The Literacy Gender Gap: The Changing Nature of Adolescent Boys’ Literacy and Implications for Practice.

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Abstract

Results of recent standardized achievement tests across the western world have revealed that adolescent girls are significantly outperforming boys in literacy. Teachers have also reported that boys underachieve in classroom literacy activities. Many of these adolescent boys, however, are successfully involved in diverse literacy activities outside of school. This paper examines some of the possible reasons that boys underachieve on tests and in the classroom. It also explores possible options for teachers and schools to re-engage boys and ensure they develop literacy skills that will be necessary for success in a global technological world.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Declaration ..................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iv

Chapter One - Introduction ............................................................................................ 1
   Aim of the Study ............................................................................................................. 1
   Problem Underlying the Study ...................................................................................... 1
   Research Methods ......................................................................................................... 3
   Significance of the Study .............................................................................................. 3
   Definitions ...................................................................................................................... 3
   Limitations and Delimitations ....................................................................................... 4

Chapter Two – Literature Review .................................................................................... 5
   Introduction ................................................................................................................... 5
   Standardized Testing and the Gender Gap ................................................................... 5
   Factors that Influence Boys’ Engagement and Achievement with Literacy in School ... 9
      School Culture of Femininity ................................................................................... 10
      Family and Background Culture ............................................................................ 11
      Peer Culture .............................................................................................................. 13
      Classroom Practices and Curriculum ................................................................... 15
      Student-Teacher Relationships ............................................................................. 18
      Inadequate Reading Skills and Motivation ............................................................ 19
      The In-School/Out-of-School Literacy Gap ............................................................ 20
   Improving Boys Literacy Achievement ..................................................................... 21
      Student-Teacher Relationships ............................................................................. 22
      Curriculum and Pedagogical Practices .................................................................. 22
      Providing Social Contexts for Literacy ................................................................. 26
      Utilizing Peers ........................................................................................................... 26
      Defining Literacy Broadly ....................................................................................... 27
      Literacy Texts ............................................................................................................ 28
      Authentic Assessment ............................................................................................. 30
      Connecting with Home ............................................................................................ 32
      Defining Masculinity in Multiple Ways .................................................................. 33
      Incorporating Technology for Now and the Future .............................................. 34
      Community Partnerships ....................................................................................... 36
      Single Sex Classes and Schools ............................................................................ 36

Chapter Three – Analysis, Interpretation, Discussion ................................................... 38

Chapter 4 – Summary .................................................................................................... 44

References ...................................................................................................................... 46
Chapter One - Introduction

Aim of the Study

The intent of this study is to review research regarding the underachievement of adolescent boys in literacy as measured by standardized tests and classroom assessments. This study will examine possible reasons for underachievement and recommendations regarding classroom practices to motivate adolescent boys to improve their participation and achievement in school literacy activities.

The study will focus on the following questions:

- What reasons are given for the underachievement of boys on standardized literacy tests?
- What reasons are given for the underachievement of boys in classroom literacy activities?
- How can classroom teachers make literacy activities more meaningful to boys?
- How can classroom teachers ensure that boys have the literacy skills they need for a global, technological world?

Problem Underlying the Study

A number of educational systems throughout the industrialized world utilize standardized tests to measure and compare the literacy achievement of their students. In 2000, 32 countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development participated in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). Fifteen year
olds were assessed on a number of skills, but the main focus of this assessment was on reading achievement. The results of this international study found that girls performed significantly better than boys in all countries (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2000).

While the information from standardized test scores gives quantitative indications of achievement in traditional print-based literacy skills, they do not accurately reflect the diverse literacy practices in the lives of today’s adolescent boys (Martino, 2003; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Blair and Sanford (2004) found that boys are resisting traditional school literacy and “transforming it into something more personally engaging, meaningful, humorous, active and purposeful” (p. 452). Additionally, researchers have found that boys participate in many literacy activities outside of the classroom that include print, as well as media and electronic technologies; activities not often valued by schools (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Blair & Sanford, 2004; Cook 2005).

In our rapidly evolving world, students will need to be multi-literate; boys’ engagement with non-print forms of literacy may prove to be as necessary for their future success as print forms are for school success (Martino, 2003; Lenters, 2006; Blair & Sanford, 2004). In order to motivate boys to engage in classroom literacy activities, schools will need to broaden their definition of literacy and incorporate methods to include the literacy practices of adolescent boys outside of the classroom (Lenters, 2006; Smith & Wilhem 2002; Martino 2003; Sanford & Blair 2004; Fu, Lamme & Fang; 2003).
Research Methods

The study will consist primarily of a literature review using journals, published texts and online sources.

Significance of the Study

In my middle school in Coquitlam, Canada, provincial standardized tests and district assessments indicate a significant gap in reading achievement between grade 7 boys and girls. This gap widens in high school. Based on these results and from school-wide discussions with teachers, our school has targeted the improvement of boy’s literacy achievement as one of our primary goals. I chose this study in order to develop a better understanding of the reasons for boys’ lower test achievement scores and their resistance to school literacy activities.

My goal is to share my findings with teachers in the hope that they will incorporate strategies that will motivate boys to engage more willingly in school literacy activities.

Definitions

Literacy: For the purpose of this study literacy will be defined broadly as going “beyond the functional skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening to include multiple literacies such as visual, media and information literacy” (The Centre of Literacy of Quebec, 2008). This definition also reflects the position of the International Reading Association (2001).
**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study will focus on the literacy needs of adolescent boys and the classroom literacy practices that will motivate them to participate. Recommendations for practice will focus on those that can be implemented in the classroom or resource room setting. Strategies that can be implemented at home will not be discussed in detail. Strategies that address additional challenges to literacy achievement such as severe learning disabilities, social/emotional difficulties, severe behavioural difficulties or English as a second language acquisition will not be addressed in this study. An in depth critique of current standardized tests and their uses will not be examined, but this may be a recommendation for further study.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will review the literature to examine some of the possible reasons for the underachievement of adolescent boys on standardized measurements of literacy and in classroom literacy activities. Secondly, it will review a number of authors’ recommendations for improving boys’ literacy achievement and in-school participation. Finally it will identify those literacy skills that will be necessary for the future and what schools can do to ensure that boys have opportunities to acquire them.

Standardized Testing and the Gender Gap

Results of recent standardized achievement tests across the western world have revealed that adolescent girls are significantly outperforming boys in literacy and these results are fuelling fears that boys may be in trouble academically. In 2000, 15 year old students from 32 countries throughout the industrialized world participated in a standardized assessment that focused primarily on literacy skills. Results indicated that girls performed significantly better than boys in all countries and across all Canadian provinces (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada 2000). Furthermore, literacy test results from these countries indicate that the literacy gap between boys and girls widens as students progress through the educational system from the primary to secondary grades (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Lenters 2006; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2000; Kecker 2006; Ontario Education 2007). These results have raised alarm across nations and incited politicians, media, educators, researchers and parents to focus their attention on boys’ literacy achievement (Martino & Kehler 2007; Moje 2002).
This gender gap in literacy achievement has existed for centuries, so why are educational stakeholders now so concerned, particularly as reading scores for both sexes has gone up overall (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Wallace 2008; McDonald 2007)? According to Wallace (2008), what has changed is the economic context; male employment patterns are changing and literacy skills are now more important than physical strength for acquiring highly paid jobs. Traditional skilled male working class jobs in areas such as manufacturing are decreasing while service sector jobs which require communication and interpersonal skills, customarily perceived as feminine, are expanding (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Arts 2008; McDonald 2007). Education and literacy have become more important for economic security than in the past, yet a decreased number of males are meeting college acceptance criteria (Queensland Department of Education, Training & Arts 2008; Ontario Education 2007; Kecker 2006).

