

THE SECOND SEX OF TOMORROW?  
CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY  
IN THE MORAL PANIC ABOUT BOYS' EDUCATION.  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Based on qualitative content analysis of articles in ten major Canadian newspapers between 1990 and 2011, this thesis asks how masculinity is represented in discourses about gender and education. My analysis suggests that the public discourse about boys' education is out of touch with scholarly research, and instead relies on a number of problematic tropes: (1) Schools are imagined as being run for girls and by female educators devoted to an anti-male agenda; (2) education is seen as a zero-sum game, in which what benefits girls must be necessarily bad for boys; (3) boys are being constructed as one homogenous group that is inherently different from girls, while any diversity among boys, especially in terms of race and class, is erased. I argue that the panic about boys' education must be understood as a backlash against feminism, based on a misreading of economic transformations through a gender lens.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2012, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) introduced five so-called 'Leadership Academies' – specialized elementary school programs that focused on a specific mission or broad content area. Alongside 'Academies' dedicated to 'Sports & Wellness', 'Health & Wellness' and 'Vocal Music', two of these novel programs consisted of a 'Girls Leadership Academy' and a 'Boys Leadership Academy', in other words: single gender public schools. Framed as offering greater choice in primary education, these 'Academies' were being marketed as trailblazing and promising innovations that were supposedly based on the premise that “[e]very child is unique”<sup>1</sup>. Especially the introduction of a 'Boys Leadership Academy' was reflective of a renewed interest in – and as I will show: panic about – boys' educational opportunities and (under)achievements over the last two decades. Moreover, the founding of this gender segregated public school was not accompanied by much public controversy<sup>2</sup>, despite the TDSB openly acknowledging that “research on single gender classes in relation to student achievement is not conclusive” (TDSB 2012b). This lack of public controversy demonstrates how deep the notion that boys are in need of support has been engrained into collective consciousness. The claim that “[a]necdotally, we hear positive things about single gender classes”(TDSB 2012b) seems to be sufficient to legitimize such schools.

In order to understand how we arrived at this taken-for-granted assumption about boys and schooling, and in order to investigate the constructions of masculinity and

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1 This is the slogan on a flyer advertising these new 'Leadership Academies' (TDSB 2012a).

2 This stands in stark contrast to the debates and public outcry about the introduction of an 'Afrocentric' school in the TDSB system.



femininity in public debates about gender in education, this thesis analyzes two decades of Canadian news media discourse about a so-called 'boy crisis' in education – the belief that boys are losing out in today's educational system and require specific remedies.

It is true that recent studies show that on average girls tend to outperform boys on a range of indicators for educational success today. For example, male students are more likely to drop out of school, receive poorer grades, perform less well in standardized tests and are now outnumbered by females in post-secondary educational institutions (AUCC 2011; Kerr 2010; Kimmel 2010). As I will show, these findings have sparked public debate about a notion of male victimization; some commentators even argue that feminism has launched a “War against Boys” (Sommers 2000) that penalizes boys for 'being boys'. Moreover, the idea that 'natural' differences exist between boys' and girls' learning strategies are often put forward both by pundits trying to explain the underachievement of boys and by policy makers in their push for single-sex educational programmes. These arguments often assume that there are inherent gender differences in cognitive abilities and learning strategies, as exemplified by a May 2011 op-ed in the *Toronto Star*:

Would you put two groups of students, who speak completely different languages, in the same classroom with one teacher?  
Probably not. You would most likely argue that to thrive, they need to be taught in their own languages. Yet, in a co-ed classroom, the divergent development of boys and girls means that this is essentially what happens every day. (Chan 2011)

According to this view, not only are boys and girls so fundamentally different that they even lack the fundamental ability communicate with each other but also, by

implication, one gender is assumed to be forced to deal with an environment that quite literally does not speak to them in their own language.

By conducting a content analysis of Canadian print media – that combines both descriptive quantitative with more extensive qualitative, in-depth analysis – my thesis investigates the content of this public discourse about an alleged 'boy crisis', as well as its origins and trajectory. Building on Bouchard, Boily and Proulx's (2003) research on the 'boy crisis' debates and its connections to the 'Men's Rights' movement, my primary research question is: How is masculinity conceptualized in these public debates and, more specifically, how does public discourse manage to frame an alleged underachievement by a group that has historically and structurally been privileged over the other gender? Moreover, I will attend to whether – and how – the intersections of masculinity and whiteness, racialization and class are addressed in this discourse, in order to understand just who these boys are that the public is talking about: Is there an assumption that boys are a homogenous category or does the discourse acknowledge the specific struggles and needs of any particular group of boys?

My thesis first lays out the context of the the discourse to be analyzed: Chapter 2 reviews the academic literature on gender and educational achievements – and the underachievements of boys more specifically – and studies that pertain to the public discourse of a 'boy crisis' itself. In Chapter 3, I will introduce my methods and methodology. First, I will address methodological questions, discuss underlying

assumptions about sociological research and briefly introduce content analysis of print media as a method in sociology before turning to the question of sampling. Afterwards, I will explain my practice of coding.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the major findings of my analysis. Chapter 4 analyzes how the media discourse presents schools as spaces hostile to boys and set up to the benefit of girls. Here, I make the argument that the 'boy crisis' discourse amounts to depicting boys as a disadvantaged population and special interest group that is suffering from discrimination. Moreover, I argue that the discourse blames this supposed discrimination against boys on women and feminists, and depicts feminism as having achieved cultural hegemony, allegedly resulting in ignorance or hostility toward men and boys. At the same time, I show that ironically it is often the appropriation of feminist rhetoric that allows for a portrayal of boys a group in need in the first place.

Chapter 5 shows that the discourse on gender and education tends to portray male and female learners as two fundamentally distinct populations that exhibit specific needs and traits. Based on ideas of biological determinism, boys are imagined as a homogenous group in need of specific styles of instruction that would allow for success in schools. As such, the media debate tends to also ignore, or explicitly deny, the diversity of experiences and needs among the male student population, collapsing them into one uniform category that is said to be in need. Moreover, as I show, even those articles that do not primarily rely on biologicistic notions of sex differences, when explaining male and female students' behaviours, ultimately end up treating gender as a given rather than

trying to deconstruct gender roles in society.

Based on the findings presented in the previous two chapters, the concluding Chapter 6 argues that the 'boy crisis' discourse ultimately must be understood as a misguided and misleading attempt at coming to terms with major transformations in Western capitalist economies over the past decades. Very real concerns about the prospect of working-class and middle-class students and workers are being translated in this discourse into concerns about *male* students and workers. And rather than understanding the erosion of socioeconomic prospects for these populations as rooted in shifts in post-industrial capitalism and economic crises, the expansion of women's opportunities and achievements – relative to previous decades – is being blamed, resulting in reactionary rhetoric on the part of many of those lamenting a 'boy crisis'.

## **2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1. THE GENDER GAP IN EDUCATION**

Whereas from the 1970s until the early 1990s discussions about gender and education were primarily concerned with girls, more recently public discourse has taken a pronounced “boy turn” (Weaver-Hightower 2008). Journalists, politicians and the public alike have increasingly claimed that today it is not girls, but boys on whom educational policy should focus. This shift of focus in debates about gender and education – and the changes in educational policy and practice that these have inspired – has also drawn the attention of sociologists and scholars of education. Before engaging with the research about media representations of masculinity more broadly and the public discourse on gender and education in the media more specifically, I will lay out what academic research has found about the interplay of gender and education in order to provide background information that enables a better understanding concerning to what degree the media discourse contradicts empirical findings.

#### **2.1.1. Trends in Gender and Education**

Recent data suggests that female students *on average* do slightly better than their male counterparts; however, there are important caveats to be taken into account. Enrolment in both high school and post-secondary education is higher for female students than it is for males. For example, high school drop out rates for Ontario in 2008/ 2009 were 10% for boys and 6% for girls, and “young males were less likely to be fully

engaged in school” (Kerr 2010:15). Similarly, more female than male students today enrol in (and graduate from) universities and colleges. While in the US about 59% of B.A. degrees are now earned by women (Kimmel 2010:8), Canada has seen a similar increase in the percentage of female students on campuses over the last three decades. Whereas women only made up about 37% of students at universities in Ontario in 1971 (Kerr 2010:12) and accounted for about 45% of Canadian university students in 1980, they began to outnumber men by 1987 and today constitute 58% of the student population in both Ontario and all of Canada (AUCC 2011:12; Kerr 2010:1). Women are less likely to drop out of either college or university (Kerr, 2010:4) and make up the majority in both university applicants and enrolment in college programs in Ontario (Card et al. 2011:5). Boys are also seemingly falling behind girls in grade point averages and scores on standardized tests. Not only do more female students in Ontario perform at or above provisional expectations in standardized tests and receive a higher share of top grades, but they are also less likely to repeat a grade (Kerr 2010:12).

However, these trends are more complicated than the notion of boys falling behind girls tends to convey. For instance, the gender gap in undergraduate enrolment has peaked in the late 2000s, with evidence of small decreases in the percentage of female enrolment compared to that of boys more recently (AUCC 2011:12). This indicates that the ratio of male to female students is unlikely to shift even further towards women in the future.

Additionally, the gender gaps that do exist – and that are often portrayed as a radically recent and surprising phenomenon – have in fact existed for several decades

both in Canada (Davidson et al. 2004:55) and the US, where girls on average have earned higher grades than boys as early as the 1950s (Buchmann et al. 2008:322). Moreover, dropout rates have been declining for both girls and boys since the 1990s, showing that a panic over current boys' disengagement is not substantiated by evidence and that the gender gap in dropout rates is not a new phenomenon but has existed well before the recent concern about boys and education, partially due to the fact that more boys than girls leave school in order to seek employment without a high school diploma. What is novel seems to be the collective concern and panic about boys' achievement rather than their actual achievement levels and behaviour (Yates 2000:307).

Most importantly, the fact that men are now outnumbered by women on university campuses does not indicate that male students are doing worse than ever; quite the opposite is the case. Both men and women today enrol in universities at historically high numbers in the US (Kimmel 2010; Mead 2006) and Canada (Kerr 2010; AUCC 2011), making boys actually *more likely* to attend and graduate from university than thirty years ago, since “percentages of both males and females attending university as a proportion of the population have continued to grow” (Kerr 2010:3). Also when it comes to test scores “data suggest that boys' academic achievement levels actually improved during the 1990s” (Davidson et al. 2004:59) and boys “are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before” (Mead 2006:3). What we are seeing then, is not a decline in male educational attainment and achievement but an increase – although, admittedly, a smaller increase compared to that of female students.

### 2.1.2. Postgraduate Outcomes

While women do outnumber men in the overall undergraduate population, on measures other than high-stake test results or enrolment numbers – such as data about fields of study, postgraduate degrees and labour market outcomes – women continue to fall behind men, further invalidating the idea that it is girls who are unquestionably the winners in the educational system (Collins et al. 2000). For instance, men remain overrepresented in some of the most financially rewarding subjects areas. In fact,

[i]n 2008, women constituted the minority in the combined disciplines of mathematics, computer and information sciences where they represented 26 percent of students, and architecture, engineering and related technologies where women represented 20 percent of students. (AUCC 2011:14)

Moreover, men continue to outnumber women in the most financially lucrative sectors of postgraduate education, despite significant gains made by female students over the last few decades. In the US, women earn less than half of PhDs, law and medical degrees and remain concentrated in postgraduate fields like education, psychology and the humanities (Mead 2006:12). Similarly, the share of women enrolled in PhD programs in Canada has plateaued and remained relatively steady at 46 percent in the 2000s after having grown from around 30 percent in 1980 (AAUC 2011:14).

These numbers also translate into labour market trends favouring men. Although women have made great strides over the past decades, female workers continue to earn less because of a horizontally and vertically gendered labour market (Kerr 2010:8). In addition to being outnumbered by men in positions of authority and higher management, women continue to constitute the majority in the fields of health care, education and



service sector jobs, while men predominate in the applied sciences, management, the industry and the trades (Kerr 2010:6). In the US, female university graduates continue to earn less than men in the same occupational fields and “women ages 25 – 34 who have earned a bachelor’s degree make barely more money than men of the same age who went to college but didn’t get a bachelor’s degree” (Mead 2006:13). Similarly, employment rates overall still favour men. For instance, among Canadian university graduates 90 percent of men versus only 81 percent of women were employed in 2008, with an even larger gender gap when taking into account only full-time employment (Kerr, 2010:7).

Despite the public's concern over boys' educational performance and employment outcomes, all of these findings suggest that society still does not adequately support women in translating their educational credentials into success on the labour market but rather show that traditional gendered inequalities are being perpetuated in transformed ways. The fact that “the highest status, most powerful and best paid jobs continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by (white, middle-class) men” (Francis & Skelton 2005:7) despite women slightly outperforming men educationally at the high school and undergraduate level could rather be interpreted as evidence that women – not men – are still facing structural discrimination today. Thus, despite concerns about boys' achievement levels in schools, “there is no evidence to suggest that this [alleged lack of success in schools] has affected their future career prospects compared with women working in similar areas” (Francis 2000:9).

