

(Re)Engendering Classroom Space: Teachers, Curriculum Policy, and Boys' Literacy

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Abstract

How teachers are engaging with a particular Ontario curriculum resource document, *Me Read? No Way!*, and the problem of boys' literacy achievement in the context of a globalized neoliberal discourse of 'failing boys' has important implications for pedagogy and practice in the classroom. This investigation into teachers' work adopts a feminist poststructural framework and uses critical discourse analysis to develop two case studies based on focus group interviews with a purposeful sampling of Intermediate level teachers. Not only are boys' perceived needs and interests driving teacher choices in pedagogy and resource materials, but girls are perceived as not having any particular educational needs at all: boys will be boys and girls will be good. This investigation concludes that teacher professional knowledge must include a more developed understanding of how the social construction of gender is negotiated in the classroom.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine teachers' responses to educational policies that focus on boys' literacy. Such policies are representative of a global concern with boys' educational achievement in most industrialized nations. Through an investigation of one policy initiative I seek to gain deeper insight into how teachers' understandings of gender shape their pedagogical practices. Weaver-Hightower (2003) states that "whatever curriculums, policies, programs, or practices develop from the continuing advance of the boy turn in research, the most imperative need is for independent research 'on the ground' in schools and other educational environments" (p. 489). The investigation I have undertaken, focusing on teachers and the politics of boys' literacy in Ontario, Canada contributes to the growing body of teacher-centred research globally which examines the classroom effects of so-called 'boy-friendly' policies, pedagogies and practices for girls and for marginalized boys.

Feminist scholars have challenged the notion that schools have become too 'feminized' through the presence of so many female teachers (Reed, 1999), and that women's ways and expectations are inimical to boys (Skelton, 2001) such that boys are disengaging from education and failing to achieve, but governments contemplate recruitment campaigns and incentives for male teachers despite evidence that such role modeling has little positive effect on boys' academic achievement (Martino, 2008). Popular writers are keen to persuade the public that boys have innate, biologically determined ways and preferences that female teachers need to learn to appreciate and to which they must learn to adapt (Gurian, 2001; Pollack, 1998), and the media are only too ready to take up this renewed version of the "battle of the sexes."

These concerns are not new: like Hayley's comet, the cyclic crisis of masculinity can be predicted to recur as an addendum to times of significant social change and disruption in normative gender roles (Cohen, 1998; Kimmel, 2006; Martino, 2008). Politically, however, the current neoliberal project with its global regime of standardized testing has added to the complexity. Not only have neoliberal think tanks been quick to seize upon banks of statistics as performance indicators which allow them to publicly rank and classify schools in the name of enhanced consumer choice, but the pundits, the politicians, and the media have been quick to seize upon the statistical gap in performance between boys and girls to effect very specific educational policy initiatives.

The reaffirmation of the free market ideal has been a slow and careful political project carried out by a coterie of neoliberal intellectuals in resistance to the Keynesian triumph of the social welfare state. The resulting radical restructuring of society to a market ideology and the commodification of institutions that accompanied it have had very specific implications for schools. The purpose of education has been subverted to acquiring a set of marketable skills intended to satisfy the needs of a globalized economy. Educational achievement is now framed as a set of measurable outcomes linked to a narrow range of test indicators which can be competitively ranked and published in the name of accountability. In this context, the Ontario Ministry of Education's boys' literacy document, *Me Read? No Way!* (2004) offers a collection of quick strategies claimed to improve boys' engagement and hence performance in literacy activities. Written and organized so that the reader can flip through and randomly select what appears to be a good idea much as one might select a good recipe from a cookbook, teachers are in fact advised to "review the list of 'Strategies for Success' in the table of contents to pinpoint those areas most relevant to [their] immediate needs," and to read the rest "as time permits and need dictates" (p. 2). No particular knowledge or deeper understanding seems to be required if the right technique is taken up. A closer reading of the "Best Practices" and "Try It Now!" tips quickly reveals that what is presented as generically friendly for boys becomes increasingly unfriendly for girls. Whether recommending more boy-friendly reading materials that "reflect [boys'] image," "focus on action more than emotion," feature science fiction or fantasy because "many boys are passionate about these genres," and include "newspapers, magazines, comic books, baseball cards and instruction manuals" (Maloney, 2002, quoted in *Me Read? No Way!*, p. 8), or suggesting that a "boys only" zone be created in the library (p. 13), it becomes apparent that there is little concern for what the unintended consequences of such interventions might be for the girls, particularly those girls who are also struggling with literacy. The cover collage of photographs of boys, almost all of whom are active and alone, has already privileged the ideology of a rugged, competitive male individualism which continues throughout the document.

