differently literate” but argue against previous research that suggests there is an identifiable gender characteristic in writing.

Arguing that current curricula are limited in their scope to respond to and reflect student literacy practices, Wendy Cumming-Potvin argues for embracing the “cultural capital” students bring to school as literacy learners and, moreover, that school curriculum better align itself with students’ multi-literate lives.

In an illuminating study, Helen Harper provides insight into the ways adolescent novels offer complex renderings of gendered identities as an opportunity for teachers to engage students with discussions of masculinities and femininities. Her research illustrates the performativity of masculinities and femininities embodied by characters and provides an invitation for English Language Arts teachers to more carefully examine how masculinity and femininity are storied and performed in contemporary texts.

Marilyn Chapman, Margot Filipenko, Marianne McTavish, and Jon Shapiro describe the preferences of grade-one students for particular texts. Their conclusions about reading preferences and perceptions of reading among boys and girls question the practices of purchasing more boy-friendly books.

Statistically rich, White tackles the data frequently used to mobilize and justify particular responses to “help the boys.” She raises concerns about addressing differences in reading achievement levels between boys and girls. Her conclusion, which indicates the effect of social class on literacy achievement, notes a danger in the development of practice-oriented solutions that fall short in understanding the extent and nature of the reported differences.

In the final article of this special issue, Alloway offers “an Australian story” to highlight the significant ways teachers might be “encouraged to swim against the tide of populist discourses about boys and about literacy.” With a focus on Australia, her critique and analysis of the data and arguments presented nationally are equally potent in the broader international context.

These articles offer important analytic insights into the problem of gender and literacy that are eschewed in the populist and policy related domain, where there is a tendency to construct boys as a homogenous

group, undifferentiated by factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, geographical location, or cultural background (see Brown, 2006). Moreover, they provide a research-based perspective and, hence, what we consider to be a more informed analysis of the factors impacting on boys' engagement with literacy. Ultimately, the articles included in this special edition offer important lessons about the limits of essentialist frameworks and their capacity to adequately provide insight into the complexity of boys' engagement with literacy.

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En janvier 2005, le ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario a commandité un colloque sur les garçons et la littératie à Toronto. Parallèlement, le ministère a lancé une initiative visant à orienter et à documenter des pratiques susceptibles d'améliorer les compétences des garçons en matière de littératie. Les articles dans ce numéro spécial présentent des points de vue autres que ces positions officielles au sujet du rendement des garçons en littératie et analysent de façon critique les facettes de la littératie et de l'éducation marquées par le genre. Force est de constater que la question de l'échec des garçons suscite, dans tous les pays de l'OCDE, un vif intérêt et même, a-t-on dit, une « panique morale ». Plusieurs chercheurs, hommes et femmes, reprennent la question à leur compte, d'où ces analyses fouillées sur les échecs des garçons, surtout dans le domaine de la littératie. La plupart des chercheurs étudient le sujet de manière critique en remettant en cause l'existence même et la pertinence d'une « panique morale ».

Les articles dans ce numéro spécial témoignent des nombreuses inquiétudes et interrogations ignorées dans les approches et stratégies prétendument conviviales mises en place pour les garçons actuellement mises en place. À cet égard, ce numéro spécial met en relief les limites de ce que Griffin (2000) décrit comme un processus qui jette un éclairage inversé sur un groupe indifférencié de garçons devenus des victimes d'un nouveau discours sur le genre et l'éducation. Les articles qui suivent témoignent d'une compréhension plus nuancée des préoccupations susmentionnées et, pour la plupart, reflètent un point de vue analytique et empirique, souvent critique des interventions gouvernementales, point de vue peu présent dans les documents officiels comme le guide ontarien *Moi, lire ? Tu blagues !*

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