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Les garçons, les livres et l'homophobie: exploration des pratiques et politiques de la masculinité dans les écoles

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Article abstract

Disturbed by a proliferation of quick-fix literacy strategies to "help the boys" increase achievement levels in the midst of a policy shift that acknowledges gay, lesbian, bi and transgender, questioning (GLBTQ) youth, the author examines how masculinities are connected to literacy practices and negotiated through a safe school policy. He argues that specific literacy strategies recommended in recent support documents for teachers are limiting and restrictive because of a narrow view connecting gender and masculinity to literacy practices that reinscribe heteronormative masculinity in schools. He further argues that strategies to increase literacy achievement levels among boys run contrary to a more embracing school board policy aimed at acknowledging diverse multiple youth identities.

BOYS, BOOKS AND HOMOPHOBIA: EXPLORING THE PRACTICES AND POLICIES OF MASCULINITIES IN SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT. Disturbed by a proliferation of quick-fix literacy strategies to "help the boys" increase achievement levels in the midst of a policy shift that acknowledges gay, lesbian, bi and transgender, questioning (GLBTQ) youth, the author examines how masculinities are connected to literacy practices and negotiated through a safe school policy. He argues that specific literacy strategies recommended in recent support documents for teachers are limiting and restrictive because of a narrow view connecting gender and masculinity to literacy practices that reinscribe heteronormative masculinity in schools. He further argues that strategies to increase literacy achievement levels among boys run contrary to a more embracing school board policy aimed at acknowledging diverse multiple youth identities.

LES GARÇONS, LES LIVRES ET L'HOMOPHOBIE : EXPLORATION DES PRATIQUES ET POLITIQUES DE LA MASCULINITÉ DANS LES ÉCOLES

RÉSUMÉ. Dérangé par la prolifération, au sein de la littérature, de stratégies « remède rapide » visant à « aider les garçons » à améliorer leur niveau de réussite au cœur d'un changement de politique reconnaissant les jeunes lesbiennes, gais, bi et transgenres, et ceux en questionnement (LGBTQ), l'auteur s'interroge sur la façon dont les masculinités sont apparentées aux pratiques de lecture et traitées par une politique scolaire réfléchie. Il suggère que certaines stratégies mises de l'avant et recommandées dans la littérature et documents destinés aux enseignants sont contraignantes et restrictives. En effet, elles offrent une vision restreinte en reliant sexe et masculinité à des pratiques de lecture qui réaffirme la norme de la masculinité hétérosexuelle au sein du milieu scolaire. L'auteur avance même que les stratégies mises de l'avant pour augmenter les niveaux de lecture des jeunes garçons nuisent aux politiques plus ouvertes des commissions scolaires visant la reconnaissance d'une variété d'identités chez les jeunes.

INTRODUCTION

In response to published achievement scores from the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004), a groundswell of debates about boys, literacy, and schooling has emerged on a national and international scale. Considerable media hyperbole has contributed to the debates, suggesting that boys, not girls, are underserved and the newly disadvantaged. These debates are not new, but the attention given to concerns for boys' underachievement has received considerable media attention (see Francis & Skelton, 2005). There is a resounding call to "fix the problem" in what appears to be an endless effort to "help the boys" and "save the boys" without fully addressing or acknowledging *which boys* are in need. Ironically, while strategies are being proposed to increase achievement levels among boys, a troubling tension is developing between those quick-fix approaches and emerging safe school policies intended to acknowledge a broader diversity of youth in schools.

I begin this paper by outlining the calls for quick-fix strategies to increase achievement levels for boys while identifying an undercurrent in those calls that runs counter to safe schools policy initiatives. Second, I provide an examination of specific literacy strategies proposed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. And finally, I raise questions about how heterosexuality operates in relation to homophobia in schools. I argue in this final section that the visibility and invisibility of heterosexuality powerfully influences the degree to which heteronormative masculinity prevails in schools. I conclude this paper by suggesting that tensions between Ontario curricular initiatives to improve literacy achievement levels among boys and safe school policies need to be more closely aligned with one another so that administrators as well as teachers can provide a more consistently supportive and inclusive climate for *all* students.

UNPACKING THE GENDER BINARY

Much of the dominant discourse informing band-aid solutions to help boys in English Language Arts lands squarely at the familiar intersection of gender and achievement. Largely a re-emergence of past bio-determinist brain sex positions (see Alloway, 2007; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002), which argue that boys and girls learn differently, the mainstream discourse to "help the boys" operating in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere has implications in practical terms that translate into particular literacy practices. These practices, I argue, are aimed at restoring a normative view of masculinity as natural and pre-determined. This recuperative position, largely held by a conservative right men's politics, considers boys to be naturally active, aggressive, and competitive and, as such, a particular kind of learner, different from girls (see Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009; Mills, 2003; Rowan et al, 2002; Sanford, 2005).

