

Boys, literacies and schooling

The dangerous territories of
gender-based literacy reform

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Series editors' introduction

Educating boys is currently seen – both globally and locally – to be in crisis. In fact, there is a long history to the question: what about the boys? However, it was not until the 1990s that the question of boys' education became a matter of public and political concern in a large number of countries around the world, most notably the UK, the USA and Australia.

There are a number of different approaches to troubling questions about boys in schools to be found in the literature. The questions concern the behaviours and identities of boys in schools, covering areas such as school violence and bullying, homophobia, sexism and racism, through to those about boy's perceived underachievement. In *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement*, Epstein and her colleagues (1988) identify three specific discourses that are called upon in popular and political discussions of the schooling of boys: 'poor boys'; 'failing schools, failing boys'; and 'boys will be boys'. They suggest that it might be more useful to draw, instead, on feminist and profeminist insights in order to understand what is going on in terms of gender relations between boys and girls and amongst boys. Important questions, they suggest, are: what kind of masculinities are being produced in schools, in what ways, and how do they impact upon the education of boys? In other words, there is an urgent need to place boys' educational experiences within the wider gender relations within the institution and beyond.

Despite the plethora of rather simplistic and often counter-productive 'solutions' (such as making classrooms more 'boy-friendly' in macho ways) that are coming from governments in different part of the English-speaking world and from some of the more populist writers in the area (e.g. Steve Biddulph), there is a real necessity for a more thoughtful approach to the issues raised by what are quite long-standing problems in the schooling of boys. Approaches for advice to researchers in the field of 'boys' underachievement'

by policy makers and by teachers and principals responsible for staff development in their schools are an almost daily event, and many have already tried the more simplistic approaches and found them wanting. There is, therefore, an urgent demand for more along the lines suggested here.

This is not a series of 'how to do it' handbooks for working with boys. Rather, the series draws upon a wide range of contemporary theorizing that is rethinking gender relations. While, as editors, we would argue strongly that the issues under discussion here require theorizing, it is equally important that books in the area address the real needs of practitioners as they struggle with day-to-day life in schools and other places where professional meet and must deal with the varied, often troubling, masculinities of boys. Teachers, youth workers and policy makers (not to mention parents of boys – and girls!) are challenged by questions of masculinity. While many, perhaps most, boys are not particularly happy inhabiting the space of the boy who is rough, tough and dangerous to know, the bullying of boys who present themselves as more thoughtful and gentle can be problematic in the extreme. We see a need, then, for a series of books located within institutions, such as education, the family and training/workplace and grounded in practitioners' everyday experiences. There will be explored from new perspectives that encourage a more reflexive approach to teaching and learning with references to boys and girls.

We aim, in this series, to bring together the best work in the area of masculinity and education from a range of countries. There are obvious differences in education systems and forms of available masculinity, even between English-speaking countries, as well as significant commonalities. We can learn from both of these, not in the sense of saying 'oh, they do that in Australia, so let's do it in the UK' (or vice versa), but rather by comparing and contrasting in order to develop deeper understandings both of the masculinities of boys and of the ways adults, especially professionals, can work with boys and girls in order to reduce those ways of 'doing boy' which seem problematic, and to encourage those that are more sustainable (by the boys themselves now and in later life). Thus books in the series address a number of key questions: How can we make sense of the identities and behaviours of those boys who achieve popularity and dominance by behaving in violent ways in school, and who are likely to find themselves in trouble when they are young men out on the streets? How can we address key practitioner concerns how to teach these boys? What do we need to understand about the experiences of girls as well as boys in order to intervene effectively and in ways which do not put boys down or lead them to reject our approaches to their education? What do we need to understand about gender relations in order to teach both boys and girls more effectively? How can we make sense of masculinities in schools through multi-dimensional explanations, which take into account the overlapping social and cultural differences (of, for example, class, ethnicity, dis/ability

and sexuality), as well as those of gender? What are the impacts of larger changes to patterns of employment and globalization on the lives of teachers and students in particular schools and locations? The series, as a whole, aims to provide practitioners with new insights into the changing demands of teaching boys and girls in response to these questions.

Literacy (or a lack of it) has been at the heart of much of the recent public and political concern about boys' school-based achievement and there have been many interventions into this debate – some useful, others not. We are, therefore, delighted to be able to publish this outstanding contribution to thinking about *Boys, Literacies and Schooling*. Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum and Colin Lankshear do not offer easy answers in what they describe as the 'dangerous territories of gender-based literacy reform'. Indeed, rightly in our view, they counsel against approaches which give 'off the shelf' (apparent) solutions to the alienation that many boys feel in relation to schooling in general and literacy practices in particular. Rather, they take the reader down an intellectually and pedagogically invigorating path towards understanding the dynamics of gender, literacy and other 'differences that make a difference' (like socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexuality, indigeneity).

Using accessible language, which is nonetheless theoretically nuanced, they have achieved that rare thing – a book which is at once academically rigorous *and* practically useful. There are no lesson plans or specific exercises here, but rather accounts of real initiatives, in real schools and a clear analysis of how they did or did not work. These are set within the context of a clear exposition of different 'mindsets' with which gender and literacy can be and are approached and an analysis of the likely outcomes from these different approaches. They demand of educationists something more difficult, yet more energizing and more likely to be successful, than the 'back to basics' strategies adopted by so many policy makers or the essentialism underpinning tying literacy education to some notion of what (undifferentiated and homogenized) 'boys' will like.

The flaw in these approaches is perfectly illustrated by a scene from a school in London researched by the series editors. The children in a Year Five (age 9–10) class were using the only time now available to children in English primary schools to sit and read a book of their own choice – the five or ten minutes during which the teacher took the register. During this time, the researcher (Debbie Epstein) noted one of the boys as being totally absorbed in his book (a novel). At the end of roll call, the teacher said, 'Now kids, put your books away. It's time for literacy hour.' The boy walked, as slowly as he could manage, still reading, from his desk to his drawer to put his book away. Desperate to finish the chapter, he delayed as long as he dared before returning to his desk to spend an hour, divided into short bursts, on the tools of literacy – spelling, 'comprehension', phonics.

The authors of *Boys, Literacies and Schooling* argue convincingly that we need to move away from such (often counter-productive) ‘easy answers’. They offer educators a different, more challenging, but ultimately more successful set of strategies. These involve: developing deep knowledge of the *particular* kids and what they bring to *particular* classrooms and contexts; starting where the kids (and teachers) are, but moving beyond that through making and enabling connections; being brave enough to experiment with learning processes; and rigorous enough to assess the outcomes realistically. Literacy education is, as they say, ‘always accountable to producing demonstrably better outcomes’ that ‘*work* for people in the world’ (p. 210). And, as they continue, ‘they will always involve much more than literacy basics and, indeed, literacy outcomes alone’. What this book provides for educators are the tools with which to develop such outcomes, using their highly developed professional skills of analysis and pedagogy, in real classrooms and different contexts. We are proud to have it in this series.

Debbie Epstein
Máirtín Mac an Ghail

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Introduction – Dangerous places: debates about boys, girls, schooling and gender-based literacy reform

An opening story

During the five years 1996–2000 two of the present authors taught in a core subject called ‘Gender as a Social Justice Issue’ taken by students enrolled in primary and secondary teacher preparation projects within an Australian teacher education programme. The subject provided students with opportunities to explore theoretical perspectives relating to gender; to engage with contemporary debates relating to the production and regulation of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’; and to make explicit the impact that gendered norms have on various dimensions of schooling practice. Conscious of the resistance students in this particular rural and rather conservative university bring to this kind of subject matter – and sensitive to the need of spending a lot of time reassuring students that the subject will *not* be an exercise in male bashing – the teaching team gave students the opportunity in their first tutorial to identify their hopes and fears about the subject.