Some research suggests that the increased concern is a result of a traditional backlash stemming from an educational agenda that has focused on the needs of girls at the expense of boys and a feminist movement which over the past decade has challenged gender roles both at home and in the workplace (Wallace 2008; Queensland Department of Education, Training & Arts 2008). Educators that don’t understand boys’ traits, classrooms and curriculum that are more accommodating for girls and a lack of male teachers and role models are cited as evidence of an educational system that has ignored the needs of boys (McDonald 2007; Queensland Department of Education, Training & Arts 2008). This position is reflected in current policies of right-wing politicians who are
using recent test results to promote and maintain hegemonic masculine stereotypes and regain the power and status that has privileged white middle class men in the past (Wallace 2008).

Nyland (2001) states that there is little difference between boys’ and girls’ potential for literacy, so why then do boys demonstrate less success on standardized literacy tests? Blair (2004) suggests that girls may be better at writing the tests, particularly as standardized tests contain elements that show bias towards girls. Salisbury, Rees and Gorard (1999) found that tests often favoured narratives, poetry and expository comprehension over action stories or informational reading preferred by boys. Test formats that involved extended writing instead of more structured response formats such as multiple choice and short answer, gave girls an edge (Salisbury et al. 1999).

Additionally, these tests focused on measuring “students’ capacity to engage with narrow forms of print based literate practice” and failed to measure “competence and skill in navigating alternative digital literacies” often preferred by boys (Martino 2003, p.10; Sanford 2005/2006, p. 305). They did not include the genres that many boys are involved in outside of school such as popular culture, electronic technologies and multimedia (Sanford, Blair & Chodzinski 2007; Alloway 2000).

Boys’ disinterest and resistance to standardized tests may also account for lower scores. Tests that contain material that is not of interest to boys or that does not reflect their life experiences and culture will be met with resistance and apathy (Lenters 2006). Additionally, tests that lack an authentic purpose and fail to provide immediate feedback
will reduce motivation to achieve (Cook 2005; Martino 2003; Wilhelm & Smith 2005). Standardized assessments are often perceived by students as disconnected from “what real readers do and achieve in their lives” and are often viewed as something only done for school purposes (Smith & Wilhelm 2006). Boys want activities to be contextualized, connected to their lives and to provide immediate feedback of their success; when these conditions are not met, boys are more likely than girls to disengage (Smith & Wilhelm 2006). Feedback from many standardized tests is often delayed, non-specific and impersonal and is frequently used to highlight weaknesses (Booth 2002). Boys who do not see themselves as literate beings may respond to these assessments with disinterest or resistance in order to mask their lack of confidence and feelings of incompetence (Booth 2002).

It should be noted that while test score data does indicate a literacy gender gap, not all boys are lagging behind all girls. Many boys are doing well on standardized tests and outperforming some of the girls. Weaver-Hightower in 2005 (cited in Wallace 2008) asserted that race and social class have a greater impact on achievement than gender; boys who are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class and traditionally masculine are doing well on tests (Freedom 2003). The OECD (2004) supports the positive correlation of socioeconomic factors and achievement citing that students of both sexes from higher socioeconomic backgrounds consistently outperform those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Interestingly, research shows that as income and status rise, the gap between the literacy achievement of boys and girls narrows (Freedom 2003).
In 2002 Hillocks (cited in Smith & Wilhelm 2006) emphasized the importance of not equating test scores with education. Standardized tests have limitations; they are designed to “measure literacy as it is performed and evaluated in school” and “may not correlate significantly with success in adult life” (Alloway 2000 p. 336). Martino and Kehler (2007) advocate for a “research-based response” to the crisis in boys’ literacy (p.406). A critical examination of boys’ literacy achievement must focus on which boys are struggling and consider multiple contributing factors including socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds and current pedagogical practices (Martino & Kehler 2007; Smith & Wilhelm 2006).

**Factors that Influence Boys’ Engagement and Achievement with Literacy in School**

In 2001 McCarthy (cited in Triplett 2004) states that “students who identify well with school and well with teachers tend to be more successful in school literacy and those who find identities defined by other aspects of their lives may not be as successful in school literacy practices” (p. 215). Engagement with literacy activities and successful achievement in school depend on many factors. While good reading skills are important, affective aspects of reading such as motivation, attitude and self-concept play a significant role, particularly with adolescents (Clark, Osborne & Akerman 2008). Family and cultural background, peers, educational policy, school systems and policies, teachers, curriculum and pedagogy all influence how well boys identify with and perform in school.
**School Culture of Femininity**

One current hypothesis for the literacy gender gap proposes “that boys’ apparent failure and disengagement with schooling are linked to a feminisation of schooling” (Martino 2003, p.407; Salisbury et al. 1999; Alloway 2000). Schools are criticized for failing to “accommodate boys’ needs and learning style” (Martino & Kehler 2007, p.407). A lack of male teachers in elementary schools and a language arts curriculum that appeals to the interests of girls are often cited as a rationale for this statement (Martino 2003).

Currently, there is no research based evidence indicating that increasing the number of male teachers will increase boys’ literacy (Martino & Kehler 2007). Moreover, the boys surveyed by Slade and Trent (2000) stated that they did not prefer male teachers over females; they did, however, want a teacher who was interested in them and cared about them.

Some researchers argue that reading, particularly the fiction reading done in language arts classes, is viewed by boys as a girls’ activity (Scieszka 2003; Freedom 2003; Martino 2003; Alloway 2000; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr 2002). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that the boys in their study did not view this reading as feminised, but did view it as “schoolish” which they described as being future oriented, not immediately relevant and focused on knowledge which was not valued outside of school (p. 83). Many boys expressed enjoying literacy activities when they were more like the literacy activities they pursued outside of school (Smith & Wilhelm 2002).
Martino and Kehler (2007) argue that blaming schools for being too feminised offers a simplistic view of the problem and fails to consider other factors that influence performance and gender construction such as teaching practices, culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Boys as a group are not homogenous and there is as much diversity among boys as there is between the genders (Ontario Education 2007). This statement is supported by other researchers who encourage educational stakeholders to take a socio-cultural approach to whole-school reform that does not reinforce a hegemonic masculinity or emphasize gender differences, and instead emphasizes a curriculum and pedagogy that allows for the construction of different masculine identities (Martino and Kehler 2007; Smith and Wilhelm 2002). In 2005 Francis and Skelton (cited in Martino & Kehler 2007) found that in classrooms where gender differences are less emphasized, boys’ achievement improves.

