
Boys, Girls, and the Myths of Literacies and Learning

*Edited by
Roberta F. Hammett
and Kathy Sanford*

Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

chapter four

BOYS READING *AMERICAN GIRLS*: WHAT'S AT STAKE IN DEBATES ABOUT WHAT BOYS WON'T READ

Elizabeth Dutro

A recent *Newsweek* article (Tyre, 2006), “The Trouble with Boys,” quoted a mother’s lament on her high school son’s experiences in English class. She said, “Last semester, when his English teacher assigned two girls’ favorites—*Memoirs of a Geisha* and *The Secret Life of Bees*—Nikolas got a D.” This was a boy who, his mother explains, was struggling in every subject. Was it really the assigned books that explain his D in English? What is the relationship between boys’ achievement and engagement in school literacy and the question of what boys won’t read? As reports swell and subsequent debates heat up about boys’ literacy achievement relative to girls’, increased attention has been paid to the texts that children encounter in schools and whether those texts themselves might be implicated in boys’ purported struggles (e.g., Bauerlein & Stotsky, 2005; Brooks, 2006; Brozo, 2002; Hoff-Sommers, 2000). Given that gender is a primary way that individuals are socialized to understand their identities and classify themselves and others, both children and adults bring beliefs and assumptions about masculinity to the issue of what reading topics and genres will or should appeal to boys. Therefore, the question is not whether gender matters in the relationship between boys and reading, but how that relationship should be understood and brought to bear in classrooms. The implication in much of the popular press surrounding boys’ literacy achievement is that reading and literature curricula should be revised to be more inclusive of boys’ needs and interests (e.g., Chiarella, 2006; Tyre, 2006). Because these arguments tend to simplify a highly complex issue, it is crucial to

examine what is at stake in such calls for gender-based curricular reform (see Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001, for an extended critique of a broad range of gender-based reforms).

At the outset, one of the challenges of arguing for complexity on the issue of boys and school reading is that much recent policy seems to take the need for more boy-friendly school reading as an unquestioned given. For instance, policy documents from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain indicate that the “take home” message being received and enacted by policy-makers is that the reading and/or literature curriculum has become increasingly feminized, and boys will only become better, more engaged readers if the curriculum is revised to become more traditionally masculine (for discussions of these policies see Foster et al., 2001, and Hammet & Sanford, introduction to this volume). The Gurian Institute is one prominent example from the United States of an organization promulgating a primarily biologically based conception of gender that is having a growing influence on the curriculum and methods being adopted by elementary schools (www.gurianinstitute.com). The institute has trained more than 20,000 teachers, and its programs have become the basis for an increasing number of school-wide gender reform efforts (Tyre, 2006). Although the assumptions embedded within such efforts have been empirically challenged by scholars within and across national contexts (e.g., Epstein et al., 1998; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Rowan et al., 2001), policy documents and popular press accounts continue to inscribe and promote an essentialized notion of gender that has consequences for what children and adolescents will read in schools.

In my own work with elementary students, I have examined the ways that children both construct and disrupt gender boundaries in their reading practices (e.g., Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003), including the texts they choose and their interactions with books they are required to read. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the academic and popular debates about boys and school texts and draw on a classroom study of African-American fifth graders' gendered reading practices to examine what is potentially at stake in prescribing a particular kind of masculinity through the reading and literature curriculum. My intent here is not to analyze the data from this study in depth (see Dutro, 2003, for such analysis), but rather to use examples from one reading unit during the school year—when boys were required to read books that were highly gendered as female—to illustrate some of the complexities and consequences surrounding boys, gender, and school reading.

DEBATES ABOUT WHAT BOYS WON'T READ IN SCHOOL

Many of the debates surrounding boys and literacy achievement engage the issue of school reading, even as those involved vary widely in their political stance and conceptualizations of gender (e.g., Brozo, 2002; Gurian, 2002; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Hoff-Sommers, 2000; Rowan et al., 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2001). Although there is not space in this chapter to provide a comprehensive review of discussions about boys and school reading, this section examines a few examples from research and the popular press, including a discussion of the very different theoretical assumptions and frameworks that ground work on this issue.

Fundamental to debates about boys and what they should read in school are theories of gender: what does it mean for a boy to “be” a boy? Most scholars who write about boys and literacy align themselves either with or against essentialism (i.e., the belief that biology largely determines and explains perceived differences between male and female behaviour, learning styles, interests, etc.) as a primary way of understanding gender identity and behaviour. Operating from the belief that gender differences are innate and hardwired leads essentialists to assert that boys and girls *need* particular (and different) texts and methods in order to maximize learning. The most influential essentialist arguments are often grounded in brain-based research that locates gender differences in biology, drawing in part on brain scans that indicate differences in brain chemistry; such studies have fuelled popular responses to the issue of boys and learning (e.g., Gurian 2002; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sax, 2006).

In contrast to the essentialist view, many scholars within gender studies have refuted arguments that root masculinity exclusively in biology, arguing instead that gender identities are shaped through social interactions (see Connell, 1995, for a review of this literature). A primary assumption guiding my own and others' research within an anti-essentialist framework is that “who we are is shaped by historical circumstances and social discourses, and not primarily random biology” (Berger, Wallis, & Watson, 1995, p. 3). Those whose work is grounded in this perspective argue that the workings of gender in individual lives and in society can, and oftentimes should, be altered toward the goal of social justice.