In this paper, I argue that this positioning of boys and girls is an active and strategic attempt to restore what, in Hoff-Sommeresque terms, is a "sex under siege" in the "war against boys" (Hoff-Sommers, 1998). In the following section, I illustrate how the literacy practices to "help the boys" are an authorization of a particularly restrictive form of masculinity at the expense of non-conforming, non-normative masculinities, in addition to the raced and classed masculinities presently missing from the ongoing debates (see Blair & Sanford, 2004; Dutro, 2002, Frank, Kehler & Davison, 2003; Kehler, 2007, 2008; Martino, 2001, 2003, 2008). As the OECD acknowledges, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are on average less engaged in reading (OECD, 2004). The current response to increase boys' literacy achievement levels inadequately addresses discrepancies that, once disaggregated, tend to reveal the impact race and class have on achievement levels. (For a useful discussion see Francis & Skelton, 2005; White, 2007.) From within a critical literacy framework (see Alloway, 2000; Alvermann, 2001; Hicks, 2001; Hinchman, Payne-Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott, 2002; Martino, 2001, 2003; Taylor, 2005; Young, 2001), I highlight some unsettling tensions between a recuperativist politic intended to restore normative masculinity (see Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009) in the English Language Arts classroom and a safe school policy aimed at embracing a diversity of sexualized and gendered identities of youth in secondary schools.

Dillabough (2001) provides a useful overview of the emergence of gender theorizing in education. As she notes, recent theorizing in gender and education research has witnessed the emergence of feminist post-structuralism and a significant shift toward deconstructing language and gender identity as unstable and constantly in flux. Rather than rigid and static, gender is understood to be fluid and less restrictive. Judith Butler's (1999) theorizing of gender acknowledges the performativity of gender and the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence (p. 42-43). As Butler argues, gendered/sexualized identities are consolidated through a heterosexual matrix of power in the effort to evade "'gender trouble'" (p. 42-43). As such, schools are sites in which gender is actively performed and negotiated in different contexts to protect or maintain gendered identities while deflecting public scrutiny or criticism. Gender is an active performance.

Research in education reveals that boys routinely negotiate multiple masculinities in which they actively take up or reject positions of masculinity. Connell (1995) describes this process as a "*moment of engagement* with hegemonic masculinity" (emphasis hers) in which boys take up this project of masculinity as their own (p.122). There is no one form of masculinity or femininity but rather competing, contradictory, and overlapping forms (see Connell, 1995, 2000; Kehler, 2004, 2007; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2004). This research and conceptual framing of gender, and masculinities in particular, stands in stark contrast to conservative calls to "save the boys" through policy initiatives aimed

at "helping" the newly disadvantaged and increasing literacy achievement levels (for a critique of recuperative politic responses see Alloway, 2000; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2006). While sex brain proponents such as Michael Gurian (2002) and Leonard Sax (2005) have gained considerable media attention for their position, there is still much debate in recent research which argues that differences among and across boys significantly fractures the claim that *all* boys are underachieving. Moreover, as I argue here and elsewhere (see Martino & Kehler, 2007), sex brain theorists arguing that boys and girls are hard-wired rely on conclusions that fail to account for the overwhelming evidence that race and class are significant if not central factors underlying school achievement levels. (For a useful discussion of the competing debates see Francis & Skelton, 2005.) From this position, I raise questions suggesting that the current framing of boys and the efforts to restore masculinity through specific literacy initiatives are in fact efforts to reclaim and reinstate a heteronormative masculinity that flattens and homogenizes boys as a coherent group of literate subjects. I reject arguments suggesting that the current round of literacy initiatives in Ontario is driven by a new or renewed concern that boys are slipping in achievement scores. Considerable evidence already exists illustrating that some boys are indeed underachieving but not *all* boys. In fact, the issues intersecting boys, literacy, and schooling are much more complicated than evident in the public discourse when, for example, race and socio-economic background are taken into consideration (see Alloway, 2007; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Froese-Germain, 2006; White, 2007). James (2009), for example, explains that the process of racialization of masculinity powerfully influences and contributes to the marginalized boys we see in many Canadian schools and "ultimately affect[s] the educational participation, aspirations, possibilities, and outcomes of students" (p.104). This discussion is not within the scope of this paper but is addressed in the literature (see Francis & Skelton, 2005; James; 2009; Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009), although it receives less attention in approaches that support developing literacy practices in schools.