Me Read? No Way!, thus draws on the global policy discourse of 'failing boys' and inscribes particular practices perceived as 'boy-friendly' and presented as 'girl-neutral' with the aim of engaging boys in literacy activities and improving boys' achievement. As a curriculum resource document focusing on boys' literacy at a time when the Ministry of Education is publicly committed to raising standardized test scores, reducing gaps in student achievement, and increasing public confidence in publicly funded education, *Me Read? No Way!* is of considerable professional interest to teachers (*Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education*, 2008). The discursive positioning

of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ and requiring a recuperative remasculinization of pedagogy and practice thus receives wide dissemination among teachers. In this paper, I take the position that to the extent that teachers, both male and female, position themselves within these discourses, take up the social meanings and implement strategies, whether advocated in the document or derived from the broader global discourse, a neoliberal agenda of recuperative masculinity is reinstated in the classroom, and gender justice is no longer served.

The Research

Using a feminist poststructural framework, this paper places gender at the centre of the research, and highlights the centrality of language as enacted through discourse, recognizing that “social reality has no meaning except in language” therefore “the range of discourses and their material supports in social institutions and practices are integral to the maintenance and contestation of forms of social power” (Weedon, 1997, p. 33). An understanding of policy as discourse considers policy as regulating social relations primarily through positive means by discursively producing subjectivities, hierarchies, and taxonomies for understanding the social world, thereby infiltrating rather than simply changing power relations (see Allan, 2008). The study draws on two case studies each of which employed focus group interviews to examine how teachers are engaging with *Me Read? No Way!* or taking up pedagogies and practices which derive from the broader global policy discourse of ‘failing boys’ from which the curriculum document emerges.

Two small focus groups of both male and female teachers who work with Intermediate level students (grades seven and eight) were brought together at two different elementary school locations in south-western Ontario. Each group met for approximately two and one half hours, and three key questions served as the interview guide:

- (1) To what extent does an awareness of gender, either your own or your students’ genders, influence your pedagogy?
- (2) To what extent has the Ministry document, *Me Read? No Way!*, influenced your pedagogy?
- (3) What do you see as the greatest challenge facing teachers in meeting the needs of young adolescent learners, whether boys or girls?

Although teacher focus groups must necessarily involve only a small number of participants, the research findings are situated meaningfully within the context of the wider literature which is confirmed by recognized research about teachers and boys’ literacy globally (see Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In this way, Ontario teachers take their place within a global policy field.

The Educational Context

Neoliberal principles of individualism, privatization, and decentralization have played an increasingly important role in educational governance in Ontario since 1995. The Ontario Ministry of Education has been able to implement and legitimize these

policies through the creation of independent regulatory agencies such as the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). For more than ten years annual mandatory testing in literacy and numeracy has been administered by the EQAO province-wide in grades three and six. Detailed test results for every school in the province are released to the media and posted on the internet. The Ontario Ministry of Education document, *Me Read? No Way!*, “a practical guide to improving boys’ literacy skills” (cover) released in 2004, must be understood within the discourse of standardization, effectiveness, and human capital that informs neoliberal education policy globally. As Delaney (2002) states, “Policy ultimately dictates what happens at the building and classroom levels and it is at these levels that teachers do their work on a daily basis” (p. 100): the personal knowledge about gender and the commitment to social justice that they bring to the classroom will determine each teacher’s response to *Me Read? No Way!*.