Drawing heavily on Butler (1990, 1993), many anti-essentialist literacy scholars have turned to performance theory as a key framework for understanding the role of gender in students' classroom literacy experiences (e.g., Blackburn, 2005; Davies, 1997, 2003; Dutro, 2001/2002, 2003; Rice, 2002; Rowan et al., 2001). Butler argues that gender subjectivities do not exist apart

from the ways that they are performed, or acted out, in the world. In this view, what it means to be a "boy" or "girl" unfolds in a series of performances that express the complex ways that gender operates in our daily lives—the choices we make, our conceptions of self, our negotiations with the norms of gendered behaviour. Gender here is not a given, immutably inscribed in individuals, but is rather a "surface politics of the body" that allows for resistance and play within fixed, hegemonic notions of what gender looks like (Butler, 1990). Given this framework, it makes sense to argue vociferously against the use of normative ideas of masculinity to determine what boys should read in classrooms. It is those very normative ideas of masculinity (or femininity) that necessarily obscure and exclude multiple ways of being a boy and preclude possibilities of doing gender differently. Although this approach does not deny that gender differences exist, it does suggest that gender always operates in relation to particular constructions, through particular discourses, and within specific contexts. In other words, to enter a given context with a priori ideas of what it means to be a boy in that space is to get it wrong.

The varying theoretical assumptions (and, often, political orientations) that researchers and authors bring to this issue are clear in the arguments made about what boys should read in school. For instance, in a 2005 op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, "Why Johnny Won't Read," Bauerlein and Stotsky write that "the K-12 literature curriculum may in fact be contributing to the problem" of boys' disinterest in reading. Asserting that "boys prefer adventure tales, war, sports and historical nonfiction, while girls prefer stories about personal relationships and fantasy" and that "moreover, when given choices, boys do not choose stories that feature girls, while girls frequently select stories that appeal to boys," Bauerlein and Stotsky argue that it is unfortunate that "the textbooks and literature assigned in the elementary grades do not reflect the dispositions of male students" (p. A15). Similarly, in a 2006 op-ed in *The New York Times*, David Brooks asserts that bookstores are one of the most gender-segregated spaces in society and, drawing on brain-based research on gender differences, argues that "it could be, in short, that biological factors influence reading tastes, even after accounting for culture." He continues, "This wouldn't be a problem if we all understood these biological factors and if teachers devised different curriculums to instill an equal love of reading in both boys and girls." Although Brooks believes single-sex education is the ultimate solution for boys' struggles in literacy, "for most kids it would be a start if they were assigned books they might actually care about. For boys, that probably means more Hemingway, Tolstoy, Homer and Twain." Also writing from the political right, Hoff-Sommers praises some British schools that "are again allowing gender stereotypes in their educational materials" by encouraging

boys to read books with stereotypically masculine themes. She views this as a necessary correction to the feminization of the curriculum that she attributes to the feminist movement. Although not as overtly political as those writers, Brozo (2002; Young & Brozo, 2001), a literacy researcher, also argues from a self-described "essentialist" position that boys will be more motivated to read if they are provided with books that stress archetypal masculine themes.

Anti-essentialist researchers tend to share a conceptualization of gender as performed or socially constructed (e.g., Blackburn, 2005; Epstein, 1997; Rowan et al., 2001; Martino, 2001; Young, 2000), but there is not a clear consensus on the extent of gender's influence on boys' reading preferences or engagement. For instance, Newkirk (2002) argues that a primary issue in boys' disengagement from literacy is the narrowing of what counts as appropriate to read and write in literacy classrooms, particularly the exclusion of popular culture texts by adults who tend to bring simplistic and alarmist interpretations of boys' engagements with violence or "gross" humour. He argues that boys do bring particular gendered interests and engagements into schools and explores the potential benefits for boys (and girls) of honouring and finding critical ways to incorporate the television, music, movies, video games, comics, and other texts with which students choose to engage outside of school. Thus, he advocates employing texts that conform to the gendered interests of boys as a way to engage them in literacy. Although Newkirk does not argue that those interests are immutable or rooted in biology, he does argue for the importance of gendered interests in determining what texts should be included in classrooms.

In contrast, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) question the utility of gender as a consideration in determining what texts will most interest or engage boys. Their analysis of interviews, reading logs, observations, and other qualitative data sources showed that the "conventional wisdom" that gender would have a significant influence on what texts adolescent boys prefer did not hold up in their study of adolescent boys' literacy practices. The boys they worked with did not identify the gender of a novel's protagonist or author as important factors in their response to school reading. Indeed, in a think-aloud protocol involving several short stories, the boys, as a group, had more extended comments on a story that was the most focused on female characters. Thus, instead of identifying gendered texts as a key factor in boys' engagement in school literacy, the researchers traced boys' experiences to other aspects of classroom literacy experiences, particularly the boys' needs to feel that their interests were valued, that they were provided some level of control and choice over their school reading, and that their reading was scaffolded through engaging classroom activities.

and that these opportunities sometimes require texts that may be met with some resistance (e.g., Blackburn, 2005; Duto 2001/2002; Rice, 2002).