Men's studies and profeminist research (see, for example, Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1997) extends this theorizing by arguing that many men routinely ride gender boundaries protecting themselves by "checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through" (Kimmel, 1994, p. 132). Similarly, many boys actively try to deflect suspicion that they are anything less than men. Kimmel (1994) describes the surveillance and scrutiny of peers who act as "gender police constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies" (p. 132). A manly front is maintained by actively constructing and reconstructing a façade of masculinity that publicly affirms heterosexuality through exaggerated rules and norms of masculinity. The relationship between heterosexuality and homophobia is unmistakably parasitic when young men feel the need to prove

their manhood at all costs. Men's fears of being suspected as gay operate in a powerful manner to sustain and maintain narrow and restrictive versions of masculinity. The link between heteronormative masculinity and its location in, for example, the English classroom is significant. I elaborate on this aspect in the following section.

LITERATE SUBJECTIVITIES AND EFFORTS TO "HELP" THE BOYS

In this section I raise questions about proposed strategies to improve literacy among boys. By building on the above mentioned work, I challenge the static concepts of masculinity and literacy currently informing the strategies for literacy success among boys. In doing so I expose a) essentialist notions of masculinity, b) the limiting and restrictive practices associated with restoring heteronormative masculinity, and c) the implications this may have on safe school policies. I argue for a more critical reconsideration of how current efforts to address the "problem with boys" and underachievement levels among "the boys" in English Language Arts classrooms may inadvertently undermine progressive steps to support diverse masculinities and, more broadly, create safe spaces for gay, lesbian, bi, transgender, and questioning (GBLTQ) youth in our school communities.

There is a remarkable sense of urgency to the attention currently being focussed on boys, literacy, and schooling. As mentioned in the introduction, this level of urgency has been driven largely by media hype. Canada, similar to Australia and the UK, has increasingly engaged in a debate calling for formal action and initiatives to address boys' underachievement levels. At the provincial level, the *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of Ontario*, for example, supported a research monograph addressing boys' underachievement (see Martino, 2008). Within the scholarly community, a special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Education* published "Boys, literacies and schooling," in which the contributors address the international scope of concerns intersecting literacies and boys' education. Beyond the academic community, the media has spurred on this hype with references to a "moral panic" or "crisis of masculinity" that has captured the national and international limelight (see Alloway, 2000, 2007; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Rowan, et al, 2002).

Much of the concern about boys' school performance and the accompanying panic about boys and literacy has morphed, or as Alloway (2000) argues, "transfigured into concern about their performance of masculinity" (p. 334). The suggestion that boys are being feminized or the school curriculum is biased toward girls' learning styles relies on ideological assumptions. For example, advocates, of single-sex boys' schools in Toronto, Ontario, connect boys, underachievement, and schooling with a concern that boys are not being allowed to "just be boys." Schools, they argue, cater to girls' learning styles and support feminine interests, not boys' interests or learning styles (see Wingrove

& Reinhart, 2009; for a critique of learning styles theories, see Ivie, 2009). In the largest school board in Ontario, Chris Spence, a Toronto School Board Superintendent, claims that "boys learn differently from girls and have *suffered* under a unisex model for child rearing and teaching"(Wingrove & Reinhart, 2009). In the public domain, the argument is framed neatly and tightly as an either-or, us-them, the boys against the girls issue, and most importantly, a question of who comes out on top.

Provincially, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has responded to some of the aforementioned public concerns by producing a document offering a set of strategies to improve boys' literacy. Following in the same footsteps, The Manitoba Ministry of Education has adopted the document. Widely distributed throughout the province to faculties of education and school boards, and adopted by many teachers, this document (*Me Read? No Way!: A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills*) is part of an initiative to support student success in literacy, but specifically *boys'* literacy. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004), the strategies they offer reflect "the most important research on how boys learn to read and write and the most effective instructional approaches and strategies for helping boys enjoy learning to read and write well" (p. 2). The Ministry claims that its "solution" to the "problem" with boys aims at providing "classroom experiences that respond to the interests, needs, and learning styles of all students, and that we explore ways to engage boys and girls equally as readers and writers" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 5). The actual position the authors take on literacy, gender, and achievement, however, is implicit and not explicit in the practices they propose for increasing achievement levels among boys. In particular, I argue here and elsewhere (see Martino & Kehler, 2007) that the Ministry is unequivocal in its commitment to "recuperating and reasserting gender differences in the classroom through pedagogical interventions and curriculum reform designed to cater to boys particular orientations in learning" (Martino & Kehler , 2007, p. 414). I want to also argue that noticeable by its absence is the Ministry's failure to acknowledge diverse masculinities and, in doing so, inadvertently threatening to re-inscribe rather than reform traditional masculinities (see also, Epstein *et al.,* 1998, Foster *et al.,* 2001; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Jones & Myhill, 2007; Mills, 2000, 2004; Titus, 2004). In other words, while the proposed guide is aimed at improving literacy skills for boys, the strategies outlined by the Ministry actually threaten to marginalize some boys and their literacy practices. Boys who, for example, do not share what the Ministry claims to be a common interest in "adventure" series or a sense of mischief may be misunderstood and misinterpreted by other boys. The stereotypical expectation of what boys ought to read and what interests boys ought to have is short-sighted and counter-productive if the Ministry intends to be responsive to *all* boys. Rather than acknowledge a repertoire of literacy practices, interests, and reading preferences available to both boys and girls, the Ministry's sugges-