In the second half of 2000 students seemed particularly willing to take up the invitation to express their opinions about what a gender-based subject might offer. They were clear and direct in articulating what they hoped the subject would explore, and what they hoped it would leave alone. Their desires were neither simple nor homogeneous. They were, however, rather loudly and passionately expressed. Some argued, for example, that they needed to learn more about boys – and masculinity – in order to teach boys more effectively (a real concern because, as everyone knows, boys just aren’t doing well). This group hoped that this tutorial series would help them understand more about natural masculinity. Others felt that they needed to learn more about boys in order to help boys to be *less* masculine, and they

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expressed a desire for strategies that would help them to disrupt boys' commitment to traditional masculinity.

Still others claimed that focusing on boys would only remind them – boys that is – of their marginal status, and that what we needed to do in tutorials like this was learn how to focus on students as *individuals*. A different group expressed the opinion that the whole boys debate was nothing more than the kind of male whinging that women had gotten used to, and that we shouldn't dignify it with our attention. For these students, girls were living through just another backlash and subjects like this at university should be designed to help teachers negotiate these and other anti-women sentiments. Someone offered the fascinating piece of information that girls could say tongue twisters faster if they were menstruating, and another person replied that anyone making that kind of claim needed to rethink their career path. A noisy group argued that all that gender stuff had been sorted out way back in the seventies and couldn't we just get on with learning how to teach, and another offered the rather bored-sounding suggestion that we all needed to chill out and keep a sense of humour.

As they had done in previous years, the tutors worked hard to assure the students that the subject was neither anti-male nor anti-feminist. The tutors spoke openly about the nervousness they always felt before entering tutorials, because of the stereotypes people often held about 'gender studies' and those who work in the field. Some students acknowledged that they had been concerned about being 'forced' to work with left-wing-lunatic-wouldn't-touch-em-with-a-barge-pole-seventies feminists. Others acknowledged that they would have been more worried if they hadn't previously met some of the teaching staff and discovered that they were, in fact, just 'normal women'. One male student captured this attitude well when he said 'I was a bit anxious before I came – I mean having to work with – and I don't mean to be rude, but you know, *feminists* and all that – but the tutor, well, she's *nice* and, we're even allowed to talk about guys; so I reckon it should, hopefully, be okay.'

Along with all the other perceptions students have expressed about the subject both before and after studying it, this rather startled concession that perhaps a person could be simultaneously a feminist *and* interested in boys' education and *nice* illustrates a point we have long been aware of: discussing boys' education is difficult. Teaching gender studies is hard work. Opening up debate about the educational needs of boys *and* girls is time consuming. And going into any of these areas can lead into dangerous territories.

The focus of the book

This leads us to the focus for this book: a focus that is at once simple and complex. We are interested in boys in school. More specifically we are

interested in tracing some of the links between boys' diverse educational and social experiences and their varied and varying literacy levels. This necessarily involves us in exploring the ways in which boys are increasingly represented as the 'new losers' in contemporary educational settings and the multiple solutions that have been put forward to meet this 'new' gender equity challenge.

While these goals may seem simple enough there are challenges to be overcome and risks to be taken if we are to achieve any of them.

Three challenges are worth mentioning here. First, as is already apparent, discussions focusing on boys, schooling and literacy take us into emotionally charged territories. It would be difficult to find a teacher in Britain, Australasia and North America who has not heard during recent years the plaintive cry, 'what about the boys?' It would be similarly difficult to find a teacher who had not heard (or made) the arguments that 'feminism has gone too far'; that schools are 'over feminized' and 'anti-male' and that what we need to do for boys is return to a world where their unique male qualities are recognized and valued. Regardless of whether one takes up or rejects this 'anti-feminist' and 'pro-boy' attitude (and the opposition between feminists/women and boys which it works to construct), the fact remains that there is controversial and highly charged terrain that needs to be negotiated whenever one moves into the boys/school/literacy debate.

Second, debates surrounding boys, schooling and literacy involve a wide range of people. While early gender and schooling projects have largely been initiated and implemented by women (often feminists), concerns about boys' educational needs have been expressed by a diverse group of people. These include not only those with a background in gender equity but also others – parents, friends, media commentators and an increasing number of men – who are new to the whole area (including some who glimpse an opportunity to air longstanding anti-feminist prejudices).

A third challenge arises from the fact that many of the people who are now involved with the boys' education debate hold preconceived ideas about the motivations and agendas of other participants in this field. Many who are 'new' to the area look suspiciously at those who have a history of working on school-based gender reform projects. If all these 'newcomers' have heard about the work of 'gender equity experts' is that they have created school environments that discriminate against boys, it is not surprising if they look suspiciously at such 'experts'. On the other hand, many people with experience of working on gender reform projects have spent years negotiating the indifference or hostility of others. Not surprisingly, they are sceptical when some of these same people (or others who seem to be like them) move into debates focused on boys: is this another backlash? Are girls now meant to suffer?

To complicate things further, all the key terms at the heart of this debate – boys, gender, literacy and reform – are defined in multiple ways. There

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are many ways to think about literacy. There are many ways to conceptualize gender-based reform. There are many variations to the category 'boy'. It is far from being the homogeneous term it is often represented to be. Issues of race, socio-economic status, location and sexuality intersect with gender to impact on the kinds of schooling and literacy experiences boys (and girls) are likely to have.

It is possibly because of these complexities that discussions around boys, schooling and literacy so regularly become heated and passionate arguments. While there is nothing inherently wrong with either heat or passion, we are well aware how easily an impassioned discussion can degenerate into a heated argument that soon loses sight of the issues at the heart of the debate. More specifically, we are aware of how easily genuine concerns about boys and their educational experiences can get lost in complex and emotionally charged debates that often result when the topic is raised. This is part of the reason for the sub-title of this book: *The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform*. To open up debate around boys, girls, schooling, gender reform and literacy is to enter into a dangerous space where debate can descend into brawling, and where it is difficult indeed to articulate clearly one's concerns. Moreover, even the most focused and dispassionate exploration of boys and their literacy experiences is challenged to negotiate and engage with the sheer volume and scope of material relevant to the issue. This involves diverse opinions about the nature and origin of the problem, as well as diverse opinions about possible solutions.

Because of this diversity, and the confusion, frustration and anger it readily evokes, one of our primary goals for this book is to provide a detailed map of the various fields that relate to discussions of boys, schooling, gender reform and literacy. We aim also to interpret and identify pathways within these fields that we think have the best chance of promoting the development, implementation and success of literacy programmes that respond to the real needs of boys *without* generating new problems for girls. This is an important point. Like all who enter the boys/literacy/school debate we have our own beliefs about the 'real' problems facing boys, and the 'best' ways we can respond. We discuss these beliefs in more detail through the following chapters. It is important, however, that we make our starting point explicit at the outset.

First, we acknowledge that there are significant challenges associated with boys' education that need to be addressed, and that many of these are longstanding and deeply entrenched in education systems.

Second, we believe these challenges are directly related to the ways schools specifically, and other cultural institutions more generally, circulate understandings about what it means to be a 'boy' and a 'man'. We begin, then, with the belief that narrow and restrictive understandings of normative masculinity have consequences for boys, and that these consequences

include the construction of boys who are regularly alienated from literacy classrooms and literacy experiences.

Third, we are convinced of the need for educationally based programmes that work to contest narrow and limiting understandings of what it means to be a boy and that contribute to improving boys' access to and enjoyment of literacy lessons. At the same time, however, we accept that this work cannot be seen as separate to work concerned with the educational needs of girls. Boys' education is fundamentally connected to girls' education. Hence, educators need to develop an understanding of the ways *gender* reform in schools and literacy contexts can meet the needs of girls *and* boys alike. We are, then, committed to providing a framework for thinking about gender reform, literacy and the educational experiences of boys and girls that result in effective, sustainable and *transformative* schooling practices. We are not at all interested in maintaining traditional frameworks for making sense of boys and their educational and social needs. As a result, this book examines issues to do with the education of girls and boys, and proceeds from the understanding that we cannot focus on issues of masculinity without attending, also, to issues of femininity.