**Family and Background Culture**

The impact of the home in shaping boys attitudes toward literacy is significant; parental support, literacy habits, language use at home, cultural values and socio-economic status all influence boys’ literate behaviour. Parental support is powerful in developing literacy habits and positive attitudes. Boys who underperformed on literacy tests reported rarely or never reading at home (Freedom 2003; Traves 2000). Strommen and Mates (2004) examined factors that foster a love of reading and noted that adolescents who did not enjoy reading also “did not see recreational reading as an important part of their families’ lives” (p. 194). They stated that reading was not a priority for either their parents or themselves. Strommen and Mates (2004) also found that students who did not enjoy reading reported that once they entered school, they were no longer read to, nor were they
supported with access to books or encouraged to read for enjoyment. Many parents see reading instruction as the school’s job and are not aware of their importance in modeling or supporting their child’s literacy acquisition (Traves 2000). Parental literacy models, availability of reading materials, the amount of reading guidance and encouragement, and the amount of reading engaged in at home are important both for the literacy development of younger readers and for encouraging adolescents to read throughout secondary school (Clark et al. 2008; Freedom 2003).

Boys’ self perceptions and attitudes towards literacy and school are affected by their cultural context and ethnic background (Lingard et al. 2002; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Romano 2006; Clark et al. 2008; Coles & Hall 2002; Alvermann 2001b). Lingard et al (2002) reported that boys whose fathers held traditional gender roles and placed a higher value on activities such as sports, put less value on school literacy and associated reading as being more of a girls’ activity. This was particularly evident in boys from traditional Italian, Portuguese and Middle Eastern backgrounds (Lingard et al. 2002). Similarly, Fordham and Ogbu in 1986 (cited in Smith & Wilhelm 2002) reported that African American students, especially boys, associated literacy and school success with “acting White” and therefore rejected it (p. 78).

The language used in the home was also an important factor in literacy achievement. Students who do not share the language or life experiences of the dominant culture struggle more often with tests and activities that are based on a narrow perspective of language and literacy (Nyland 2001). In today’s classrooms, students bring different
experiences, different languages and different ways of using language. Curriculum and assessment that is not representative of these differences will exclude some students and put them at a disadvantage (Nyland 2001). Martino and Kehler (2007) state that achievement for all students improves in school environments where differences are recognized and celebrated and “high levels of connectedness” are fostered (p. 424).

Alloway (2000) noted that boys from higher socioeconomic backgrounds outperformed girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and emphasized the importance of looking at the influence of socioeconomic variables as well as gender and other factors in interpreting achievement results. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2004) reported that “socio-economic difference is the strongest single factor associated with performance”, but it also noted that homes that foster reading for enjoyment are more important predictors of school success than socioeconomic status alone (Martino & Kehler 2007, p. 414; Clark et al. 2008). Clark et al. (2008) affirm this statement with findings that the “home environment is a better predictor of children’s attitudes towards reading than social class memberships” (p. 12).

**Peer Culture**

Clark and colleagues (2008) emphasize the importance of peers and social interaction on reading attitudes; by adolescence, many boys are more interested in pleasing their peers than their teachers. Peer groups have a powerful influence on boys’ attitudes and behaviour toward literacy and school. Peer pressure directly impacts work habits, subject choice, relationships, and overall achievement (Lingard et al. 2002).
Smith and Wilhelm (2002) stress the importance of boys’ needs to feel competent amongst their peers. Some boys choose non-school literacy activities that give them “social capital” in a specific peer group or they may reject learning altogether in order to belong (Lingard et al. 2002, p. 81). Boys who struggle with reading find it hard to reconcile the lower social standing they are “offered in class with the social standing they aspire to in their relations with peers” (Moss 1999, p. 2). Many of these boys opt for non-school literacies that give them power in their peer groups and will often use strategies or behaviours that mask their poor literacy skills (Weinstein 2002; Moje 2002; Moss 1999). Activities such as writing rap lyrics, tagging or video game play can command respect from others and elevate self image particularly for students who are “marginalized by the educational process” (Weinstein 2002, p. 42).

Boys experience many pressures in school to behave in ways that conform to a narrow construct of masculinity (Blair & Sanford 2008). Some peer cultures encourage boys to behave in ways that are anti-school or may demand that they subscribe to a dominant stereotypical way of being male which interferes with school literacy success and their willingness to engage in literacy activities (Lingard et al. 2002; Alloway & Gilbert 1997; Blair 2008). For some boys, working hard in school is not considered cool and good grades are acceptable only if they appear effortless (Lingard et al, 2002; Clark et al. 2008). Disruptive behaviour is often utilized to impress other boys and subjects such as drama, dance and English are shunned as they are seen as being for girls or sissies (Lingard et al. 2002).
Clark and colleagues (2008) reported that a significant number of boys in their study perceived readers to be geeks or nerds and saw reading as “a girls’ thing”; several of the boys who stated they did not read, also remarked that they would be annoyed if someone said they were a good reader (p. 39). Many boys are pressured to conform to a masculine ideal in a peer group that restricts and polices their behaviours with consequences for non-compliance (Lingard et al. 2002). Romano (2006) attributes this phenomenon for partially explaining the gender gap in adolescent black males, particularly those from single mother households; their ideas of masculinity are connected to their sexuality and toughness and are at odds with developing literate practices. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) are supported by Martino and Kehler (2007) who argue that such restrictive, culturally embedded conceptions of masculinity actually prevent boys from learning and achieving in school and limit the acquisition of skills needed for life beyond school.

**Classroom Practices and Curriculum**

Slade and Trent (2000) documented the viewpoints from 1800 high school boys in a study that looked at decreased rates of achievement and retention in school. The overall perception from this group of subjects was that they “felt stuck in an unsuitable, out of date and culturally inconsistent learning environment” that they felt powerless to change (Slade & Trent 2000, p. 201). The boys wanted school to pay attention to their interests, be relevant to their current lives, allow choice and flexibility and be structured in a way that fits their learning style.

In 1997 Millard (cited in Clark et al 2008) stated that curriculum and reading materials that focused on fiction and narratives favoured girls and ignored boys’ interests; she
argued that this disadvantaged boys in school and again later in life as these materials were seldom found in the workplace. Boys reading choices often reflect their pragmatic interests and relate to their personal identity construction (Lenters 2006). Many of the materials that boys enjoy reading are not valued or encouraged in the classroom (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Clark et al. 2008). Action oriented stories, comics, magazines, graphic novels and multimedia texts such as videos, TV, cartoons, video games and songs are much more engaging and meaningful than traditional school texts (Sanford 2005/2006). Boys in particular are embracing these alternative texts and technologies (Sanford 2005/2006; Blair & Sanford 2004; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Booth 2004). Many teachers and some parents are reluctant to support the use of alternative texts in the classroom because they have not been part of their own cultural experiences or because they do not value them as “proper reading materials” (Sanford 2005/2006; Cavazos-Kottke 2005; Clark et al. 2008, p. 58). Many of the texts utilized in school, however, are “too far from the lived experiences” of students (Piper & Tatum 2006, p. 7). Boys who do not see themselves and their interests and texts valued in school, disengage from school literacy activities (Clark et al. 2008; Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Many boys who opt out of school literacy view themselves as non-readers and look to out of school texts to meet their literacy needs (Clark et al. 2008; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Cook 2005).