As I hope this brief review demonstrates, issues around what texts should be included in literacy classrooms based on boys' self-reports or a priori assumptions about what boys will or won't read are far from straightforward. The idea that boys should be provided with boy-friendly texts assumes that boys' interests do and should conform to particular conceptions of masculinity and that those notions of masculinity should be catered to in order to maximize their literacy achievement. This idea is currently being inscribed in the official realm of policy. In the sections that follow, I introduce a classroom study of gender and reading practices and draw on data from that study to raise questions and concerns about policies that seek to inscribe traditional notions of masculinity on boys' school reading.

LEARNING FROM BOYS AND THEIR BOOKS

I spent a school year with a class of fifth graders and their teacher, Anna.¹ Anna, an African-American woman who had taught in her district for more than 20 years, was committed to a literature-based, student-centred literacy curriculum. She generously invited me into her classroom to collaborate on her literature circle curriculum (based on Daniels, 1994). She also supported my desire to engage children in conversations about their choice reading, both individually and in groups, and helped to create opportunities for those discussions to take place. Twenty-six children, all of whom were African-American, participated in the study. They attended a predominantly African-American school in a working-class suburban district in the Midwest. Seventy-eight percent of the children at the school qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch. I visited the classroom as a participant-observer two to three times a week during their literacy activities, lunch, silent reading, and recess. In addition to keeping extensive fieldnotes of children's interactions with books and with each other, I collected their written work and audio-taped their weekly literature circle discussions and also taped individual and group interviews with the children about their reading, as well as voluntary lunchtime book club discussions.

In the following sections, I focus on several boys' experiences of reading books that were highly gendered as "girls' books." These boys represented two friendship groups and boys who were variously positioned both socially and academically (see Table 1 for descriptions of the boys). I first provide some background information on this particular reading experience and then draw

on data examples to illustrate both the complexities surrounding the issue of masculinity and reading choices and the potential risk of basing school reading curricula on a priori assumptions of what books boys will or won't engage with.

Table 4.1: The Boys Who Participated in the Research

Anthony was reading at grade level, according to the district assessment. His closest friends were Ray, Kenneth, Junius, and Corey. He always played sports with his friends at recess.
Corey was a very successful student both academically and socially. Lavell was his best friend, but he seemed to have comfortable relationships with all of the boys in class. He played sports each recess with Ray, Anthony, Kenneth, Junius, and Lavell.
J.J. was a very engaged reader and read above grade level, according to the district assessment. Keith was his best friend and they spent their recesses together, often playing kickball with the girls in the class.
Junius struggled academically, particularly in reading. He often dressed in basketball shorts and jerseys and always played sports at recess. His closest friends were Anthony, Ray, and Kenneth.
Keith also read above grade level. It was rare to see him without J.J. at his side. He did not interact with the other boys in the class on the playground, but he enjoyed reading sports novels.
Kenneth scored at grade level on the district reading assessment. He seemed most invested in his friendships with Ray and Anthony. He was usually very enthusiastic about literature discussions and joined as many book clubs as possible.
Lavell was a strong reader, scoring just above grade level on the district reading assessment. He played sports with the same group of boys as Corey, but he wasn't as socially connected with them off the playing field.
Ray assessed at slightly below grade level in reading. He did well on the classroom assignments that he completed, but he didn't always finish his work. He was a leader in the classroom. He always played sports at recess. He interacted with everyone, but his closest friends were Anthony, Junius, and Kenneth.

BOYS READING *AMERICAN GIRLS*

In the spring of the year I spent in Anna's classroom, she and I investigated the following question within my broader study of children's gendered reading practices: what happens when boys are required to read books that are highly gendered as "girls' books"? We enacted this inquiry during one month of literature circles, bringing in six books each of four titles in the *American Girl*

series, a popular series of books about girls' experiences at various points in American history. The protagonists were Samantha, a wealthy white orphan girl of the Victorian era; Josephina, a Latina living in the Southwest of the late 1800s; Molly, a middle-class white girl experiencing the impact of World War II in her Midwest town; and, Addy, an African-American girl who escaped slavery and fled with her mother to Pennsylvania during the Civil War.

The children spent two weeks of literature circle time on a book, so each student read two *American Girl* titles over the course of the month. Literature circle groups were determined according to the books children chose—those who chose the same title would form a group. On the day we announced the *American Girl* unit, I briefly introduced each book and then the book-choosing commenced. The children chose their *American Girl* books according to the system that Anna employed throughout the year. She pulled names one by one from a cup and each child approached the front table and chose her or his book in turn.

When Anna and I announced the new literature circle choices the girls cheered and the boys looked at us in shocked disbelief. There were groans, angry mutterings, and stunned laughter. I heard Keith mutter, "You can't make me read that." Anthony mouthed, "This sucks," across the room to Ray, who smiled and shrugged. Several of the girls laughed and rolled their eyes at the boys' reactions. Following this initial response, the students seemed to settle into the familiar routines of literature circle readings and discussion; however, their experiences over the next month were particularly revealing of the role of gender in children's school reading practices.

