TEACHING & LEARNING

A Conversation about Boys and Literacy

Kathy Sanford, Heather Blair
and Raymond Chodzinski

Professors Kathy Sanford and Heather Blair have worked independently and cooperatively researching and writing extensively on the subject of gender and literacy. Their findings and suggestions have shaped practice in schools and influenced research in this critical area of teaching and learning. They are highly regarded as experts on the topic and have achieved well-warranted accolades for their work as academics, teachers, speakers and writers. They continue to address audiences at many national and international venues while continuing to explore and unravel the mysteries of how children learn the "literacies" and what exactly being literate actually means. For this issue I invited each of them to respond to questions related specifically to boys and literacy, share insights about myths and practices, comment on best practices and as well, comment on gender as an influence in learning. Kathy and Heather responded to my questions individually. I merged the responses to create a single manuscript.

Chodzinski: Your expansive research, writings and presentations reflect your interest in gender issues. Explain why and how you became interested in "boys literacy" issues specifically and how this research has shaped your current focus.

Sanford: My own interest in gender developed quite by accident initially. As I was completing my graduate work I had an opportunity to teach in a girls' only program, and this was the first time that I actually recognized gender as a significant influence on learning. As I was teaching these adolescent girls, I began to recognize that although there were many individual differences in the ways they learned and viewed the world, there were some differences in the way they interacted in the absence of males. There appeared to be a greater propensity to working collaboratively and supportively, to sharing and discussing, and less interest in appearance and making an impression while they were in the company of other girls. This did not hold true once they were away from the school environment, however. This experience of teaching in the girls' program caused me to think about why I had not considered issues of gender in the previous 15 years of teaching. I realized that it was because gender as an influence was often disguised as something else such as behavioral or personality issues. This has led to my ongoing exploration of gender as a significant social construct that shapes the way individuals and groups learn, behave, think, and understand the world, first through an investigation of single-sex schools and programs, then in a more focused way on boys' literacy learning, and now in relation to how we think about gender and literacy in different learning spaces. Since beginning my research explorations into issues of boys and literacy, I have recognized the complexity both of the notions of "boys" and notions of "literacy". These phenomena are complex, and we need to be reminded that the generalizations offered in research should not necessarily dictate pedagogy in the classroom where questions like "Which boys [or girls] are achieving well or poorly and deserve particular kinds of learning supports" should guide practice.

Blair: I became interested in gender and literacy when I was a doctoral student at the University of Arizona and took a course on gender and schooling. Subsequently, I was hired by one of my professors as a research assistant on a research project that explored the learning experiences of girls in a girls-only math program in a public middle school. These single-sex programs were rare in public education at that time, and there was a great deal of controversy over whether separation by sex was a good idea (Streitmatter, Blair, & Marasco, 2002). This experience heightened my awareness of the genderedness of learning and the role of language. As a feminist concerned about equity, I wanted to further understand the educational experiences of girls, and I decided to do my dissertation research on early adolescent girls' language and literacy. I also did some further work on single-gender education in Canada, and that is how I met Kathy Sanford at the University of Alberta. She had just finished teaching in an all-girls junior high, and we decided to engage in a small study with a few single-gender programs in Western Canada. Several of these schools had girls- and boys-only classes, and one school was having problems with the boys in their program. At a meeting with the teachers, one of the male language arts teachers questioned the program's existence and said that he understood why there were girls' classes in math and science—there are gendered reasons for girls' being behind in these areas—but why are there boys-only classes because there are no issues of gender for boys. I asked him, "What about literacy? What about reading and writing? Why do we hear teachers perplexed questions about what to do about the boys in their language arts classes if
there are no issues of gender for boys?" I also wanted to ask about the bullying and harassment by boys in schools that I had found in my study of adolescent girls (Blair, 2001).

When Kathy and I began our SSHRC study on early adolescent boys and literacy, it seemed that there must be some straightforward reasons that boys' scores have been lower than girls' and why they have been less engaged in language arts classes. In the first year of our study we observed and interviewed 25 Grades 3-6 boys in five different classrooms, and when we read our interview transcripts and field notes, we made recommendations that we need more books for boys, more fathers need to read to them and around them, and we need more magazines and non-fiction texts that will interest, motivate and engage them, and publish more "boy books." William Brozo (2005) is a proponent of the need for appropriate reading material for boys and more male readers as models. But the longer we worked with these boys, the more we questioned whether they were actually performing poorly. We began to wonder what the tests were testing and not testing. We found that the boys were multiply literate in many modes and genres that were not being assessed in their classrooms, and we began to look at the boy's literacy practices in a much bigger way. We also came to realize that not all of the boys in our study were doing poorly in these classrooms; in fact, many were doing well even by the measures of standardized tests. We began to ask what the boys were doing rather than what they weren't doing and in what kinds of literacy activities they were engaging that teachers were overlooking. We began to explore their out-of-school literacy practices.