The First Focus Group: Boys Will Be Boys

The teachers in the first focus group were professionally ‘young’ with less than ten years of experience, located at an urban elementary school in a low income area with a high needs population including a significant number of English Language Learners. Two teachers in particular agreed to be interviewed together, one male and one female. These teachers were actively working to implement a boys’ literacy club as recommended by the Ministry of Education document, *Me Read? No Way!*. Given the current emphasis on the importance of male role models for boys both as stated in the document and argued more broadly in the media, the female teacher responsible for initiating the club didn’t feel that she could run it alone.

Kathy: When we started the literacy group I thought it was really important to have Mr. Allen [Paul] as a role model in our group. I didn’t want to run it by myself. I didn’t think the boys would respond to me in the same way as they would a male, as far as reading went and accessibility to reading, so I was happy that he was on board for that.

Interestingly, while the idea of male role models was one that Paul willingly embraced throughout the interview, it was never a role he openly acknowledged as one he took on for himself. When I asked him “how [he] saw [his] gender playing out as a role model with this kind of literacy initiative as a literacy leader for boys at the school,” he redirected the question.

Paul: I think it’s certainly important to have male role models who, in terms of, well, just to have male role models in general in society, just as we need good female role models. But with the issue of reading, to see that there are adult males who read, that reading becomes socially acceptable, that is, the, I mean, the one way we improve our knowledge base and the wealth of information we have is through reading.

The third person (impersonal) standpoint to male role models was one he consistently maintained throughout the interview, suggesting ambivalence at perhaps being thrust into a role. Given his position within the school and the fact that “for teachers to resist is to disrupt; to disrupt is to violate the norms of the teaching profession” (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008, p. 73), perhaps the impossibility of his refusing involvement in the boys’ reading club is underscored. Certainly this offers a reading for the counternarratives he consistently produced throughout the interview.

Kathy is very explicit about the impact *Me Read? No Way!* has had on her pedagogy and practice. She consciously accommodates to address boys’ literacy needs in her classroom through what she identifies as typical male interests and activities.

Kathy: *Me Read? No Way!* also informed my teaching, obviously...I have a SMARTboard. It’s excellent. I pull up Youtube. I pull up internet articles. I pull up all sorts of different stuff on basketball and sports, and things like that to really cater to the boys and to get them interested and engaged in it; whereas at the same time you’re thinking about the girls as well, but you know they’re already reading. So it’s really informed the way I do things and the tips and the things like that and how I can incorporate that into my classroom practice to improve the engagement of the boys.

As Myhill and Jones (2006) note: “teachers believe that their teaching needs to be aimed specifically at the needs of boys, while girls will ‘just get on with it’” (p. 111). The overwhelming assumption that girls’ achievement is not an issue has led to a massive neglect of girls’ experiences in school and a failure to allocate resources to girls’ needs (see Ringrose, 2007). Further to this, due to the perceived ‘special’ needs of boys, the students were held to different standards of behaviour based on gender in terms of classroom management.

Kathy: When you get down to it, and you see a kid in your class and he’s a boy and he’s fidgety and he’s moving around, you’re going to approach that situation in a different way because you recognize the signs...So you give different directions and instructions and a little bit of leeway for those boys as well; whereas, if I think a girl was acting in a similar manner, not that you wouldn’t give that to her, but you would question, well, what else is going on in the situation and should this be disciplined or managed in a different way than I would with a boy?

Again, Myhill and Jones (2006) note that “many teachers are strongly committed to the idea of gender difference believing that it influences attitudes to school, motivation, maturity, responsibility, behaviour and identification with the school ethos” (p. 100). While boys are expected to be more active and disengaged in class, and “leeway” is given

accordingly, girls are expected to be “compliant and diligent” (Jones, 2005, p. 276), and any deviation from this behaviour raises the question “Should this be disciplined?” Positing boys’ misbehaviour as a desire to assert themselves, and girls’ misbehaviour as a character defect, this ‘young’ teacher positions herself in an established teacher discourse that Reay (2001) claims has held for some twenty years.