### 2.1.3. Explaining the Gender Gap in Education: Masculinities

As discussed earlier, talk of a 'boy-crisis' in education appears overly alarmist and exaggerated in the light of data that only shows small gaps between male and female students and against the backdrop of a labour market where by no means men as a group are losing out. Nevertheless, sociologists and education scholars have investigated the small gendered achievement and enrolment gaps that do exist. In order to understand achievement differences between boys and girls, these researchers have relied on the insights of genders studies and critical masculinity studies. Critical masculinity studies – which emerged in the 1980s (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009) as an approach developed by (primarily) male academics aligned with feminist theory and politics – draws heavily on social constructivist (West & Zimmermann 1987) or deconstructivist (Butler 1990) conceptions of gender, arguing that masculinities (and femininities) must be understood as social constructs or performances, that are learnt, produced and reproduced in interactions and that are tied to specific institutionalized structures of domination and subordination. At its best, masculinity studies is therefore able to both account for specific experiences, power differences and hierarchies among different men and boys (as reflected in the emphasis on the study of *masculinities* in the plural), while at the same time not losing sight of societal imbalances between genders.<sup>3</sup>

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3 However, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argue that this connection between masculinity and power has received too little attention in more recent research in the field of masculinity studies since scholars have increasingly focused on the notion of multiple masculinities and their respective nuances. Similarly, Hearn (1996) cautions that “[t]he concept [of masculinity] may divert attention from women and gendered power relations” (213) and may ultimately lead to a discourse in which men are portrayed as the 'new victims'. It is crucial then for scholars of masculinity to be aware of these pitfalls and take seriously Mills' (2003) reminder that many of the hardships and traumas that men face *as men* are side effects of gender privilege, not oppression.

RW Connell's (2000; 2005) theorem of hegemonic masculinity is probably the most sophisticated attempt to connect these notions of a multiplicity of masculinities and the reproduction of a gender system in which men still hold power over women. Connell argues that different and relationally connected forms and idea(l)s of masculinity compete for hegemony within any given gender order and it is primarily those men that succeed in embodying a form of *hegemonic masculinity* that are the main beneficiaries. On the other hand, some men find themselves in the category of *subordinated masculinities* (for example, homosexual and gender-nonconforming men), while others (especially non-white men) fall in the category of *marginalized masculinities*, which means that the success of these individuals in performing what is regarded as a legitimate form of masculinity does not translate into the validation of the group's status overall. The situation is even more complicated in the case of *complicit masculinities*, that is, men who aspire to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity but fall short of realizing all privileges that comes with this status. Nevertheless, these men not only contribute through their behaviour to the reproduction of a patriarchal system but also tend to be rewarded for their complicity with hegemonic notions of masculinity by cashing in on a “patriarchal dividend,” an overall oppression of women as well as marginalized and subordinate men.

Applying Connell's framework to the realm of gender and education allows us to understand that the fact that some boys are losing ground in the educational system does not contradict the patriarchal structure of society but must rather be understood as a necessary side-effect or collateral damage of upholding the overall privilege of men over

women. In other words, researchers (Connell 2000; Kimmel 2010) have argued that rather than supposedly 'inherent' attributes of boys, it is specific versions of masculinity within this relational and hierarchical structure of complex and contradictory masculinities that interfere with (some) male students' educational outcomes.

School is one of the most central areas of socialization for children and youths: It is not only an institution that communicates knowledge to children but also one in which children and adolescents acquire and produce their (gendered) individuality and subjectivity. Children are social agents within the realm of school and (re-)negotiate possibilities and limits of gender performance – albeit against the backdrop of and influenced by hegemonic discourses about gender that have already been internalized. Producing and performing gender is consequently always a collective process, which is why scholars researching the negotiation and policing of gender in schools specifically pay attention to peer groups and their dynamics (Thorne 1993; Eder 1995; Mandel et al. 2000; Pascoe 2007).

Although children and youths do not simply conform to hegemonic gender norms in an unproblematic way, they are, of course, not able to re-invent gender from scratch but remain under constant pressure to become 'real' men or women. For boys, this means learning to develop what might be called a male *habitus* and to – quite literally – embody certain features of hegemonic masculinity. Height, physical strength, hairstyle, clothes and even the way one moves are constantly being evaluated through a gender lens, and individuals are forced to conform to a binary gender system. This also implies that masculinity is not a state that can be reached once and for all but instead it is performative, “a process of endless

'becoming' [...]. In short, context-appropriate masculinities have to be worked at, lifelong, and proved, every day” (Nilan 2000:55).

Schools thus serve as “masculinity-making devices” (Haywood & Mac An Ghaill 2000:59), where the construction of masculinity is structured by hegemonic norms of what is deemed 'manly' in society as well as the school's teacher culture, gender policing through peer groups, and an implicitly gendered curriculum (Haywood & Mac An Ghaill 2000). Important features that are associated with masculinity are attributes such as autonomy, success, power, assertiveness, strength as well as aggression and sexual potency (Askew & Ross 1988:2). Despite not every boy being required – nor able – to embody all of these features to the same extent, these values still constitute the framework within which male adolescents create their identity in order to present a 'legitimate' version of masculinity. This need for boys to maintain a masculine gender performance – especially in the presence of other boys or men since, as Kimmel writes, “manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval” (Kimmel 1994:128) – is accompanied by a rejection of things considered feminine and unmanly. This is also reflected in the fact that for boys being called “fag” or “sissy” remains one of the most hurtful and problematic insults since they are thus labelled a “failed male” (Thorne 1993:115). In fact, homophobia also is of fundamental importance in boys' school interactions to the point where “misogyny and homophobia are not merely linked but are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable: misogyny is homophobic and homophobia is misogynist” (Epstein 2001:106). Students internalize not only positive stereotypes of what it means to be a man but also complementary negative stereotypes about women, which in turn are used as a

negative blueprint against which their own identity is formed. Virtually all studies about gendered interactions in schools point out how creating hierarchies amongst boys and drawing lines of demarcation against girls play major roles in boys' attempts to associate most closely with the culturally dominant notion of masculinity. Masculinity in schools can thus be described as “a form of dominance usually expressed through sexualized discourse” (Pascoe 2007:5). Studies repeatedly show that homophobia and a denial and rejection of femininity remain constitutive of a heterosexual-masculine self-concept of boys and male youths in schools. Therefore, masculinity has to be understood against the backdrop of heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools. However, this construction of a male identity, although revolving around violence and discrimination against others, is always a precarious one and implies a constant pressure on boys not to risk being 'gay' or feminine.

#### **2.1.4. Collateral Damages of Hegemonic Masculinities**

Although various concepts of masculinity relate to a similar set of general values (autonomy, power, success), these values can take on radically divergent forms in everyday life. Power, for example, can be interpreted as physical strength, wittiness and domination, or, alternatively as self-confidence or academic success. This means that the specific ways in which masculinities shape out in schools vary significantly. Some of these enactments of masculinity facilitate conformity to the school's expectations while others conflict with these (Francis 2000:124). In other words, educational institutions, their micropolitics and gendered dynamics produce a variety of masculinities (from the nerd to the jock, and from the highly

engaged student to the openly defiant, etc.) some of which are at the same time marginalized by the school itself (Kessler et al. 1985:42).

One important version of hegemonic masculinity in schools is created via educational success. Within its highly competitive setting, schools necessarily produce a small group of winners, while a large group is made into underachievers. While educationally successful boys and male adolescents are encouraged by the institution to continue to perform well and are thus able to construct their masculinity around a competitive approach to learning and achievement, being stigmatized as an academic failure often results in (especially male) students rejecting the school's rules, parents' and teachers' expectations and ultimately the concept of academic achievement itself. Unable to construct their masculinity in terms deemed acceptable by the educational system, “[t]he reaction of the 'failed' is likely to be a claim to other sources of power, even other definitions of masculinity“ (Connell 2000:137).

While boys in general are subject to a pressure of appearing 'cool', this pressure is felt even more strongly by those boys who have no access to alternative avenues of proving their masculinity. For instance, Jackson and Dempster (2009), in their study of masculinity in UK secondary and post-secondary schools, found that even high-achieving students resort to a discourse of coolness and present their achievement as “effortless”, emphasizing that they are doing well despite supposedly not even trying. Concepts of masculinity solely based on coolness or physical strength thus can diminish the chances of succeeding in schools since these tend to be based on open confrontation with the authority of the institution, as power is claimed not through educational success but by daring to dissent (Connell 2000:135).

Recognition and acceptance as autonomous, strong and independent men by their classmates in these versions of 'protest masculinity' therefore rely on a form of over-identification with certain features of hegemonic masculinity (power, independence, prestige, rejection of things deemed 'feminine') that necessarily reverts into educational failure due to nonconformity with the rules of the educational institutions. In other words, in schools we find subcultures of students, whose images of masculinity are hardly compatible with academic requirements. Subscribing to notions of hegemonic masculinity and making their claim at masculinity in ways that hurt them in the long run, these boys can serve as a prime example for what Connell terms 'complicit masculinities'.

The specific details of gender differences in educational achievement can consequently be more thoroughly understood through the lens of masculinities. For instance, studies show that the largest achievement gap between boys and girls continues to be found in reading ability and language comprehension. While girls do hold a small advantage in reading comprehension over boys as early as primary school, US based studies show that this gap actually increases as students make their way through the educational system:

[A]lthough girls and boys start first grade with similar reading scores, a female-favorable gap in reading emerges by fifth grade, but only for children from economically disadvantaged families... (Buchmann et al. 2008:322).

In contrast to popular opinion that often attributes this difference to an alleged – biological-natural – slower development of boys, these findings can in fact be connected to dynamics of staging hegemonic masculinity. Reading – as a supposedly non-active, indoor, non-productive – activity is strongly associated with femininity in hegemonic discourse,



making it a less desirable leisure activity for boys. Accordingly, boys on average read less than girls and do not perceive themselves as readers to the same degree as do girls (Askew & Ross 1988:25). And as the pressure to embody a legitimized version of masculinity intensifies during puberty, boys more strongly reject activities, competences and attributes that are considered female, resulting in a lack of motivation to engage in reading. Similarly, Dumais (2002) argues that the ability to mobilize cultural capital in one's favour is a highly gendered process and that some boys are incapable of translating their cultural capital into classroom success since activities through which cultural capital is acquired (such as art or music lessons) are often considered unmanly by (male) peers. Showing effort in school through 'feminine' activities that support the acquisition of higher cultural capital are often rejected.

Gendered behaviour and expectations also produce paradoxical gendered outcomes pertaining to scores on high-stakes tests. In her study of students' perceived ability in different school subjects, Correll (2001) found that male students evaluate their competence in math higher than female students when controlling for test scores and grades.<sup>4</sup> As girls self-select out of subjects, programs and high-stake tests traditionally associated with masculinity,<sup>5</sup> male students tend to be overconfident in their abilities, resulting in a higher number of average or low-scoring boys represented in these subjects, whereas the distribution of female students enrolled in math and sciences will be skewed toward high achievers (Kimmel 2010:31).

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4 At the same time, she found that girls conceive of themselves as having stronger abilities in reading and language or verbal tasks, subjects traditionally associated with femininity.

5 See for example: Gillborn (1990), who in the UK context found that girls tended to opt out of traditionally male fields, due to gendered job aspirations and identity constructions as well as overt discouragement by teachers to pursue non-traditional gendered field.

Another factor in the recent steeper incline of achievement levels of girls relative to boys is female students' changed behaviours and expectations. Over the last decades, programs have supported girls in gaining more confidence in and access to formerly masculine dominated subjects. As a result, girls do not tend to reject notions of masculinity to the same extent as boys reject being associated with femininity, facilitating female students' appropriation of subject matters traditionally regarded as unfeminine. Moreover, some scholars argue that a tacit awareness of the very real gender discrimination in the job market actually has pushed girls toward a stronger motivation to perform well in school. This is “because the majority of girls see themselves as potentially disadvantaged in the job market as a result of their gender, [and] they place great emphasis on achieving at school” (Francis 2000:87).

All of these dynamics point out that hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity not only impact students' identity construction and gender performance but also have profound influence on how they negotiate and perform in schools.

#### **2.1.5. Which Boys? Which Girls?**

An even more complicated picture of success and failure of students is revealed when attention is paid to students' social class, race and ethnicity. Against the tendency to conflate all boys into a seemingly homogenous group, scholars (Francis 2000; James 2009; Jóhannesson, Lingard & Mills 2009; Kimmel 2010; Mead 2006; Mills & Keddie 2010) have shown the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality to highly influence educational outcomes and experiences; it is especially working-class, marginalized and

racialized boys (and girls) who are being underserved.

Parents' educational achievements continues to impact students' prospects of enrolling in post-secondary education, despite universities' attempts to include a larger and more diverse group of students. In Ontario, for instance, “21 per cent of students from families with the lowest levels of education chose not to pursue any postsecondary education” whereas only 6% of children whose parents have earned a Bachelor’s degree or more do not pursue post-secondary education (Lennon et al. 2011:4).

Similarly, race still matters in terms of educational outcomes, as non-white students continue to lag behind their white classmates. In Canada, Aboriginal students remain one of the most marginalized groups in the educational system, as they complete high school and enrol in colleges and universities in significantly lower numbers than non-Aboriginal youths. Despite a growing number of Canadians of all backgrounds earning post-secondary degrees, the percentage gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginal has actually widened over the past 25 years. In 2006, 23.4% of non-Aboriginal Canadians aged 25 – 64 held university degrees, compared with 7.7% of Aboriginal Canadians. Moreover, the ratio of Aboriginal Canadians not having completed high school is more than three times that of non-Aboriginal Canadians (AUCC 2011:19).