To provide important context for the remaining discussion, I begin with excerpts from the beginning and end of a group interview that occurred in the middle of the *American Girl* unit.

Based on my observations during their reading of the *American Girl* novels, I was convinced that most of the boys in the class were enjoying the books. Even Junius, a struggling reader who rarely finished assigned texts, had read his *American Girl* book and was able to retell crucial elements of each chapter. In interviews, a few of the girls mentioned how much the boys seemed to be enjoying the books. However, in the first few minutes of the boys' group interview they only had trivializing and negative things to say.

From the beginning of the conversation:

Elizabeth: So, how do you like the *American Girl* books?

Junius: I like, I kind of liked Josephina.

Elizabeth: Why do you like Josephina?

(Junius hesitates and grins.)

Anthony (laughing): Because she looks good, that's what you said.
(All of the boys giggle.)
Corey: He did.
Elizabeth (to Junius): What did you mean when you said you liked Josephina? (Junius continues to silently grin.)
Anthony: I wasn't kidding.
Elizabeth: Okay, well, what do the rest of you think?
Anthony: I don't like them books at all. I just don't like them because they don't make sense really. Josephina is just stupid cause all it really talks about in the beginning was her making her dress and all that.
Corey: *Well, I think that Addy—*
Kenneth: *I like Molly.*
(a few seconds of silence)
Lavell (to Kenneth): Oh, I never read that one.

Kenneth's comment "I like Molly" was a turning point in the conversation. His comment seemed to provide space for the boys to include positive talk about these books, and the conversation turned to the plots and characters in the stories. Indeed, from the moment Kenneth had first announced that he "liked" one of the books, none of the boys made a negative comment. I wanted to give them opportunities to express misgivings, so toward the end of our discussion, I presented them with a scenario.

From the end of the conversation:

Elizabeth: If you went to the library and there was the next Addy book, or Molly book, or the next Samantha book, sitting right there on the shelf and you could choose it and check it out if you wanted to, would you do it?
Corey: *Yeah.*
Kenneth: *Yeah, because—*
Lavell: I would because I want to see what happened about her mom and what happened to her.
Corey: I would because they write a whole bunch of points and they're good.
J.J.: I would too because I want to see if her [Addy's] father and Sam, if her father and her brother Sam ever come back.
Corey: *Cause Sam might come back rich.*
Keith: I want to see about Molly.
Elizabeth: Anthony, did you say you would?
Anthony: *Yeah.*

Elizabeth: Okay. I just want to remind you that when we started the conversation you said you didn't like them at all.

Anthony: Well, I meant to say except for Addy.

The conversation shifted dramatically from beginning to end. By the end, it was safe not only to admit liking the books, but also to claim that they would freely choose to read further in the series. Even Anthony now chose to revise his negative statements from earlier in the conversation, claiming that they did not apply to his favourite character. Whether or not the boys would actually risk such a public choice outside of the classroom, it marked a significant change for these boys to talk positively, among male peers, about books that they had previously ridiculed.

WHAT'S AT RISK IN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHAT BOYS WON'T READ

I draw on theories that view gender as multiple and fluid because there is much at stake in the theoretical orientations that educators bring to this issue. Based on my own and others' research on gender and literacy, I am convinced that building a reading curriculum based on essentialized notions of gender will inevitably lead to the marginalization of many of the boys educators intend to support. As I will discuss, the move to reify particular ways of being masculine through the reading curriculum has at least three overlapping consequences: it constructs some masculinities as deviant; it ignores the complex and consequential interactions between masculinities that occur in classrooms; and such a move risks homogenizing masculinity in ways that overlook other important social identities such as race and class.

What Counts as Masculine?

J.J. had made himself vulnerable on his very first day of school. He started in Anna's room a few days after the school year started. On his first day, Anna told his table that they could not be dismissed for lunch because they had been talking. J.J. had not participated in the chatting, and as he watched Anna lead the rest of the class out of the room, large tears began to roll down his cheeks. Tia let out a whoop and asked tauntingly, "Are you crying? He crying!" Another girl, Sese, quickly stepped in and told Tia to be quiet. She asked J.J. what was wrong and he sobbed softly, "I'm hungry and now I can't eat lunch." "Oh," Sese told him, "she'll let us eat, don't worry." Anna walked back into

the room and Sese told her, "He's crying cause he thinks he won't get to eat." Anna told him firmly that there was no need to cry, he would get to eat his lunch and he needed to proceed to the lunchroom. He dried his eyes and complied. Although some of the children in this class did live in poverty, J.J. was not one of them. He did not qualify for free lunch and brought a well-stocked sack lunch to school each day. His tears seemed more a sign of sensitivity to and uncertainty in a new situation than of hunger. This was one of a few times that J.J. cried in front of his peers and this, coupled with his disinterest in sports, quickly led to his being labelled a "wimp" and "nerd" by the socially dominant boys in the class.