Fourth, we believe that in order to construct such a transformative framework – and for it to be implemented in any sustainable or effective fashion – we need to bring together people, places and ideas that are commonly, if not routinely, kept apart. This involves drawing upon and responding to the diverse groups of people who have discussed explicitly boys' educational needs. But it also involves making connections with people, ideas and resources that have not figured prominently within the boys' education debate.

Fifth, notwithstanding the fact that pursuing debates around boys, girls, schooling and literacy can lead us into dangerous – or hostile – terrain, we believe it is important for educators to develop skills to negotiate it. Furthermore, we believe that learning to navigate tricky (and often foreign) spaces has the potential to lead us (and by us we are talking about ourselves as the authors of the book) beyond the immediate danger posed by the unknown, towards futures that become possible only when we take some risks.

Whence, *Dangerous Territories*. While we have personally experienced gender equity debates as danger zones within which discussion can quickly become argument and good ideas are easily rejected, this isn't the only meaning that can be assigned to 'danger'. In the safety-conscious decade of the 1990s it became common for us to warn ourselves and, more particularly, our children about dangerous things, dangerous places, dangerous people. Kids in schools know all about the danger posed by strangers, drugs, poisons, the sun, the rain, traffic, bullies and sitting too close to the TV. Marketing and corporate discourses have also introduced us to the dangers of standing still: of failing to innovate, failing to move, failing to change with the times.

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Within different discourses – or ways of communicating that are associated with particular contexts and beliefs – therefore, danger is associated with both the new and the old. There is nothing inherently dangerous about where we are or, indeed, anything inherently risky about other locations. Following an unknown and dangerous pathway doesn't always bring disaster: it can lead to new and better locations, new and better lives. And staying where we are isn't always bad: it can give us time to marshal our resources and reflect upon what to do next. The trick, it seems, is to know which choices are going to lead us to where we ultimately want to go.

In using the term 'danger' throughout this book we want to signal much more than just the risks of following some pathways. We want also to indicate the productive value of taking risks, exploring the unknown and letting go of the familiar and the 'safe'. This involves embracing 'dangerous possibilities' and seeing these not so much as risky but, rather, as *risqué*: that is to say, as lively, animated, spirited and capable of moving us beyond immediate dangers into new ways of thinking about and 'doing' gender reform in literacy contexts.

We have a definite agenda here. The old, familiar and comforting models around literacy, schooling and gender have not taken us where we want to go. Schools and literacy classrooms have produced and reproduced narrow and limiting understandings about what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl. This has had real – and *really* dangerous – consequences for our kids, our societies, ourselves.

In this context we can choose to stay within familiar and 'safe' territories or we can try other paths – or, more accurately, a network of paths – that take us beyond the limitations of culturally bounded, institutional governed, dominant discourses, towards new, and as yet ungoverned, cultural spaces. Audre Lorde (1990: 286) makes a passionate statement about the political importance of new ways of thinking, new ways of acting. She identifies a need for

new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recriminations, lamentations, and suspicion.

In this book we take up the challenge of finding a productive and effective way to speak about the complex and emotional issues surrounding boys, literacy and schooling. To achieve this goal we seek to explore ideas, practices and ways of knowing that are unfamiliar to many people. We are committed to letting go of familiar and known responses in favour of the unknown and the risky. We will make connections between people and practices that are commonly kept apart. We will move beyond the limitations commonly

associated with stereotypical notions of boys, girls, schooling and literacy. And we will use whatever theoretical resources support us in this undertaking. In this way, we are positioning ourselves as what Rosi Braidotti (1994a: 23) has described as ‘intellectual nomads’: people interested in crossing boundaries, and committed to ‘the act of going’.

With all this in mind we have structured the book in a way we believe will allow us to navigate successfully the complex terrain while working towards a transformative model for thinking about and going towards new ways of dealing with literacy in schools.

In Chapter 1 we distinguish between what can loosely be described as the rhetoric and the realities surrounding the current ‘what about the boys?’ debate. We identify risks associated with overly emotional or inflammatory discussions around the needs/rights of boys (and girls) and the ‘real’ challenges that educators concerned with the literacy experiences of boys and girls now face. In naming our desire to distinguish between what might loosely be termed ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’, two further challenges immediately become apparent. First, we have learned over the past twenty years that there are few genuinely homogeneous categories in the world. To speak of ‘boys’, ‘schools’ and ‘literacy’ as though they are unified and unproblematic categories is therefore a dangerous and, indeed, meaningless gesture. In working to map the experiences of boys within schools generally and literacy classrooms more explicitly, therefore, we are aware of the need to provide multiple maps which are able to identify and acknowledge the existence of many, many different boys, who are located differently within many, many different schools and who experience many, many different versions of literacy.

Consequently, we cannot, in fact, identify the ‘real’ experiences of boys in literacy classrooms. Any such attempt is doomed before it begins. *We will* attempt, however, to map common and recurring patterns of experience. In Chapter 2 our overarching goal is to identify the context to be negotiated by any attempt to conceptualize gender-based literacy reform. To respond to this context and the ‘real’ challenges it poses, educators need a range of conceptual and practical resources. To this end, Chapter 2 reviews the strengths and limitations of various ‘solutions’ advanced in answer to the boys/literacy crisis. We align ourselves with those resources that can be seen as transformative in intent and possibility. We discuss the characteristics of this transformative mindset and make explicit the ways in which the theoretical resources that have helped to produce it can assist in making sense of various approaches to gender reform and various perspectives on literacy.

In Chapters 3 and 4 we explore the articulation between these theoretical perspectives and various literacy mindsets.

Chapter 5 builds on the theoretical resources relating to literacy and gender reform explored in the earlier chapters to tell two different stories

about possible responses relating to boys and their literacy needs. The chapter compares and contrasts essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives on gender-based literacy reform and highlights some of the dangers and possibilities associated with each.

Building on this distinction, Chapters 6 and 7 explore in more detail the risks and potential associated with two common strategies used to shape transformative literacy practice: the use of technology and the attempt to respond to generationally specific interests. In reviewing both the potential and the limitations of technologically mediated or generationally targeted literacy practice we will highlight the difference between those implementations which contribute to the critique and transformation of limiting gender norms, and those which work to reinforce and reinscribe these same traditions. These chapters also explore challenges associated with implementing and sustaining any kind of gender reform project in what is often described as a 'post-feminist' age.

In the concluding chapter we acknowledge the very real challenges associated with attempting systematic gender-based literacy reform and offer some final images for helping to conceptualize and sustain this work.

Our aim throughout is to examine ways in which various mindsets relating to gender, masculinity, gender reform, literacy, technology and popular culture can either open up or close down new conceptualizations of what it means to be a boy, and what it means to be literate. We will identify those mindsets that appear to us to have most to offer diverse groups of people concerned with the educational needs, experiences and outcomes of the boys and girls in contemporary schools. These include parents, teachers, students, media personalities, community members, those who are new to gender debates and those who have worked in the field for years.

Our data come from a range of places. We draw on various research projects we have conducted since 1997. We employ vignettes taken from our collective experiences in education over the past ten years. We use 'imaginary conversations' and anecdotes put together to capture the tenor of particular school-based literacy or gender reform projects. We also extract from a wide range of materials collected at schools and school forums over the past ten years.

It is important to note that throughout the book we explore practices associated predominantly with school-based literacies: that is, the kinds of literacies most commonly measured, benchmarked and assessed within western schooling systems. We also identify, however, a range of non-school literacy performances and highlight the importance of links between everyday literacies and classroom practices.

Our commitment to making new connections, and taking risks, relates not only to practices inside schools, or to conversations among academics. One of our fundamental goals, indeed, is to make connections between the ideas, beliefs and practices of academics, teachers, parents, kids and

community members. For this reason we have tried to make the book as accessible as possible, while trying to stay close to traditions of academic writing. This is a dangerous move that risks satisfying no one at all! It is, however, something that is important to try to do. Rather than trying to have the proverbial foot in both camps, we are interested in the possibility of doing away with rigid distinctions that would construct camps as distinct, oppositional and fundamentally different from each other in the first place. We are not claiming that we have left behind all academic discourse. Nor, indeed, do we believe this is necessary. Despite common stereotypes, teachers are not anti-theory, and teacher educators are not inherently out of touch. We have tried to make the relevance of various theoretical concepts as explicit as possible and hope to demonstrate that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. In this way we hope to help to strengthen connections between those who are positioned by their involvement in close and personal relationships with boys, girls, schools and school-based literacy practices, and those who are positioned by working in universities.