I personally learned a great deal from this research, most of it from the boys. They were very willing to talk to us about what they were doing, and I was amazed at the depth of their expertise in a range of literacies about which I knew little. The most prominent of these were their digital literacies. When I remember that the Internet existed for only a handful of scientists and academics until 15 years ago (about the same time that these boys were born) and that it has now become so much a part of our everyday lives, I think about how rapidly literacies are changing. The boys in our study were well versed in the concepts and use of Web sites, links, MSN chat rooms, home pages, search engines, downloading, and surfing. They were also engaged in a whole range of console and computer games. The ease with which they discussed their use of digital modes and texts continually surprised me. Although they knew these primarily in relation to their own local context, their immediate needs, the ways that they entertained themselves, their socializing with friends, and their research for school requirements, several of them also had a sense of the global and international sphere available to them. That is a very different mindset toward literacy than we would have found even 10 years ago. Compared to their adept use of multiple modes, I was a novice, which was an excellent position for a researcher because my questions were genuine, and the boys took on the role of teaching. This is a position that as literacy specialists we need to recognize and capitalize on because we can learn a great deal not only about them, but also from them as we all move forward in this ever-changing digital age. Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, and Lankshear (2002) wrote a wonderful book on this that has helped me to understand what we experienced in our research and think through the complexities of this topic.

I am currently following up with four of these boys as they proceed through junior and senior high school. I am asking them how they see their literacy practices having changed over these past six years and what they see as their current strengths and challenges. I am also asking them to examine their previous literacy practices and written texts in relation to their current practices: Why did they choose the things that they did? What did it mean to them? And what do they do now? I am interested in the evolutions that they have experienced and how they have morphed over time. I am framing this as a retrospective text and literacy practice analysis.

Chodzinski: Australian researcher, Dr. Peter West (1999) wrote that "Being a boy, with all its qualities of noisiness, risk and adventure, does not mesh very well with what teachers expect of children[boys] who are in classrooms. You make the point that Boys and Literacy is a conflict in the making (2000). How does your research and findings support this notion?

Sanford: Initially, the observations that I was doing with Heather caused me to believe that what was commonly understood (boys don't like reading/literacy, boys don't do as well in school, boys need to be active) was truly the case, and indeed we could find many examples of these commonly held beliefs - in retrospect, looking at our observational and interview data, these common understandings were not necessarily born out in the data. Although it is sort of seductive to find evidence supporting what is commonly believed, after closely examining our data it was evident that the state of the world for boys and literacy was not as simplistic as first believed. Actually, there
were many boys who were successful with literacy, who liked to read, who enjoyed school. Lots of boys were not exuberant, enjoyed quiet activities, enjoyed the company of girls. So what, we asked, was providing the impetus for the beliefs held by teachers that boys generally didn’t do well in reading and writing activities, required physically active environments, and needed more support in becoming successful in school learning? In other research I had done (Sanford, 2002), I was finding that there are vast differences in the ways boys learn, work in school, and engage in the world. However, what we observe often supports what we believe to be true. If we have a conception of boys’ behaviours and attitudes, then we will tend to be more aware of these observations and ignore others that do not fit with our conception. This is certainly true of what I saw when I first began researching in the schools. School is a very socializing environment, and the expectations of teachers shape the way boys and girls interact in school environments. So, boys and literacy may be a conflict in the making because teachers (and often parents) have particular gendered expectations of their children and describe their learning in those terms. Our subsequent research (Blair & Sanford, 2004) identifies ways that boys deal with literacy expectations in school, and shaped their experiences with reading, writing, and learning in school. More and more, I am coming to understand boys’ attitudes and behaviours as products of societal expectation rather than biological difference. Although it is clear that there are biological differences between boys and girls, it is much less clear what impact the societal expectations (operationalized since before birth, even) have upon their understandings, interests, behaviours, and aptitudes. Therefore, I am becoming more concerned about the notion that boys are just not born to be good at literacy, and more inclined to believe that socialization plays a powerful role in determining what and how boys will succeed — this is not necessarily framed in terms of school literacy.

Blair: We have found that the ways that literacy has been defined and the ways that boys have understood it are part of the conflict. The boys’ literacy practices included a much larger array of events than were previously defined in school. For the boys in this study, school “reading” has a very narrow definition, focusing as it does on teacher-selected texts comprised largely of short stories, novels, and some poetry. The texts that boys enjoy, in which they find their heroes represented — for example, in comics, magazines, non-fiction books, games, and manuals — do not have a place in most school reading programs. Therefore, reading for school for many of these boys has little personal purpose or pleasure, whereas protagonists who appeal to girls (often loyal, supportive, sensitive, and caring) are represented in any number of fictionalized stories used in elementary and junior high language arts classrooms, which reinforces the societal norms for girls of male “heroes” (brave, strong, resourceful, independent) are found elsewhere, often in texts that are not on current recommended reading lists.