One of the key risks of reifying traditional notions of masculinity through the reading curriculum is that boys who enact a gender identity that lies outside that prescribed notion of masculinity will be defined as deviant and abnormal. Indeed, in the face of rigidly, dichotomously defined gender categories, there is no other way to define boys who display any traits that might fall within the bounds of "feminine" (Blackburn, 2005; Martino, 2001). In this way, the reification of gender boundaries through assumptions about what boys will or won't read is inextricably tied to homophobia and heterosexism. As Blackburn (2005) writes, by dichotomizing gender categories "we allow for a norm and the opposite of that norm—the norms being male, masculine, and heterosexual, and the opposites, the not-normal, being female, feminine, and homosexual. In short, we perpetuate the violence" (p. 513). Boys like J.J.—non-athletic, quick to cry, not dressed in "cool" clothes—live with the constant risk of ridicule and have to work hard to construct a comfortable space in school.

As several studies have shown, boys understand the social risks of crossing gender boundaries in school, resulting in a policing of boundaries that does marginalize boys who do not meet with the expectations of masculinity in any given context (e.g., Blackburn, 2005; Davies, 2003; Dutro 2001/2002; 2003; Epstein, 1997; Martino, 2001). The rejection of things feminine by many boys is documented by researchers who suggest that early in life boys realize that things associated with girls and women are devalued by society, that identifying with those things is likely to get you labelled a "wimp" or "faggot" and, thus, that it is important that they define themselves against femininity (e.g., Best, 1983; Miedzian, 1991; Thorne, 1993). Raphaela Best (1983), for example, found that boys' rejection of things associated with girls was well in place by second grade. This leaves little room for boys to comfortably display the range of ways of being gendered that all boys possess and clearly pushes many gay or transgender young men to the margins.

Given what we already understand about the complex workings of masculinity in K-12 classrooms, it would seem a given that attempts to build literacy

curricula on received notions of what is appropriately masculine, and that reinforce what counts as “normal” in the interests and behaviours of boys, can only exacerbate the hetero-normative culture of schools (Blackburn, 2005). Of course, it would be naive to believe that the reification of a particular brand of heterosexual masculinity is but an accidental by-product of a desire to boost boys’ literacy achievement. Miedzian (1991) writes that encouragement of stereotypically masculine behaviour betrays “fear that if we don’t raise boys who are tough and tearless, they will be gay or at the very least wimpish” (p. 291). It is crucial to acknowledge and examine the homophobia that lurks within arguments that boys should be provided with texts that emphasize “masculine” topics and genres. (It is also important to realize that raising issues of sexuality in any discussion that involves children and adolescents is always going to provoke discomfort and resistance in some.)

In order for K–12 classrooms to challenge, rather than reify, dichotomized notions of gender, educators and policy-makers have to embrace the idea that it is in all boys’ best interests for a range of masculinities to be acknowledged, explored, and valued through their literacy practices in school. Classrooms have the potential to function as safe spaces for children and young people to enact a range of gender identities, but that potential can only be realized if a range of being gendered in the world is supported through word and deed. A reading curriculum based explicitly on stereotypical, essentialist notions of gender inevitably denies that potential through its reinforcement of rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity.

What Occurs in the Underlife of Masculinity in Classrooms?

Although most of the boys seemed unhappy to be required to read the *American Girl* books, they quickly began to plan their book choices with friends. Ray, Anthony, Lavell, Corey, Kenneth, and Junius decided that they would all choose *Molly Learns a Lesson*, ensuring that they would be in the same literature circle. As Anna enacted the usual ritual of drawing names from her cup, Junius tried to intimidate other boys from choosing the Molly book. When Keith’s name was called, Junius glared at him and hissed quietly and ominously, “You’d better not pick Molly if you know what’s good for you.” Keith hesitated and avoided Junius’s eyes as he rose from his chair. Then J.J. said to Keith, loud enough so Junius could hear, “You choose whatever book you want to.” Junius responded with a grave shake of his head that expressed both his shock at having been challenged and the sense that the challenge could hold dire consequences. Keith did not choose Molly, but J.J.’s comment

was significant nonetheless. I had not seen anyone challenge Junius in any context, and this was a particularly brave move for J.J., who, as I discussed previously, was positioned as a “wimp” by the dominant group of boys.

This interaction between Junius, Keith, and J.J. was instructive on a number of levels. It illustrates how masculinities functioned in the classroom, regardless of the books on the table, and it complicates notions of reading interest and choice. As was true in every book-choosing episode throughout the year, any sense of “free choice” was an illusion as these boys managed and negotiated their choices of *American Girl* books. The question of what occurs in the underlife of masculinity in literacy classrooms is related to the previous discussion of what counts as masculinity, but differs in its analytic lens. We can examine what counts as appropriately masculine in theoretical terms, simply by revealing what is included and excluded in any given definition of or attempt to operationalize masculinity. In contrast, understanding the underlife of masculinity in classrooms requires close examinations of children’s performances of gender and literacy in schools. In operationalizing assumptions about what boys won’t read, we risk missing this underlife—we risk overlooking, ignoring, or sublimating the complexities and nuances within boys’ individual and interactive performances of masculinities in literacy classrooms. This has consequences for our ability to provide the varying kinds of academic and social support that students need in order to be successful in reading and other school-valued literacies.

Scholars of gender studies have emphasized that masculinities are multiple and are defined in relation to each other (Berger et al., 1995). A key concept in the field is the idea of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 1996). Masculinity takes many forms and at any given historical moment many versions of masculinity will be in “play” simultaneously. However, one of those versions will hold a position of authority and “hegemonic” refers to that position of cultural authority. The hegemonic masculinity within any space becomes the version by which other forms of masculinity are measured.