Two final points are important. We will argue that any attempt to engage with the literacy needs or experiences of boys must attend to the multiplicity of the category 'boys' and to the diverse ways masculinity is experienced and negotiated within any school. Consequently, it is not possible to advance one-size-fits-all strategies for reform. There is no single literacy worksheet that can meet the needs of every classroom. There is, in short, no quick fix. Nevertheless, we believe there *are* ways to move forward. Throughout the book we present stories of gender-based literacy reform that emphasize possibilities for change and that celebrate alternative, multiple and *literate* performances of school-based masculinity.

Each such story relates to specific cultural, historical and social circumstances. Hence, we do not conceptualize this book as any kind of 'final word' or 'real story' on boys, schooling and literacy. The book is intended to function as a starting point, not an ending. We hope the book will provide those new to the debate with an orientation to a complex terrain, while also indicating some new and challenging pathways for those who have negotiated the space for a longer time. Out of respect for both these groups we have tried to avoid, in the various chapters, lengthy recitations of statistics or data reported elsewhere, and have included, instead, summaries of key material and indications of useful sources for those wishing to pursue a particular issue or idea in more depth.

Finally, our decisions about what to include and leave out, and about what to highlight and downplay, were influenced first and foremost by knowing that it is the boys and girls at the heart of our discussion who will live with the consequences of our ability (or inability) to have productive conversations, make new connections and negotiate risky and dangerous places in our attempts to respond to their individual and collective needs. They are worth the risk.

chapter / one

What about the boys? The rhetoric and realities of the new gender crisis

Debates associated with boys, literacy and gender reform draw us into complex and disputed territories. Accordingly, our goal in this chapter is to provide a detailed map of the complex terrain associated with boys and their educational and literacy experiences. ‘Complex’ is a key word here. The wide range of emotions that are attached to debates around boys, literacy and schooling make it difficult to progress the discussion beyond the emotional level towards a space where action and intervention are possible. Yet because there is so much at stake we need to get better at having these debates. As a step in this direction our main goal in this chapter is to distinguish between what might be called the rhetoric and the realities of this new gender crisis, to put us in a better position to determine where action needs to be taken, and what this action might look like.

While it is probably impossible (and not even desirable) to isolate the debate from emotions surrounding it, we will try to disentangle some of the individual strands of argument that have become closely entwined. We aim to identify some of the data that have fuelled the debate, and to highlight different and conflicting political positions used to make sense of this material. The challenge here will be to steer a course between oversimplifying complex arguments, on the one hand, and alienating readers with unnecessarily detailed accounts of particular issues or ideological positions, on the other. Consequently, we will not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of all that has been said or written about boys and their educational outcomes or, indeed, about girls and *their* educational outcomes. We *will*, however, try to provide an overview of the kinds of claims regularly made about the experiences of boys and girls in schooling contexts, and to use this as a basis for identifying the risks associated with the various positions

attached to these claims. We aim to identify patterns associated with the ways boys and girls and their various educational experiences are discussed and critiqued.

The chapter is organized in two sections. The first discusses the emergence of the boys/literacy crisis as an identified area of public concern, identifies the emotions that have been associated with the debate and considers the risks associated with the production of boys as the ‘new losers’ in contemporary school contexts. The second identifies what ‘we’ think we *know* about the performance of boys in schools generally and in literacy contexts more specifically. Here again we are looking for recurring patterns that can be taken as indicators of significant and widespread problems, rather than trying to address an exhaustive database.

‘It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it’: masculinity in crisis and the failure of boys at school

During 1999–2000 the authors collectively participated in twelve forums focused on boys and their educational needs. A plethora of school-based activities concerned with boys, literacy and masculinity have helped to generate a sense that boys have somehow slipped off the schooling agenda, and that we need to redress the neglect that they have endured for so long. Publicly articulated concerns about boys’ educational outcomes have become very common over the past ten years. It would be a mistake, however, to begin here by assuming that no one had previously looked seriously at boys’ education. On the contrary, people have been exploring various issues associated with the relationship between boys and schooling for a very long time. According to Elaine Millard (1997), differences in boys’ and girls’ educational achievements were discussed as early as 1867 in a Schools’ Inquiry Commission in the United Kingdom. Debates about the kinds of education most suitable for girls and boys continued on and off for the next hundred years, until in 1987 questions associated with the education of boys were raised by feminist Madeleine Arnot when she asked explicitly, ‘how are we to educate our sons?’ And for more than twenty years a great many feminists (and pro-feminist men) have also expressed concern about the need for us to attend not just to the quest for educational equity for girls, but also to positive educational experiences for boys. Bob Connell has drawn attention to a minor panic within the USA in the 1960s about the way schools were ‘destroying “boy’s culture” and thereby denying them their “reading rights”’ (Connell 1996: 115). In this context, Lingard and Douglas observe that ‘it is not new news to those who have been involved in schooling for a lengthy period of time that boys are slower to read than girls and require more remedial intervention’ (Lingard and Douglas 1999: 115).

Even so, it is only during the past ten years that relatively well known data about boys' literacy levels have been taken up in any sustained way by public and institutional discourses. Much of the early writing focused on the common roles assigned to, or taken up by, boys in various school contexts. It explored the various versions of masculinity performed within schools, and the effect these had on boys, but primarily on teachers and girls. In this literature, attention was drawn to the ways in which schools are involved in producing particular understandings of 'masculinity' where masculinity was in turn understood not as a natural phenomenon, but as 'a social construction about what it means to be male in certain times and certain places' (Kenway, 1995: 61). Much of the early literature here was closely allied to work focused on school-based gender reforms aimed at girls. There was an emphasis on the ways girls were disadvantaged by school-based celebrations of various forms of masculinity. The concern was for the ways in which particular versions of masculinity – particular ways of being a male – as well as fundamentally patriarchal perspectives were privileged within school structures, curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices.

The audience for the considerable volume of work on how schools participate in constructing and celebrating various forms of masculinity was often confined to people working in girls' educational reform projects. For this audience, understanding the construction of masculinity was recognized as a necessary stage in working to effect the kind of cultural transformation necessary to enable the valuing of girls within and by their schooling systems. Although this was seen as something that would have positive outcomes for men, the catalyst was, for the most part, concerns about girls. As Jane Kenway argued in 1994:

to put it simply most feminists want boys and men to change so that they cause less problems for girls and women and themselves, so that the sexes can live alongside each other in a safe, secure, stable, respectful, harmonious way and in relationships of mutual life-enhancing respect.

(Cited in Mills and Lingard 1997b: 51)

Within a similar framework, many teachers and policy makers interested in gender equity provided opportunities for girls *and* boys to reflect upon the social construction of gender, and made use of the kinds of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive teaching strategies intended to improve educational and life opportunities for both sexes. In the broader context of school culture, however, understandings about the ways in which schools help to produce particular versions of masculinity and femininity were seen to make few demands on boys. While boys were expected to 'accommodate' the new and emerging type of girl, they were seldom asked – in any *institutionally* supported fashion – to reflect upon on issues to do with their own 'boy-ness', their own masculinity. Boys, in a sense, were just part of the backdrop

against which girls were encouraged to improve their own educational experiences and educational outcomes.