Chodzinski: You both refer to the concept of “morphing literacy”. What do you mean by this term and how does an understanding of this concept help teachers to teach boys?

Sanford: Morphing literacy is a term we coined that describes how boys (in particular) make sense of and manipulate school-based tasks set for them so that the activities become meaningful and for some boys, bearable. For example, when asked to write a poem, often boys use a humourous approach (bordering on inappropriate), depicting rough play, violence, defiance of rules, and “making fun” of situations. Their humorous approach also manifests itself through the creation of fantasy situations and world, enabling characters to have superhuman powers or to act in ridiculous ways. They select ideas that include things they are interested in, careers, sports, hobbies, and interweave these in whatever ways they can to their assignments. Boys’ socialization has not been the same as girls, they are often not able to or interested in completing tasks for the teacher’s praise; rather, their gratification comes from having fun, entertaining their peers, making tasks suit their own interests. This phenomenon that we observed repeatedly helps teachers to understand the motivation for boys’ practices, ones that we might not think are appropriate, that do not match the teacher’s expectations, and that do not match the tasks set. It might help teachers to rethink the tasks they are setting, to better engage these boys in their assignments and class activities. (And this, I argue, will be good for all students, regardless of gender, class, culture, or ability).

Blair: For the most part the boys in our study wanted to be successful in school; they articulated clearly the importance of school in relation to very real practical possibilities for themselves in the future. School offered a means to an end: being successful and getting a job at which they could earn a living. They were very pragmatic about it. At the same time, they didn’t all buy into all of the classroom activities that their teachers set out for them. Some completed the required tasks until they could find more interesting things to do and make it as palatable as possible; in the meantime, others resigned themselves to being bored. It was then that we coined the term
morphing literacy (Blair & Sanford, 2004). The first time that I remember boys' using the term was in relation to the Pokemon game and video. They discussed how the characters "morphed," took on new powers, and changed into more capable creatures. In their notebooks there was evidence of how they also "morphed" when they shaped teacher-directed tasks or transformed them into something more interesting and more powerful for themselves. One boy had sketched a second level of story throughout his language arts notebook; it was an illustration that did not accompany the written text that he had done as a class assignment. He explained the drawings as an entirely different story with its own plot and characters that he was writing that continued over several weeks across the top of the pages in his notebook. He was using this sign system to construct a story that interested him and sustained his interest while he was completing the tasks that the teacher had assigned. This second story never appeared in his teacher-graded final draft.

Chodzinski: Your work has shown that boys demonstrate literacy in ways that are different than what is generally accepted within the traditional school curriculum. Please explain for our readers what you found and why it is important for teachers to understand these differences.

Sanford: I have been engaged in several studies related to this question. The first research project was that conducted with Heather Blair, and after spending three years following three distinct groups of adolescent and pre-adolescent boys, we recognized that there were many types of literacy activities that boys engaged in, including print-based reading and writing activities. We identified several of these types of literacy activities in our article "Morphing Literacy" (Blair & Sanford, 2004). The boys we worked with were adept at orally describing and explaining highly complex concepts (e.g., rules to games, ways that games work) - interviews with them suggested that they were highly literate. They easily adopted new vocabulary to their existing lexicon, and used terms specific to games and to technology easily and accurately. Additionally, they engage in a range of visual, technological, and multi-modal texts that are not recognized or validated by schools and parents. We watched boys voraciously "reading" Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh cards, developing a vocabulary and understanding around these literacy events. They bought magazines, played games, and exchanged cards, none of which would have been possible if the boys had not been literate. Boys were eager to engage in literacy events that incorporated meaningfulness, engagement, activity, purpose, and fun (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Blair & Sanford, 2004), so they adapted or morphed the work assigned in school to better align with their understandings and interests related to literacy. In subsequent work, I have explored reasons for boys (and girls being engaged in various literacy activities, and determined that it is not a biological disposition for particular types of learning, but is related to the societal expectations we impose on children from a very young age, including ways to play, to work in school, to engage in social relationships, to select appropriate activities, and to develop skills (Sanford, 2006). Literacy attitudes and aptitudes are related to the opportunities given to children as they are growing up, whether they are enabled to see reading of fictional texts as something engaged in by both men and women, whether they are exposed to technologies, and whether they are enabled and encouraged in diverse forms of literacy.