These and similar inequalities result from an amalgam of institutionalized racism, class inequality, educational institutions rooted in middle-class norms and values, as well as internalized aspirations and motivations structured by race and class, a process described by some sociologists as “cumulative disadvantage” (DiPrete et al. 2006).

Most crucial in the context of this study is the fact that inequalities in terms of class and race do not play out in gender-neutral ways; in fact, the gendered achievement gap is strongly structured by class and race. In the US, for instance,

the [enrolment] gender gap between college-age middle-class white males and white females is rather small, 51% women to 49% men. But only 37% of black college students are male, and 63% female, and 45% of Hispanic students are male, compared with 55% female (Kimmel 2010:25).

Similarly, Buchmann et al. (2008) agree that it is especially sons of less-educated households that are struggling in schools, and Mead (2006) points out that racial gaps are larger than gender gaps, summarizing that “[w]hen racial and economic gaps combine with gender achievement gaps in reading, the result is disturbingly low achievement for poor, black, and Hispanic boys” (9).

It is arguments from masculinity studies that can help explain why achievement gaps are more pronounced for racialized and poor boys than they are for girls. As already argued in the previous section, different constructions and performances of masculinity impact boys' educational experience and performance. For instance, in his ethnographic study of working class boys in the UK, Willis (1971) describes how the 'lads' developed a (male) working-class habitus that puts them at odds with the educational system and its culture, and ultimately impeded their social mobility. Similarly, Epstein (1998), points toward the contradictory gendered power relations among male working-class students. Students who were aspiring to middle-class careers and who were more engaged in school, tended to hold a subordinated position while attending working-class schools, yet, they were also the ones with better career prospects in the future (Epstein 1998:101).

Race complicates this picture even further, as male students of colour have to navigate a particularly complex and contradictory system of expectations. To put it simply, boys of colour tend to be both underserved and overpoliced. As class and race strongly correlate, students of colour tend to lack in material resources as well as cultural and social capital that facilitates achievement in the educational system, a problem that is even exacerbated for male students navigating hegemonic constructions of masculinity. At the same time, the behaviour of Black students is socially more harshly policed because of cultural stereotypes of Black men as potentially dangerous. As observed by Pascoe (2007) in her ethnographic study at a US high school, these subliminal cultural beliefs have real-life consequences for Black male adolescents who are perceived as dangerous and ill-intended students. As a consequence, their transgressions in school tend to more easily result in detention, suspensions and other punishments. White boys on the other hand, are treated in a more lenient way and their deviant behaviour is discursively normalized by appealing to the idea that 'boys will be boys' (Pascoe 2007:48).

This process of overpolicing, of course, impacts these male adolescents not only materially but also psychologically. In his ethnographic study of Black and Latino male teenagers growing up in Oakland, Rios (2011) convincingly shows how these boys were being treated as suspicious, deviant and de facto criminal by both the police and their schools even before they had ever engaged in any illicit activities. Frequent experiences of being stopped by police officers as well as being channelled into the criminal justice system by their teachers and principals for minor infractions resulted in them losing any

faith in both the criminal justice and the educational system. Noguera (2008) argues that this overpolicing of Black bodies in American culture as well as the tracking of (male) Black students into Special Education programs fosters lower self-expectations as well as resentment and resistance toward schools in these teenagers. The experience of racism thus leads some of these youths to equate academic success with “acting white” (Noguera 2008:9) and they tend to construct engagement in academics overall as a 'white' or 'sissy' endeavour (Epstein 1998:107). In other words, against the backdrop of experiences of racial injustice, the rejection of school culture becomes transformed into a reaffirmation of both racial and gender identity for some of these male teenagers of colour. To reject school means laying claim at being a 'real' Black man. It is the intersection of these economic, structural and cultural factors that complicates the situation for male students of colour, as institutionalized racism, economic deprivation, and a gendered response to experiences with racism all impede conformity to the requirements of the educational system.<sup>6</sup>

Gender gaps are also more pronounced among immigrant populations as female immigrant students tend to outperform their male counterparts. Again, we find a similar pattern of gendered expectations and harmful gender performances as teachers today report having higher expectations of immigrant girls and perceiving them as hard-working compared to immigrant boys (Suarez-Orozco 2004:305).

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6 Tyson and colleagues (2005) complicate this hypothesis further by arguing that there exists a general stigma against high achievement – reflected in the ridiculing of so-called “nerds” – in addition to specific racialized – “acting white” – and class based – “acting high and mighty” – stigmas against high-achieving students.

Current research also indicates that LGBT students, and especially queer boys of colour, face specific obstacles in the educational system that significantly impact their educational experience. For instance, homophobic bullying as well as a persisting school culture where activities and social spaces remain organized by class and race stand in the way of truly inclusive education (McCready 2003). Accounting for these intersections of class, race, gender and sexuality is therefore imperative in understanding the experience and performance of students in school (McCready 2010).

As this review of research into boys' educational performance has shown, the situation is clearly more complicated than a simple gender gap favouring girls. For instance, “there is overwhelming evidence that middle-class boys are still doing well in school and [...] after graduation from university in labour markets” (Jóhannesson et al. 2009:311). Conversely, it is specific class- and race-based performances of masculinity that impact boys' educational trajectories. Ironically, despite the media's obsession with a gender gap, race and class continue to influence educational outcomes to a much stronger degree, leading some scholars to point out that “[c]losing racial and economic gaps would help poor and minority boys more than closing gender gaps” (Mead 2006:3). As the studies from Canada, the US, England and elsewhere indicate, it is the intersections of class, race and gender that determine the opportunities of children in the educational system. Consequently, “[d]espite middle-class anxieties, it is hard to argue that middle-class boys from professional backgrounds are failing in school“ (Reed 1999:110).

## 2.2. MASCULINITY & THE MEDIA

Like in the field of gender studies more broadly (e.g. Gill 2007), scholars in the field of masculinity studies have paid a significant amount of attention to the construction of gender – masculinities in this case – in the media (eg. Hanke 1998). From images of masculinity in lifestyle magazines (Ricciardelli et al. 2010) to the representation of the 'crisis of masculinity' in the literary genre of 'ladlit' (Ochsner 2012), and from the intersections of race and gender in representations of 'nerds' in TV shows (Quail 2011) to the instrumentalization of racialized urban masculinities in lifestyle sports marketing (Atencio et al. 2013), researchers have investigated how different forms of masculinity are being represented in the media and how these images are connected to broader social transformations of the past decades.

Integrating the findings from various studies on masculinity and the media, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity plays out and is being reinforced in the media through a variety of mechanisms, such as the construction of athletic hypermasculinities in sports coverage or the marginalization of alternative versions of masculinity by means of rejection or omission. Meanwhile, some researchers have shown that one of the more noteworthy findings about the representation of masculinity is that at times masculinity is explicitly *not* being represented. For instance, Consalvo (2003) points out the absence of any discussion of the role of masculinity in school shootings; rather than interrogating the connection between the perpetrators' gender and the massacre they committed, the media constructs them as 'monsters', making



their gender invisible and thus inhibiting any meaningful public debate about the connection between masculinity and violence.

In her analysis of nerd/ geek characters in reality TV shows, Quail (2011) argues that constructions of nerdy/ geeky masculinity are gendered, sexualized and racialized. Since nerd masculinities are being rejected as effeminate (that is, subordinated in Connell's terms), the association of academic success with the nerd/geek stereotype forecloses academic achievement as a desired version of masculinity and, as Quail argues, especially denies the possibility of Black academic masculinities. Instead, the Black nerd jeopardizes both his masculinity and his Blackness, as he is perceived as 'acting white'.

Studies suggest that in post-modern and post-fordist social and economic arrangements and in the light of women's rising status and opportunities, Western culture is re-emphasizing physical strength and aggression in men in order to compensate for feelings of loss of power (Jeffords 1993). This is reflected in the trend of middle-class men bulking up in gyms as well as in action figure toys and male actors becoming more muscular over the past decades (Ricciardelli et al. 2010). However, these are not the only versions of masculinity that achieve hegemonic status in contemporary society. For instance, in their study of advertisements in Chinese, Taiwanese and US lifestyle magazines, Tan et al. (2013) show that the contemporary iteration of hegemonic masculinity is less reliant on hypermasculine representations of bodily strength but rather revolves around sophisticated, trendy and refined consumption choices. The authors even go so far as to argue that these refined consumer masculinities “emphasizes intelligence,

the value of education as well as academic, financial, and occupational achievement” (Tan et al. 2013:245) rather than masculinity being constructed in opposition to education. However, I would contend that there is a more pessimistic interpretation to Tan et al.'s findings. As the authors rightly point out, consumption of high status goods is at the core of these neoliberal sophisticated consumer masculinities. But it is less clear that these depictions do, in fact, emphasize “intelligence and the value of education” (Tan et al. 2013:245) as Tan and colleagues claim. Rather, these representations could also be read as reinforcing a form of entitlement on the part of men, as hard work and the process of education are likely invisible from these advertisements and instead what is being represented is an upper middle class status and the possibility (and need) to consume certain goods. Rather than representing education as an important value, these ads may serve to teach young men that they are entitled to having access to such goods and lifestyles.

Analyzing lifestyle magazines in the Canadian context, Ricciardelli and colleagues (2010) come to the conclusion that different versions of masculinity predominate in slightly different genres of lifestyle magazines geared at men. Whereas *Men's Health* promotes a version of masculinity closely aligned with muscularity, for instance, masculinities depicted in *GQ*, *Details*, *Esquire* and *OUT* could be described as different variations of 'metrosexuality', that is, masculinities revolving around body work in the form of fashion, grooming and sophistication. Lastly, magazines such as *FHM*, *Stuff* and *Maxim* fall into the category of 'laddist' masculinities. 'Laddism', a concept developed in

the 1990s, describes masculinities that are based on notions of “youthfulness, hedonistic consumption, bachelorhood, the objectification of women and sexual conquest” (Ricciardelli et al. 2010:64) that can be described as a rejection of gender equality and dismissal of forms of masculinity which appear to embrace 'female' characteristics (such as 'metrosexuality'). Rejecting emotionality, 'laddist' masculinities include stereotypically masculine behaviours and interests, from cars to sports, from drinking to promiscuity.

A point that resonates with categorizing depictions of men in the media as 'laddist' is made by Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) in their analysis of alcohol advertisements. Tracing the history of beer advertisement back to the 1970s, the authors argue that recent decades have seen a shift from depicting men drinking in the company of their wives to representations of men drinking in the presence of other men, with women absent in the role of partners and instead only present as “sexualized fantasy objects” or as characters spoiling the bachelor lifestyle of these men (Messner & Montez de Oca 2005:1887). The authors contend that these ads revolve around a form of 'loser masculinity' that speaks to insecurities rooted in the economic and social transformations of the past decades and shifting gender roles. The men represented in these commercials seem to exist solely rooted in a world of bachelor leisure; drinking is no longer depicted as a reward for hard work (as in advertisements in earlier decades) but as part of a leisurely lifestyle itself. A similar argument is also made by Gottshall Jr. (2008) who, in his analysis of depictions of masculinity in magazine advertisement between 1960 and 2000, found that men “were depicted in terms of a separation of masculinity from family

and work and a stronger association between masculinity and consumption, attention to lifestyles and consumer tastes” (Gottshall Jr. 2008:275). In a way then, the 'loser masculinities' described by Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) are the more explicitly hostile complement to the entitlement and consumerism of neoliberal consumer masculinities depicted in lifestyle magazines. Insofar as these depictions of men in alcohol ads affirm and embrace a form of 'loser masculinity' and insofar as women are exclusively represented as sexualized objects or as overbearing killjoys, the authors conclude that the “cultural construction of white males as losers, then, is tethered to men’s anger at and desire for revenge against women” and that “revenge-against-women themes are evident in some of the most recent beer and liquor ads” (Messner & Montez de Oca 2005:1906). Whereas advertisements in lifestyle magazines depict hegemonic masculinity as a form of 'high laddism' – that is, a sophisticated bachelor lifestyle revolving around expensive consumer goods and adorned with the sexualized bodies of women – the liquor and beer ads analyzed by Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) illustrate a version of masculinity that is similar in its values but that has been translated into a 'loser masculinity'; a masculinity that is more openly resentful toward women as a result of its failure to live up to the hegemonic norm. According to Green and Van Oort (2013) this discourse has intensified in the past decade. Commercials have grown more openly dismissive of white collar masculinities, instead embracing markers of working-class masculinities, not as a longing for a return to working class status, but as a symbol for a specific masculine lifestyle and a rejection of gender equality.

### **2.3. MEDIA & POLICY DISCOURSES ON MASCULINITY & EDUCATION**

Some of the same tropes identified by researchers investigating the representation of masculinity in the media more broadly also play out in public debates about gender and education; most prominently that of a thinly veiled push-back against progress toward greater gender equality as well as aspects of the 'laddism' trope, translated into the “boy will be boys” cliché.