In more recent times, however, data associated with *boys* and *their* schooling outcomes have received considerable press. Many people in diverse countries have responded to the plaintive cry ‘what about the boys?’ and the angry riposte ‘what *about* the boys?’ Both sides of the argument have helped to generate a very real sense that ‘we’ – all caring and concerned citizens – are now facing an educational crisis for which ‘we’ – particularly interfering feminists who have privileged girls and those who have let them get away with this – are largely responsible. As one commentator claims, ‘To say boys are toxic and are failing is all a bit glib. Boys are not failing. It is we who are failing them’ (Bantick 2000: 79).

Within this crisis discourse, media commentary, ‘folk’ wisdom, government reports and academic research in the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia (among other countries) have been used to fuel public claims that boys are the ‘new losers’ in our schooling systems. Is there a teacher, a parent, an academic in the over-developed world who hasn’t heard about the existence of ‘facts’ to prove how ‘our’ boys are now ‘failing at school’ (*Economist* 1996: 24). We are assured that there is ample evidence to demonstrate the ‘plight of boys’ (Willis 1999: 1). And we have been told that the past two decades have witnessed an ‘alarming decline in boys’ attainment and participation at school, noted in almost all industrial countries’ (Biddulph 1995b: 1).

Commissioned research projects argue that ‘the tables have turned. Boys have become the new disadvantaged’ (Teese *et al.* 1995: v); political figures identify the existence of a ‘culture of defeat’ (Wells 1999); and widely quoted articles and books even suggest that we are witnessing a ‘war on boys’ (Summers 2000). In the quest to lay blame, people have identified many favourite ‘whipping girls’ (Faludi 1999: 7), and the war against boys has been widely seen as the initiative of ‘misguided feminists’ (Summers 2000) or ‘meddling gender equity experts’ (Buttrose 2000) and associated with the ‘anti-male attitude so prevalent in schools’ (Buttrose 2000: 78). Underpinning much of this crisis rhetoric is the belief – both implicitly and explicitly communicated – that if boys are now losing at school then girls must clearly be winning. This kind of sentiment sees claims that girls are ‘out-performing’ boys, leaving boys behind, ‘beating boys’ and so on.

The intertwining of discourses of crisis and competition that characterizes many discussions about boys, girls and schooling has two immediate effects. It generates a sense that boys and girls must now compete for a finite set of positive schooling outcomes: some will win, and some will lose. Second, it attaches an air of urgency to the discussion by implying, as it does, that if the situation has gotten so bad for boys so quickly, and if girls are so clearly on a ‘winning streak’, then something must be done to stem the tide as soon as possible. There are strong resonances here with the Monday

morning analysis that takes place around weekend sport results. While boys might have been the premiership team for most of the 1900s, latest results appear to indicate that they have fallen off their game and allowed an unexpected and underrated contender to sweep them off the podium. Clearly, we need to sack our (feminist!) coach and rethink our match strategy.

This sense that we have been witnessing a hard fought contest between boys and girls is reflected in the title of a recent research project focused on the outcomes of boys and girls in Australian secondary education: *Who Wins at School?* (Teese *et al.* 1995). This problematic title – acknowledged as such by the authors – highlights the extent to which debates about boys, girls and schooling play on our emotions, inviting us to pick a winner, and put our time, our energies and our resources into seeing that winner home.

Christine Hoff Sommers's book *The War on Boys* (2000a) provides an especially stark illustration of the ways boys and girls are set up as competitors for various markers of social success. It includes the following observation of the differences between American girls' and boys' current sense of themselves:

It's a bad time to be a boy in America. The triumphant victory of the US women's soccer team at the World Cup last summer has come to symbolize the spirit of American girls. The shooting at Columbine High last spring might be said to symbolize the spirit of American boys.

(Sommers 2000b: 1)

It is difficult to sympathize with any point of view that links women's success at soccer to mass killings at a high school in such a way as to suggest some causal relationship between the two. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of inflammatory comment that works to make productive discussion around boys and schooling such a challenge.

We may rightly be critical of the terms in which the debate is often couched, and alarmed at some of the strategies employed by people who wish to draw attention to the 'plight' of boys. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that there certainly *are* some boys who are experiencing school in very negative ways, and that the crisis rhetoric *has* played some part in getting these issues on a public agenda. The point we want to emphasize here, however, is that the public debate that has grown up around boys and school is tied as closely to a perception that things are *different* as it is to any hard data that things are *worse*. This makes debates around boys and literacy particularly challenging. It requires us to distinguish between politically motivated scare mongering aimed at reinstating boys to their 'naturally' superior position on the one hand, and genuine and sensitive concerns for boys and girls that seek to extend work dealing with the construction and reconstruction of gender norms for girls to the lives of boys on the other.

Of course, it is tricky to distinguish between those who ‘really’ care and those who are in the debate for their own purposes. Even to say that we are more interested in pro-feminist positions is to invite the question highlighted by Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas: ‘what feminism are we pro?’ (Lingard and Douglas 1999). We will employ here the definition of pro-feminism advanced by Lingard and Douglas.

Pro-feminism sees the need to change men and masculinities, as well as masculinist social structures, while recognizing the hidden injuries of gender for many men and boys. Pro-feminists also support feminist reform agendas in education and more broadly, and at the same time recognize the structural inequalities of the current societal gender order, and of the gender regime within educational systems.

(Lingard and Douglas 1999: 4)

Our position will highlight the relationship between pro-feminist and feminist agendas relating to literacy and educational practice. We begin by recognizing the need always to move beyond the surface of any boys’ education debate in order to develop an understanding of the politics attached to the various ways of speaking and writing about boys and their school lives. More specifically, we recognize the existence of different and competing positions concerning the relationship between boys’ education and girls’ education. As we have seen, in dominant discourses associated with the ‘crisis’ in boys’ education, girls and boys – and men and women – are regularly positioned in opposition to each other. This reflects what has been described as the kind of ‘backlash’ politics that has increasingly been used to try to undo some of the hard won reforms of the various waves of feminism.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that discussions around the ways boys are currently positioned by and performing within mainstream schooling structures are closely tied to social and cultural concerns about the roles to be taken up by men and women respectively in the present and future. For example, a famous article in the *New Economist* that examined changing employment patterns for men was called ‘Tomorrow’s second sex’. The article was accompanied by a picture of several young anxious-looking boys peering out from behind the bars of what might be anything from a communal jail cell to a school security screen. A similarly emotive picture is provided by the cover of an edition of *North and South*. The headline reads ‘Man alone’. It features silhouettes of young boys sitting on the top of a small hill, looking across the rooftops of a distant town. Another newspaper article reviewing the controversial film *The Company of Men* implies that there are only two subject positions open for contemporary men: ‘Misogynist predator or feminist victim’ (Slattery 1998). This is a familiar and repeated pattern in countries like our own. We have witnessed a barrage of newspaper and magazine features, journal articles, books and TV programmes with titles like ‘The trouble with boys’ (Bantick 2000), *Stiffed: The Betrayal*

of the Modern Man (Faludi 1999), 'The crisis of manliness' (Newell 1998) and so on. Steve Biddulph's *Manhood*, Robert Bly's *Iron John*, Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power* and Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson's *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* are four well known and influential books belonging to what we call the protest masculinity framework. Such works share a tendency to argue that something fundamentally 'masculine' – the real 'manliness' of men – has been problematized, criticized and carelessly thrown aside by an overly zealous commitment to advancing the cause of women. These texts – and many others – help to lend credibility to and naturalize discussions around boys/school/literacy that emphasize crisis and seek to assign blame. Although there has been a significant increase in the number of texts celebrating the emergence of new figurations of masculinity, these are heavily outweighed – in number, emotion and press coverage – by works that portray men as lost, abandoned or betrayed. It is important here to recognize the risks associated with dwelling too long in the middle of such dramatically structured debates.