In addressing the literacy "problem" in any meaningful way and determining appropriate strategies to work with boys in school settings, we must first tease out the complexities of the problem. With the current concerns about boys doing less well in school, it is important to do in-depth research into the literacy practices of adolescents to better assess the validity of these concerns and to reassess the literacy practices and knowledge of boys and girls. What researchers (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) have come to understand is that many males and some female students are finding success with alternative literacies. Literacies such as chat rooms, internet, comic books, cell phones, blogs, trading cards, zines, film creation and video games are a few of the new and alternative literacies that students are engaging in largely outside of school spaces.

Although it may be reported that boys are not reading or writing successfully, our observations and conversations with adolescents tell us a different story. They enjoy a range of fictional works, including fantasy, science fiction, realism, adventure, and mystery. They also read biographies, non-fiction texts, newspapers, magazines, internet texts, Pokemon and Yu-Gi-O cards, graphic novels, emails, comic books. In a less traditional sense of literacy, they "read" TV, videos, and videogames. They write and create a similar range of texts, demonstrating sophisticated vocabularies, concepts, and multi-modal literacy structures. As previously identified (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Blair & Sanford, 2004) boys seek texts that are purposeful, engaging, active, fun, and meaningful. If fiction offers these characteristics, they willingly engage. If not, they seek other modes of active engagement and enjoyment. Some boys struggle with reading school-
TEACHING & LEARNING

based print text, but many are highly literate.

The literacy aspects involved in alternative texts are often under-valued in school because they are seen as mass culture, cultural practices produced for the general public (Hong Xu, Sawyer Perkins, & Zurich, 2005). However, we have observed sophisticated learning and literacies taking place when students transact with alternative literacies. Reading non-linear, multi-layered, intertextual texts, as well as reading images and other semiotic sign systems are some of the literacy skills being practiced with these alternative texts. The New London Group (1996) recommended that a broadened understanding of literacy needs to be adopted to address, “the culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies” and to “account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (p. 61). In other words, literacy pedagogy needs to move beyond the “formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (p. 61). Once this perspective of literacy is adopted, adolescent male literacy practices can be recognized for their sophistication and complexities. Video game play and creation is a growing phenomenon, especially among boys, which combines numerous complex literacy skills in one activity (Gee, 2003; Sanford & Madill, 2006, in press).

Blair: In the field of literacy education we have overlooked the uniqueness of boys’ gender prints (Blair, 2000) in the belief that we should treat all of the children the same. This underlying equality framework served for many years as a foundation for our schools, and even though we have embraced an equity or equality of outcome stance for more than 20 years, we still have the residual notion that same is equal.

A great deal of research on gender and literacy over the past decade has shown that literacy practices differ across gender (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Barbieri, 1995; Barrs, 2000; Blair, 1998, 2000, in press; Blair & Sanford, 2004, in press; Dutro, 2003; Finders, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1999; Martino, 2001; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Newkirk, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). These authors all suggested that we need to understand more deeply the unique positioning of boys and girls in our classrooms to best plan for their literacy development.

As teachers, we need to continue to look at how the field of semiotics can inform our understandings of literacy. Lorri Neilsen (1989) discussed how as humans we receive and create signs that embody meaning from the world around us, and we are always in the process of making and taking significance from the people and events around us. Every act, gesture, symbol, and word has meaning in a context connected to the people involved in the event. (p. 7). In this way children read and take significance from the signs around them, whether the sign is a word on a page or the symbols on a video console, and they create signs to make themselves understood; they write, they talk, they sketch. We need to refocus our attention on the specifics of these sign systems as our students engage in them. This notion gives us more power to think about the sociocultural-historical specificities of each child and understand children’s prospective literacies as we plan for their overall language and literacy growth.

Chodzinski: Your article, “Boys demonstrate literacy in ways the current curriculum doesn’t assess” (2002), speaks to the notion that boys “learner needs” may be different than girls and that boys are faced with societal pressures that may conflict with schooling expectations. How does your research and findings fit with the notion that “boys should be taught differently and tested differently than girls”? If it does fit what are your suggestions for changing classroom practice.

Blair: The suggestion that we simply teach and test boys and girls differently is misleading. It is more important that we reexamine our teaching and assessment practices for all children. It is widely accepted that, standardized tests as a measure of learning may be inappropriate for all children. An inquiry framework for learning and portfolio assessment, for example, would provide richer and more authentic learning opportunities in which children of both genders could demonstrate the strengths of their learning. Any curriculum framework needs to be flexible enough that children can select a variety of modes of representation in the learning process, and these ways of demonstrating their learning would be acceptable. It needs to include a comprehensive range of texts, conventional and digital, but more important, it needs to provide youth with choice. The boys in our study made this point loudly and clearly, but I suspect that it is true of girls as well.