In Anna’s classroom, several boys—Ray, Anthony, Corey, Kenneth, and Lavell—embodied the socially dominant masculinity: they were athletically talented, played sports at recess, and talked knowledgeably about sports teams and famous athletes. In contrast, some of the other boys in the class, particularly J.J. and Keith, were not positioned comfortably.

As the following excerpts illustrate, the complexity of the relationships between masculinities in the classroom was apparent in interviews and written work.

From an interview with J.J.:

Elizabeth: Would you choose to read a book about girls?

J.J.: Probably not. They're for girls. I don't like girl books.

Elizabeth: Why don't you like them?

J.J.: They don't have exciting plots. I like adventure.

From Keith's reading journal during the *American Girl* unit:

"I didn't like this book because it is for girls."

"They can make me read it, but they can't make me like it."

From an interview with Anthony:

Elizabeth: What do you think of the idea that some books are considered more "boys' books" and some "girls' books"?

Anthony: I just choose what I like. It don't matter to me if it's about a girl or boy or what, as long as it's interesting, you know?

As I have described in detail elsewhere (Dutro, 2003), the dominant social status of Kenneth, Ray, and Anthony allowed them to more safely play with gender in their reading choices, whereas any such play was far more risky for J.J. and Keith. For instance, Ray and Anthony refused to ever admit, in group or individual conversations, that they didn't want to read a book that was highly gendered as a "girls' book" (even though their behaviour when choosing books sometimes suggested otherwise). On the other hand, J.J. and Keith, who were not engaged in sports at school, who often played with girls at recess, and who were not part of the socially dominant group of boys, were adamant in their public rejection of "girls' books" (even as they were two of the students who were most highly engaged in the novels the class read by renowned African-American authors, some of which featured girls as protagonists).

These relationships among masculinities in Anna's classroom were important in the boys' experiences reading the *American Girl* books. Challenging boys' own assumptions about what they will read seemed to allow the boys to *begin* 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 not otherwise risk expressing (such as J.J.'s positive comments about his reading of *Addy Learns a Lesson* in a group discussion). It is important for socially dominant boys to be given opportunities, such as the one that Kenneth took up, to lead the way in challenging gender norms, and it is important for boys such as J.J. to be able to participate in the new kinds of conversations that such a safe space can create.

The underlife of masculinity in Anna's classroom that was revealed through the *American Girl* reading experience and other episodes throughout the year

illustrates some of the important underlying issues in boys' reading choices. For instance, the reading preferences a boy reports on a survey or in an interview, or, indeed, the selections a boy makes when he approaches a bookshelf or stack of reading "choices," are necessarily complicated by social expectations, positioning, and context and must be considered in light of other information gleaned from observation and understanding of the larger relationships in which the boy's choices are reported and made. A reading curriculum that enacts a static notion of masculinity ignores and potentially reinforces the complex ways that masculinity is lived within literacy classrooms.

What Gets Lost in Defining "Boy"?

The following excerpt is from a group interview during the class's reading of the *American Girl* books:

Corey: Addy's just bunk.

Anthony: No way. That's the best book out of all of them.

Corey (shaking his head): Uh uh.

Elizabeth: Which one is the best?

J.J: *Addy*.

Kenneth: *Molly*.

Anthony: *Addy*.

Lavell: *Addy*.

Corey: Wait a minute. I liked Samantha. I liked that book better.

And, the following is from an interview with Ray, a leader among the socially dominant group of boys:

Elizabeth: What did you think about *Addy Learns a Lesson*?

Ray: It's really good and, like, important cause it's about, like, what happened to my ancestors. That coulda been someone from my family who was like in slavery and had to run away to the North. I'm just glad I read that book.

Determining a "boy-friendly" reading curriculum requires a construction of "a boy" (what he will find appealing, what interests him, what motivates him to read). This is a problem because any generic, static notion of "boy" necessarily sublimates other identities, particularly race, class, and, again, sexuality, and how those factors impact boys' lives and opportunities in

school. As research emphasizes, the consequences of achievement discrepancies are not equal across groups of boys (or girls for that matter) (see Epstein et al., 1998). Davis (2001) writes that the simple statement “not all boys are the same” is “not an obvious one given all the talk about the ‘boy problem’ in the United States” (p. 140). He asserts that the rhetoric in the United States about the issue of boys’ achievement relative to girls has ignored the “racism, poverty, and violence” that surrounds the struggles of many African-American boys and, thus, has created “a separate discussion and agenda, particularly about schooling, that removes black boys from an important national debate” (p. 140). Indeed, if images tell a story, it is almost exclusively white boys who stare out from covers of books that purport to describe “boys’” experiences—even when the contents of the book does include attention to boys of colour (see for instance, Newkirk, 2002; Pollack, 1999; Rowan et al., 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Indeed, the cover of the *Newsweek* issue with which I began this article features three blond white boys from a school that is well over 90 percent white (as well as 97 percent middle or upper middle class).