Discussions of men as 'lost' or 'betrayed' reinforce the idea that men and women are of necessity on different sides of the fence when it comes to debates associated with gender generally, and boys' education more specifically. Different dimensions of the 'what about the boys?' discussion position men and women in opposition to each other – as competing victims – and, in the process, generate stereotypes about the 'nature' of the men and the women, the boys and the girls, who are at the centre of the discussion. As noted above, men are regularly represented as 'feminist victims' or 'misogynist predators', while women are commonly assigned the role of 'meddling gender experts' or 'misguided feminists'. Such name-calling discourses discourage the kinds of collaboration among men and women that could benefit boys. They also position those with experience in gender equity in a problematic relationship with those who are new to the field. Many people who have recently begun to explore the relationship between gender and educational performance have thus been encouraged to look suspiciously on those with histories of working on issues to do with gender equity and schooling, and regularly assign at least some of the blame for boys' current problems to them. There is, then, a real risk that the experience and knowledge of those who have worked for years to improve the educational experiences of girls *and* boys will be ignored (at best) and actively devalued (at worst). This in turn means that many gender reform projects designed to respond to the needs of boys do not manifest an understanding of what has been learned during 20 years of work focused on improving the education of designated groups.

The chance that ill-informed interventions will be designed and implemented is increased by the air of urgency that characterizes claims that boys are now in crisis. It is certainly difficult to resist the imperative to action when confronted with claims that 'we' are failing boys and that their health,

their welfare, indeed their very survival are dependent upon our abilities to respond to this with due haste. But rushing into reform without understanding the strengths and weaknesses of various reform strategies only increases the chances of failure. This has in turn the potential to widen further the rift between ‘new’ and ‘old’ gender workers.

A related risk is that those who *do* have an understanding of the history of gender reform will become alienated from the debate. This could result either from consistent claims that the current situation for boys is somehow their fault, or from realizing that, as an area of concern, boys’ educational needs have in a few short years acquired a much higher public profile than girls’ educational needs ever did. This risk cannot be taken lightly. Many people who have worked tirelessly to improve the educational experiences of and outcomes for girls have done so from fairly marginal positions. In de Certeau’s terms, many attempts to address girls’ educational needs have functioned as ‘tactics’ of subversion: subversive moments that worked to disrupt dominant conceptions of ‘education’ without being able to depend upon the support of the discourses that were most powerful in these contexts (de Certeau 1988: xix).

Those involved in early and ongoing efforts at gender reform in school illustrate Audre Lorde’s point when she writes that traditionally ‘it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor’ (Lorde 1990: 281). This was certainly the case with girls in schools. Women had to identify it as an area of concern, and argue for its legitimacy. They had then to seek funds and other resources to support reform efforts, and argue about their legitimacy. They had then to implement, evaluate and modify initiatives, and argue about *their* legitimacy, while regularly negotiating hostile and resistant contexts which saw little to be concerned with in the first place.

The dramatic rise of popular and institutional interest in boys’ education has been very different. Within the crisis discourse explored earlier there are few calls for those concerned with boys’ ‘failure’ to justify their claims. There are few demands that the data be examined to prove which boys are failing and where this is happening. Likewise, there is little sense that the problem is relevant for and of interest to men only. Instead, there is an underlying assumption that boys are the responsibility of women *and* men. In particular, they are the responsibility of those women who have messed up schools in the first place.

The emotional nature of the ‘what about the boys?’ discourse can, then, lead to polarized responses and hasty reaction, and/or a kind of stubborn inaction where teachers – often women – object to the discourses which construct schools as overly feminized and anti-male.

A real consequence here is that lessons learned about the importance of defining carefully the nature of any gender-related problem will not inform

the development of programmes directed at boys. In Chapter 2 we address at length several points related to this. Meanwhile, it is important here to note the danger that boys and girls will, respectively, be conceptualized homogeneously and in opposition. For example, boys may be construed as uniformly failing at school, in the same ways, and for the same reasons. Girls, in contrast, may be seen uniformly as ‘winning’ at school, and for the same reasons. This, however, is obviously not the case. Twenty years of gender work has established that any attempt to address the needs of girls or boys must always ask, as an opening move, ‘which girls, which boys?’ (Collins *et al.* 2000).

The complex set of discourses associated with boys and the crisis associated with their social standing and their education can take boys’ education debates in many directions. Some of these are more dangerous than others. Discourses of crisis do not automatically lead to effective and transformative practices. They can also leave the situation relatively unchallenged, and may actually reinscribe the initial disadvantage.

Jean Baudrillard provides a useful perspective here via his discussion of the Watergate scandal in the USA. According to Baudrillard, the construction of – and response to – a designated, clearly identifiable, high priority crisis is a key strategy for powerful, mainstream organizations, institutions and discourses. He claims that ‘the denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law’ (Baudrillard 1983: 27). In the process of identifying and responding to social, political or ‘moral’ crises (for example, those highlighted by feminist educators with regard to issues of access and equity), institutions have a remarkable capacity to turn ‘scandal to regenerative ends’, They can create the illusion of ‘purification’ and, from this basis, move happily into the (same old) future (Baudrillard 1983: 27).

Maurice Blanchot offers a similarly cautious and analytically useful discussion of the political significance of discourses of disaster. He argues that ‘the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact’ (Blanchot 1986: 1). In other words, it is possible to argue that despite popular rhetoric, the phoenix does not always arise from the ashes of its cremation. Sometimes all that we end up with are the charred remains of a large, dead bird.

In negotiating the ‘what about the boys?’ rhetoric, then, it is important to be aware of its fundamentally political nature. Those who participate in this debate do so from various complex (and often contradictory) positions. This, of course, is always the case, since there is no ‘neutral’ speaking position. Likewise, there is no action that can be seen as totally separate from an individual or collective subjectivity or political position. There are, however, some contexts within which the politics of one’s speaking position are more easily obscured than in others. This is particularly so within debates that focus on such ‘natural’ concerns as the welfare of our boys. Where the ‘future of our sons’ is at stake, it is difficult indeed to stand

back and debate the agendas underpinning the various contributions to the ‘solution’.

It is precisely because so much is at stake that we need to develop skills in negotiating this terrain. The first move is to acknowledge the complexity that is involved, and to recognize the consequences of an unproblematic acceptance of any dimension of the crisis discourse. The second move is to try to be clear about the ‘real’ issues facing boys (and girls) in schools. In the second section of this chapter we explore what it is we now think we know about the educational needs of boys and girls.

What’s it all about? Boys and their schooling outcomes

We have argued that debates around boys, schooling and literacy are commonly couched in dramatic and alarmist terms and that this has the potential to generate further obstacles to meaningful reform (for boys *and* girls). We will now survey a range of common contemporary claims about boys’ experiences in schools. In some cases the data are necessarily presented in comparison to the outcomes of girls in schools.

Who wins at school? Early differences between boys and girls

Concerns about the differential educational outcomes of boys and girls generally draw attention to both the early differences that appear in terms of their skills and abilities – particularly early literacy and numeracy abilities – and their ‘final’ or leaving results. Early differences in girls’ and boys’ achievements have been identified among children in England and Wales, with girls scoring higher on tests conducted at 5, 7, 9 and 11 (*Economist* 1996: 23). A similar pattern is identified within Australian data. Masters and Forster’s 1997 report of a national survey of literacy levels in Australian Year 3 and Year 5 students found that ‘the mean literacy achievements of girls were higher at these Year levels than those of boys and the differences were greater for writing and speaking than for reading’ (cited in Collins *et al.* 2000).

The report on Australian national literacy testing in 1996 (DETYA 1999a, b), identified the fact that only 66 per cent of male students were able to meet the reading benchmarks set for Year 3, compared with 77 per cent of female students. Likewise, 65 per cent of all male students tested scored at or above the writing benchmark for Year 3, while 81 per cent of female students scored above and higher for the same benchmark. According to this report, the ‘gap’ between girls’ and boys’ performance repeats itself for the Year 5 test results conducted in the same year: 65 per cent of the boys tested and 76 per cent of the girls tested scored at or above the reading benchmark in Year 5; 59 per cent of the boys reached or went beyond the

benchmark set for Writing in Year 5, whereas 74 per cent of girls met or exceeded this benchmark (DETYA 1999a, b).