Wodak (2001) suggests that “texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” (p. 11). While Kathy embraces the politics of *Me Read? No Way!* quite extensively, Paul takes every opportunity in the interview to discretely and graciously distance himself from it. His most effective tactic is to segue into a related feminist counternarrative which he offers up as a personal observation or a curiosity that he has found puzzling. For example, a discussion of the value of “adult males who read” and the value of books that present male role models so that “there are first of all male role models in the world and that it’s ok also as males to read” segues into one of a number of counternarratives.

Paul: One thing I’ve noticed in elementary, as you’ve pointed out in your question, there are obviously more female teachers than there are male teachers, and even with the male teachers that do exist in the elementary panel, be it at this school, or at my understanding, it’s province-wide, most of those male teachers seem to be placed or have obtained positions that are the higher grades, the grade seven or eight, and sometimes that’s almost seen as a position of being a senior teacher, or maybe of respect or authority . . . You have the teachers there that tend to be disproportionately more likely to be male than female, and are maybe looked up to by other students as well.

Despite the claims that teaching has become ‘feminized’ through the higher numbers of female teachers, Paul chooses to highlight the gender regime which privileges male teachers in the schools and which is still very much intact (see Martino, 2008). His segues consistently raise issues of traditional male privilege or power and challenge gender specificity. The end of the interview brings an extended counternarrative.

Paul: Afterthoughts. . . . I have had in my educational career as a teacher, I’ve had male students say, “I want to be a doctor.” I’ve had female students that say, “I want to be a doctor when I grow up.” I’ve had female students who’ve said, “I want to be a nurse when I grow up.” I’ve had no male students – none – say, “I want to be a nurse when I grow up.” They all say, “I want to be a doctor.” The females, there’s a split. Now, I’m wondering why there are some female students who say they want to become a nurse instead of a doctor, not to say that a nurse is any less honourable or subservient to being a medical doctor, and why there are no male students who say they want to be a nurse?

Paul's segues reflect both a struggle to make sense of and a certain resistance to the neoliberal gender order, what McRobbie (2004) terms 'free market feminism'. The meaning of feminism as Paul has understood it has clearly shifted. In fact, the current post-feminist discourses of unambiguous female success and presumptive gender equity are taken as proof that meritocratic principles have worked (see Ringrose, 2007). Paul has been told that boys are 'the new disadvantaged', and that boys need men and manly ways to begin to succeed in school, but it's a discourse too much at odds with the knowledge Paul already holds about the social construction of gender and the complex issues with which it is interrelated.

In this school, the curriculum resource document, *Me Read? No Way!*, elicited two very different teacher responses. It was both actively taken up and passively resisted by teachers who held to the same goal: improving boys' literacy achievement. It is not hard to understand the appeal of a widely-held, 'common sense' discourse of gender difference for Kathy, and the compelling limitations of a discourse based on the supposed 'hard-wiring' in the brain inherent in male biology for Paul. For men such as Paul who have succeeded in school and achieved high levels of professional literacy, the 'failing boys' discourse bears little resemblance to their own lived experience. Despite their rich academic and professional backgrounds, neither Kathy nor Paul has reflected on or participated in conversations about ways that gender and its intersections with class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation are negotiated in the classroom and implicated in educational achievement. Pedagogy that caters to boys' perceived interests, learning styles and behavioural needs, that ignores differences among boys based on class, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, and that features girls as docile, compliant and "learning anyway" produces classroom effects which mitigate against creating a successful learning environment for all students.