Boys will engage in literacy activities when there is a “clear and immediate purpose” such as finding out information or enjoying activities with friends (Smith & Wilhelm 2002, p. 104). Many school literacy activities lack this clear sense of purpose (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Clark and colleagues (2008) found that adolescents willingly engaged
with texts outside of school for purposes that were relevant to their own interests, but often failed to see the purpose of the reading assigned in school. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggest that boys’ underachievement can be explained by this “huge mismatch” between school literacy and how boys practice literacy outside of school (p. 14). They argue that “literacy in school needs to be more like literacy in life” in order to be relevant, meaningful and motivating (Smith and Wilhelm 2006, p. 155).

Boys’ learning styles are different from girls and may not be fully understood or accommodated in the classroom. Many boys prefer to learn actively in social contexts (West 2008b; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Slade & Trent 2000). Boys who are motivated when they explore, experiment and argue may not conform to the behaviour teachers expect from students in the classroom, however when these active learning styles are not supported, boys will not learn (West 2008b). Boys crave variety, novelty and fun and are easily bored with much of their schoolwork which they find repetitive and irrelevant (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; West 2008c; Slade & Trent 2000). Blair and Sanford (2002) found that boys who resisted many school-based literacy practices, often transformed them into “something more personally fun, engaging, meaningful, humorous, active and purposeful “(p. 452). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also found that humour was an important element in boys’ literacy; yet many boys interviewed by them claimed that laughter was never part of their school literacy experiences (p. 157).

Boys want to have control over their learning and literacy activities (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Much of the teaching that occurs in school is through methods that present
information as opposed to methods that teach how to learn and emphasize the joys of finding out (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Boys enjoy the immediate feedback from finding out something that they want to know as opposed to being told something that they may or may not be interested in (Smith & Wilhelm 2006). Boys also need to feel competent if they are going to be motivated and stay engaged with an activity; unfortunately many boys report that they feel that they will not succeed at school (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Smith & Wilhelm 2006; Bird 2007). Often texts that are assigned in school, especially textbooks, are information dense and written above the reading level of the students they are intended for (Jitendra, Nolet, Xin, Gomex, Renouf, Iskold & DaCosta 2001). They often present information from one perspective and the knowledge is disconnected from the ways in which it was initially procured; many boys find them boring, detached from real-life and difficult to read (Smith & Wilhelm 2002).

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

One of the most significant influences on boys’ engagement with literacy and school is the relationship they have with their teacher (Slade & Trent 2000; Lingard et al. 2002; Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Teachers who attribute underachievement to a problem with or a deficit in the boys or who fail to take an interest in the boys’ personal lives are quickly dismissed by students, especially by boys who will refuse to work for them (Slade & Trent 2000; Lingard et al. 2002). Teacher perceptions and expectations that ascribe problems to the boys negatively influence their literacy performance in school (Salisbury, et al. 1999). These teachers may hold the belief that boys don’t like to read or may attribute their underachievement as a lack of work ethic instead of examining their own teaching practices (Sanford 2005/2006).
Boys tend to express their dissatisfaction more overtly than girls through disengagement and mischief (Sanford 2005/2006; West 2008a). Many boys in the study by Slade and Trent (2000) reported behaving poorly for teachers with whom they did not connect. Boys want teachers who listen to them, laugh with them, respect them, encourage them to succeed and who don’t let behaviour affect their marks (Slade & Trent 2000). Lingard et al (2002) noted that the quality of relationships between both the student and teacher, and between students themselves, had the most impact in reducing behaviour problems and increasing time spent engaged in learning.

Inadequate Reading Skills and Motivation

Inadequate reading skills can set boys’ up for a downward spiral of failure and disengagement in school (Lenters 2006; Traves 2000). Boys who struggle to acquire early literacy skills can develop negative attitudes, misbehave and lose interest in reading if they do not receive intensive early intervention and home support (Traves 2000). Interestingly, Moje (2002) reports that some struggling readers devour books outside of school while others who have difficulty with spelling conventions are able to follow and teach complex rules for tagging. She joins Clark and colleagues (2008) in emphasizing the important role of contexts and the affective aspects of reading such as motivation, attitude and self-concept on achievement and engagement in literacy. Piper and Tatum (2006) suggest that schools change their focus from remediation of literacy skills to “honouring multiple literacies” and bridging the literacy gap between in-school and out-of-school contexts (p. 6).
Literate students are both able to read and choose to read (Lever-Chain 2008). Many boys who do not engage in literacy activities do have adequate reading skills (Blair & Sanford 2008). Lever-Chain (2008) suggests that schools turn boys off of reading with their skills-based teaching practices and formal approach in the early grades. Author, Paul Kropp, (2008) maintains that boys do not begin school with reading disadvantages, but by grade 3 there is a measurable problem. Scieszka (2003) proposes that lack of motivation is at the root of boys’ literacy problems. Literacy is more than “just accuracy with the written word”; it must motivate students by incorporating the social contexts, private practices and texts of students outside of school (Faulkner 2005, p. 112; Moje 2002).

The In-School/Out-of-School Literacy Gap

While test scores and research on boys’ engagement with classroom literacy indicate that boys in general do not perform as well as girls; more insight may be gained from examining another literacy gap, one between boys’ in-school literacy practices and their out of school literacy practices. There is “an increasing gap between the types of literacy activities being practiced in school and [those] out of school” (Sanford 2005/2006, p. 305). According to Blair and Sanford (2004) current research on boys’ out of school literacy practices indicates that there is “more going on for early adolescent boys than suggested by test scores” (p. 454). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) examined the in and out-of-school literacy activities of 20 young men who possessed many different interests and were from varied backgrounds. They found that while these boys were experiencing success in a variety of complex, challenging literacy activities that went beyond the narrow academic literacy activities valued and tested by schools, they did not perceive themselves as readers (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). In addition, Sanford and colleagues
(2007) found that even boys who struggled with school-based print text were highly literate outside of the classroom as they engaged with alternate literacy texts that included popular culture and technology. Similar findings are supported by other researchers (Moje, Young, Readance & Moore 2000; Moje 2002; Cavazos-Kottke 2005; Norton 2003; Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes & Williams 2007). In his experience with adolescent boys, Cavazos-Kottke (2005) found a common element for this phenomenon; a discrepancy between what the boys wanted to read and “the kinds of reading teachers valued” (p. 183). Digital technologies feature prominently in the out of school literacy practices of boys, but were not as readily available or utilized in school (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Honan 2008; Booth 2004). Digital texts were less prevalent; teachers lacked training or tended to focus on technical skills that students already possessed, access to computers was limited and schools lacked financial resources to keep up with technological demands (Honan, 2008). This gap between the way literacy is practiced at school and at home highlights the need for schools to examine their curriculum and teaching methods so that school literacy can be made more responsive to the needs of boys.

**Improving Boys Literacy Achievement**

Regardless of how boys performed on tests or engaged in school literacy, most agreed that school was important to their futures (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Lingard et al. 2002). Boys’ willingness to engage in literacy outside of school indicates that there is an opportunity for schools to learn what motivates boys and utilize these findings in the classroom setting to improve literacy achievement and engagement.
**Student-Teacher Relationships**

One of the most significant factors in engaging boys in literacy activities is the relationship of the student with the teacher (Slade & Trent 2000; West 2008b; Lingard 2002; Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Teachers who take a personal interest in boys, set high expectations for them, communicate to them that they are valued and liked and who teach to their individual needs will motivate boys to engage in literacy (West 2008b; Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Teachers who embrace teaching practices that offer choice and consider the interests of students empower students and create positive relationships (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt 2002). Child-centered practices such as inquiry based learning create teacher-student relationships that are more of a facilitative nature and more enjoyable for both (Alloway et al. 2002).

