Gender Gap in Education – Issues and Strategies
Snapshot of the Literature[1]

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Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services (CRECS), March 2012

Many Western societies today are struggling to understand the reasons behind an alleged downtrend in boys' educational performance and seek to develop appropriate responses. This literature review will summarize the most common debates in the area of study, and will offer some considerations about possible future practical school-based strategies.

A wide number of studies over the last two decades tried to pinpoint the reasons for the growing gender gap. There are currently four broad schools of thought in educational research literature: (1) popular-rhetorical, (2) theoretically-oriented,(3) practice-oriented, and (4) feminist (Weaver-Hightower 2003).

Popular-rhetorical literature

This type of literature argues that boys are at a considerable disadvantage even when socio-economic ranking and race are taken into account. It focuses on re-masculinising educationin order to cater to boys who are seen as "victims of single-parent families, female-dominated primary schooling, and feminism which has enabled girls' successes" (Skelton 2001, p.6). Also included are studies that acknowledge a natural degree of difference between boys and girls. Generally, strategies suggested by popular-rhetorical literature focus on 'boy-friendly' approaches (i.e., expansion of sports programs, increased opportunities for competition, etc.).

Theoretically-oriented literature

Acknowledging that there is no single notion of 'masculinity', this perspective seeks to determine society's role in reproducing established labels, and to eventually challenge this practice (Weaver-Hightower 2003). Most theoretically-oriented studies agree that the solution to boys' underachievement lies in the long-term objective to challenge the stereotypical male image. They caution against enforcing 'quick-fix' solutions' or 'boy-friendly'[curricula]", as these are more likely to inadvertently reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity without properly investigating the kinds of differences in which boys are actually interested (Martino et al., 2004). In broad terms, interventions must be based on collaboration rather than competition (i.e., group work), fostering a strong ethic amongst both sexes, and giving students the opportunity to critically reflect on their own needs (Warrington, 2000).

Practice-oriented literature

Practice-oriented literature (i.e., case studies, policy documents, etc.) concentrates on developing strategies and interventions as well as new tools for testing and evaluation. Principally, this type of research "seeks to ameliorate the academic and social problems of boys at the classroom

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[1] This literature brief was developed in responses to request(s) at a Regional Instructional Leadership clinic, sponsored by MISA-PNC, held at the University of Ottawa, Feb 24, 2012. The review is intended as a brief overview and to provide fodder for further reading, discussion and consideration. Comment and questions are welcome: Please correspond with Brad Cousins, CRECS, University of Ottawa: bcousins@uottawa.ca

level" (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). These studies are primarily concerned with finding short-term solutions that would benefit boys in the context of the particular school in question.

Feminist and pro-feminist literature responses

This last category of research stresses that by solely focusing on boys, educators begin to disregard the needs of girls, who on average, fare worse later in life (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). This perspective has shifted over the years to one which questions *which* of the boys are struggling, and argues that class, race, religion, and sexual orientation can play an important role in boys' educational underachievement, rather than gender alone (Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Literacy - Strategies

Although there appears to be no single solution for improving literacy performance, a number of classroom interventions aimed at improving boys' engagement have already been carried out. Drawing on the theoretical discourses outlined above, the following are examples of some of these strategies.

Use of technology

Boys' attitudes such as non-compliance, lack of interest, and disengagement have been linked to issues of self-esteem (Warrington et al., 2000). However, it was found that teachers who employed hands-on approaches and/or utilized technology also observed boys developing an increased interest in the activity. Technology can be used in various ways, such as in co-authoring and co-production of e-books/magazines/newspapers, or marketing and design of CD packages. Technology competence is common amongst boys, thus its use allows boys to demonstrate their skillsin a meaningful and dynamic way (Alloway et al., 2002). Finally, producing a better product contributes to a positive presentation of the self, ultimately affecting boys' confidence in an encouraging manner (Alloway et al., 2002).

Active learning and personal histories

Some schools found that boys became more engaged in literacy activities when given an opportunity to choose a topic related to their interests (Atkinson 2009; Gallagher 2009). Choosing a topic permitted boys to become active researchers, more vigorously involving them in their own learning experience (Alloway et al., 2002). Furthermore, inviting boys to share their findings with the rest of the class can help them become 'experts', thereby promoting confidence building (Alloway et al., 2002, see Appendix A).

A number of theoretically-oriented scholars said that the process of involving all students, and not *just* boys, in the selection of materials for the classroom may enhance their sense of ownership while giving the teacher an opportunity to discover in what youth are interested. This is particularly important for those boys who may not be fascinated by technology or topics connected to essentialist notions of masculinity (Watson, 2011). In such circumstances, the teacher must understand the nuances and complexities of individual students' situated histories so that literary practices must be adjusted accordingly (Watson, 2011).