The Second Focus Group: Girls Will Be Good

The teachers in the second focus group were 'veterans' at an affluent rural elementary school located in a 'bedroom community' serving a major metropolitan area some two hours distant by road from the first school. Four teachers agreed to be interviewed together, two men and two women. These teachers had between 20 to 40 years of experience in the classroom, and had started their teaching careers well before the advent of the neoliberal education reforms of the past fifteen years. Where the concentrated poverty in the community at the first school had been the overriding concern for the teachers, it was an overweening culture of organized competitive sports that had to be accommodated at this second school. Parental attitudes privileged sports participation over academic engagement for boys, and parents frequently withdrew their sons to compete in tournaments, keeping them out of class longer than required for the actual competition. Connell (2002) notes that through competitive sports at school and in the media boys are taught the importance of appearing hard and dominant.

Despite exemplary EQAO literacy test results – 12% above the provincial standard – this school was not exempt from the global concern over boys' literacy achievement. This was especially interesting as the most recent grade six test scores indicated that performance at level one (5%) and level four (0%) was identical for both boys and girls. In other words, the weakest students were girls and boys in equal percentages, and those students who were underperforming at level two were slightly more likely to be girls

(14%) than boys (11%). However, the nuanced break down of specific EQAO test results generally receives little attention at the school level when the focus is on a school's overall provincial ranking and the ways in which this statistic will be taken up by the media and institutions such as the Fraser Institute. Teacher concerns remained firmly focused on the boys.

Jane: [I] have noticed in the past while that the academic level is certainly slipping big time, and right now in the last few years, my classes, you can just divide them by gender. It's brutal how way behind the guys seem to be getting.

Karen: I have to say for me in math . . . that I really feel badly that some of our guys don't get to demonstrate what they're able to do because there's so much language tied up in it and they're just not patient to read through all of that . . . The girls are pulling ahead of the guys now in math as well.

The framing of the math situation takes up the key aspects of the 'failing boys' discourse which has had wide circulation globally: it's not that the girls are pulling ahead due to improved or perhaps even superior math skills, but rather the boys are disadvantaged by the language expectations embedded in the new math program allowing the girls to pull ahead of them. As Skelton (2006) observes:

Thus, it is not too surprising to read of research which tells us that teachers continue to see girls as succeeding through their quiet diligence and hard work, while boys are more 'naturally clever' and this is only inhibited by their laziness. Indeed, it is fair to say that this is probably *the most* frequently cited finding of studies of both elementary and high schools. (emphasis in original, p. 145)

Further to this, assuming the EQAO tests are an accurate reflection of literacy achievement, statistically the test results do not support the level of gendered underachievement the teachers report. Jones (2005) suggests that "over the last 10 years, the underachievement debate in English-speaking countries has been almost exclusively about boys, to the extent that the idea of a girl who underachieves seems virtually inconceivable" (p. 269).

Jones and Myhill (2004) note that there is a tendency for teachers to voice many of the common gender stereotypes that constitute accepted social wisdom, positing a view of girls as compliant and boys as immature and disruptive.

[T]eachers give voice to a deficit model of male achievement. Boys are principally seen in terms of the things they cannot, will not and do not do. Girls are seen in terms of the things they have achieved and in terms of compliant behavior. (p. 553)

This statement is certainly validated in the focus group teacher responses.

Jane: If I'm choosing a story, say out of a reader or something for them, I *always* think, "Are the boys going to get into this? Are they going to buy into this?" The girls will anyway, nine times out of ten, just 'cause they wanna get their work done and get it done well, but . . . you have to engage the boys, because they'll be the ones that if they don't like it, can't do it, are going to be acting out in a different way than the girls will.

Karen: I'm actually pulling out some older texts and using some of that to do the practising and stuff where there's less language because they're getting turned right off of math, and for some of them that's their one area that they can shine . . . usually it's the guys who are supposed to be the stronger in math.

With the threat of boys getting "turned right off" (and shifting into the kind of behaviour that comes with academic disengagement), the solution is to 'dumb down' the program using less challenging materials so the boys can "shine" the way they're "supposed to." Jones (2005) notes "how [the discourses of boys' disengagement and underachievement] have translated into classroom practice, practices that highlight the perceived needs of boys while representing girls as not having any particular needs at all" (p. 271). While Jane recognizes that "it's not *fair* to paint them all with the same brush," she also points out that "there is a group, a large group of boys that don't make any bones about their displeasure at what you're doing."