**Curriculum and Pedagogical Practices**

Some researchers advocate the development of boy-friendly curriculum and teaching practices while others emphasize the need to provide a curriculum that emphasizes “productive and authentic pedagogy” for all students that takes into account individual differences, without emphasizing gender binaries (Martino & Kehler 2007, p. 419). Both sides do agree on the importance of connecting curriculum content and its delivery to students’ lives outside of school (Martino & Kehler 2007, Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Moje 2002; Lenters 2006; Faulkner 2005).

Adolescent boys want literacy practices that are relevant and useful to them in their every day lives (Moje et al. 2000; Smith & Wilhelm; Promote active literacy 2002; Lenters 2006; West 2008c). Schools that privilege academic literacy and disregard the every day
literacy and language practices engaged in outside of school ignore boys’ needs and run the risk of alienating them and damaging their self concept as a literate being (Alvermann 2001a; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Piper & Tatum 2006; Cavazos-Kottke 2005; Coles & Hall 2002). Elements from both home and school literacy contexts are crucial for effective instruction that will be seen by boys as relevant; therefore schools must get to know their students out-of-school interests and literacy activities and provide authentic purposes for engagement as a starting point for making connections to academic literacy (Alvermann 2001a; Smith and Wilhelm 2006; Weinstein 2002).

Popular culture texts hold powerful and personal meanings for students and can be effective in bridging home and school literacy contexts; students are able to learn in a context that is familiar, meaningful and interesting to them and gradually expand their knowledge into more academic texts. Popular texts can validate diverse cultural and linguistic experiences, be used to teach language arts concepts, teach literacy across the curriculum and develop critical literacy skills (Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter 2003). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) describe how the popular television show, the Simpsons, can be used in a Language Arts curriculum to explore the concept of irony in the social and political contexts of the student’s world. They also describe using episodes of the Simpsons, the Doonesbury comic strip and scenes from The Fellowship of the Rings to introduce the concept of reliable sources before exploring this concept in academic texts. Alvermann and colleagues (2003) advocate for balancing academic goals with enjoyment of popular culture. They explain how a newspaper article about a cancelled Bratney Spears concert
can be used to develop critical literacy skills and explore real-life issues while engaging with a topic and text form that students enjoy (Alvermann et al. 2003).

The boys in Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) study emphasized the importance of having control over their learning; they wanted to be able to choose what they learned and read based on their current interests and they wanted a pedagogy where teachers facilitated and encouraged their independent learning. Inquiry-based learning can offer both control and choice to students. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) strongly advocate this approach to learning as it is based on real, relevant questions, can tap into students’ interests, allows choice in the texts utilized, allows choice in how knowledge is demonstrated and is easily transferable to how knowledge is gained in life. Furthermore, recent studies such as the Whirlwind and Annenberg projects in Chicago schools found that inquiry “leads to more retention, real learning and higher test scores” as well as increasing student motivation (Smith & Wilhelm 2006, p. 76).

Teachers can also allow give students choice in the texts they read. Cavazos-Kottke (2005) reports how increasing choice in his Self-Selected Reading (SSR) program was a “powerful motivator” that helped students, especially the boys; rediscover their “passion for reading” (p. 183). Wilhelm & Smith (2005) encourage teachers to pay attention to the texts that they see boys engaging with outside of the classroom and provide opportunities to include these texts in the classroom.
Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that the boys in their study wanted to be challenged, but also wanted to know that they would be successful. Tyrer (1999) reported that underachieving boys would tackle challenging literacy activities when they were “modelled, broken down into manageable bits and taught so success was guaranteed” in an environment that valued out-of-school literacies, incorporated technology and provided variety, structure, praise, rewards and respect (p. 2). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) emphasize the importance of frontloading as a prerequisite for success. Students who have background knowledge and a clear purpose before engaging with texts are able to successfully cope with literary challenges such as new vocabulary (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Additionally, using texts and experiences that students can relate to, setting a purpose that is of current relevance to students, and creating a learning context that is enjoyable will increase motivation and ensure successful learning even when content and texts are challenging (Smith & Wilhelm 2002).

Boys want to be actively involved in literacy activities; they want to do literacy (West 2008a; Ontario Education 2007). Incorporating activities and multiple media such as debates, discussions, role play, dance, cinematography, drawing and movie revues into English curriculum instead of more traditional approaches can inspire boys to get involved and improve their achievement. Bird (2007) utilized role-play to explore the motives, opinions and relationships of characters in both fiction and non-fiction books. Bird (2007) also found that getting students active by designing storyboards in the planning stage of writing helped them to structure their writing and create a better quality product. He found that this approach promoted good discussions, expanded vocabulary
and developed higher level thinking skills such as reasoning and analysis and motivated his boys to produce higher quality writing (Bird 2007). In 2005 Kist (cited in Bean 2005) emphasized the need for concrete, active literacy experiences involving multiple texts and described classrooms where students enthusiastically responded to literature through interpretive dance, designing ads for different media modalities, and creating original films for a film festival.

Providing Social Contexts for Literacy

Most boys surveyed by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) reported liking school because of the “social dimension of schooling” (p. 44). Boys value their social relationships and see them as contributing to their identity and overall learning (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) and Coles and Hall (2002) found that literacy activities that provided opportunities for socialization were more likely to engage and motivate the boys in their study. Lab work, buddy reading, literature circles, drama, discussions and debates were cited as activities the boys enjoyed (Smith & Wilhelm 2006; West 2008b).

Additionally, activities that made use of the computer encouraged social interactions within the classroom and provided a tool for connecting with people from all over the world (Smith & Wilhelm 2002).

Utilizing Peers

Peers can be very influential in shaping positive attitudes towards literacy and should be utilized to create a culture of reading within the school (Clark et al. 2008). Activities and programs that provide opportunities for peers to interact, share, discuss, and recommend books and other literacy materials are important for increasing engagement and
motivation (Clark et al. 2008). The Reading Champions program was launched in 2005 in the United Kingdom in response to concerns over boys’ and men’s underachievement and to address the lack of male role models for reading (National Literacy Trust 2008). It was developed to increase boys’ enjoyment of reading and uses peer and adult male role models along with competition and rewards as motivators (National Literacy Trust 2008). Schools invite influential boys to be Reading Champions and they organize activities and promotions within the school that encourage other boys to get involved in reading (National Literacy Trust 2008). Recruiting student leaders who were viewed by their peers as cool was especially effective in changing attitudes towards reading as it sent the message that reading is not just an activity for girls or geeks (Clark et al. 2008).