tions for literacy and engagement further entrench a singular notion of boys and girls as monolithic and unidimensional literate subjects. In short, the proposed literacy practices outlined by the Ministry to increase achievement levels among boys are practices that rely on stereotypical assumptions about boys as well as girls and may in fact contribute to self-constraining reading practices stemming from such gender-based literacy reforms (see Chapman et al, 2007). In doing so, this set of strategies fails to acknowledge the impact that culture and negotiated masculinities and femininities have on the ways students develop as literate subjects and, in short, relies all too simplistically on biological sex differences (see Hatchell, 2006; Martino, 2008; Martino & Berrill, 2003).

A relatively narrow and limited conception of masculinity is evident in the various practices the Ministry recommends. Consider for example, how gender differences are framed in relation to literacy. With reference to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), the Ministry document notes that;

• Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do;

• Boys read less than girls;

• Boys tend to be better at information retrieval than girls are
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 6).

The distinctions made by the Ministry repeatedly differentiate boys' and girls' learning and reading in terms that essentialize and homogenize gender as a unidimensional concept or dimorphic social identity. Gender-specific reading strategies are proposed on the basis that boys and girls are biologically different and thus naturally predisposed to different learning styles. Most evident in the proposed strategies is the underlying claim being made about effective learning based on gendered assumptions. The Ontario Ministry of Education further conceptualizes masculinity by suggesting that:

Boys like to read:

• Books that reflect their image of themselves;

• Books that make them laugh and that appeal to their sense of mischief;

• Fiction, but preferably fiction that focuses on action more than emotions;

• Science fiction or fantasy (many boys are passionate about these genres)
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 8).

The author relies on unquestioned assertions describing boys' literacy practices as unique and distinctly different from girls' literacy practices. This perception of boys and girls as different types of readers and learners is captured in the "try it now" section of the guide, in which the Ministry proposes, "Involv[ing] boys by creating a 'boys only' zone in the library and by encouraging boys to

recommend their favourite texts to others" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 13). The premise that boys and girls need and should operate from different "zones" underscores the Ministry understanding of distinctly separate and gendered literacy practices. In addition, this approach begs the question of who the "others" are for whom these boys might be making recommendations. By isolating boys' and girls' reading materials, the Ministry essentializes boys' and girls' reading practices and interests and implies polarities between how and what they read.

By polarizing boys' and girls' interests and suggesting there be a zone of separation, the Ministry employs sex-based theories of learning. In short, the Ministry adheres to a biological explanation that centres on boys as *naturally* active learners while girls are typically passive. A survey of the references cited by the Ministry as "the most current research" further substantiates the particular framework they draw from to suggest that boys and girls learn differently. Pedagogically, the Ministry is consistent in its framework; for example, the author suggests, "for many boys, literature appears to involve a secret code, one that is understood by authors, teachers and some students, especially girls" (p. 17). The author continues drawing on Pirie (2002), who claims that "boys don't like to feel stupid but they sometimes do, especially around girls, women and English teachers. Women . . . often leave things unspoken, expecting men to read between the lines. . . . This makes boys feel nervous" (as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 17). The implication is that communication for boys and girls is distinctly different, causing boys to work harder to decode language while girls can do this much more easily based on some innate ability. This position further entrenches the assumption that boys do not fit in English classrooms and, moreover, that these classrooms tend to be feminized and more ideally suited to girls' learning styles. And though the Ministry arguably employs a critical literacy framework that might interrogate texts, the proposed strategies are framed by a masculinist discourse that suggests "for many boys, intellectual sparring is a way of showing their interest and engagement in a subject" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 33). The suggestion that, when employing a critical literacy framework, teachers need to "be prepared to welcome intellectual challenges" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p.33) because "boys enjoy figuring things out," implies that girls do not present the same kind of intellectual challenges or engagement as boys. Moreover, the Ministry's positioning of boys and girls as disparate learners and readers appears to be implying that the competitive, combative "sparring" is reserved for the way boys learn *naturally.*