Despite a large amount of scholarship on gender and education (as presented in the first section of this literature review), public debates on gender and education have only sporadically been treated as a topic of analysis in their own right. Moreover, the majority of studies that do address the discourse about boys and education have especially focused on Australia's federal parliamentary enquiry into male students, since it marked the first national effort to address the issue of boys and schooling in any country. In their critique of the committee's report, Martino, Mills and Lingard (2007) argue that the report “Boys: Getting it Right” promotes a politics of “recuperative masculinity” and conceals its anti-feminist agenda by appealing to “commonsense” notions of essentialized gender differences. They note further that the report explicitly rejects academic findings about gender equity in school, due in part to having been influenced by popular publications, submissions by men's lobby groups and anecdotal evidence. Ultimately, the report portrays boys as a group in need and as victims of feminist policies, thereby engaging in an “identity politics of the dominant” (Martino et. al. 2007:6).

Weaver-Hightower (2008) equally engages with the Australian case, providing an

extensive policy analysis of the making of “Boys: Getting it Right”. Although he acknowledges that taking up the question of boys in education is not an inherently conservative act, he argues that the way this issue has been addressed makes it a key moment in masculinity politics since “objectively and empirically speaking, *the conservative interpretation of the boy debates is dominant, and conservatism has driven the direction of policy*” (Weaver-Hightower 2008:54, emphasis in original). According to his analysis, several factors have enabled this anti-feminist discourse about gender and education to become hegemonic: a) a moral panic, fuelled by media reports and popular-psychology books, b) ironically, the feminist investigation of gender itself which made boys' gender visible in the first place, c) narrow indicators of gender equity in education (such as enrolment and test scores), d) neoliberal reforms in education that have led to a more commodified learning environment, e) an explicit backlash against feminism, f) changes in the global economy and a related crisis of masculinity (such as the loss of full-time employment opportunities and industrial jobs and therefore the threat of losing the status of breadwinner for some men), and g) the fact that researching boys constituted a new area of scholarship which therefore appealed to a vast number of researchers for both academic and financial reasons.

Weaver-Hightower (2008) also shows how hearings during the Australian enquiry strongly favoured conservative views on the issue of boys and schooling, as well as how members of the committee dismissed pro-feminist scholarship as detached from the real issues on the ground. In this way, the committee members gained the authority to decide

what counted as official (and even scientific) knowledge, often with reference to 'common-sense' arguments. Additionally, he points out that economic interests impacted the report, as stakeholders in the business of boys' education (from consultants to single-sex educators) were initially relied on as experts, and subsequently benefited financially from government programs: “The 'turn' to boys [...] has not solely been discursive. Material resources, too, have become the booty of those who are winning the boys' education debates [...]” (Weaver-Hightower 2008:128).

Other researchers agree with Martino et al. (2007) and Weaver-Hightower (2008) that the current public debates in industrialized countries about boys' education must be characterized as a backlash against feminism. Mills (2003), for instance, in his discussion of major best-selling publications of backlash against feminism, draws on Connell's (2005) theoretical framework to argue that these works tend to either essentialize cognitive and neurological gender differences as biologically inherent (Biddulph 1998; Gurian 1999; Gurian & Stevens 2007; Kindlon & Thompson 1999) or argue that feminism – rather than resulting in gender equality – is now oppressing boys (Farrell 1994; Sommers 2000). It is questions and negotiations of masculinity that are playing out in the debate about boys and schooling, as anti-feminists are attempting to “re-establish boys and men as the privileged subjects within educational discourse” (Mills 2003:59). As he points out, various authors of bestselling books argue that boys are equally – if not more – oppressed by gender norms, resulting in what he calls a “competing victim syndrome” and argue for a re-masculinization of schools as the remedy for the supposed

crisis. Even more explicitly than Weaver-Hightower (2008), Mills also emphasizes the fractions and contradictions within the category of boys, arguing that some men and boys do in fact experience exclusion and discrimination in the education system. However, as previously discussed, this exclusion is based on racism and socioeconomic inequality, not primarily on gender, as popular discourse seems to imply. This leads Mills to conclude that the conflation of all men and boys into one supposedly oppressed identity in fact serves to reaffirm the privileged position of some men – not only over women, but also over other men and boys.

Francis and Skelton (2005) agree with the critique against authors like Gurian and Hoff Sommers, whom they classify as “men's rights/ recuperative masculinity theorists” (Francis & Skelton 2005:41), who allege that the school system, curriculum and teaching profession have been feminized and who excuse the supposed male underachievement with reference to anti-male discrimination or by drawing on essentialist “boys will be boys” arguments that imply male students' inert inability to conform to certain expectations. Similarly, Epstein, Elwood, Hey, and Maw (1998) argue that in addition to the masculinist nature of the current moral panic about boys' education, the discourse also falls short because it introduces a binary opposition between boys and girls and because it relies on a narrow definition of both of its central concepts: gender and education.

In addition to the aforementioned works that have engaged with and challenged the political discussion about boys' education and the resulting policies, there have been almost no studies that attempt to analyze what exactly is being communicated in these



debates; especially in a North American context. In one of the very few more extensive studies, Sternod's (2009) critical discourse analysis of the boy crisis discourse focuses specifically on the prevalent notion of 'male role models'. Including historical discourses from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he shows that moral panics about an emasculation of boys through female educators are not an entirely new concept but have occurred at different times during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Confirming many of the findings and insights of other researchers, Sternod shows that the 'male role model' discourse has taken on a life of its own that does not seem to even require any rationale; instead the idea that male teachers are inherently positive for male students is generally accepted as a truism and the question of what types of masculinities male teachers actually enact as well as their impact on (both male and female) students is never problematized.

In order to understand the current debate about a 'boy crisis', scholars have also turned toward earlier discussions about boys and education in Western history. For instance, Foster (2011) points out that the current debate can actually be traced back at least to the turn of the last century: Around 1900, the public became increasingly concerned that boys were falling behind girls in education – although factually it was only working-class boys for whom this was true. The public blamed the predominantly female teaching profession and alleged that schools were too feminine for boys' education, resulting in reforms to make boys' educational institution more relevant for work. A similar point is also made by Martino, Kehler and Weaver-Hightower (2009), who argue that from the *Boy Scouts* to physical education and even military training, historically

there have been numerous attempts made to instill 'traditional' masculinity in boys through educational institutions, often in response to crisis discourses.

The closest precursor to my research presented here, especially in a Canadian context, is the work of Bouchard et. al. (2003). Bouchard and her colleagues conducted a content analysis of the 'men's advocacy' discourse between 1990 and 2000, in Canadian and international news media sources, with a special focus on the question of the links between the 'boy crisis' discourse and other topics raised by so-called 'men's rights' advocates. Relying on an approach that combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the authors not only showed that the publication of articles on the topic of the 'boy crisis' correlated with so-called trigger events – for instance, the release of large-scale data on student achievement – but also found that certain arguments and themes clearly dominated the discourse. According to their findings, the 'masculinist' discourse on boys' education primarily revolved around the notions of a) male victimization, b) feminism or women overall being to blame for boys' struggles, and c) an underlying essentialist boys-will-be-boys discourse.

As previous research has shown, despite an increasing diversity in depictions of masculinities in the media, it is not so much a questioning of traditional notions of masculinities that we are witnessing but rather the transformation of hegemonic discourses of masculinity into new forms. Furthermore, at least parts of the media discourse on masculinities can be read as a response to the movements toward greater

gender equality of the past decades, in that male entitlement and resentment against women is depicted in various forms in these media discourses.

As observed by various researchers, similar tropes also play out in media debates about gender and education – that, for the most part, are also dangerously out of touch with social scientific research – where boys are increasingly depicted as losing out and as being the victims of a feminist agenda. What both the media depiction of masculinity more broadly and the discourse on boys and education more specifically have in common then, is a sense of masculinity under threat and a desire to defend or re-establish men's and boys' dominance. As careful scholarly analysis of the discourse on boys and schooling is lacking for the Canadian case – apart from Bouchard and colleague's (2003) analysis of explicitly anti-feminist outlets – this study will ask whether these trends observed by researchers in Australia and elsewhere hold true for the Canadian case.

### 3. METHODS

As has already been noted in the introduction, this project is based upon quantitative and qualitative content analysis. In the broadest sense, content analysis can be defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data” (Krippendorff 1980:21). Naturally, quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis not only differ significantly in how the data is treated and the steps necessary for data analysis but also, and more fundamentally, in their goals and thereby in what questions can be answered by employing each method. For instance, Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) emphasize the value of quantitative content analysis in providing descriptions of the content of media messages and the statistical analysis of relationships among certain codes (although they also nod towards inferences and interpretation):

Quantitative Content Analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption. (25)

In other words, quantitative content analysis is primarily concerned with quantifiable content of data and their relationships.

Conversely, qualitative content analysis is an approach to understand, interpret and uncover meanings inherent in the data. This is achieved not by translating content into numbers that are to be counted and correlated, but through a process of qualitative coding that attempts to capture the recurring patterns, themes or messages. Hsieh and Shannon

(2005) define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (1278).

Although qualitative and quantitative approaches are often (mis-)represented as mutually exclusive and in contention, both approaches can provide useful and insightful results due to their respective abilities to answer different research questions. Thus combining both approaches can be used as a form of triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. Nevertheless, due to the primary research questions of concern in my work here, my analysis relies more heavily on qualitative content analysis. This is supplemented by basic, descriptive quantitative content analysis to describe to magnitude aspects of this crisis discourse are part of the media debate.

Due to this stronger qualitative orientation based in my primary research questions, I also diverted from the strategies used by the majority of mixed methods approaches. While many mixed methods research projects begin with qualitative analysis in order to generate theory and then move on to quantitative approaches in order to test the developed theories, I initially started with quantitative content analysis only to subsequently move on to qualitative, more in-depths, analysis. This decision, again, was based on my primary research interest – which is qualitative in nature – as well as the fact that studies such as Bouchard (2003) et al.'s and the work of Weaver-Hightower (2008) and Mills (2003) already provide specific preliminary codes to be utilized in quantitative analysis, which I subsequently adjusted to fit my research interest and specific sample. At

the same time, however, it needs to be emphasized that even in the quantitative phase of my research I also remained attentive to emerging codes and did not simply follow – or seek to reaffirm – the findings of previous researchers.

### **3.1. QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS & CODING**

As already discussed, quantitative content analysis of media sources “aims to understand what the media produces by systematically quantifying media content, using pre-determined categories, and analyzing the results statistically” (Bruce, Hovden & Markula 2010:19). It is through the use of these codes that the researcher is able to find patterns as well as adhere to the standard of reliability (Bruce, Hovden & Markula 2010:22), since “measurement instruments applied to observations must be highly consistent over time, place, and circumstance” (Riffe et al. 2005:122). The development of codes and their operationalization is rooted in theory and it attempts to ensure validity, as the codes need to accurately represent the concepts being studied for the analysis to be valid (Riffe et al. 2005).

The literature typically distinguishes between manifest and latent coding in quantitative content analysis. In manifest coding, content clearly visible on the surface is being analyzed and words, phrases or sentences are simply counted, allowing for a high degree of reliability and even a computerized coding process. At the same time, validity can become a problem in this type of coding (depending on the specific research question), since meaning is communicated in different ways and passages of text might

communicate the same meaning without necessarily using the specific words coded for. On the other end of the spectrum, latent coding attempts to be attentive to meaning, themes and implicit messages by not coding the utterance of words and phrases but instead by coding phrases, sentences or paragraphs according to their meaning. This, of course, provides a greater problem for the requirement of reliability – the requirement that different coders will code the same passage in the same way. This is addressed by formulating, revising and identifying specific rules for coding, including examples and contrasting cases, and recording them in a *coding frame* or *code book* in order to ensure a high degree of temporal consistency.

Researchers thus attempt to clearly define codes in consistent and – depending on the specific questions – mutually exclusively ways: “A researcher records all decisions he or she makes about how to treat a new specific coding situation after coding begins so that he or she can be consistent” (Neuman & Robson 2011:211). Nevertheless, latent coding arguably remains less reliable than manifest coding. At the same time, however, it can be argued that latent coding has important advantages in terms of validity as it captures meaning regardless of specific word choice of the authors (Neuman & Robson 2011:210). Additionally, in both manifest and latent coding, it is necessary to specify what it is that is being coded for. More precisely, researchers might code for frequency (i.e. how often a certain word is being used), intensity (i.e. how strongly a certain message is being communicated), space (i.e. how much room a certain message claims within a text by counting words, sentences or paragraphs) and direction (i.e. whether something is

portrayed as positive or negative).

The quantitative part of my content analysis relied most heavily on latent coding, with some manifest coding for very basic information. Using latent coding, I coded for different themes present in the articles, loosely based on codes introduced by Bouchard et al. (2003) in their study of education-related articles in masculinist discourse. Coding for space, I used a 0 – 5 ordinal scale in order to reflect how much room each theme took up in each respective article, with 0 indicating no mention at all, 1 being “one sentence or less”, 2 being “few sentences”, 3 being “one full paragraph”, 4 being “multiple paragraphs”, and 5 being “main focus of article”. In addition to coding for the presence or absence of different themes, I also coded for the mention of different axes of inequality using the same scale. In other words, I asked whether other sociologically relevant categories of inequality (and identity) were being addressed by the authors in addition to gender; such as race, ethnicity, age, class or language. I also coded each article according to the question of whether it focused primarily on boys, girls, or all genders.<sup>7</sup>

### **3.2. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS & CODING**

As already noted, qualitative content analysis differs significantly in its goals and approach from quantitative content analysis. As opposed to counting instances of difference codes, asking how prevalent these are in the data and relating them by using statistical analysis, qualitative analysis seeks to understand the meanings of different codes and attempts to get at the latent aspects of the data (Neuman & Robson 2011:308).