**Defining Literacy Broadly**

In today’s rapidly evolving global, technological world, the concept of literacy is currently “in flux” and is shifting away from its traditional definition of reading and writing; literacy basics must now incorporate reading and writing with digital, multimodal and semiotic systems (Blair & Sanford 2004, p. 452; Walsh 2008; Alvermann 2001a). The current school definition of literacy “excludes so much of what passes for literacy in the world” (Smith & Wilhelm 2002, p. 186). The demands of today’s world require a broader definition of literacy as students will need to be proficient in multiple literacies both for their professional and social futures (Moje et al. 2000; Lenters 2006). This will also require changes in educational policy and testing practices which still focus on print-based texts and necessitate that teachers discard their biases and embrace diverse texts such as magazines, comics and websites (Walsh 2008; Cox 2003).
Schools can be pro-active in re-defining and modeling an expanded notion of literacy. Clark and colleagues (2008) suggest libraries set up displays that include magazines, graphic novels, newspapers and interesting web sites. School curriculum reading lists can include websites, magazines, picture books, videos etc. (Clark et al. 2008). Teachers can read a variety of materials including technological texts to model that reading is more than just fiction and keep a variety of literacy materials in the classroom (Clark et al. 2008). Teachers can also offer students different ways of expressing their knowledge and ideas such as creating video documentaries, podcasts, blogs, web sites, digital stories, CDs; writing song lyrics and designing magazines or comic strips (Walsh 2008; Sanford et al. 2007). Cross-curricular projects that focus on relevant and authentic topics or questions can provide students with opportunities to utilize multiple texts and literacy strategies while also learning content (Moje et al. 2000). This wider definition of literacy would allow teachers to build off the strengths and interests that boys have in popular culture and media and better prepare them for a “modern world that uses a profusion of multimedia signs” (Smith & Wilhelm 2002, p. 186).

**Literacy Texts**

Many boys who did not engage with school literacy activities stated that they could read, but chose not to and ignored activities that they perceived as useless or boring; they were very selective in the texts they would read (Blair & Sanford 2008). Texts selected for use in the classroom need to be varied, relevant and appeal to the interests of all boys (Piper & Tatum 2006; Promote active literacy 2002; Lenters 2006).
Boys do willingly engage with texts when there is an authentic purpose such as finding out how something works, staying connected with friends, having fun or informing an interest such as keeping track of sports statistics (Blair & Sanford 2008; Sanford et al. 2007). Boys choose many different texts in order to construct their identities, pursue interests and to develop shared interests with friends (Blair & Sanford 2008; Coles & Hall 2002; Cox 2003). Engaging books along with other popular cultural texts provide opportunities for boys to explore their unique interests and can be easily exported into conversations with friends or family (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Providing boys with a variety of texts in the classroom that are relevant to their interests and providing opportunities to interact with others while reading are ways teachers can encourage boys to read (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). Martino and Kehler (2007) and Clark and colleagues (2008) stress the importance of selecting a wide and inclusive range of texts to meet the needs of all boys and to avoid inadvertently reinforcing stereotypical masculine identities.

Boys are interested in books that contain action, emotions, humour, novelty and visuals as well as popular culture texts such as movies, CDs, videos, magazines, comic books and graphic novels (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Sanford et al. 2007; Sanford et al. Coles & Hall 2002; Cox 2003). Teachers can utilize these diverse texts effectively and creatively to teach content. For some teachers this will require decreasing their reliance on print-based texts, especially textbooks, and incorporating texts that include the multimedia texts that boys willingly engage with outside of school into the classroom (Clark et al. 2008). Many researchers have documented boys’ dislike of reading textbooks (Lenters 2006; Wilhelm & Smith 2006). Textbooks are information dense and often boring to
read; they are meant to be utilized as tool for learning and not as a focus (Jitendra et al. 2001; Piper & Tatum 2006; Smith & Wilhelm 2002). The boys studied by Smith and Wilhelm (2006) did not want to passively receive information from textbooks, but wanted to experience it through primary documents and hands-on learning. Storied texts such as historical documents were preferred over textbooks as they featured “real stuff, by real people” and provided the character connections that the boys enjoyed (Smith & Wilhelm 2002, p. 151).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that being able to form a relationship with the characters in both media and print texts was important to boys regardless of their reading ability. Many boys reported that they read and reread books in series or collections that “allowed them multiple opportunities for engagement” with familiar characters, styles or genres (Smith & Wilhelm 2002, p. 153). This is supported by Scieszka (2003) who wrote the *Time Warp Trio* series for young, reluctant, male readers. The familiar events across the series encouraged readers to read more books providing them with “continued practice and success” (Scieszka 2003, p. 18).

**Authentic Assessment**

Boys are more literate than results from standardized test indicate (Martino 2003). Research on adolescent boys’ literacy practices outside of school indicate that boys do engage in skills for high reading achievement such as “integrating information across multiple texts” and “relating textual readings to personal experience”, yet standardized assessments point to a weakness in these skills (Moje 2002, p. 220). O’Brien (2001) studied 30 adolescents who had scored in the lowest quartile on a standardized reading
assessment and found that they demonstrated critical literacy skills in a variety of media texts. Slade and Trent (2000) state that the way achievement and education are delineated must be reviewed; current methodologies too narrowly define success and achievement. This is evident in current policies such as “No Child Left Behind” in the United States which emphasizes standardized testing as a way of defining achievement and relies on test scores to drive educational practice (Smith & Wilhelm 2006; Salisbury, et al. 1999). Researchers indicate that standardized tests require students “to be successful on assessments that have no connection to what people do in the world” and consider only traditional academic literacy practices (Smith & Wilhelm 2006, p. 161; Williams 2005; Alloway 2000). Smith and Wilhelm (2006) emphasize the importance of “assessments that centre on the accomplishments of real practices of literacy” and advocate for more meaningful assessment tools such as projects or portfolios that are connected to standards (p. 160). Blair (2008) echoes this recommendation stating that schools must revise their assessment practices and criteria so that they promote the kinds of literacies required for home and work.

Martino (2003) advocates for standardized tests that measure a broader spectrum of literacy activities and suggests that these may give a more complete assessment for both girls and boys by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in both groups. Current tests fail to measure areas of literacy where boys have an advantage such as information and communication technology and mask the disadvantage that many girls have in this area (Martino 2003).
Connecting with Home

Schools have a role in communicating to parents how important they are in nurturing positive reading attitudes throughout adolescence (Clark et al. 2008; Traves 2000). Parents who establish reading routines with their children, continue to support their access to books in the later grades and participate in ongoing dialogue about books establish a family culture of reading that is important for the literacy development of adolescents (Strommen & Mates 2004; Clark et al. 2008). Talking about reading, encouraging a wide range of materials that reflect their adolescent children’s interests, and praising both motivation and achievement are ways parents can promote literacy (Clark et al. 2008). Additionally, fathers or male caregivers can effectively support literacy for boys and are encouraged to get more involved with their sons’ literacy by modelling literate behaviour at home which sends a message that reading is for everyone (Clark et al. 2008).

Home literacy practices, however, are also evolving rapidly in response to technology and globalization. Video games are replacing board games; the internet which provides a source of instant information, entertainment, social contact and access to services is replacing many traditional literacy texts and practices spawning new communication genres such as e-mail and text messaging (Norton-Meir 2005; Wollman-Bonilla 2003). Many parents may be concerned by how readily these activities are embraced by their children, especially their sons, and worry that traditional literacy practices are suffering as a result (Alloway et al. 2002). Schools can help parents recognize and value these everyday literacies and facilitate home and school literacy connections that support a
broad definition of literacy (Cook 2005). Cook (2005) proposes replacing booklists with logs of reading experiences that include junk mail, comics, blogs etc. and incorporating everyday literacy activities such as home writing or website creation in the school assessment process. Both parents and teachers can show boys that literacy encompasses many texts and is relevant to their lives in both contexts.

