

Book Reviews

Boys, Girls and the Myths of Literacies and Learning.

Roberta F. Hammett and Kathy Sanford (Eds.).

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As the title *Boys, Girls and the Myths of Literacies and Learning* indicates, Roberta F. Hammett's and Kathy Sanford's new book highlights attempts to unpack unsubstantiated conclusions and emotional reactions to headlines suggesting that the so-called declining literacy rates of boys should be declared a national emergency. The authors remind us that the issue is complex and that educators should ask which boys (and which girls) appear to be doing poorly and what can be done to help them. Hammett and Sanford have assembled a collection of essays by influential researchers working in gender and literacy today to provide a critical analysis of this multilayered issue.

The editors have three goals for this volume that they describe in Chapter 1. First, five myths of literacies and learning are presented to contextualize the remaining 11 chapters written by the contributors to this book. The myths include the assumed importance of male role models and the assumption that girls are just better readers. Another myth asks readers to consider standardized testing and what kind of reading is really being tested by such instruments. Hammett and Sanford suggest that we need to "deconstruct the binary construction of 'boy' and 'girl,' challenging the notion that masculinity and femininity are in opposition to one another" (p. 14). Second, the authors wish to initiate a discussion and deep thinking about current school practices of literacy that are prevalent in Canadian classrooms. They wonder if preservice teacher education and local community culture create literacy practices that may close down or prevent some boys and some girls from being successful in language arts classrooms. Third, they ask readers to question which boys and which girls are served well by the present curricula and which boys and which girls are ignored. Factors of gender, class, culture, race, and sexual orientation all affect the educational literacy experiences of students.

The authors have assembled a number of prominent Canadian and international authors who represent some of the key researchers working in literacy and gender today. Building on the concept of hegemonic masculinity as described by Gilbert and Gilbert (1999), Michael D. Kehler examines "the ways in which normative masculinity is being framed within and through initiatives to support boys' literacy practices" (p. 23) in the second chapter. Conflicting ways of understanding and performing *boy* collide in school classrooms. He asks readers to consider what it means to be masculine in today's school by attend-

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ing to the stance that “the body is a communicative site for the construction of masculinity” (p. 32). A fresh view of identity construction is offered for thoughtful consideration.

Following a similar theme, Wayne Martino’s Chapter 5 analyzes a recent Ontario Ministry of Education document written to help educators teach literacy to boys. Of concern to Martino, and ultimately to all educators and students, is his concern that this document merely reifies “culturally validated versions of hegemonic masculinity through an erasure and active denial of . . . gendered identity” (p. 91). He believes that the document is based on the essentialist notion of gender based in the belief that some essential and natural differences exist between boys and girls. He encourages the reader to deconstruct prevailing notions of hegemonic masculinity and school and what it means for the boys who do not fit the stereotype of what it means to be a boy.

Laura Rattner examines feminists’ interventions in education in the third chapter. Of particular value here is a chart of feminist ideological stances and their effects on educational research. Rattner’s discussion includes how various types of feminism have been perceived to affect public debate about the effect on boys and literacy. Rattner’s chapter helps us to see that the gender debate is more complex than the belief that “the provision for the educational needs of the girls has been at the expense of the boys” (p. 43). Also addressing gender in Chapter 6, Julie Hamston and Kristina Love compare literate and alliterate boys through the lens of Bourdieu to ask the important questions “Which boys? Which reading practices?” (p. 118). They share their Australian research project centered on boys who were identified as either committed readers or reluctant leisure-time readers. As a result, school-organized parent workshops for sharing strategies for encouraging leisure-time reading and strategies of fathers who support their sons’ reading experiences were developed. Future plans are for programs that will expand the teachers’, parents’, and boys’ understanding of literacy to include digital text and magazines.

Elizabeth Dutro challenges the prevailing assumption that boys might have greater success in literature classes if the course curricula were revised to include more stories and books that reflect boys’ needs and interests. She discusses her own research where boys were required to read books that were highly gendered as female and the consequences and complexities that followed regarding boys, gender, and school reading.