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to the Appendix for the codebook.



Accordingly, the coding process in qualitative content analysis is vastly different from that in quantitative content analysis. Instead of beginning the analysis with pre-determined codes and counting them, the goal here is to identify themes that run through the texts and to organize these into a theory. Patterns are not found after the coding process via statistical methods but through the very process of coding itself, and the emergent web of codes is part of the results of the analysis, rather than codes being the starting point of it. A code in qualitative content analysis can be defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana 2009:3). Some authors even argue that coding is synonymous with analysis in qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994:56), although others disagree and state that coding is only part of (Basit 2003:145) or the first in a number of steps of data analysis (Saldana 2009:8). Additionally, it is important to note that coding is more than simply labelling parts of the text but instead involves linking, organizing and reorganizing the codes into a meaningful, insightful and valid theory (Saldana 2009).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) distinguish between three ideal types of qualitative content analysis: Summative, conventional and directed content analysis. Conventional content analysis can be described as an inductive approach to analyzing the content of text, strongly related to the concept of grounded theory. It aims to develop codes and categories directly from the data through an emphasis of immersion and open coding strategies. Codes are developed and linked without relying on prior literature, which is

only brought into the research in the discussion sections of papers. The advantage of this version of content analysis is its proximity to the original data. However, I agree with critiques of this approach which emphasize that conventional content analysis can fail to capture important relationships between codes (and their context) if it tries to rely on the data alone and effectively blocks access to theoretical insights and the literature. Therefore, it can at best serve for the development of initial models or concepts but in my view lacks deeper theoretical insights (Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1281).

Summative content analysis, in contrast, can be understood as an extension of latent quantitative content analysis, in that codes are initially counted, for then later to be analyzed more rigidly in terms of their latent meanings (Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1284). Although my analysis bears some resemblance to this approach in that I started with a quantitative – primarily latent – content analysis of the data and moved on to more in-depths analysis, my analysis goes beyond simply exploring the codes used in the quantitative content analysis and can therefore better be understood as exemplary of a third version of qualitative content analysis: Directed content analysis.

Directed content analysis acknowledges research already available and starts its coding process by using codes derived from theory and the literature. At the same time, however, the researcher remains open to new, emerging codes and assigns such codes to data that does not fit into pre-existing codes. By employing this approach, theory can be supported, enriched, contradicted, expanded upon or refined by new evidence:

The main strength of a directed approach to content analysis is that existing theory can be supported and extended. In addition, as research in an area

grows, a directed approach makes explicit the reality that researchers are unlikely to be working from the naive perspective that is often viewed as the hallmark of naturalistic designs. (Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1283)

A possible problem with a directed approach to content analysis, however, is that it may lead to a form of confirmation bias in that the researcher is more attentive to evidence that supports prior theory rather than to contradicting evidence. Nevertheless, I would argue that directed content analysis is preferable to conventional content analysis precisely because of this potential pitfall. The case can be made that even in conventional versions of content analysis, the researchers do not approach their data in a naive, impartial, uninformed and undirected way but that they, too, bring preconceptions, tacit knowledge and prior familiarity with the theoretical debates in the field to their analysis, which clearly must inform their coding. Rather than pretending to engage in a strict bottom-up approach, I find it more useful to acknowledge prior knowledge and theoretical thought, make use of them in the analysis and remain self-reflexive about my own preconceptions. In this sense, my methodological perspective, which is dialectic and hermeneutic in nature, is informed by non-positivist epistemologies such as those developed by Sandra Harding, in her proposal for a feminist standpoint theory (1991), and Donna Harraway (1988) and her notion of situated knowledge. These epistemologies reject the positivist 'view from nowhere' and instead understand knowledge generated through research as contingent on both the interaction between researcher, respondent or data and their historical, social and cultural positionality. Harding's notion of "strong objectivity" (1993) consequently calls for a high degree of self-reflectivity and the awareness that the perspective,

preconceptions and assumptions on the part of the researcher have been shaped by the same historical and social formations as the research 'object'.

In other words, as already mentioned, I approached my data in a manner resembling directed content analysis, informed both by prior studies as well as with the knowledge of preliminary findings of my own quantitative content analysis. Therefore, I began my own research by transferring codes I had used for quantitative analysis into my qualitative analysis but also developed new codes from the very beginning. Additionally, my analysis was also directed in the sense that it was geared toward my primary research questions. That is, I coded material that spoke to how boys (and girls) are being portrayed in media discussions of the 'boy crisis', how other axes of inequality are taken into account, and how the supposed problem of boys' education is being framed. After two initial rounds of this semi-open coding – that is reading the text closely and creating and assigning codes, while simultaneously being informed by prior research – I engaged in axial and analytic coding, adhering to the constant comparison method (Boeije 2002) in order to refine analytic codes.

For this qualitative data analysis, I made use of the free and open source qualitative data analysis software RQDA. Using this software allows the user to create codes and assign them to passages of text as well as create higher level categories or nodes to link different codes while recording the relevant text passages.

### 3.3. SAMPLE & SAMPLING

While Bouchard and colleagues' (2003) study provided useful preliminary codes, my research project differs from their earlier work in multiple important ways in that it is both broader and more narrow at the same time. Whereas Bouchard and colleagues (2003) made the decision – by way of their search terms – to limit their analysis to more or less explicitly masculinist sources that portrayed boys as losing out in education, while at the same time expanding their sample to include articles dealing with topics of concern to the masculinist movement besides education – such as divorce – my own keyword search was deliberately designed to capture a wider sample of articles on gender and education – not only those that portrayed boys as losing out – while not including articles with masculinist content that did not discuss education.

The sample of newspaper articles used for my analysis was drawn from a mixture of convenience sampling and purposive sampling (Riffe, Lacy & Fico 2005:101), in that I used the ten English-language Canadian newspaper with the highest weekly circulation available through the *Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies* database. These newspapers are *The Globe and Mail* (a national newspaper based in Toronto), the *Toronto Star*, the *Vancouver Sun* (not affiliated with *Sun Media*, publishers of the *Toronto Sun* tabloid), *The Province* (Vancouver), *National Post* (a national newspaper based in Toronto), *The Gazette* (Montreal), *Calgary Herald*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Ottawa Citizen* and *Edmonton Journal*. These papers include ten of the eleven Canadian English language newspapers with the highest weekly circulation; out of the top ten, only the tabloid *Toronto Sun* is

missing from my sample, since it is not featured in the database and does not provide free access to its digital archives.

In order to obtain my sample, I performed a keyword search in the *Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies* database with the following parameters: I included articles published in the aforementioned newspapers between 1990 and 2011 (01/01/1990 – 31/12/2011) because the literature suggests that the 'boy crisis in education' gained prominence in the mid 1990s (Bouchard et al. 2003). I designed my key word search to capture articles that discussed boys in relation to education by using the following search terms, in “an all but full text” search<sup>8</sup>: “*boys AND (education OR school) AND (gap OR scores OR tests OR single sex OR achievement OR difference)*”. This keyword search resulted in an initial sample of 1348 articles, which were afterwards narrowed down to include only those relevant to my analysis by reading the headlines and – where necessary – skimming the article. Specifically, I was looking for articles where the gender gap in education is one of the main themes, which discuss single sex education in relation to its benefits (or lack thereof) for either gender, or which discussed differences between girls and boys as they related to schooling and education, all with a focus on Canada, North America, or industrialized countries. I excluded letters to the editor. After removing all articles not pertaining to my research interest<sup>9</sup>, I arrived at a sample of 240 articles of

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8 This means, the search engine browsed the headlines and abstracts of the respective articles but not the full text body.

9 For instance, I removed articles discussing gender differences in education in the developing world because the discourse here is quite different in that girls are portrayed as lacking behind in (access to) education. My keyword search also resulted in a great number of false positive results because of the combination of “boys + school + scores”, which captured newspaper articles about high school and collegiate athletics.

relevance. These articles included original content, interviews, editorials, op-eds and reports by each respective paper as well as reprints of or coverage based on press agency releases. Additionally, I also decided to include reprints of articles from US newspapers – as opposed to only articles originating in Canada – because of the close cultural ties between the US and Canada and because these articles still inform and influence the public on matters related to education as they become part of the overall public discourse.<sup>10</sup>

For the qualitative analysis, this original sample was further narrowed down to a sample of 54 articles by including only articles that were coded as both focusing on questions of “Gender and Achievement” (as opposed to, for example, articles addressing primarily single-sex education) and whose primary gender focus was boys. I then performed qualitative coding with these 54 articles as mentioned in the previous section.

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<sup>10</sup> Refer to the *List of Newspaper Articles* section in the bibliography for a full list of newspaper articles included in this study.

#### 4. THE “FEMINIZATION” OF EDUCATION

My findings confirm the overall trends observed by researchers such as Bouchard and colleagues (2003) as well as scholars outside of Canada (see: Francis & Skelton 2005; Martino, Mills & Lingard 2007; Weaver-Hightower 2008). The alleged struggles of boys are regularly contextualized with reference to societal changes that are supposedly putting men and boys “under siege” (Kenway 1995). Thus, the discourse on boys and education not only misrepresents trends in male students' achievement levels but it also equates different academic performance with institutional power and constructs an origin story for these societal changes. For the educational system to have arrived at a situation where girls are supposedly ruling over boys, something must have changed to the detriment of boys. In addition to blaming politicians and the teaching profession more broadly, it is specifically women and the feminist movement that are targeted in a great number of articles in my sample. The overall recurrent trope is that of an assumed victory of feminism, similar to what Francis and Skelton (2005) observed in the Australian context, where “the popular message in the media is that feminists have 'won' and girls are now doing well but boys have paid the price for this progress” (Francis & Skelton 2005:40). This notion of a 'victory of feminism' plays out in slightly different, yet overlapping, variations in the Canadian case, which will be the topic of this chapter: School have supposedly been turned into institutions run by women and for girls, feminism is assumed to have succeeded (thereby becoming obsolete), feminism is seen as



having gone too far, boys' troubles are supposedly being ignored due to the dominance of feminism and so-called political correctness, and boys thus supposedly constitute a new disadvantaged population. At the same time, it is the very language of feminism and equality that is now drawn upon by those arguing against the need for feminist activism. Before discussing each of these tropes in detail, the following section will first lay out when and where the 'boy crisis' discourse originated in the Canadian context, and how prevalent major tropes are in the Canadian news media discourse on gender and education.

#### **4.1. ORIGINS OF THE 'BOY CRISIS' DISCOURSE**

My study confirms prior findings (Bouchard et al. 2003) that have argued that the current iteration of the 'boy crisis' has its origins in the late 1990s. While almost no articles about the topic were present in Canadian newspapers prior to 1994, the number of articles in my sample hits its first peak in 1999, and, although fluctuating over the next decade, at no point thereafter decreases to early 1990s numbers.

That this increase in the number of articles was driven by a concern for boys rather than gender and education more generally is evident when zeroing in on the gender focus of the articles in my sample (Figure 2). While articles focusing primarily on girls' education tended to outnumber articles focusing on boys before 1994, articles focusing on both genders became more prevalent in the mid 1990s, before articles focusing on boys dominated in 1999 and thereafter. Moreover, qualitative analysis showed that even among

articles that spoke at length about both genders, the majority were triggered by the new concern about boys doing less well than girls. With the exception of 2008<sup>11</sup>, articles focused on boys as well as those concerned with both genders continue to dominate the discourse throughout the 2000s, supporting the claim that it was primarily a new concern about boys that accounts for the increase in articles about gender and education since the mid 1990s. On the flip side, articles focusing primarily on girls are almost non-existent in the media discourse, reflecting what Jones (2005) has called the “invisibility of the underachieving girl”.<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on boys losing out in the educational system today – whereas concerns for girls' achievements are pushed into the background – becomes especially apparent when accounting for the different themes present in the articles (Figure 3). While the theme of *boys lagging behind* is explicitly present in roughly 60% of the articles, less than 25% of all articles present girls as lagging behind boys in any way in education; and of these, half of the articles devote only a sentence or less to notions of girls not doing well. The numbers also confirm that while there was virtually no concern for boys' lack of educational attainment in the early 1990s, the theme of *boys falling behind* outnumbers articles with references to *girls lagging behind* by wide margins after 1999 except for a short period in the mid 2000s.

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11 The year 2008 can be considered an outlier to the overall trend, as it is the only year after 1993 in which girl-themed articles account for the majority of newspaper coverage. It is also the sole year with no boys-focused articles after 1996. Additionally, this peak in girls-focused articles was caused by six different newspapers publishing a virtually identical article by the same author.

12 "Other" refers to articles that did not primarily focus on gender but still prominently included references to gender and education.