Certainly the boys who participated in the research I describe here performed gender within very different assumptions about their masculinity than middle-class white boys. As African-American scholars and cultural critics have emphasized, young African-American males are consistently portrayed in American media and popular culture as dangerous and deviant (e.g., Belton, 1995). Further, positive images of young Black men are almost always limited to athletics or the entertainment industry (Dyson, 1997; Kelley, 1997). In short, the shape of the masculinity narrative shifts radically when race and class are taken into account (Stecopoulos & Uebel, 1997). Some of the negative attributes attached to masculinity in general are further magnified and distorted when attached to Black masculinity. Don Belton (1995) writes that “historically, the black male body has been scapegoated in the cultural imagination to represent the violence we fear as a nation” (p. 2). As historian Robin Kelley (1995) puts it, “it is an established fact that our culture links manhood to terror and power, and that black men are frequently imaged as the ultimate in hypermasculinity” (p. 15).

The boys who participated in my study fall outside the generic notion of boyhood within disaggregated accounts of boys’ literacy struggles, but they do variously embody the “problem boy” or “safe Black boy” of discourses surrounding Black masculinity. For instance, Ray, Kenneth, and Junius were fairly consistently in trouble for fighting or name-calling; they were aware that other kids found them intimidating and they used this to their advantage. On the surface, they might fit racist assumptions of young Black

men as aggressive, intimidating. Corey and Lavell, on the other hand, were invested in sports like Kenneth, Ray, and Junius, but were very rarely in trouble and were not aggressive toward peers. They did well in school, but were not labelled “nerds.” They fit well with Robin Kelley’s (1995) description of himself as a “safe” Black man. Corey and Lavell were “cool,” but unthreatening. They were boys that, in Kelley’s words, “white folks could feel good about.” These stereotypes were absolutely challenged by these boys’ experiences and behaviours both within and outside of the classroom, yet racist discourses of Black masculinity no doubt have and will continue to impact the boys’ schooling experiences.

Even if a “boy-friendly” reading curriculum were devised according to the racial identities of boys in particular classroom contexts, such a move assumes that gender trumps race and class in determining what will be most engaging to boys. The boys’ reading of *Addy Learns a Lesson* in Anna’s classroom is a good example of what can be lost in such an assumption. The Addy book was by far the most preferred and praised *American Girl* book by the boys who had read it as one of their two choices. In group and individual interviews, several boys referred to their interest in the characters and their desire to find out what happens to them in the other books in the Addy series. A few boys, like Ray, spoke explicitly about the book’s themes of slavery, race, and oppression and the importance of reading about “my ancestors” or “my history.”

The boys almost surely would not have had the opportunity to read the Addy book in most classrooms, as it epitomizes what is usually thought of as a “girls’ book.” One can only imagine that this assumption would be exacerbated if reading titles were self-consciously selected for children with a static notion of gender as a primary criterion. Requiring the boys in Anna’s class to read books that challenged, rather than reinforced, their own assumptions about what they would read (or allowed a safe space for boys who may have wished to read these books, but would never have risked choosing them publicly), provided at least two opportunities. First, it allowed them a connection to a text that they most likely would not have otherwise read but that was significant to key aspects of their identities and interests. Second, it allowed the possibility of broadening ideas of what constituted appropriate and acceptable performances of masculinity in the classroom. As Davis (2001) writes, “the inability to explore and embrace other possibilities of boyhood reduces the kinds of options and opportunities African-American boys can have and desperately need at school” (p. 151).

CONCLUSIONS

The issue of what boys will or should read in school is highly complex, and there is too much at stake for boys in ignoring that complexity. The political nature of much of the debate surrounding gender and schooling certainly makes it all the knottier. As this issue moves steadily from debate to policy to classroom practice in the United States, research must continue to demonstrate the compelling evidence that boys are capable of questioning their own and others' assumptions about masculinity and that supporting multiple ways of being masculine in classrooms will work to boys' benefit as readers and as human beings. Classroom-based research of literacy curricula and methods that challenge essentialist notions of masculinity are key if anti-essentialist arguments are to have an impact on developing policy. For instance, many of the recent books and articles about boys and literacy that challenge essentialism have called for a literacy curriculum that includes both a wide variety of texts and opportunities for boys (and girls) to critically discuss gender through their reading (e.g., Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2001; Rice, 2000, 2002; Rowan et al., 2001). Although we are beginning to understand what happens when students are provided those opportunities (e.g., Davies, 1997; Dutro 2001/2002, 2003; Rice, 2001, 2002)—and the consequences of not providing them (e.g., Blackburn, 2005)—there is much to learn about the impact of such curricular moves. In addition, we need to heed the call by Blackburn (2005), Davis (2001), and others to conduct gender studies that acknowledge the hetero-normativity of school literacy practices and that centrally locate the needs and experiences of boys of colour in the larger conversation.

It is not my intent to argue that boys should be required to consistently read books that are highly gendered as feminine, but boys reading *American Girls* does not have to be anathema to boys' reading engagement and achievement. Indeed, the boys in Anna's classroom point to the limits of such assumptions. It is crucial for educators to examine the masculinities that are reified in classrooms and the ways that those masculinities influence curricular decisions. The risks of doing otherwise are too great.