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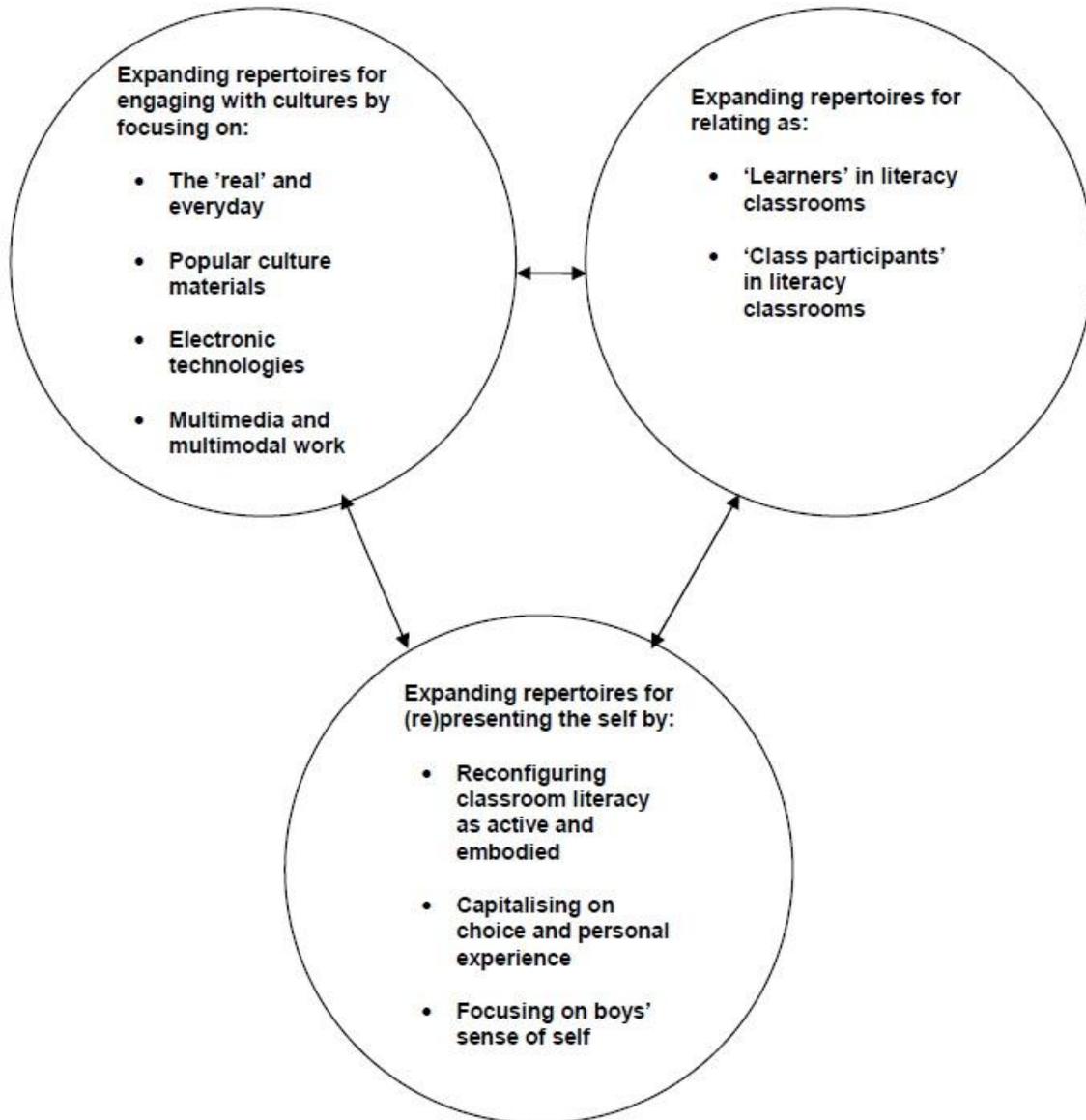
Further Reading

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APPENDIX A: Teacher recommendations for improving boys' literacy outcomes

Figure 8.1: Teacher recommendations for improving boys' literacy outcomes

Expanding repertoires for
engaging with cultures by
focusing on:

- The 'real' and
  everyday

- Popular culture
  materials

- Electronic
  technologies

- Multimedia and
  multimodal work

Expanding repertoires for
relating as:

- 'Learners' in literacy
  classrooms

- 'Class participants'
  in literacy
  classrooms

Expanding repertoires for
(re)presenting the self by:

- Reconfiguring
  classroom literacy
  as active and
  embodied

- Capitalising on
  choice and personal
  experience

- Focusing on boys'
  sense of self

Source: Alloway, et al. (2002). *Boys, Literacy, and Schooling: Expanding the repertoires of practice*.
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