Figure 1: Articles per Year

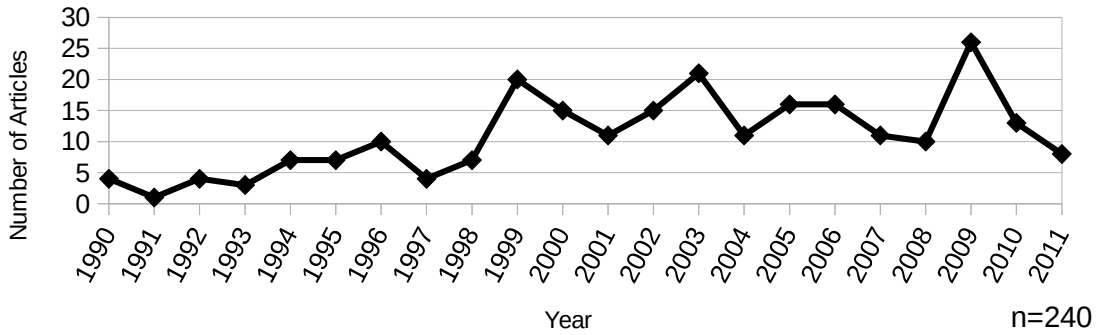


Figure 2: Gender Focus per Year

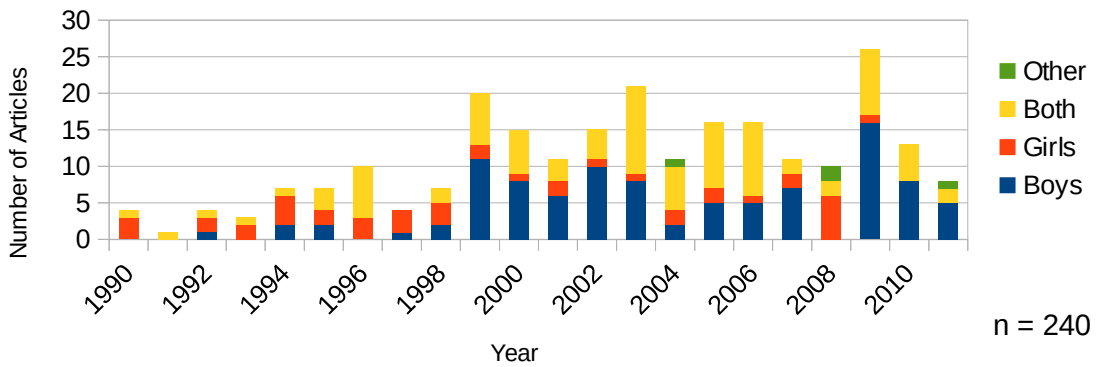
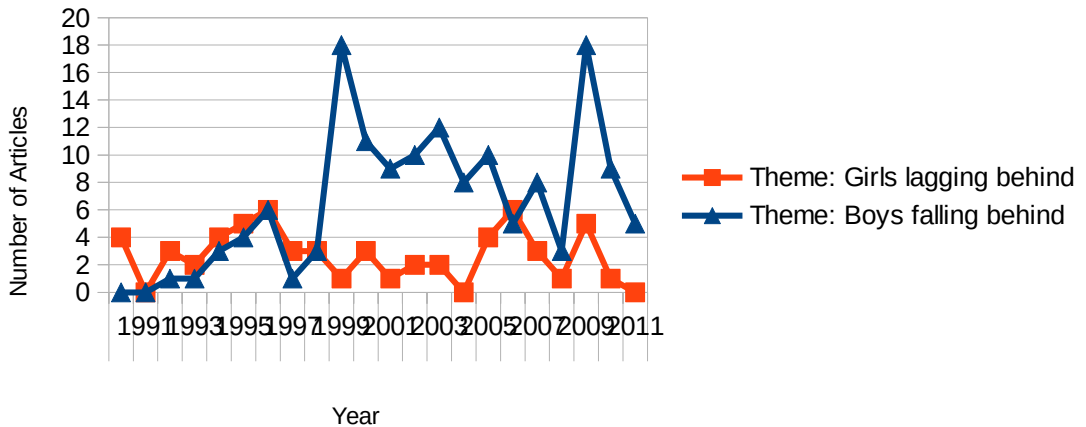


Figure 3: Themes Over Time 1



When it comes to the role played by different newspapers in perpetuating the notion of a 'boy crisis', there exists a high variance, with no clear pattern of political stance or geographic region (see Table 1). Probably the most striking finding, however, is that the conservative *National Post* accounted for the highest number of articles at 42 (about 18%) despite the *National Post* only being founded in 1998<sup>13</sup>. The fact that a significant portion of the increase in coverage of boys and education was driven by a newspaper on this side of the political spectrum can be taken to confirm Weaver-Hightower's assertion that “objectively and empirically speaking, the conservative interpretation of the boy debates is dominant” (Weaver-Hightower 2008:54). Moreover, returning to the question of the gender focus in different articles (see Figure 4<sup>14</sup>), it is again the *National Post* that – along with the *Vancouver Sun* and the conservative-leaning *Globe and Mail* – exhibits a stronger focus on boy-centric articles. At the same time, however, it is important to point out that the debate does not originate exclusively or initially with one newspaper. The rising concern about gender and education predates the founding of the *National Post*, and the first slight increase in articles in the mid 1990s was spread across a number of newspapers, showing that a panic about boys' education cuts across the spectrum of political editorial stances.

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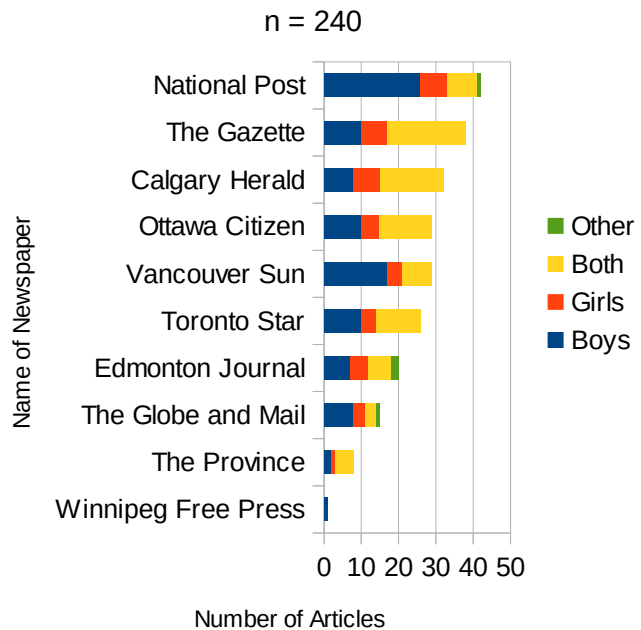
13 The *National Post's* predecessor *Financial Post*, published until 1997, was not included in my sample.

14 "Other" in Figure 4 refers to articles that did not primarily focus on gender but still prominently included references to gender and education.

**Table 1:Articles per Newspaper**

Newspaper	Articles	%
National Post	42	17.5
The Gazette	38	15.8
Calgary Herald	32	13.3
Ottawa Citizen	29	12.1
Vancouver Sun	29	12.1
Toronto Star	26	10.8
Edmonton Journal	20	8.3
The Globe and Mail	15	6.3
The Province	8	3.3
Winnipeg Free Press	1	.4
Total	240	

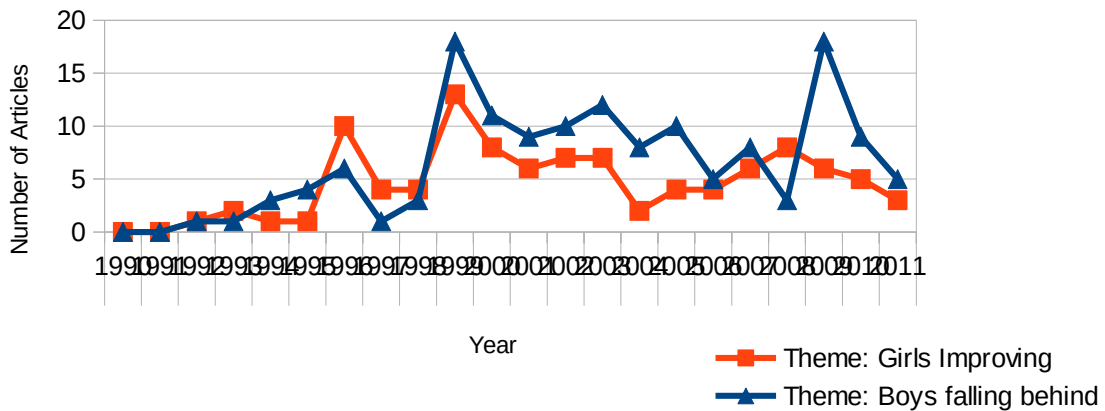
**Figure 4: Gender Focus per Publication**



#### **4.2. A QUESTION OF EMPHASIS: BOYS AS THE NEW DISADVANTAGED**

As the literature presented earlier indicates, both the notion that boys are doing worse than ever and the idea that the gender gap between boys and girls stems from boys' achievements falling off the cliff are not supported by research in the social sciences. Instead, the gender gap in education is primarily caused by girls' achievement levels improving, a fact that tends not to be reflected in the news media. Figure 5 depicts instances of two separate themes, that of “girls improving” versus that of “boys falling behind”.

Figure 5: Themes over Time 2



With the exception of 1993, 1996 and 2008, the theme of “boys falling behind” outnumbers the theme of “girls improving” by solid margins. A framing of boys' achievement levels and enrolment numbers as being in decline is presented in this 2007 *Calgary Herald* piece, for example:

Post-secondary education for women is one of the cornerstones of an advanced society and it is encouraging to see women, shamefully neglected in less enlightened eras, fulfilling their academic potential. However, this rise in academic girl power has been counterbalanced by a much larger decline in male university enrolment. (0188<sup>15</sup>)

Although acknowledging the increase in opportunities for female students, this author, makes the counter-factual claim that male university enrolment has dropped, implying the gender gap is primarily caused by the failings of boys rather than the improvement of girls. The talk of “less enlightened eras” even suggests that society may be on its way to such an era yet again, only that it is now boys who are the victims.

15 The newspaper articles analyzed as part of my sample are identified by ID number (rather than author's last name). Please refer to the *List of Newspaper* articles section in the bibliography for full references.

Underlying such arguments is the presumption that something must have changed, resulting in current hardships for boys, as evident in this 2009 *Globe and Mail* article:

Boys were doing far better 40 and 50 years ago than they are today. There's some evidence the gap emerged in the early 1980s, so it can't be genetic, it has to be that something has changed since then. (0224)

In addition to a nostalgia about a counterfactual era in which boys were supposedly doing better than today, the author argues that societal changes have resulted in boys falling behind. This trope of something having happened – or having been done – to boys is one of the major recurring themes in the media discourse. One way of connecting the supposed decline of male academic performance to the notion of cultural changes is conflating female students' performance with institutional power. According to a number of articles, girls are not only outperforming boys in schools but are in control of the institution. For instance, the headline of a 2001 *National Post* article reads:

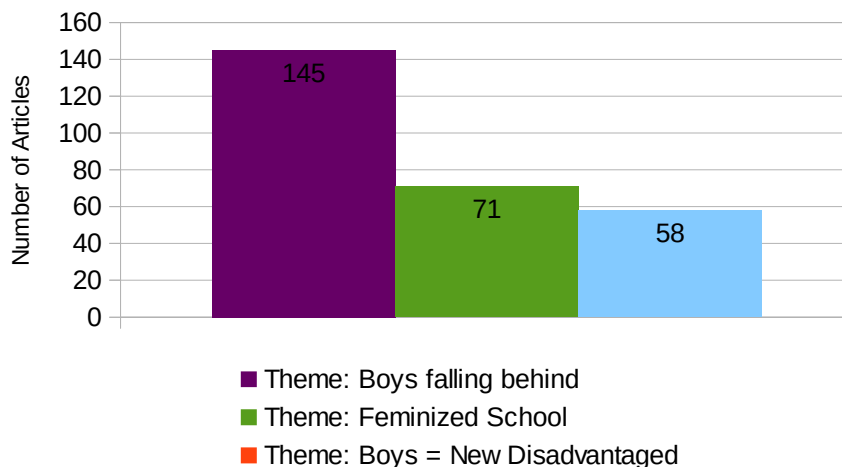
The new gender gap – 'Girls Rule.' (0087)

Commentators thus take a leap from describing the performance gap between male and female students to talking about hierarchical relations between girls and boys and insinuate that girls virtually “rule” over what goes on in schools. A 2009 *Vancouver Sun* article talking about a teacher re-entering the profession strikes a very similar chord:

[H]e was struck by the huge cultural shift that had occurred in his absence. 'To put it bluntly, the girls are running the place,' he told The Sun [...]. (0206)

Again, girls are portrayed not simply as more successful students but as in charge and in control (“running the place”); put in charge by a “cultural shift” toward a more feminine classroom environment favouring girls over boys.

Figure 6: Boys in School. Major Themes



These claims that schools are “feminized” and arguments that it is boys today that constitute a new disadvantaged population are powerful recurring tropes in the media discourse as shown in Figure 6. In addition to more than 60% of articles portraying boys as falling behind, 58 articles – almost 25% – go even further and consider boys as 'the new disadvantaged'. That is, they imagine boys as marginalized or ignored group in need of help, or as a minority that is being actively discriminated against. The related trope that schools are “feminized” and have been turned into girl-friendly environments that are hostile to boys is present in almost 30% of the articles.<sup>16</sup> The following sections will explore this notion of schools having been feminized and the related trope of an alleged victory of feminism having devastating results for male students.