Jane: Look at certain classes, and if you pulled out some, I don't want to say the word, 'girly' story or something that they just didn't relate to at all, they're not going to sit there quietly and decide that "Oh yes, well, I'll just sit here quietly and do this because..." [multiple voices]

Karen: Where if you pull out something more masculine, the girls will, for the most part, not all, but for the most part, will just bear down, get it done because I've got to do it and that'll...

As with the teachers in Jones and Myhill's (2004) study, the teachers in the focus group share the perception that "girls, by contrast, are not bored: they are keen and hardworking, they will succeed without any special strategies, they will knuckle down and make the best of all school experiences because they make the effort" (p. 560). The disruptive behaviour that some boys display is explained as a way of masking poor academic skills.

Jane: I do agree that the acting out often comes from an inability to read.

Karen: [W]hen they can't [read], by that age they have no choice but to pretend they don't want to.

The conclusion Jones (2005) arrives at seems equally appropriate in summing up the statements of the focus group:

An account of underachievement has emerged building on a deficit model of male achievement and behaviour. It is constructed as caused by weak language skills, and being less settled in the classroom environment, being more active and challenging, or because perceptions of masculinity lead to a disengagement with the educational process. (p. 284)

At this second school the curriculum resource document, *Me Read? No Way!*, has been largely ignored, not on the basis of its merit, but because the teachers have been saturated with boys' literacy initiatives as part of their professional development. The ways in which the teachers have been sensitized to boys' underachievement are clear. The behavior of some boys becomes conflated with the achievement of all boys and begins to drive curriculum choices which serve to limit the opportunities for the entire class, boys and girls alike. However, as Jones and Myhill (2004) note, research by Martino (1999) documents able, middle class boys who speak of the need to 'act dumb' in order to preserve an appropriate masculine identity, and their own research finds that the high-achieving boy from Year 5 more closely resembles the underachieving boy by Year 8 in terms of observable behavior traits.

As with Jones and Myhill (2004) where "a small minority were resistant to gender typicality" (p. 553), there were dissenting voices among the teachers I interviewed, and the focus group was actually divided along gender lines. The two male teachers, while respectful of the female teachers' views, did not necessarily endorse them.

Steve: I don't have a lot of faith in the phrase 'boys will be boys' because in my classroom, boys, some boys perform very well at those language-rich activities, some don't. There are girls who are in the same boat... That's not to say that boys don't have different needs than girls as a gender, but as Mike said, I think differentiated instruction really refocuses that to looking at each individual and saying, "There's a number of ways of delivering."

Jan: So, and I think what I'm hearing then is when boys are disengaged the, it's more obvious because of the behavior...

Steve: I won't fully support that, again, because boys, some boys we've had are really academic boys. If they're disengaged, they do something as some of our girls will do if they're disengaged. Certainly to characterize boys as being disengaged and so they get noisy or physical, I think is a disservice just... [multiple voices]

While Steve is willing to acknowledge that boys can be disruptive, he's not willing to accept that this is somehow innate or natural to all boys.

Steve: Part of that, I think, is bringing their experience outside of the school into the classrooms, like "Well, I get away with this," or "Your expectation is radically different than what my life is outside of these four walls."

Jane: We're not even talking classroom management per se, it's that they're *not* getting, yeah, there's an attitude.

Steve's suggestion that the boys are "bringing their experience outside of the school into the classrooms" takes us back to the arena where "they all know one another from the hockey rink" and the world of organized competitive sports: these boys are being inducted into a hegemonic hypermasculinity. As Jane observes, there's an "attitude." Connell (1996) argues that society, school and peer milieu make boys an offer of a place in the gender order, and boys determine how they will take the offer up, suggesting that 'taking up the offer' is a key to understanding disciplinary problems in school: "Groups of boys engage in these practices, not because they are driven to it by raging hormones, but in order to acquire or define prestige, to mark difference, and to gain pleasure" (p. 220).