Similarly, the combined results of the 1999 national testing in the United Kingdom for reading, writing and spelling (the Key Stage tests) for 7, 11 and 14 year old students indicate that 77 per cent of boys reached level 2 and above in reading, while 86 per cent of girls tested reached the same level and above. Similarly with writing, 78 per cent of boys tested and 87 per cent of girls tested performed at level 2 or above. In terms of spelling performance on the national test, only 65 per cent of boys tested at level 2 or above, whereas 76 per cent of the girls tested at level 2 and above (DfEE 1999a).

A recent Department of Education publication claims that, in the United States, '41 per cent of our 4th graders cannot read at the basic level and only 28 per cent performed at or above the proficient level, according to the 1998 NAEP Reading Report Card' (US Department of Education 1998). The test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1996 have been analysed according to male and female performance in reading, writing and spelling tests and indicate what many see as 'dangerous' gaps between male and female performance in relation to sets of literacy skills.

These are not isolated cases. The pattern which identifies early differences between girls' and boys' literacy levels recurs in many countries. The reading literacy study conducted in 1990–1 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) measured reading performance of 9-year-old students from 27 countries across the world. Secondary analysis of these data (Helbers 2000: 14) notes that there were significantly more boys than girls located within the 'low scoring' category. In Canada, boys comprised 56 per cent of the low scorers; in New Zealand, boys accounted for 64 per cent of those in this category; and in Trinidad and Tobago the figure was 53.8 per cent.

Kenway *et al.* (1997: 49) note that while once 'it never mattered much to boys, and to men generally, that girls succeed at things they despised, suddenly it matters that boys are not as successful as girls in the less prestigious subjects.' The current concern with boys' educational outcomes, however, has put these issues firmly on the agenda. There is a widespread insistence that basic and higher level literacy and numeracy skills are essential for full participation in academic, social and professional contexts, and that boys' needs in this area must be addressed. This concern is tied to an awareness that boys are occupying some less than prestigious spaces during their school lives.

Slow progress

Concerns about the lower literacy levels of boys are deepened when they are read alongside reports that identify less than desirable sets of experiences

for boys during the course of their education. Researchers in a range of countries and across a variety of schooling sectors have presented evidence to argue that boys are:

- over-represented in remedial education classes (Prior *et al.* 1999) and more likely to be held back a grade (*Economist* 1996: 23);
- most likely to demonstrate behaviour problems (New South Wales Government 1994; Collins *et al.* 1996);
- more likely to be suspended (Lingard and Douglas 1999);
- the majority of counselling referrals (New South Wales Government 1994);
- three times as likely to receive a diagnosis of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (US Department of Education 1997).

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are also gendered patterns relating to subject choice, educational progress and school completion. At school boys are more likely than girls to enrol in high-level maths and science courses, and less likely to undertake studies connected to English and the humanities. This pattern continues into universities, with male students continuing to choose science, technology and engineering over humanities or education.

Leaving subject choice aside, boys are performing less well than girls when it comes to their final examinations or leaving certificates. A recent report into post-school options of Australian boys and girls provides information to demonstrate that:

In Year 12 assessment, the average girl is performing better than the average boy over a larger number of subjects than vice versa in each of the three States we have chosen for illustration. Differences in average performance in major subjects in Western Australia and Victoria tend to be small – less than three per cent in most subjects. Excluding LOTE subjects where enrolments tend to be more erratic from year to year, in Western Australia in 1998 the average male who enrolled in these subjects out-performed the average female in computing, economics, geology, chemistry and physics. The average female out-performed the average male in approximately fifteen other major subjects. In Victoria in 1998 the average boy out-performed the average girl in literature, texts and traditions, music performance, accounting, international studies, chemistry and maths methods (the standard university entrance maths). The average girl did better in 35 other subjects. In New South Wales in 1998, the differences tend to be larger. Furthermore, in NSW the average boy outperformed the average girl only in 2-unit and 3-unit computing studies and in ‘mathematics in practice’. That is all. The average girl outperformed the average boy in everything else.

(Collins *et al.* 2000: 50)

A similar pattern has been found within the European Union, where data reveal that in 1995, 124 girls received leaving certificates to every 100 boys (*Economist* 1996: 23). Lingard and Douglas provide an excellent overview of the situation in the UK. Citing Elwood's analysis of gendered patterns relating to entry and achievement within the General Certificate of Secondary Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, they argue that 'in terms of the percentage of students getting A–C grades, girls outperform boys in all subjects (including chemistry and physics), except for biology and maths, and that the disparity in maths is minimal' (Lingard and Douglas 1999: 106).

And it's not just school

Concerns relating to boys' schooling experience are also linked to alarming (although hardly new or surprising) data relating to their out of school and post-schooling experiences. A variety of evidence suggests that young males are more likely than girls to appear in court, and to be convicted of a juvenile crime. For example, males account for 72 per cent of youth appearances in Canadian courts (statistics available from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/State/Justice/legal14.htm> and <http://www.csc-cc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/briefs/b22/b22e.shtml>). Similarly, 69 per cent of juvenile arrests in the USA relate to males (Snyder and Sickmund 1999: 81) and in the United Kingdom nearly one in four juvenile crimes is committed by girls (Teeside Probation Office 1999).

These are not the only risks negotiated by boys outside of school. They have a significantly higher chance of dying in motor accidents, of being murdered (Ryan 1998) and of committing suicide. In the United States it is generally conceded that boys are four times more likely to kill themselves than girls (Ryan 1998); in Australia the suicide rate for males aged 15–24 is four to five times that of women in the same age cohort (ABS 1997). These data, of course, are not unproblematic but there is enough of a pattern here to generate serious concern.

Boys and men are also seen to suffer from low level depression (80 per cent in the USA: Ryan 1998). Rising levels of unemployment, particularly for working-class men, are associated with poor health and psychological problems. This connection is graphically illustrated in the popular movie *Brassed Off* (1996). Set against the backdrop of the 1992–3 mining pit closure programme in the United Kingdom, the movie focuses on the experiences of members of a Yorkshire Colliery Band who struggle to keep their mine open, and to support themselves or their families. The emphasis in these and other movies is, understandably, upon the mental anguish experienced by men who lost a sense of purpose or direction. Australian data, however, indicate that 'by the upper years of schooling . . . girls' rates of mental health morbidity have increased and are on a par with boys' rates' (Collins *et al.* 2000).

Reflections and qualifications

It is difficult not to panic or be alarmed by such data. And it is easy to understand how discussions that explore these and related claims can quickly become emotional and hostile or descend into the ‘competing victim’ syndrome described by Eva Cox (1995). It is important, however, that we are not dazzled by the data, or reduced to emotive responses on account of their poignant or pathetic nature. Rather, we need to examine the data carefully and closely to identify some useful questions they challenge us to ask.

One important question, which is addressed in Chapter 4, concerns how ‘success’ or ‘literacy’ are measured. There are arguments to be made that evidence of boys’ poor literacy is based upon particular and narrow understandings of what counts as literacy. The question we need to consider here has to do with *which* boys and *which* girls the data most accurately represent. Susan Bordo (1990: 139) reminds us that ‘gender forms only one axis of a complex, heterogenous construction, constantly interpenetrating, in historically specific ways, with multiple other axes of identity.’ With this perspective in mind – and without in any way wanting to detract from the seriousness of the statistics presented above – we therefore need to acknowledge the fact that *some* boys continue to do very well at school while *some* girls continue to fail (Kenway *et al.* 1997). A critical review of this research suggests the following points.

First, school failure increases among boys from low socio-economic or marginalized cultural/geographical communities: ‘The higher the socio-economic status of parents on these measures [of household income, family structure, parental education], the higher is the literacy and English performance of their children, both boys and girls, on average’ (Buckingham 1999: 7). Indeed, ‘socio economic status makes a larger difference than gender to Year 12 performance even . . . where girls generally do better than boys’ (Collins *et al.* 2000: 4) and it seems that socio-economic status appears to be the most salient factor in boys’ (and girls’) literacy performance in schools (ERO 1999).