Lynn Wiltse uses Bakhtin’s notion of carnival to interrogate literacy myths related to boys, girls, and their literacy practices. Her research in an urban Canadian school explored gendered responses to a literature activity in a grade 9 language arts classroom. A medieval unit culminating with a feast provided a unique opportunity for Wiltse to observe and reflect on the carnivalistic life of the classroom. Her observations provide teachers and teacher-educators with impetus for continuing to create “opportunities for hands-on participation and thus development and learning in the classroom” (p. 163), which can then lead to critical readings of texts.

Four chapters examine technology and literacy themes. Jamie Myers discusses how gender identities are enacted and reflected in student-constructed hypermedia assignments. Groups of students created videos to represent an idea important to creating community. Myers wondered if and how “gendered

identity would influence the selection of images, music, and words included in the video project" (p. 168). He concludes by discussing the potential of composing videos as a critical literacy practice.

In Chapter 9, Marion Harris Fey notices a reproduction of gender relations in students' computer-facilitated conversations with each other during a planned novel study. Fey paired college students in the role of friendly mentors with 9th-graders. Her research revealed that teachers may have more success as computer-literacy mentors when they become more sensitive to their language use because historically, men's language has been used by teachers of both sexes. Language that was used to develop relations and to understand the students' learning context contributed to greater success.

Kathy Sanford and Heather Blair examine the out-of-school electronic literacy practices of boys and how these are understood or misread by educators. This chapter is of particular interest to me, because as a classroom teacher, I noticed that the multiliteracies and digital texts that the students practiced and were fluent in were not recognized by curricula, much less fully understood by practicing teachers. Sanford and Blair urge the reader to expand the currently held notions of literacy definitions to include the electronic literacy practices in which the students currently engage.

Finally, Barbara J. Guzzetti follows two female students in their last two years of high school, a site that they believed perpetuated power relations between males and females. The girls spoke out about the behaviors of their classmates and teachers, which made them feel marginalized as females in the classroom. Faced with silence from their classmates and teachers, the two girls turned to *zines*, online magazines, as a forum to establish their identities as feminists and activists. This 11th chapter complements Chapter 2 and asks teachers to examine how they might perpetuate the concept of hegemonic femininity in classrooms and the disturbing implications.

The final chapter describes Wendy Glen's use of the feminist lens of "authentic realism" to study the male gender role in some of Karen Hesse's fiction for adolescents. Hesse's novels feature male characters who display a more sensitive side, bend gender norms, and are not "necessarily bound by societal expectations" (p. 235). Through the use of critical reading activities, the students were able to analyze, question, and critically evaluate story texts and later disrupt their earlier ideas about gender roles in literature.

Each author backgrounds his or her particular area of interest with theoretical support and asks concise questions to frame his or her chapter. The references for each chapter are a rich source of further reading for anyone who wishes to delve deeper into a particular interest area. This book would be of great value to a preservice teacher preparation course, as well as to graduate students wishing to broaden their gender and literacy knowledge base.

The chapters in this book could have been loosely organized into sections about gender, theories of gender, and digital literacies. In the absence of this framework, each chapter appears to be a stand-alone provocative piece of research, thoughts, and ideas about gender and literacy. The reader is required to make his or her own connections between and among the chapters and his or her own experiences.

Socioeconomic status and ethnicity are not addressed in this book. The question of whether socioeconomic status has a direct effect on the literacy achievements of both boys and girls remains to be explored. Schools and families in low socioeconomic areas do not always have less success in literacy activities. Nor is ethnicity, either of new Canadians or of Indigenous populations, addressed. For example, an examination of the literacy practices of Canada's young Aboriginal youth could generate some interesting discussions about prevailing myths of literacy and learning. The Canadian government's employment strategies have yet to address the issue of literacy acquisition among young Canadian Aboriginal boys and girls. Perhaps these two ideas will be the first chapters in Hammett's and Sanford's next book.

Research about gendered literacy practices has been plentiful in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The writing in this book fills the void of what is current and what is Canadian. The volume features many Canadian literacy researchers who write about their research and can take its rightful place in contemporary literacy research.

Reference

Gilbert, R., & Gilbert, P. (1998). *Masculinity goes to school*. London: Routledge.