**Defining Masculinity in Multiple Ways**

Adolescents’ engagement with literacy activities is important for shaping identities; boys construct their gender identities through talk, reading and writing (Lenters 2006; Blair 2008). Schools can provide boys with opportunities to construct their identities through exposure to texts and activities that reflect their diverse interests and needs in an environment that accepts and celebrates differences and encourages students to critically examine gender issues in the curriculum (Blair 2008).

Sanford (2005/2006) invites teachers to examine their “gendered assumptions and expectations” and provide “opportunities for all students to develop their identities more fully” (p. 314). Pedagogical practices that reinforce narrow masculine stereotypes can interfere with school literacy success (Blair 2008). Moje and colleagues (2000) advocate for critical literacy activities as an approach for helping boys to understand “how texts construct gender identities in stereotypical ways” (p. 407) These may include recognizing sexist language in media or examining how males are represented in books or movies (Moje et al. 2000; Coles & Hall 2002).
Author, Jon Scieszka (2003), stresses the importance of positive male role models for reading both at home and in all levels of school and highlights the need to change present social values and gender roles that send the message that reading is a girls’ activity. Scieszka developed the website Guys Read which collects ideas and provides a diverse list of book titles that boys recommend to other boys. He encourages librarians and teachers to utilize this site in creating a shelf of Guys Read books that reflects the interests of all boys.

**Incorporating Technology for Now and the Future**

According to Luke and Elkins (1998), literacy is “reinventing it self through digital technologies” (p. 4 check). To be fully literate in today’s world requires proficiency in “reading, responding to, and producing multimodal and digital texts” (Walsh 2008, p.101; Sternberg, Kaplan & Borck 2007). The boys’ in the study by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) ‘used technology in their out of school literacy activities “to communicate among themselves, to express their own views, to pursue their interests, and to do research and learn”, but seldom had these opportunities in the classroom (p. 166). Incorporating these digital technologies into classroom learning is crucial for relating to boys, meeting their needs and preparing them for the future as “reading and writing seldom occur in isolation for today’s students” (Smith & Wilhelm 2006; Clark et al. 2008; Walsh 2008, p. 101; Sternberg et al. 2007). Many teachers will need to learn “specialized literacy practices” that incorporate both traditional and technological forms of literacy (Moje et al. 2000, p. 401; Clark et al. 2008; Walsh 2008). Additionally, school districts will need to commit resources for teacher professional development and for the necessary technological infrastructure (Clark et al. 2008).
Utilizing the technology that boys engage with in their out of school literate lives can effectively motivate them to actively participate in academic activities. Carico, Logan and Labbo (2004) describe a project that built on the popularity of virtual chat rooms in order to engage students in meaningful discussions of academic novels. Students were offered a choice of novels and interacted with peers and pre-service teachers in an in-house, secure, chat room. The classroom teacher acted as a facilitator to guide and monitor discussions. This format was enthusiastically embraced by students who did not see the task as work. Additionally, the teacher was pleased with the quality and quantity of participation; students who would not usually participate in classroom discussions were more comfortable participating in the chat room (Carico et al. 2008).

Providing extracurricular opportunities to develop literacy skills through technology can also reach students who do not see themselves as literate. The Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth program (DUSTY) is an after school program for middle and high school students that utilizes information and communication technologies along with multimedia to teach literacy skills and encourage underachieving readers to “create new literate identities for themselves” (Alvermann et al.2007, p. 35). Through this joint University of California Berkley and community venture, students work with instructors to create digital stories, raps, beats and performances using tools such as Adobe Photoshop and iMovie which are displayed and celebrated in a final community event (D.U.S.T.Y. 2008).
Community Partnerships

Schools can form partnerships with community libraries and organizations to help connect in-school literacy activities with out-of-school literacy practices. One such organization called *Literacy through Hip Hop* works with libraries and schools to develop the literacy skills of underprivileged youth in grades 6 and 7 (Literacy through Hip Hop 2008). This program utilizes guest speakers such as rappers, dancers and graffiti artists and multimedia to encourage youth to use language and images along with reading, writing, speaking and listening to create and perform hip hop (Literacy through Hip Hop 2008).

Single Sex Classes and Schools

Single sex classes and single sex schools have been employed by some school districts to provide boy-friendly curriculum and teaching methods. Both are controversial and have been implemented with mixed results (Wallace 2008; Lingard et al. 2002). Gender based schools and classes run the risk of making “assumptions about being a certain type of boy” and thereby promote hegemonic masculine identities that can be counter-productive to literacy development (Martino 2003, p. 15). It is important to consider that boys’ as a group are not homogenous. Practices such as single sex classes, boy-friendly curriculum and texts as well as male role models must include many representations of masculine identity and celebrate differences (Lingard et al. 2002; Martino 2003).

Slade and Trent (2000) reported that most of the boys they surveyed were against single sex classes with the exception of PE and Technical studies; the boys stated that the presence of girls created an environment that was more conducive to work. Some
schools, however, find benefits to offering single-sex classes within a co-educational setting particularly in subjects such as English (West 2006). While some boys do benefit from single-sex arrangements, Lingard and colleagues (2002) emphasize that single sex classes do not in themselves guarantee a “school and classroom environment conducive to learning”; teaching practices, classroom dynamics and culture also need consideration (p. 92).

Currently, there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of single sex schools in raising the literacy achievements of boys (Wallace 2008). These schools often exist based on political and often elitist historical traditions that reinforce male stereotypes through pedagogical practices that marginalize boys who do not fit in (Wallace 2008). Blair, however, is quoted in the Edmonton journal as an advocate for single sex schools provided that they promote a curriculum and role models that emphasize positive masculine traits rather than reinforce stereotypical male identities (McKeen 2005).
Chapter Three – Analysis, Interpretation, Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to examine current literature in order to answer the following questions:

- What reasons are given for the underachievement of boys on standardized literacy tests?
- What reasons are given for the underachievement of boys in classroom literacy activities?
- How can classroom teachers make literacy activities more meaningful to boys?
- How can classroom teachers ensure that boys have the literacy skills they need for a global technological world?

Recent results from standardized tests of literacy that indicate boys are lagging behind girls along with expressed concerns from teachers about the growing disengagement of boys in classroom literacy activities have been described as an educational crisis. Educational stakeholders that include parents, teachers and politicians are scrambling to find reasons for boys’ underachievement so that they can implement educational policies and practices that will improve the engagement and achievement of boys in literacy. Much of the political focus has been on finding fault with schools, the context of the home or with the boys themselves. The problem, however, is not so simplistic. In today’s rapidly evolving world, technological and globalization forces are changing the very nature of literacy and redefining the skills and texts that constitute what it means to be literate. According to Walsh (2008), literacy skills must now include digital, multimodal and semiotic systems as well as reading and writing. Many boys are embracing literacy
activities that encompass this broader definition in their out of school lives. Boys’ literacy performance on standardized tests and in the classroom may, therefore, be more indicative of a gap between school literacy practices, including testing practices, and the way literacy is practiced outside of the classroom.