The move to improve literacy achievement levels for boys has been framed as a gendered issue. And though the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) acknowledges that "differences among boys and among girls are greater than the differences between boys and girls" (p. 6), the authors nonetheless appeal to a bio-determinist framework suggesting that boys and girls naturally learn

differently. In short, they espouse a position suggesting that boys and girls are inherently different. The Ministry does not make explicit the position it has adopted with regard to boys, achievement, literacy, and gender, but rather claims the strategies provided reflect "the most important research on how boys learn to read and write" (p.2). However, Francis and Skelton (2005) argue that the gender dimensions of pupils' various approaches to learning have been allowed to obscure broader questions about effective teaching and learning" (p. 86); moreover, they argue that

> the most recent research on learning styles indicates . . . there is no evidence, as yet, to suggest that matching teaching style to learning styles brings about any improvement in achievement. . . . This is not to argue against seeking out pedagogical approaches . . . but these should be based on what is known about effective teaching rather than essentialising boys and girls. (Francis & Skelton, 2005, p. 87)

Unquestioned literacy strategies such as those outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education are controversial and contested. The reference to gender-specific learning styles as unproblematic reflects a particular way of understanding literacy, learning, and gender. It is necessary then to destabilize and deconstruct gender not as a fixed or rigid subject location within literacy practices, but rather as tenuous and mediated positions. I agree with Francis and Skelton (2005), who argue that while admittedly there are apparent preferred learning styles among both boys and girls, identifying such strategies as gendered and adopting them as either/or options is misguided and, moreover, will only entrench traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes of boys and girls as learners (see also Sanford, 2006; White, 2007). It is also worth mentioning the fact that an approach that seeks to help boys at the expense of or in competition with girls inevitably leads to struggles for resources in a system intended to help *all* children. As Sanford (2006) reminds us, it is "critical to recognize that there are still many opportunities *not* available to girls and that there is considerable work to be done to ensure equity of opportunity and access for all students" (p. 303). Moreover, learning communities are complicated, raced, classed, *and* gendered and to suggest that gender operates in isolation and explains literacy underachievement is arguably misguided (see Alloway, 2007; Cumming-Potvin, 2007; Hatchell, 2006).

The "boys as victim" argument has a seductive but dangerous influence in its capacity to "reinforce the very versions of masculinity that need to be challenged in schools" (Martino, 2001, p. 83). While it is debatable whether approaches such as increased numbers of male role models and more male-centred, or action-oriented books will improve achievement levels, what is clear is the degree to which these approaches remasculinize schools by re-inscribing narrow and restrictive versions of masculinity (see Martino, 2000; Martino & Kehler, 2006; Mills, 2004). These, and other such strategies, are quick and visible responses to what it means to be a boy in school, but they send problematic messages

in the mainstream media. And if the approaches being adopted by schools in Canada, Australia, and the United States, for example, are genuinely aimed at improving achievement levels among boys, then it follows that schools will need to seriously reconsider addressing masculinity in and of itself. Simply adopting literacy strategies to accommodate "boys being boys" through the reinscription of traditional masculine behaviours and attitudes in school has not proven to significantly increase achievement levels and only masks the need to address and interrogate the relationship between boys' school experiences and how boys negotiate hegemonic masculinity in school (see Francis & Skelton, 2005; Sanford, 2006).

To this point, I have argued that the backlash discourse driving the boys' education agenda attempts to defeminize schooling by reasserting a normative and essentialized masculinity. I have illustrated which specific strategies essentialize boys as a coherent group and deny the complex and contradictory ways boys negotiate gender in relation to schooling and specifically literacy practices. In the following section I extend this position to highlight what Martino (2005) argues is a denial implicit in "how bullying and resistance to learning for boys is symptomatic of the hegemonic masculinist structures and cultures still legitimated in schools and manifested through homophobia and misogyny" (p. 79). I take up this position specifically in connection to safe school policies and curricular initiatives arguing that they are intimately related in the conceptualizing of masculinity in schools.

EXAMINING CONTRADICTIONS IN HETERO POLICIES AND NORMATIVE PRACTICES

At a time when a growing number of schools in Ontario are developing *safe school* policies that, among other things, seek to eliminate "discrimination based on sexual orientation," there emerges a curious tension between recent curricular initiatives to "help the boys" and broader school policies aimed at "a deliberate and systematic effort to respect student diversity" (TVDSB, 2004, p. 2). In this section, I explore how heterosexuality and normative masculinity underscores gender relations in schools. I want to argue that because a dominant assumption of heterosexuality prevails in many schools, non-conforming masculinities are oftentimes blurred or erased from both policy and practical landscapes in schools. As such, heterosexualized identities are regularly normalized to a point where directly and indirectly LGBTQ youth are further marginalized through a dominating and oppressive power differential underlining literacy strategies that aim at allowing "boys to be boys" in the face of a perceived "masculinity crisis."