Sanford: I have recognized, through a decade of researching this area, that the curriculum (and subsequent examinations) does not recognize a great deal of the knowledge gained by students as being significant or important. Boys more than girls tend to express their learner needs (and possibly dissatisfaction — they are less compliant) more overtly, but it is important that all students need to engage in meaningful, active, and fun activities where they are allowed to make informed choices and to voice their interests and their questions. If learning strategies are helpful for boys in enabling them to recognize their prior...
knowledge, engage actively in their learning, problem-solve and question. Some boys struggle more with the demands of formal schooling (i.e., following explicit rules, being physically still and quiet, passively receiving knowledge) but this does not hold true to all boys. There is evidence to suggest that issues of class and poverty have much more to do with success than do gender.

It is important that all students, boys and girls alike, should be taught and tested in ways that ensure personal success, to focus on their ability rather than their disability. This would be a change in classroom practice, where currently the dominant model of teaching and testing is to determine the students’ weaknesses (related to school goals and values) and to remediate those weaknesses. I am advocating for an approach by which students’ strengths are determined first, explicit recognition of the differences that students bring (sometimes as a result of gender difference) and then strive to broaden their skill base, their interests, their ways of viewing their learning and the world. For example, rather than looking at boys’ written expression and determining that they cannot organize their thoughts effectively, they do not have an effective introduction, that they have spelled words wrong, or that they have not completed the task, I am suggesting that first we look at what they can do well, such as develop creative ideas and interesting combinations of words and including illustrations to accompany their written text. From that point, we can help them to develop other needed skills related to detail, accuracy, and completion. Over the several research projects I have been engaged with, I have noticed that a significant number of boys like to express themselves visually, prior to writing or sometimes instead of writing they doodle, draw detailed plans, create characters. This in itself is a literacy (often not valued in school) and an important learning strategy can be a springboard to print-based literacies as well.

Chodzinski: Much of the literature on boys and literacy including your own, suggests that there are emerging or alternative literacies (example technology) that are not given enough attention in the school curriculum. How might teachers work with their students’ to develop these learning/literacy skills?

Blair: Certainly the boys in our study have embraced the digital literacies, as I mentioned earlier. Kathy and I have written a chapter in a book that will come out this spring (Blair & Sanford, in press) in which we delineate some of the ways that they engage in these literacy practices. As Rowan et al. (2002) suggested in their book:

While boys and technology does not automatically equal learning, nor does it automatically not equal learning; the point is, there is a need for boys and technology and literacy to be combined in ways that move all the categories beyond the stereotypes or limitations associated with each other. (p. 154)

The current work done in the new Literacy Studies (Gee, 2003; Lank shear and Knobel, 1997; New London Group 1996, Street 1997, 2005) provides us with a frame for looking at multiple literacy practices in a culturally and linguistically diverse world, including digital literacies, as embedded in diverse socio-cultural practices in both formal and non-formal settings. As teachers we need to see these as a way to expand our notion of what literacy is for youth and what it can be. We need to see our students as active constructors of knowledge in a global world of information exchange. We need to encourage our students to set up blogs and Web pages on topics that they care about and to become connected in this digital sphere. This is equally important for boys and girls. Pahl and Rowsell’s (2005) book provides many very practical suggestions for classrooms.

Sanford: I agree. Youth, in particular boys, are finding many literacy activities, largely outside the realm of the school institution, that engage them and sustain long-term interest, e.g., video games (including computer and console systems); these games provide an interesting, engaging, dynamic, social space for many types of boys, both those who succeed at school literacy practices and those who struggle; they do not have to fit into any particular affinity group, they can engage without interference or sanction from adults, whenever they choose or when they have opportunities, and in ways that provide social capital for making connections with peers in real-time and virtual spaces. The lack of boys’ success in formal schooling activities, so frequently reported in public press, can, we argue, be framed as resistance, both unconscious and conscious, against meaningless, mindless, boring schooling or workplace activities and assignments; instead, they engage in activities that provide them with active involvement and interest. Videogame play serves as a form of resistance also to stereotypical views of “boys” as a category. By virtue of the fact that they are boys, many have been categorized as unsuccessful learners. For some boys videogames are spaces where players can be successful in their own endeavours. Kress (2003) suggests that “it is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors” (p.1). He sees the “dominance of writing being replaced by the dominance of the image; the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen” (p.1).
Literacy now relates to a much broader set of texts including visual, multi-modal, and digital texts that appear in many forms all around us all the time. Gee (2003) reports that “boys are resisting school literacies” where they have repeatedly been unsuccessful, “and instead [are] becoming literate in the semiotic domain of gaming which opens up experiences in different ways of speaking, listening, viewing, and representing” (p.18).