Standardized tests have proliferated over the past decade and test scores are being utilized by politicians in the western world to shape school practices and define educational success (Salisbury et al. 1999; Sanford 2005/2006). Policies that advocate for a back to basics curriculum and rely heavily on standardized tests in the name of accountability will not improve literacy achievement unless the basics are redefined in terms of today’s literacy needs, tests are designed that can authentically measure these skills and pedagogical practices are reformed to be relevant to the different experiences and language of all students. Current standardized tests are de-contextualized and only test a narrow spectrum of skills based on a narrow definition of literacy that considers the cultural backgrounds of only a small percentage of the population (Nyland 2001). Furthermore, even the most comprehensive standardized test will not be effective if they are not perceived as authentic and purposeful and representative of the backgrounds of all students.

New standardized tests are being developed for middle and high school students that will measure technology knowledge as well as the ability to “define, assess, manage, integrate, evaluate, create and communicate information in a technological environment”
(Kennedy 2006, p. 63). Results from these tests may reveal new patterns of literacy achievement; the literacy gender gap may narrow, be eliminated or even reverse.

Regardless of the results, it is important that schools use quantitative and qualitative data to determine which boys are struggling and why they are struggling in order to focus on reforming school practices so they are more inclusive of these students. Boys from low socioeconomic environments, homes where literacy is not modelled or encouraged and cultures that do not share the dominant language or life experiences of the schools are most at risk. Also at risk are boys whose masculine identities are at odds with school expectations and practices and boys with poor social skills or reading skills.

Tackling boys’ literacy achievement is closely linked to overall school improvement and each school’s approach will vary depending on student needs and stakeholder support (Bird 2007). Schools must examine the needs of all their students and adopt pedagogical practices that are inclusive. Teaching practices and curricular materials must become student-centered and build on individual interests, diverse cultural and language experiences and the out of school literacy practices of their students if they are to be relevant and meaningful. Curricular materials such as texts must incorporate a broader definition of literacy, provide a range of challenges and appeal to the diverse interests of the boys in the classroom in order to provide the choices boys want. Curriculum that is re-organized around questions and issues that are important and relevant to boys’ current lives will make activities more meaningful and motivating. Teaching practices that help students connect their school learning with their out of school world and provide them
with opportunities to work in authentic situations for real purposes will also increase relevance and motivation.

Slade and Trent (2000) found that many adolescent boys viewed school as a prison where they had little or no power over their learning. If schools want to engage boys, they must empower them by valuing their everyday texts, offering choice and giving them more control over their learning. These reforms will require a change in the role of the teacher from top-down provider of information to side-by-side facilitator, creating a teacher-learner model that shares power with students. Schools that utilize popular culture texts in the classroom demonstrate that they recognize and value the everyday literacy experiences, culture, language and skills that boys bring with them. Utilizing child-centered teaching methods such as project based learning or inquiry methods give boys more control over their learning. These power-sharing teaching methods provide opportunities for students to have choices in topic selection, reading materials, and presentation formats.

School literacy activities and assessment must be authentic and relevant if boys are going to participate. Activities that are driven by students’ interests and undertaken in a way that is closely aligned to the way they would be done in the world outside of school will have a better chance of being embraced. Boys want to do literacy the way it is done in the world. Reporting on real school or community events like a journalist, experiencing a historical event from the perspective of someone who was there, producing a music video or hip-hop routine like an artist or making a presentation for an advertisement using
multi-media are all examples of literacy activities that are part of life outside of school. Additionally, assessments that are authentic to the task and provide immediate feedback with a focus on what was learned will be more accepted by boys.

Some schools and districts have taken steps to make schools more *boy-friendly*. Increasing the number of male teachers, creating single-sex classes or schools, developing curriculum and providing books that are of interest to boys are some of the changes that have been made. Ironically, schools that de-emphasize gender differences and focus on curriculum and pedagogical practices that support multiple ways of being male have proven to be more effective in improving boys’ literacy achievement and participation (Martino & Kehler 2007). It is crucial that the “gender gap” not become a political battlefield that pits boys versus girls and invites policy and methods that reinforce stereotypical versions of male identity. Instead schools can become the place where boys can explore their masculinity as they critically examine themselves and the cultural influences that promote hegemonic masculine identities.

The importance of the home environment in supporting boys’ literacy cannot be underestimated. Research shows that parents who model literacy at home, who encourage reading throughout adolescence and who value their boys’ non-traditional literacy practices help their children see themselves as literate beings. A supportive home environment can also offset factors that may negatively affect literacy achievement such as low socioeconomic status and cultural and peer pressures. Schools must work to make positive connections with the home so that they can support parents in creating an
environment conducive to literacy development and as a means to access information about the interests, language and literacy practices of their students.

Many of the literacy practices that boys pursue outside of school involve computers and multi-media. Proficiency with information and communication technology is rapidly becoming a necessity both at home and in the world of work (Walsh 2008). Schools have been slow to embrace these technologies in the curriculum for many reasons. The high cost of acquiring, maintaining and updating technology, the lack of teachers who are trained to use it and the privileged status of print-based texts are some of the barriers that currently prevent schools from incorporating technology throughout the curriculum. As long as literacy is primarily focused on traditional print-based texts, the gender gap will remain and possibly widen as boys will continue to develop their multiple literacy skills outside of school; skills which they see as more connected to their fast-paced global digital world. Additionally many girls will miss opportunities to develop broader literacy skills if they do not pursue them outside of school, disadvantaging them later in life.
Chapter 4 – Summary

Adolescent boys’ literacy achievement scores relative to girls are a concern to all stakeholders in the educational system including parents, politicians, teachers and researchers. The reasons for this gender gap are complex and solutions will be pervasive. There is a need to approach this issue with an open-mind and a willingness to make significant changes to educational policy, curriculum and teaching and assessment methods based on comprehensive research.

There are many factors that impact on boys’ achievement and their willingness to engage in school literacy activities. The influence of people in boys’ lives is significant. Home support; the presence of literacy role models, particularly males; peer attitudes toward school and the relationship with the teacher all affect boys’ motivation and determine whether they will participate in or opt out of school literacy. Curriculum and teaching methods can inspire boys or turn them off. Curriculum and texts that ignore boys’ current interests and focus on a narrow definition of literacy that privileges print-based materials will fail to engage some boys.

While, standardized tests have flagged a literacy gap between boys’ and girls’ achievement, it is the boys themselves that are highlighting a different gap, one that is of more concern. Boys’ apparent underachievement and lack of motivation in school literacy is in contrast to their active and successful out-of-school literacy pursuits. Many boys are disengaging from school literacy because they do not perceive it as relevant to their current lives. Finding a solution to the literacy gender gap must also include
comprehensive educational reforms that make school relevant to the current lives of young men.

At the centre of the solution are the interests and needs of all children. Improvements that are implemented solely on the basis of gender, risk ignoring other factors and may perpetuate masculine stereotypes that can further erode literacy achievement. A school culture and curriculum that is representative of the diverse backgrounds of students and is inclusive of multiple masculine, and feminine, identities will invite engagement and learning. Defining literacy broadly will increase the likelihood of including the diverse interests of students and providing the choices they desire. Student-centred teaching methods such as Inquiry will allow students to pursue interests for real purposes and be assessed in authentic ways. Utilizing popular culture, critical thinking and technology will build connections between students’ in-school and out-of-school worlds making school learning more relevant and providing skills for work in a global, technological world.
References