There is increasing evidence that certain high school young men are both able and willing to negotiate and re-negotiate gendered identities in an era that allows for a broader repertoire of ways for being men. Whereas masculinity

used to be practically and theoretically limited by assumptions of a rigid and limiting nature, current arguments and interpretations of the school lives of young men acknowledge a growing elasticity and flexibility within and among high school masculinities (see Connell, 1995, 2000; Davison, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Kehler, 2004, 2007; Martino, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

In many schools the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality lends itself to being unexamined and unchallenged among students. Heterosexuality is seen as natural and certainly not a performance (see Walton, 2004). Khayatt (2006) argues that "schools both reinforce and, at the same time, reflect mainstream normative genders and sexualities. Schools teach intentionally (through the curriculum) and unintentionally, through values promoted by teachers, administration, boards and parents, a taken for granted normative sexuality and concomitant expectations of gender behaviour" (p. 135). Moreover, Kehily (2002) explains that

> school relations are organized around the assumption that heterosexuality is 'the natural order of things'. One effect of the naturalisation of heterosexual relations is widespread homophobia, with homophobic practices often treated as routine everyday activities, particularly among male peer groups. Unlike other discriminatory practices (e.g. sexism, racism) homophobic abuse has not been treated as an equal opportunities issue in school and, until recently, has not been seen as a disciplinary offence nor found its way into school policy documents. (p. 57)

In light of this it is not surprising that, in their earlier work, Nayak and Kehily (1996) found high schools are marked by a cultural landscape in which heterosexuality "acts as the norm within schools and the focal point around which other sexual behaviours are located. . . . This has the effect of seeing heterosexuality as natural rather than socially conveyed through performance" (p. 224). Young men routinely struggle to display a coherent heterosexual masculinity. In a recent ethnography, Pascoe (2007) effectively and richly details the densely heterosexualized terrain of River High. Of the public practices she witnessed in the field, she explains that "boys affirm much more than their masculinity; they affirm their subjecthood and personhood through sexualized interactions in which they indicate to themselves and others that they have the ability to work their will upon the world around them" (p. 86). She describes a kind of "masculine capital" that adolescent boys accrue over time which is most evident in their daily ability to "get girls."

For young men who resist dominant masculinising practices such as public displays of "getting girls," "sexual bravado," or "sexual one-upmanship" (see Pascoe, 2007), there is always a risk that other boys will see this as a weakness or vulnerability. Counter-hegemonic practices that effectively disrupt normative behaviours taken for granted among men thus become highly suspect. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) describe the polarizing affects dominant groups of boys have over other boys. Drawing on the voices of 900 boys and girls,

they explain the powerful impact that the "macho bullshit" (p. 83) has on maintaining and demarcating boundaries "between the normative and transgressive boys" (p. 80). Similar forms of threatening and restrictive practices are evident and widely documented in previous studies (see Kehler, 2004; Kehler, Davison, Frank, 2005; Martino, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Mills 2001; Renold, 2004; Robinson, 2005). There is room for optimism, however, according to Renold (2004), who found that there are boys "willing to openly express their discontent over the pressure of hegemonic masculinity and its unachievability" (p. 261).

Young men are aware of the contradictions and inconsistencies in how they *do* masculinity. To better support these young men as they struggle to negotiate their own identities, schools would do well to create safe spaces and to open up the margins and begin disrupting the "power relations that constitute the gendered hegemonic matrix that all children (boys *and* girls) negotiate on a daily basis within and beyond the school gates" (Renold, 2004, p. 262). Safe school policies are one way that schools are gradually acknowledging a diversity of youth in our schools. At the same time, however, there is this disturbing contradiction between policy and practice. In his analysis of bullying and homophobia in Canadian schools, for example, Walton (2004) argues "there is no focus on systemic problems (e.g. homophobia) that manifest some of these behaviours or on how structural changes in curriculum, policy or teaching can reduce school violence by fostering respect for sexual diversity" (p. 29).