The world of new technologies surrounds us, and it is males who appear to be both engaged in such activities and also less literate than they used to be. However, adolescent males are more often, at more sophisticated levels, engaging with new technologies. From preschool age, it is not uncommon for young boys to spend hours playing videogames, trying out new strategies, puzzling their way through engaging and interactive “texts”. Worrying as this may seem to be, we have examined boys’ practices with these “texts” (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Sanford & Madill, 2006; Sanford & Madill, in press), and it has become evident that literacy skills are being learned through new technologies. Videogame play can be powerful interactive learning. Gee (2003) and Johnson (2005) present compelling arguments related to sophisticated learning occurring through engagement with videogames. We believe that engagement with videogames can shape perceptions of the world and of one’s place in the world, but we do not fully understand the nature of that relationship. There is, then, a disconnect between the discourse that suggests that boys are failing in learning literacy skills, and the discourse that suggests that highly sophisticated literacy skills are being learned through engagement with videogames. My more recent research projects have examined what boys are learning through their extensive and intensive experiences with video games. I am currently engaged in a research project that explores the learning that occurs for boys who are engaged in creating their own videogames in the context of an Instructional Technology programming module, and another project has focused on boys’ literacy expertise as they teach younger children how to create videogames using software Stagecast and Gamemaker. In each of these projects, focused almost exclusively on boys, as girls as a rule have not yet begun to engage in any significant way with these technologies, I have recognized highly sophisticated and important literacies that will enable the boys to approach new learning situations and technologies with confidence and willingness to problem-solve, explore, and play with new ideas. These abilities and skills open many doors for entry into 21st century job markets (e.g., pilots, engineers, surgeons are using skills they developed while engaged with videogame play and construction).

Chodzinski: There is much talk about how parents need to get involved with children particularly boys and encourage them to read, write. What can parents do to assist boys to read and write?

Sanford: Although it is difficult for parents to stay connected to their children’s lives as they become adolescents, and as the boys are more often “outside” — that is, they are not as observable by their parents or teachers when they are not at school, they are in the playground, at a friend’s home, at the video arcade, etc. — it is essential that parents continue to know what their children are doing and learning. Parental interest can validate the learning that boys are doing, and make them see that it is important and connectable to their school-based literacy practices. For example, if parents talk to their boys, they not only understand what they know and what they like, but they also have an opportunity to suggest that their children think about these engagements. Asking questions about what they think enables a level of critical thinking that is currently missing from many school-based activities. Discussion between parents and their children allows for modeling of parents’ values and ideas, sharing ways that parents are also literate. Parents can assist their boys with literacy by sharing with them ways that adults use literacy, by broadening the conception of literacy to include workplace and leisure activities that include literacy — discussion, reading of many types of texts, writing for a range of purposes, using computers and the internet — all activities that enable children to become literate adults.

Blair: Parents need to engage their boys in conversations about their literate world. The boys in our study said that very few adults in their lives except for a few fathers and uncles had any awareness of their engagement in digital literacies. In fact, many parents could not even tell you the names of their boys’ favorite games. When parents take an active interest in the books that their children read, they often carry on conversations about the storyline or characters. Digital games also have some features of fiction that carry the potential for a literate conversation. That said, many parents are trying their best to support their boys’ literacy practices but may not be cognizant of how to do that. They are focused on the issue of how well their son is doing on his report card and on the provincial achievement tests and wonder whether his digital practices are just wasting his time.

There is an increased concern on the part of boys’ parents these days. I had a discussion this week
with a children's literature specialist at my local bookstore, and she commented on the increased desire, particularly at Christmas time last year, of adults to find books that would interest and engage boys. This is likely a good step, but it is only one part of a much bigger puzzle, and I hope that parents, grandparents, teachers, and librarians can use this increased interest in “boy books” to explore issues of gender in our society. Particularly with adolescents, there is a huge potential to challenge the conventional notions of masculinity and femininity by taking a critical literacy approach. We need to bring adolescents into a discussion of gender stereotypes, and good literature could be an avenue for those discussions.

Chodzinski: Both of you have examined the concept of single gender programs in Canadian public schools. What are the implications of your findings and what can teachers learn from your research?

Sanford: While we have identified significant advantages to single-sex programs for girls (they develop confidence, gain opportunities to speak in class, have opportunities to engage with science, technology, and mathematics rather than observing the boys doing it, gain more attention from the teachers, get more assistance) the same advantages were not noted in boys' classes. There was a less articulated agenda for boys' programs (often as a response to the development of girls' programs) — it was unclear what the intended goals were for the boys' programs that we studied. Some of the issues were related to enabling boys to focus on their studies rather than the distracting girls, to working on literacy skills, to have a more “boy-friendly” approach, and from our observations, served to further entrench hegemonic masculinity further into learning opportunities.