In this context, the 'common sense' understandings the female teachers in this focus group hold about gender, and particularly about boys' literacy, have been authorized as 'best practice' by the Ministry of Education in the resource document, *Me Read? No Way!*, and extensively promoted in professional development activities for teachers. Without a deeper understanding of how gender is enacted in the classroom and implicated in educational achievement, the female teachers are unable to offer an analysis that might move them beyond reinforcing the masculinization project the boys are importing from the arena culture. The culture of competitive sports insinuates itself into the school culture with absences and attitudes in ways that the 'best practices' understandings promoted by the Ministry of Education are unable to address, leaving the teachers without the means to name or effectively challenge the hypermasculinizing tendencies.

Implications of the Research Findings

Ball (1998) argues that there is a need to recognize that policies can create problems and generate new contexts through first-order and second-order effects: the first-order effects are the changes in practice or structure that can be seen across the system; the second-order effects are the impact of the first-order effects in terms of access, opportunity, and social justice. The first order effect of current Ministry of Education policy discourse regarding boys' literacy achievement is evident in the hypervisibilization of boys as a particular problem, and the increased attention given to accommodating boys' perceived interests and needs in terms of classroom instruction and resource materials. The second-order effect of such essentialized, boy-focused literacy policies renders the underachieving girl and her particular literacy needs invisible. Additionally, the one-size-fits-all approach to boys' instruction does little to meet the

literacy needs of many boys who do not identify with the white, middle class, Eurocentric, heterosexual norm.

Largely oblivious to the needs of the disengaged or underachieving girl, the teachers tended to believe that the girls were 'successful' learners who had no particular needs themselves but would accommodate to whatever was needed for the boys. Charlton, Mills, Martino, and Beckett (2007) note that "this perception that girls are better behaved than boys, and that girls are more capable of working independently than can boys, works to create a stereotype of female students that lends itself towards a sacrificial paradigm" (p. 472). Myers (2000) raises concerns about this aspect of classroom dynamics, and the invisibility of girls in many classrooms has been taken up as an issue by Jones and Myhill (2004) as well as Jones (2005), but Younger (2007) states that there is little evidence to suggest that these gendered aspects of classroom interactions are being recognized or remedied: "The underachieving girl often remains a shadowy figure, virtually invisible and rarely challenged in terms of work level or achievement" (Jones, 2005, p. 407).

Conclusion

It is evident from this research inquiry into teachers and the politics of boys' literacy that there is a real need to provide teachers with the opportunity to develop specific threshold knowledges in relation to gender and schooling, especially because this is an area of professional concern heavily informed by media constructed accounts of the issues of boys' schooling, and by a range of populist texts. That the Ontario Ministry of Education has chosen to take up the 'failing boys' discourse and authorize it in a curriculum policy document is especially troubling. In a policy context such as this, there is no mandate to provide teachers with a broader understanding of gender as socially constructed and marked by the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; in fact, such an understanding is antithetical to important Ministry of Education policy. Any deeper consideration of gender as performative, fluid, and responsive to the ongoing social dynamics of the classroom falls outside official Ministry of Education policy discourse. Rather than encouraging broad professional discussion that might equip teachers to challenge limiting, stereotyped gender roles for boys in meaningful ways, the current policy direction informing notions of boys' schooling renders such conversation subversive to policy and marginal, if not irrelevant, to education reform. Nonetheless, it is only through a deeper understanding of how gender is negotiated in the classroom and implicated in educational achievement that teachers will be able to effectively resist the impact of neoliberal education reform. "What is needed, rather," insists Weaver-Hightower (2003), "is curriculum, pedagogy, structures, and research programs that understand and explore gender (male, female, and 'other') in complexly interrelated ways and that avoid 'girls then, boys now.'" (p. 490). Education researchers in Ontario must remain vigilant (see Coffey & Delamont, 2000) and continue to press for Ministry of Education policy that reflects a more nuanced understanding of gender that will serve both boys and girls well in the 21st century.

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