Previous research (see, for example, Renold, 2000, 2004; Robinson, 2005; Wyss, 2004; Youdell, 2004) highlights the ways some young men transgress hegemonic masculinity through actively "destabiliz[ing] the regulatory norms that allow for shifts in masculine identities to occur" (Robinson, 2005, p. 33). Tensions emerge for young men who "actively shift in and out of different performances of other forms of masculinities available to them depending on their contextual reading of the space, situation at hand and the power relations operating" (Robinson, 2005, p. 23). These tensions often emerge in situations when young men challenge dominant codes of masculinity and appropriately masculine behaviour such as, for example, when young men develop same sex friendships with other young men in a school context (see Kehler, 2007; McLeod, 2002; Renold, 2004).

For men who resist dominant codes of masculinity, the body becomes a significant text through which gestures and actions are read and misread by other males (see Davison, 2004; Kehler & Greig, 2005). Nayak and Kehily (1996) explain that when young men deviate from what is understood to be masculine behaviour, other young men seize this as an opportunity to reassert heterosexualized identities. In situations where, for example, men work hard in school or show disinterest in fashioning a certain muscularity, they are often thought to be gay. In these cases, homophobic abuse and the threat of being

labelled gay is used to control and monitor how boys "do" boy. Martino (2000) explains that a regime of abusive practices, such as put downs and the verbal abuse similar to that described above, contribute to a hierarchy of masculinities in which some boys become ostracized and alienated as targets for harassment. In their past research, Francis and Skelton (2005) draw attention to the "general brutalising effects involved in boys' collective productions of and struggle for, masculinity" (p. 9). Their findings are echoed and well documented through studies in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the U.K. (see for example Epstein, 1998; Kehler, 2007; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005; Meyer, 2009; Renold 2000; Robinson, 2005).

Kimmel and Mahler (2003) examined connections between school violence and youth identities. They describe the lack of safety many students feel when going to school. In their analysis of school shootings, they argue for a closer examination of the "gender culture" of schools. They argue that the striking similarity across school shootings is that "all or most of the shooters had tales of being harassed—specifically, gay-baited—for inadequate gender performance; their tales are the tales of boys who did not measure up to the norms of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 1440). In their analysis, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) provide a careful examination of the connections between gender and violence and the erasure of gender from the media reports of school shootings across the United States. Most salient, yet far less acknowledged in the media accounts, is the degree to which gender underscored these shootings. Government studies examining these incidents remained similarly silent on the fact that "masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1442). Their analysis further revealed a pattern from the stories told of the boys who committed the violence. "Nearly all had stories of being constantly bullied, beat up, and, most significantly . . . 'gay—baited' . . . being mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on and threatened. . .*not* (emphasis theirs) because they were gay . . . but because they were *different* (emphasis theirs) from other boys" (p. 1445). The degree to which gender and the proper performance of codes of masculinity runs throughout these cases of violence is alarming. In disturbing and unsettling ways, cases of such extreme violence foreground both the salience of gender in the school lives of youth but also the pervasive manner in which homophobia operates as an organizing principle of heterosexual masculinity (for further discussion see Kimmel, & Mahler, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Meyer, 2009; Rasmussen, 2006).

Kimmel and Mahler (2003) draw attention to what they argue is a relationship between homophobia, being bullied and harassed, and the homophobic desire to ensure you are seen by others as a "real man." The impact of homophobia and the relationship it has to boys attempting to affirm their own heteronormative masculinity is far reaching. And while the random shootings are arguably extreme cases, they nonetheless are significant reminders of the nature of

school climates. Safe school policies can have an impact for all students, both boys and girls. At the same time, however, these policies need to be supported by curricular initiatives that—rather than affirm an already privileged status of heterosexuality—erase or at least expand the margins and embrace greater diversity in sexual identities among youth. And while addressing homophobia and sexual orientation in schools may be fraught with the politics of schooling (see Walton, 2004), it appears that there is little difficulty in sustaining and maintaining the unspoken privilege associated with heterosexuality.

Schools are, by default, heterosexualized by the daily practices, routines, and curriculum largely supported by the majority of teachers and administrators. And while policies and action plans aimed at addressing discrimination based on sexual orientation are a good first step, there are challenges of implementation. In one case, for example, I recently spoke with a school librarian who indicated that books and resources addressing sexual diversity are kept behind the desk for teachers to sign out. Accessibility to resources, in this case, is hampered by one librarian's interpretation of the directive that books and materials be made available for students and staff but, in this case, there is controlled access to the resources. Schools are able to implement strategies to support GLBTQ youth, but this also requires ongoing support in terms of financial and personnel training. The implementation of safe school policies and strategies to support youth is difficult and complicated. Meyer (2009) explains that both at the formal administrative level as well as at the informal school culture level, "the interaction between external and internal influences explains the wide variety of perceptions of and responses to gendered harassment by teachers" (p. 64). For many teachers who address gender harassment in school, Meyer (2009) found that "barriers to and motivators of teachers' interventions" were often met by "institutional resistance" rather than support. The difficulties and challenges of implementing a safe school policy, I argue, should be seen as no less important than the attention currently given to schools for academic performance in the form of public "school report cards." In short, schools might be well served to develop a Safe School Report Card that publicly indicates the levels of safety students experience at schools.