Rather than challenging existing dominant masculinity practices (competition, individualistic approaches, power differentiating), boys classes only served to exacerbate the difficulties many boys were having in focusing on their school work. Additionally, their education reinforced the differences between boys and girls, not to be denied, rather than enabling boys and girls to learn together and from each other.

Blair: I would never suggest single-sex programming across the board for all children, because I do think that that would be somewhat extreme. However, I do see a place for single-gender programs, particularly at the junior high or middle-years level. This is a time when gender differences appear to impede learning the most. Because this is such an important self-esteem and identity formation time for youth, it also has a great deal of potential for leaning opportunities unique to each gender. It would allow for the exploration of ideas about gender as unique to the students. Nonetheless, these programs need to be thought out in a philosophical and comprehensive manner.

In our research (Blair & Sanford, 1999, 2000, 2002) the boys-only programs struggled and were terminated because the schools had not thought through why they had put them together in the first place or in what kind of transformative work they might engage. They simply put a class full of junior high boys together, picked a few boy books, and did little else differently. It is no wonder that they failed! There could be a huge potential for a carefully designed boys' program to address the issues of violence, bullying, and hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1998) that plague Canadian society. We did not see any of this in the programs that we visited. If gender is constructed, co-constructed, and negotiated and there are different ways to live out “being a boy” other than the rough, tough, jock version, then we as teachers need to find ways to assist boys in disrupting the narrow definitions of masculinity and develop a broader range of alternatives. This will not happen overnight and will take thoughtful and effort on everyone's part.

Chodzinski: Heather, your work focuses on gender differences in classrooms. Why is it that girls apparently out perform boys in school on most traditional literacy skills? Are there in fact “real” differences (learner needs and competencies) attributable to gender (boys) that teachers simply ignore and are therefore perhaps guilty (without malice) of perpetuating the notion that boys simply don't like school and therefore do not do as well?

Blair: My research over the past 10 years has reinforced for me the need to continue to explore the complexities of the connectivities among multiple representations of gender and literacy and to continue to interrogate the interpretations of the current quantitative measures of success and achievement. I think that I am even more committed to pushing further to understand how to best meet the needs of all boys and girls and what it will mean to be readers and writers in the 21st century.

I have also been reminded that gender is a social category in classrooms that is so important and obvious and so often overlooked by classroom teachers. I am now working on an action research project with a group of elementary teachers to examine what gender means in their classrooms. The experiences of the girls and boys in these classrooms are different because they have particular socio-historical constructions of gender based on their class, culture, socioeconomic status, history, religion, and nationality. As these children interact in and out of classrooms,
they contribute to an ongoing construction of who they are as boys and girls, but this process is not without tensions and conflicts. Being a youth in schools today is not gender neutral or gender equal.

I believe that relations of power are central to a great deal of the societal and media hype around boys’ failing, and we need to frame our analysis in terms of how the micro context (a classroom) connects to the macro context (Canadian society). These boys in our study were, for the most part, middle-class White boys, and, contrary to what you hear in the media, I think that they will do just fine in the grand scheme of things. A new study just released on the impact of video games on training surgeons (Rosser et al., 2007) demonstrated that surgeons who had had video-gaming experience were more successful, were faster, and made fewer errors on their laparoscopic surgical skill tests. This finding supports what I have been thinking for some time: that girls are not keeping up with today's standards of computer literacy, and posed the question, “What about the girls? Are they once more being left behind?” Girls appear to be lagging behind. In Tech-Savvy: Educating Girls in the New Computer Age, the American Association of University Women (2000) reported that girls have reservations about computer culture and are not using computers as much at home or taking advanced computer courses at school. In this report girls have asserted that they can use computers, but don’t want to do so. The American Association of University Women concluded that girls are not keeping up with boys on today’s standards of computer literacy, and posed the question of what this may mean for the future. This is a very serious concern as the world and workforce become more dependent on these literacies every day. Where will this leave girls if they remain on the impoverished side of the digital divide? It is not possible to think about these digital literacies without considering the economic possibilities.

Chodzinski: Kathy, in your opinion how do boys best learn literacy?
Sanford: To respond I first need to remind readers that several “myths” of literacies and learning have been explored through various research projects, including biological determinism, significance of male role models, and the value of the “basics” of literacy.

Myths are traditional stories that serve to unfold aspects or patterns of the world view that are valued by a particular cultural group, attempting to explain practices and beliefs that embody the dominant ideals and institutions of that culture or society. These myths embody particular ideas or aspects of that culture and are widely held and easily circulated beliefs, through local, easily told stories. The myths explored through various research projects relate to the nature of boys and girls, their interests, learning styles, and endowed biological make-up. For example, it is a widely accepted and seldom-refuted belief that boys are naturally more active, curious, and competitive, while girls are more verbal, passive, and collaborative. These beliefs, which can be “proven” by single examples and personal contexts, are under-theorized and limiting. These beliefs can hinder the development of literacy for boys and for girls, and are simplistic in attempting to understand the complexities of gender as factor in successful literacy learning experiences (Hammett & Sanford, Canadian Scholars Press, in press).