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<sup>16</sup> These tropes thus play an important role in framing the debate about gender and education beyond the articles explicitly incorporating them; especially due to the lack of competing narratives in the media. In other words, not every single newspaper article that portrays boys as falling behind has to explicitly make the argument that boys are disadvantaged or that schools are geared towards girls, if these notions are already established as the lens through which to see this supposed trend.



### 4.3. THE GENDERED SCHOOL: 'FEMINIZED' CLASSROOMS

Despite a general consensus among scholars of education that “the school curriculum has always reflected and favoured the interests of boys at the expense of girls,” (Francis 2000:11) much of the newspaper coverage of the 'boy crisis' alleges that schools and classrooms have been turned into spaces geared towards girls, employing 'female-friendly' pedagogies, and run by female teachers. A so-called “feminization” of schools and education is regularly invoked as a buzzword, although more often than not it is unclear what exactly this means. What authors subscribing to this idea agree upon is that boys are not only falling behind in schools but they are suffering, and that their suffering in some way or another stems from education's supposed association with women and femininity, like these excerpts from a 1997 *Ottawa Citizen* article testify to:

So it is that the feminization of public education has now become so blatant that even the thoroughly feminized B.C. Teachers' Federation can no longer ignore its disastrous impact on boys. [...]  
For years now, many level-headed parents have sounded the alarm over the feminization of public education. (0041)

Not only is the supposed “feminization” being linked causally to the troubles of boys – in a way it *is* the 'boy crisis' – but a rift between parents and teachers is alleged, with parents being portrayed as possessing common-sense, down-to-earth knowledge of the needs of (male) students, whereas teachers are constructed as out-of-touch with reality, possibly driven by ideology and oblivious to the most pressing issues in education. More importantly, the article claims that British Columbia's teachers union is “feminized”. While it is true that the majority of teachers are female, the choice in words

– “thoroughly feminized” – seems to indicate that this attempt at vilifying the teachers union is about more than just the demographics. Rather, it is implied that the politics of the union are biased in favour of women and girls. In other words the union must be either incompetent – since they have not seen it coming – or reluctant to the idea of engaging with this 'reality' due to potential own political interests.

This idea that it has been the feminist movement that is responsible for boys' problems by turning schools into supposedly girl-centric spaces is present in a number of articles. For example, take this excerpt from a 2005 *Calgary Herald* article:

Jack Grant, headmaster of West Island College, says during the 1960s and 1970s, as part of an out-take of the feminist movement, schools took on an aggressive campaign to help girls do better academically. 'We wanted so badly to make sure that girls wouldn't be disadvantaged. But in so doing, we disadvantaged the boys.' (0154)

The allegation is clear once again: Feminist reforms have gone too far, and they are even described in terms of war metaphors, as an “aggressive campaign”. Moreover, the question of gendered achievement levels is portrayed as a zero sum game: By institutionalizing measures to improve girls' performances, boys have been left behind. And while this quote at least leaves open the idea that the supposedly negative impact of the contemporary class room was ultimately an unintended side effect of feminist advocacy, other articles are more direct in suggesting the so-called 'feminization' of education has been intended all along, as for example in this 2007 article in *The Province*:

In the '70s, there was concern that girls were less successful than boys in school. Since then, there has been a deliberate feminizing of public education, and boys have lost out big time. (0183)

Alluding to the same idea that reforms have ultimately harmed boys, the author here argues that the 'feminization' of education was not just something that *happened* but actually something that was consciously, intentionally and actively *done*.

Although there seems to be agreement in a vast number of articles that something has happened – or has been done – to schools that makes them less attractive for boys and less attentive to their needs, the exact ways in which schools allegedly are “feminized” is somewhat obscure. A 2002 *National Post* article, for example, makes the case that pedagogies and evaluation have been transformed in girl-centric ways:

Teachers began teaching differently to help girls thrive; students were evaluated in ways that were more favourable to girls, while less emphasis was placed on traditional testing methods, at which boys tended to perform better than girls. Dr. Easton [of the Fraser Institute] said boys were hurt by such 'girl-centric education.' (0100)

This article paints a picture of schools as having moved away from its traditional modus operandi by introducing new ways of teaching and different forms of evaluation and that schools have turned away from 'what works' – at least for boys, allegedly. The story this article tells is one of the decline of a traditional, standards-based education toward something new, inferior and less rigid.

Ironically, other articles arrive at the very opposite conclusion – or rather: introduce opposite premises – when trying to prove the same point, namely when explaining how exactly the school system is feminized and not geared towards boys' needs today. For instance, in 2005 the same *National Post* that had made the case for standardized testing and subscribed to the idea that the downfall of education is rooted in

its abandonment of these traditional pedagogies, argues the following:

We've created an industrial schooling system to educate the greatest number of people, and (there are) several potential mismatches. The male brain goes to a resting state a number of times a day. If you're saying, the way to learn is to sit ... when (boys) sit down, their brain shuts down. (0160)

Relying on arguments about boys' supposed neurological wiring, the activity of sitting in a classroom is portrayed as one incompatible with what boys need in order to strive. Thus, this quote tries to slip in some striking reversals of hegemonic gender assumptions in making its case. The so-called industrial learning environment is here portrayed as something that does not meet boys' learning needs – and, in the context of the overall discourse, as an environment that therefore must be geared towards girls. However, the concepts of industrial work is associated in our society with notions of masculinity. It is quite ironic then that this quote seems to take for granted the idea that an “industrial schooling system” is not one that has been established for boys but, quite the opposite, as one that harms boys. Moreover, this line of arguing depicts current trends in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century education not as symptoms of a neoliberalization of education but instead of a feminization of education. Transformations rooted in socioeconomic developments are thus rhetorically turned into a 'battle of the sexes'.

However, despite these articles decrying standardized tests as an offshoot of a vague feminist agenda, the majority of articles lamenting the supposed feminization, of education falls in line rather with earlier arguments discussed, calling for 'traditional' ways of teaching. For example, a 2000 *National Post* article quotes Adrienne Snow, director of policy and education at the National Foundation for Family Research:

'A co-operative, feel-good feminist approach to education is just not motivating for boys. They would benefit greatly from increased standards and a little bit of competition. That probably goes for girls, too,' Ms. Snow said. (0072)

The way in which the problem is framed here actually implies that boys' underachievement is, in fact, rooted in a lack of motivation, not ability. In other words, it is allegedly not their talent that results in lower grades but the fact that they are not trying hard enough, which again – and here the educational institution comes into play – results from them not being challenged enough. In a way then, boys are portrayed as potentially *too smart* for what school has to offer them. Moreover, this quote also implies, by talking about adding “a little bit” of competition, that schools do not incorporate any form of competition today whatsoever; an allegation that seems out of touch with the reality of school culture, their reliance on testing and their emphasis on grades. Moreover, it is also implied that boys are more driven by tangible goals and clear guidelines, as well as being more apt for competition rather than cooperation, thereby reproducing very standard gender stereotypes about supposedly aggressive and assertive men versus caring and subservient women – as in this 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article:

Boys thrive on competition in academics, too, and seem to do better when the results are concrete and measurable. (0088)

Finally, all of these these quotes devalue girls' achievements and skills, as female students are portrayed as unambitious and content with not being challenged.

#### 4.4. THE GENDERED SCHOOL: 'FEMNIZED' STANDARDS

In addition to claiming that pedagogies in contemporary schools have been geared towards female students, the discourse also makes claims about supposedly girl-friendly assessments. For instance, a 1999 article in the *Vancouver Sun* contained the following:

Girls consistently outperform boys in secondary school even when their scores in provincial exams are lower, says a study that suggests B.C. schools may be biased in favour of girls. [...]  
'Where an assessment is made at the school, girls, on average, do better than boys. This difference is so pervasive as to suggest that there is a structural bias in favour of girls in the design and practice of school-based assessments,' the report says. (#0054)

This article makes the argument that it is boys – not girls – who are discriminated against by the educational system and does so in a quite novel way. Schools, the argument goes, must be biased against boys because girls on average receive better grades in school-based assessment despite boys doing slightly better on (some) standardized tests.<sup>17</sup> The results of narrow standardized tests on few occasions during the school year is taken to be reflective of the 'real' potential and merit of boys, whereas the higher grades of girls earned through more holistic school-based evaluations are taken to be reflective not of the effort and performance of girls but as a sign of favouritism towards them.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the articles engaging with the question of gendered assessment go even

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17 What the article does not mention, of course, is the fact that numerous studies have continually argued that it is, in fact, standardized tests that are biased against girls – as well as lower class students and students of colour – which is why, traditionally, (white middle and upper class) boys tended to score higher compared with girls: The highly competitive atmosphere, the narrow testing of memorized facts and factoids coupled with a lack in self-esteem on the part of girls and minority students contributed to the latter achieving below their potential, it has traditionally been argued.

18 This slanted argument is less surprising when taking into account the source of this study. The study and the interpretation of the data stem from the *Fraser Institute*, a conservative, right-libertarian think tank that is pro high stakes testing and pro corporate reform of public education. The leanings of the research institute, however, are virtually never mentioned in the newspaper articles quoting them.

further and spell out what exactly they imagine students are being rewarded for. For instance, a 2005 *Calgary Herald* article contained the following statement:

Schools, particularly at the elementary level, still reward so many girl behaviours like sitting quietly and colouring between the lines. (0154)

According to this article then, it is not actual achievement, knowledge, skills, merit or even motivation and effort of girls that earn them higher grades but it is primarily their complicity with the most basic rules of conduct in the educational system: Not disrupting the lessons and playing by the rules. Moreover, these 'traits' and 'behaviours' are identified as inherently female – and thus as at odds with the 'nature' of boys. In other words, the alleged bias in favour of girls – and the supposed discrimination against boys – is less about what each gender *does* and more about what they *are*: Girls are imagined as naturally subservient, the school system is seen as rewarding these characteristics, ergo boys are losing in the competition for better grades – by no fault of their own. Conversely, girls are not seen as earning their grades but it is solely the institution and the faculty that are credited with their achievements, while the underachievement of boys is equally constructed as being located outside of themselves. This notion of schools rewarding students for what they are, not what they do, is also reinforced by complementary articles, such as this 2003 *National Post* article:

Their hostility to the male character – intentional or not – is turning boys off learning. The behaviours that earn reward and reinforcement – co-operation, communal achievement and non-assertiveness in class – are feminine behaviours. Meanwhile, such masculine traits as competitiveness, aggressiveness and individuality are seldom prized, and frequently discouraged or even punished. (0116)

Thus, girls are being portrayed as inherently possessing traits that are in line with the educational system's requirements, while schools are considered openly hostile towards the 'nature' of boys. Moreover, passages such as this take for granted the idea that schools have in fact moved away from competitiveness and individuality without providing any proof for this imagined shift (and in a sweeping claim even try to sell the idea that aggressiveness is somehow an intrinsically valuable trait).

Most importantly, this framing of boys' underachievement as institutional discrimination stands at odds with how, historically, girls' struggles in the educational system have been framed. As Michele Cohen puts it “[b]oys' achievement has been attributed to something within – the nature of their intellect – but their failure has been attributed to something external – a pedagogy, methods, texts, teachers.” (Cohen 1998: 20). This contrasts with how female underachievement in mathematics and the sciences has typically been explained: Girls were deemed less ambitious or interested in these subjects, it was their lack of motivation to enter these arenas or they were simply not considered intellectually capable for these subject areas. And now that girls are apparently outperforming boys in education, the assumption that they cannot be more capable than boys – or equally capable as boys – is carried over into the 'boy crisis' debates and translated into the idea that it must be the institution that is responsible for this shift.

Paradoxically, even a publication that had held that results on standardized tests are a true indicator of the achievement of boys, pivots to calling these tests potentially biased in favour of *girls* in cases where these tests show girls outperforming boys. This



was done in a 2001 *National Post* article about a study that had shown girls to be outperforming boys in literacy, with boys still slightly ahead in math and sciences. The article quoted Linda Philips, director of the Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta as saying:

'How can you do math and science if you can't read? You have to ask: Was there something about the stories in the test that were not interesting to boys? Maybe they were more appropriate for girls than boys.' (0098)

Again, boys' underachievement – even in the subject of reading that has for years seen girls outperforming boys – is attributed to the institution's potential bias, while girls' achievement is implicitly rendered a result of favouritism. This clearly shows an overall assumption that constructs boys as always achieving as well as – if not higher than – girls: If boys receive lower grades on in-school assessment, this must be the case because schools discriminate against them. However, if they score lower on standardized tests, it is because these exact tests – which had earlier served as testifying to boys' superior skills – are biased against them. Either way, it is the institution that is not able to accurately measure boys' 'real' potential, or as Francis and Skelton (2005) put it: “Girls (and women) are viewed as 'conformist plodders' who achieve through hard work, whilst boys (and men) are seen as lazy or distracted but 'naturally talented'”(Francis & Skelton 2005:114). This also reflects an even broader implicit assumption that treats (white middle-class) boys (and men) as the norm and the stand-in for person per se, the default position against which everyone else is measured. Only against the backdrop of this assumption does it make sense to attribute prior overachievement of boys to their inner true potential and

their current underachievement to social structures and institutions, while simultaneously conceptualizing the underachievement of *others* (girls, students of colour) as being rooted in their deviance from the norm and their lack of capabilities associated with it, while their current overachievement can only be explained with reference to institutional bias.<sup>19</sup>

These very contradictions of how exactly the contemporary school system allegedly marginalizes boys are evidence of a general consensus among these proponents of the 'boy crisis' discourse: No matter what schools are imagined to be like, all of these authors can agree that it is the fault of schools that boys are supposedly doing less well than ever before; not the fault of boys or our society's constructions of masculinity.