Intersecting with socio-economic status as a factor in boys’ troubles with literacy are indigeneity (Collins *et al.* 2000) and ethnicity (Metropolitan Life Foundation 1997; Kleinfeld 1998; Asch 1999; Cooper and Groves 1999; ERO 1999; Koerner 1999; Mahiri *et al.* 2001). Furthermore, according to Yunupingu (1995, cited in Alloway and Gilbert 1998), the same pattern of superior measured performance in literacy tasks by girls over boys occurs among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as well.

Similar findings have been reported in Britain (see, for example, Foster 2000), the USA (Kleinfeld 1998) and New Zealand. The New Zealand Education Review Office clearly sees ethnicity and low socio-economic status as two dimensions of the same problem. According to the Office:

Because employment is increasingly based on knowledge and communication skills, the gender gap in educational achievement may be reflected in future employment opportunities. For some groups of boys, such as boys from low socio-economic communities and Maori boys with few skills and qualifications, future employment opportunities are severely limited.

(ERO 1999: 5)

While this is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature relating to the multiple ways in which literacy levels are affected, the kinds of data cited here indicate that gender is by no means the only factor influencing literacy attainment. Rather, gender intersects with a range of other factors to create a network of disadvantage.

Lingard and Douglas (1999: 111) highlight the importance of acknowledging the multiplicities often concealed behind claims relating to the ‘success’ of girls or the ‘failure’ of boys via reference to apparent retention rates: ‘Any consideration of differential retention rates between various groups drives home the point that . . . we must always disaggregate the data and be clear about which girls and which boys we are talking about at any moment.’ Acknowledging the multiplicity of factors that combine with gender to influence engagement and success in literacy classrooms is fundamentally tied to recognizing that neither ‘boys’ nor ‘girls’ is a homogeneous category. Our primary goals are to identify ways in which school-based literacy programmes can meet the needs of girls *and* boys. To this end, it is necessary to be clear not just about the multiple factors that combine to produce forms of educational disadvantage among *boys*, but also about the ongoing existence of forms of educational (and post-schooling) disadvantage among *girls*.

We conclude this chapter by considering the implications of recognizing that important challenges continue to face the education of girls. These must be factored into any considerations about initiatives to be undertaken on behalf of improving literacy levels for boys.

Challenges for girls

The first point to make is that not all girls are ‘winning’ at school. While girls are generally performing better in literacy tests than boys from the same socio-economic grouping and the same racial or ethnic background, middle-class boys continue to perform better than working-class girls (Alloway 2000).

Furthermore, girls continue to be under represented within the more highly valued and prestigious subjects at high school and at university. Teese *et al.* (1995) have made the important point that ‘despite girls’ increasing participation and continuing achievement – certain boys still top the high-status

subjects and stay on top in post-school life as a result' (cited in Kenway *et al.* 1997: 48). This results in the perpetuation of the gendered nature of the workforce and the location of women within stereotypically feminine spaces; particularly in the service industries, in 'caring' or nurturing professions such as teaching and nursing and increasingly in the peripheral labour market, as casual or contract workers.

Girls continue to report high levels of sex-based harassment at school (Australian Education Council 1991) and in the workforce. As Mills and Lingard (1997b: 52) remind us, there is 'a significant body of evidence . . . which suggests that boys as a social group make life very difficult for girls in co-educational schools (as well as for boys not conforming to stereotyped masculinity) and that this is often treated as normal.' Extreme and disturbing evidence of the attitudes that underpin day-to-day harassment of girls in schools was provided by an Australian study relating to the attitudes of Year 9 boys to forced or coerced sex. 'One in three boys believed it was "okay for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse" if she's led him on' (O'Connor 1992: 2).

In addition to this, girls are more likely than boys to suffer from some form of eating disorder, with recent estimates arguing that anorexia nervosa is the third most common illness among teenagers and that bulimia is the fastest growing disease among teenage females. Indeed, it has been estimated that 20 per cent of girls aged between 18 and 22 displayed symptoms associated with binge eating disorders (The Australian Longitudinal Women's Health Study, cited in Hutchinson 2000: 1–2). Over 80 per cent of females (and, importantly, 40 per cent of males) report a high level of dissatisfaction with their body image (Kostanski and Gullone 1998: 260). Equally troubling are data that reveal that the rate of smoking among young women is continuing to rise. A Canadian study revealed that the percentage of women between 15 and 19 who smoke rose from 21 to 29 per cent between 1990 and 1994, while the rate in boys rose from 21 to 26 per cent.

It is also important to note here that while there is increasing attention drawn to the suicide rates of young males, there is evidence to suggest that girls are attempting suicide at *five times* the rate of boys.

Women in the workforce also report high levels of overt and covert harassment and continue to enjoy less secure positions or permanent positions. Even when they possess the same qualifications as men, women earn, on average, less money (Lindsey 1994). As Rowan (2000: 154) has argued, 'women and men do not routinely occupy the same workplace territory *even if* they share the same office.' Women also continue to take responsibility for the majority of family and childcare responsibilities, working the infamous double shift (Davidson and Burke 1994; Townsend and McLennan 1995). Perhaps ironically, women are also more likely to be victims of domestic violence, and to spend time in sheltered or protected accommodation (Townsend and McLennan 1995).

We are trying to emphasize here that we cannot afford to focus exclusively on the needs of boys *or* girls. We cannot afford to get caught up in arguments which claim that all girls' problems have been fixed or others which insist women are now actually privileged over men. But nor can we afford to cling stubbornly to the belief that all boys experience the rewards of patriarchy in the same way. There are real challenges relating to the education of boys and girls that require us to consider experiences of boys *and* girls in attempting to formulate any cohesive or coherent response.

Ways forward

Moving forward in response to these challenges requires an appreciation of the following points. First, there *are* patterns relating to educational experience and achievement that indicate differences between boys and girls. Second, there are similar patterns relating to groups of boys and groups of girls, which indicate that there are many ways in which different boys and different girls experience and respond to the same educational context. Third, while there are serious in-school issues to be dealt with in relation to boys, there are equally serious, though different, issues faced by girls.

To those involved in schooling generally and literacy education specifically, these points raise serious challenges. How is it possible to meet the needs of boys *and* girls? How is it possible to respond to the diversity among *groups* of boys and girls? How can literacy classrooms support overall projects of gender reform? How can literacy lessons engage various groups of girls and boys, while remaining true to the goals of an overarching reform strategy? What do we already know about boys, or girls, that we can use to respond to this challenge? What do we already know about gender-based reform that we can draw on in designing these responses?

These are all complex questions requiring not only an understanding of what is at stake, but also a clear idea of what goals we are working towards, and what strategies we will use in the process. In this chapter we have tried to emphasize the fact that the educational experiences of boys (and girls) have a range of consequences, relating not only to their mastery of the kinds of literacies that continue to be highly valued within employment and post-school contexts, but also to what might be loosely regarded as quality of life, and sense of self. In other words, there is a lot at stake relating to their education. What we need to explore now are the various strategies available to us in formulating any response. This leads, once more, to a complex area. There are many different opinions concerning the best ways in which people should respond to the current boys' 'crisis', and equally diverse opinions relating to who should respond, and who should benefit. In the following chapter our aim is to provide an overview of these various mindsets relating to the how, who and why of gender reform.

The boys'™ school environments ranged from an urban high school to a private, all-boys prep school. Participants kept journals detailing not only how they spent their time in the classroom, but also how they applied literacy skills to activities outside the classroom. In addition, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with the boys several times during the course of the study. Many study participants expressed a pronounced dislike for literacy-related classroom activities. But in their passionate descriptions of extracurricular interests —such as sports or movies — Smith and Wilhelm found t Boys, Literacy and Schooling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. Authors Professor Peter Freebody, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt Campus, Brisbane.Â Boys, Literacy and Schooling: Expanding the Repertoires of Practice describes an inquiry into the bases of the common finding that boys indicate lower literacy scores than girls on literacy tests and assessments. It explores the possible bases for that finding and offers the beginnings of an educational response.