Not until recently has the Ministry of Education in Ontario demonstrated signs of progress by acknowledging the visibility or invisibility of sexualized identities in secondary schools. In a newly revised Ontario Ministry guideline for the Intermediate-Senior English curriculum, the Ministry reveals a shift in its position in how sexualized identities are named and unnamed in schools. In the revised *Ontario Grade 9-12 English curriculum guidelines (2007)*, the Ministry of Education incorporates a critical literacy framework that prompts teachers and students to examine assumptions regarding sexual orientation. Moffat and Norton (2008) confirm how "parents, students and teachers are, and have been, active in reproducing and maintaining current gender relations and homophobia and that, given the opportunity, they could be instrumental

in creating alternative ways of interacting/viewing sexual diversity" (p.104). Particularly significant in recent curricular revisions to the Intermediate Senior English curricular document is the clear and explicit attention given to "sexual orientation," "sexual minorities," "homophobia," "bullying," and "homosexuality" and thus an emerging openness to officially disrupt and disturb the *silence* and *censoring* that has been allowed to prevail in past English curricula. Using a critical literacy approach, the authors prompt teachers to pose questions to students that interrogate heterosexuality and dislodge hetero-normativity from its unquestioned place of privilege in schools. This kind of paradigmatic shift in curricular documents goes some way to engage students and teachers in a critical re-reading of hetero-normativity and perhaps change the tide in which historically heterosexuality has been allowed to go unnamed and significantly unacknowledged.

I am optimistic and perhaps naive to think that the above-mentioned English curriculum document necessarily translates into action and guarantees the unsettling or interrogation of youth's sexual identities. I am also aware of the fact that still missing from this document and perhaps muddled between the pages are questions about trans and genderqueer youth. And though these guidelines are a significant improvement in acknowledging diverse sexualities, there is considerable room for future iterations of curriculum documents such as this. The need for revisions is far reaching and ongoing. It does not and cannot be restricted to policies and curriculum but must be extended beyond so that, as Wyss (2004) argues, "teens who in other ways defy the strict gender standards of our culture will feel more secure in their own lives and will find education a much less traumatic experience" (p. 725).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I conclude this paper with a call for coordination between education policies and practices rather than the present mis-coordination that may inadvertently render safe school polices impotent. The Ontario Ministry of Education claims to have drawn from "an international review of effective practices" to "help the boys" increase literacy and achievement levels. I have argued, however, that in Ontario the Ministry of Education's recent initiatives to improve boys' literacy is underwritten by an ideological positioning of "boys being boys." The Ministry has skirted the margins of feminist and post-structuralist research by maintaining and reclaiming gender relations that reflect the status quo. I have argued that the current positioning of boys, the definition of literacy, and how teaching is framed reflects the Ministry's attention to selective research in the areas of gender, schooling and particularly literacy (for a critique see Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hammett & Sanford, 2007).

The position of the Ontario Ministry of Education feeds into a "poor boys" discourse that suggests boys need to be helped and saved from a system that

has feminized boys and learning in the classroom. If adolescent boys appear to be non-conforming, they appear to be non-men. With this in mind, it is imperative that schools and English language arts classrooms in particular become active agents in changing how men and masculinity are understood. Schools cannot afford the misalignment of policies and practices that threaten to deride the multiple and complex ways students, both boys and girls, negotiate their identities. "Critiques of heterosexism are attacks not on heterosexual practices, but on the discourses of heterosexuality and how they have become embedded in the foundations of our thoughts and accepted as unproblematic; subsequently manifesting and maintaining power over marginalized identities. Failing to question or interrogate heterosexuality as a form of sexism leads to simplistic understandings of gender" (Blaise, 2005, p. 60). The impact of safe school policies that acknowledge a diversity of student sexual identities, operating in tandem with curricular initiatives that threaten to reinscribe heteronormative masculinity and valorize a normative boy culture, is problematic and warrants further investigation. And while I admit that policies and practices operating at cross purposes perhaps is not new, what is new and worth further attention is the contradictory and dangerous messages *all* students and teachers understand by the rhetorical framing of "the boy problem" and how it has become entangled with a school culture still characterized by dominant constructions of masculinity and homophobic surveillance.

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