NOTE

1. To protect the identities of the children and teacher, all names are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D., Moon, J., & Hagood, M. (1999). *Popular culture in the classroom: Teaching and researching critical media literacy*. New York: LEA, Inc.
- Bauerlein, M., & Stotsky, S. (2005, January 25). Why Johnny won't read. *The Washington Post*, p. A15.
- Belton, D. (1995). *Speak my name: Black men on masculinity and the American dream*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Berger, M., Wallis, B., & Watson, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Constructing masculinity*. New York: Routledge.
- Best, R. (1983). *We've all got scars: What boys and girls learn in elementary school*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Blackburn, M. (2005). Disrupting dichotomies for social change: A review of, critique of, and complement to current educational literacy scholarship on gender. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 39(4), 398–416.
- Brooks, D. (2006, June 11). The gender gap at school. *The New York Times*. Retrieved June 20, 2006, from select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html/columnists
- Brozo, W. G. (2002). *To be a boy, to be a reader: Engaging teen and preteen boys in active literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Chiarella, T. (2006, July). The problem with boys. *Esquire*, 136, 1.
- Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Connell, R. (1996). Teaching the boys: New research on masculinity and gender strategies for schools. *Teachers College Record*, 98(2), 206–235.
- Daniels, H. (2001). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. New York: Stenhouse.
- Davies, B. (1997). Constructing and deconstructing masculinities through critical literacy. *Gender and Education*, 9(1), 9–30.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities* (Rev. ed.). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Davis, J. E. (2001). Transgressing the masculine: African American boys and the failure of schools. In W. Martino and B. Meyenn (Eds.), *What about the boys? Issues of masculinities in schools* (pp. 140–153). London: Open University Press.
- Dutro, E. (2001/2002). 'But that's a girls' book!': Exploring gender boundaries in children's reading practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 55(4), 376–384.
- Dutro, E. (2003). 'Us boys like to read football and boy stuff': Reading masculinities, performing boyhood. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34(4), 465–500.

- Dyson, M. E. (1997). *Race rules: Navigating the color line*. New York: Vintage Press.
- Epstein, D. (1997). Boyz' own stories: Masculinities and sexualities in schools. *Gender and Education*, 9(1), 105-115.
- Epstein, D., Elwood, J., Hey, V., & Maw, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Failing boys? Issues of gender and achievement*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Foster, V., Kimmel, M., & Skelton, C. (2001). What about the boys? An overview of the debates. In W. Martino and B. Meyenn (Eds.), *Issues of masculinities in schools* (pp. 1-23). London: Open University Press.
- Gilbert, R., & Gilbert, P. (1998). *Masculinity goes to school*. New York: Routledge.
- Gurian, M. (2002). *Boys and girls learn differently! A guide for teachers and parents*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Gurian, M., & Stevens, K. (2005). *The minds of boys: Saving our sons from falling behind in school and life*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Hall, C., & Coles, M. (1997). Gendered readings: Helping boys develop as critical readers. *Gender and Education*, 9(1), 61-68.
- Hoff-Sommers, C. (2000). *The War against boys: How misguided feminism is harming our young men*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kelley, R. (1995). Confessions of a nice negro, or why I shaved my head. In D. Belton (Ed.), *Speak my name: Black men on masculinity and the American dream* (pp. 12-22). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kelley, R. (1997). *Yo' mama's disfunkcional! Fighting the culture wars in urban America*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. London: Open University Press.
- Mahiri, J. (Ed.). (2004). *What they don't learn in school: Literacy in the lives of urban youth*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Martino, W. (2001). "Powerful people aren't usually real kind, friendly, open people!" Boys interrogating masculinities at school. In W. Martino and B. Meyenn (Eds.), *What about the boys? Issues of masculinities in schools* (pp. 82-95). London: Open University Press.
- Martino, W., & Meyenn, B. (2001). *What about the boys? Issues of masculinities in schools*. London: Open University Press.
- Miedzian, M. (1991). *Boys will be boys: Breaking the link between masculinity and violence*. New York: Doubleday.
- Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy and popular culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Pollack, W. (1999). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York: Owl Books.
- Rice, P. S. (2000). Gendered readings of a traditional "feminist" folktale by sixth grade boys and girls. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 211-236.

- Rice, P. S. (2002). Creating spaces for boys and girls to expand their definitions of masculinity and femininity through children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 28(2), 33-42.
- Rowan, L., Knobel, M., Bigum, C., & Lankshear, C. (2001). *Boys, Literacies and schooling: The dangerous territory of gender-based literacy reform*. London: Open University Press.
- Sax, L. (2006). *Why gender matters: What parents and teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences*. New York: Broadway Press.
- Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J. (2002). "Reading don't fix no Chevys": Literacy in the lives of young men. New York: Heinemann.
- Stecopolous, H., & Uebel, M. (Eds.). (1997). *Race and the subject of masculinities*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Tyre, P. (2006, January 30). The trouble with boys. *Newsweek*, 44-52.
- Young, J. P. (2000). Boy talk: Critical literacy and masculinities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(3), 312-337.
- Young, J. P., & Brozo, W. G. (2001). Boys will be boys, or will they? Literacy and masculinities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(3), 316-335.