We need to be much more explicit and consistent about what we want for boys’ literacy development, and to consider what boys themselves need. We send very mixed messages to them, related to expectations of how to be a successful boy – we want them to do well in school, but we also want them to participate in “boy” activities such as sports and outdoor activities. We want them to be sensitive to the needs of others, but we don’t want them to look vulnerable or weak. We need, as teachers, to recognize that 21st-century literacy has changed from the schooling we remember, and we need to develop more expertise ourselves in diverse literacies, e.g., popular culture, visual literacy, technology, and to recognize the learning that these literacies offer. We need to provide our students with a range of literacy activities that enable the development of a range of skills and interests, to show awareness of abilities needed for today’s world, including an array of technological skills and understandings. The expectations we have of our boys (and girls) often dictates the opportunities that we give to them. I wonder if we are inhibiting their learning by not more explicitly examining the expectations we convey to them in many ways (by what we say and what we do not say), and by doing so recognize that they need to be given more opportunity to develop a broader set of skills and a broader sense of themselves as learners and human beings. By continuing to discuss “the trouble with boys”, “gender gaps”, and boys “lagging behind” are we not further exacerbating the concerns and causing boys to believe that they are not capable of literacy learning. We must be vigilant in our awareness that while we are creating strategies that engage boys in literacy practices more effectively, we are also looking at improving education for all students. As identified in articles pre-
Previously mentioned, boys want to see (a) personal interest (b) action (c) success (d) fun, and (e) purpose in the activities they spend time on. Boys “morph” school-based assignments so that these qualities exist for them. We need to pay attention to what they tell us of interest to them, because while we do not structure each school assignment to accommodate individual needs and interests, they learn more effectively and long-lasting when they can be personally engaged. It is teachers’ responsibility to enable that to happen.

Boys learn best when they are challenged, when they are socially involved, when they are rewarded for efforts and good work, when they are not bored, and when they see a purpose to the work they do. This requires that problem-solving, inquiry-based activities, collaborative as well as individual engagements are offered to them. This requires that they work from a variety of resources, including books, internet, physical environments, their peers, their parents, and their community. They learn best when they are introduced to multiple perspectives, including other gendered perspectives, other cultures, other classes, other abilities. They learn best when they are afforded opportunities to engage with multiple forms of literacy, including forms that are new and not very well understood by those of previous generations, including new technologies, visual literacies, interactive literacies. I do not believe (and research does not bear out) that boys will learn best when the hegemonic masculinity practices are modeled and catered to, when we select “boy-appropriate” materials and find hyper-masculine male models (e.g., football players) to promote what amounts to very traditional conceptions of literacy, i.e., reading and writing books. We must move our understandings of both gender and literacy into the 21st century world.

**Selected References:**

Please Note: Space does not allow for all references referred to in this article. For a complete list of references contact the editor or the authors.


Coffee and Collaboration: A Team Approach to Tackling Learner Challenges

Shirley Kendrick and Max Vecchiarino

The focus of this issue of Teaching and Learning, "Boys and Literacy," is an example of an education concern defined within the context of "authentic inclusive schooling and excellence for all" as defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Professionals interested in improving achievement and performance objectives related to student and school based learning and who regularly seek out opportunities to engage in group discussion and collaboration are often able to bring about change within the education environments they are employed. In the instance at hand, boys and literacy it is now more fully understood that beside planning for the host of learner contingencies that contribute to an individual learner profile, gender and socio economic influences and or differences need to be understood within the context of identifying learner challenges and needs. And that they be interpreted and represented in terms of successful classroom practices.

How does a Catholic district school board of over 88,000 students (of whom 10-12% are identified with special education needs) support authentic inclusion, foster independence and promote high expectations for the achievement and learning of all students? And

How do the daily discussions between two educators foster a deeper understanding of successful practice in inclusion among colleagues to support success for all students?

In an attempt to improve the alignment of supports provided for students with special education needs the Ontario Ministry of Education published a report titled Education For All - Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Needs K - Gr. 6. This report is the latest in a series that spanned all grade levels, in Literacy and Mathematical Literacy and encompasses the major tenets of the earlier documents, which are based on a philosophy that values both the work of researchers and the wealth of practitioners' experience. It goes further by stressing that all teachers and classroom teachers in particular, are responsible, morally and professionally, for the learning, development, and growth of all the students they serve.

Education for All is based on two foundational principles: universal design for learning and differentiated instruction. The report suggests that by bringing both to bear on the work that is done in sys-