#### 4.5. FEMALE TEACHERS

Related to the notion of 'feminized' schools is a panic about the teaching profession. In 1999, the *Vancouver Sun* raised the following questions, for instance:

The predominance of female teachers at elementary and primary levels has raised questions concerning the pressures on boys who are learning in a largely 'feminine' environment. How does this affect boys? Do they see learning as a feminine activity? Do women teachers have less tolerance of boys' naturally robust behaviour than male teachers do? (0058)

This excerpt makes a direct link between schools being “feminine” spaces and the role of female teachers in this imagined transformation of education: Allegedly, it is because of female teachers that schools have become feminized. More importantly, the

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<sup>19</sup> Ironically, these arguments of structural disadvantage are now being raised by fractions – such as the National Post and the Fraser Institute – who are traditionally averse to acknowledging systemic and structural factors in producing social inequality, based on their ideology of individualism and libertarianism.

author then insinuates that women – simply because of their gender – possess inherent biases against boys, policing them for behaviour that male teachers would allegedly be more willing to accept and understand. Additionally, boys are portrayed as a homogenous group that possesses some inherent qualities that schools simply have to adjust to and that women teachers – and the so-called feminized school system overall – simply are less able to deal with, resulting in the marginalization of boys.<sup>20</sup>

Expanding on the notion that female educators lack the basic ability of interacting with male students, a number of articles make the allegation that female teachers are responsible for boys' aversion against learning. A 2002 *National Post* article argues:

'Boys just don't seem to be reading as much,' Prof. Gambell said. Everything seems to be stacked against the boys, starting with the fact that most teachers are female. (0102)

Not only is the notion that female teachers harm boys taken as self-evident here but a connection – albeit vague – is made to the fact that boys tend to read less than girls. Various newspapers make this connection between female teachers, so-called feminized classrooms and reading material that supposedly does not meet boys' needs. All of this together, the argument goes, turns schools into spaces unfit for boys. For example, in 2006 the *National Post* quoted Leonard Sax, one of the more prominent proponents of the idea that boys are losing out in education, as saying:

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20 Mills (2003), Martino & Kehler (2006) and Sternod (2009) come to similar conclusions about the discourse of underrepresented male teachers. Sternod, for instance, argues that calls for more male teachers typically rely on stereotypical constructions of masculinity and Martino and Kehler even make the point that these calls often serve as a “normalizing strategy intended to reassert and re-traditionalize hegemonic masculinities” (114).

Little Johnny isn't happy in school, according to Leonard Sax, an American educational psychologist, because schools 'are run largely by women and according to women's rules.' To do well under such conditions boys have to adopt 'geeky' or emasculated behaviours. Rather than do so, many boys simply tune out and let their educations slide. (0116)

In addition to perpetuating the idea that virtually all boys are suffering in schools – by use of the phrase “Little Johnny” as a stand-in for boys in general – it is again the notion that women “run” the school system according to some set of female rules that is pushed here. This allegation does not only overlook – or intentionally ignore – the fact that the gender distribution of the teaching profession does not necessarily reflect gender ratios of those instituting school rules and policies – that is, politicians and educational administration – but also presupposes that there are “women's rules” in the first place. Moreover, this quote suggests that schools emasculate boys, and it is this alleged feminization and emasculation that boys supposedly resist when they drop out of or underachieve in school. While the idea that education and reading bear connotations of femininity is confirmed in research (e.g. Askew & Ross 1988), it is striking how this newspaper puts the blame for hegemonic gender connotations of different activities squarely onto women and girls, while men and boys appear innocent. In other words, it is the choice of women to enter the teaching profession that is to blame, not the choice of men to stay away from the profession of education (Martino & Kehler 2006). And it is the sheer presence of women and the achievement of girls that leads to boys rejecting education, rather than more general societal discourses that frame reading as a female activity and that emphasize the importance for boys to reject anything deemed feminine.

#### 4.6. THE SUPPOSED VICTORY OF FEMINISM

The notion that it is supposedly girls who dominate and rule over boys in schools is regularly connected to a broader story about the supposed victory of feminism. Changes in the educational system are being portrayed as evidence that equality has been won or that women are in the position to advance policies that favour girls over boys. While it is undoubtedly true that much progress toward gender equity (in education and beyond) has been made over the past 40 years, it is important to remember that we are far from living in a gender equal society. As has been pointed out in the introductory chapter of this work, a range of gender gaps persist, even in education. For instance, young men continue to gravitate towards the (lucrative) fields of science, engineering and mathematics, a gendered wage gap persists in the labour market, as do unequal contributions to household work by men and women. The fact that women have made great strides does not automatically mean that it is men who are shortchanged now.

Some articles make the argument that feminism has not only put women and girls on an equal playing field with men and boys but has even tilted the field in their favour. This 1997 *Ottawa Citizen* article, for instance, takes exactly this position:

But a funny thing happened on the way to Utopia. Equality was achieved, and the girls just kept on marching. (0041)

Not only does this author claim that society is now one in which discrimination towards the female gender does not exist anymore, but even more than that, by arguing that “girls just kept on marching”, it is implied that girls have overtaken boys and thus are the ones in charge. The logical conclusion of arguments like this can only be a call for

rolling back some of the achievements of the feminist movement that have ostensibly gone too far.

Following the logic that the educational system is favouring girls, this 2001 *National Post* piece, even speaks of “discrimination” towards boys:

The odds used to be stacked against girls. Now in study after study, and anecdote after anecdote, it's become clear it's boys who face discrimination, whose choices are stunted. By all means, let's have boys start kindergarten a year later. They have many years of brutal competition ahead in a world where, increasingly, girls rule. (0087)

Again, the systemic and structural forces holding down girls in previous decades are now assumed to negatively impact boys, as male students are portrayed as discriminated against and facing an unfair situation in which the cards are “stacked against” them. Moreover, the notion that it is girls who rule is even extended beyond schools to society more broadly. If these authors accept the notion that Western societies used to be patriarchies, the implication can only be that contemporary society has allegedly been transformed into a form of 'matriarchy', a system run by and for the benefit of women in which men and boys will inevitably be suffering.

A notion of change as a zero-sum game – the idea that what benefits girls must necessarily harm boys – coupled with an imagined feminist hegemony underlies these arguments. A similar point had already been made in a 1997 *Ottawa Citizen* article:

[...] Mr. Clarke has clearly missed a fundamental cause of the problem – feminism, a philosophy embraced by the BCTF, and one which preaches in a thousand ways that female characteristics are to be treasured, while male characteristics are poisonous and destructive. (0041)

Not only is feminism directly and explicitly blamed for the struggle of male

students but it is also portrayed as an ideology that is hostile to boys and that instills negative self-images in them. If girls had been told they were less capable and of lesser worth than boys in earlier decades, the argument goes, today it is boys who are undervalued and dismissed as second-class citizens. It is no wonder then, that some articles even more explicitly draw parallels between the discrimination and exclusion experienced by girls and women until recently and the alleged situation of boys and men today. A 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article, for instance, made the following argument:

If we don't act today, boys will not only be boys. They risk becoming the second sex of tomorrow. (0088)

(Mis)appropriating one of the most powerful phrases of feminist theory, men and boys are thus imagined as a group that is facing a future of oppression by women, a future that according to a 2010 *Globe and Mail* article has already become reality:

For men, it is 1970 in reverse. (0236)

Thus, it seems the moral panic about an allegedly feminized and feminist-dominated society has penetrated at least some pockets of mainstream journalism. Especially when taking into account the actual numbers of female representation in leadership positions, the wage gap and labour market outcomes of education, this discourse is, of course, strikingly detached from reality. Nevertheless, institutional arrangements, laws and policies aimed at combating gender discrimination are widely misinterpreted as indicating gender discrimination against men and boys.

#### 4.7. MALE VICTIMHOOD

The notion that feminism has 'won' goes hand in hand with the idea that boys' struggles in school have been ignored and knowledge about male underachievement has been suppressed by some form of 'political correctness'. In the most basic version of this trope, numerous authors claim that no attention has been paid to boys falling behind and that no attempt has been made to understand and address the specific struggles of boys. For instance, a 2009 *Edmonton Journal* article made the following claim:

Boys' school problems unique, severe, largely untreated. [...] Boys and girls both have their issues, but boys are the ones getting no support, a new study suggests. (0208)

This assumption of ignorance towards the struggles of boys, however, contradicts the evidence: By the time this article was published, not only have there been 200 newspaper articles on the issue of boys and education in my sample alone, with a clear spike in coverage in the late 1990s, but also there have been numerous studies, articles and books by academics investigating this very topic. The fact that these media articles treat the alleged struggles of boys as breaking news can surely be attributed to the logic underlying corporate journalism, as Lingard (2003), drawing on Bourdieu, explains. He argues that journalism suffers from a form of

[...] structural amnesia that works within media stories. Thus unlike the aspirations of modernist social science research, media stories do not build upon previous stories and their insights in particular ways in an attempt to move the debate on. Rather, stories on boys and schooling, for instance appear at particular times, and are written as if nothing has previously been said about the topic. (Lingard 2003:50)

As my sample confirms, this arguments still holds true about the 'boy crisis'



discourse even a decade later. This contradictory “structural amnesia” which results in authors implying that no one has ever *reported* about this issue is often coupled with a more stronger claim that insists no one so far has *cared* enough to do something about it: Accordingly, the alleged inattention to boys' underachievement is proof of society's indifference towards boys, as argued in the following articles spanning a 14 year period:

Do we care if boys fall back? (0021; *Toronto Star* 1995)

Boys were left to fend for themselves. [...] Something was seriously amiss, but no one seemed to care. (0041; *Ottawa Citizen* 1997)

Instead we need to ask why B.C. education is dragging its heels in dealing with this important issue. (0058; *Vancouver Sun* 1999)

Another factor is that less attention has been focused on boys since the feminist movement. (0166; *National Post* 2005)

Meanwhile, nationwide math and science tests show that teenage girls have achieved parity with the boys. Good for the girls, and the educators who prodded them along; but don't the boys also deserve help reaching their potential? (0211; *Globe and Mail* 2009)

All of these passages suggest there has been a degree of reluctance to even acknowledge that boys were struggling (“Do we care”, “no one seemed to care”) and claim that society overall has turned away from supporting boys in schools (“less attention has been focused on boys”). Additionally, even if the supposed struggles of boys as a group are known by the public, it is argued, that those in power have not taken any action (“dragging its heels”). Finally, the last article uses its rhetorical questions (“don't the boys also deserve help”) to portray boys as a group that has been marginalized and that faces adversity without any support (“Boys were left to fend for themselves”).

The idea that the political will to improve the situation for boys is missing also connects to the assumption that it is a form of feminism hostile to men that is running the education system and politics: The fact that there has been political will to improve girls' situations in schools while allegedly boys have received no support in a similar situation can only lead to the conclusion that society cares more about girls than boys, an argument that is made in the 2009 *Globe and Mail* article quoted previously:

The educational establishment in Canada has been too accepting of boys' failings. It verges on a willful blindness. [...] Is it possible to imagine a similar gender gap with girls lagging being similarly buried? (0211)

According to this argument, not only have leaders in the realm of education intentionally turned a blind eye on boys' supposed suffering but it is unthinkable that girls would have been ignored if they were in a similar situation. Moreover, the word “buried” suggests that the supposed indifference towards boys involves an active process of hiding evidence. It is quite obvious that articles such as this are implicitly assuming that it is an imagined feminist hegemony that contributes to allegedly keeping boys down.

Spelling these tropes out in more detail, a number of authors explicitly blame “political correctness” and “gender blindness” for the alleged trouble of boys and subscribe to ideas of reverse sexism performed by feminists against boys and men. In its least explicit version, these arguments draw comparisons between boys' situation today and counterfactual hypotheticals that imply that a lack of support for girls would be unthinkable, as in this 1995 *Toronto Star* piece:

If these numbers were reversed and it was girls who were doing measurably

worse than the boys, the gender data would have been in the headlines. Is anyone even going to care now that the shoe's on the other foot? (0021)

Without any evidence, this article seems to insinuate that there must be some scheme behind the fact that allegedly girls' problems would be taken much more serious than those of boys. A 1999 *Globe and Mail* article is much more explicit in laying blame on supposedly preferential treatment of girls over boys:

At the most, we have been practicing a form of gender bias. What the disproportionate attention paid to girls' schooling problems says is: Boys' deficiencies matter less, because boys matter less. (0052)

Here, the allegation is that boys now suffer from a form of reverse sexism that is taken to be not accidental but a symptom of an alleged larger societal devaluation of boys vis-a-vis girls. Moreover, feminist research is presented as an ideology that works to the detriment of boys, as in this 2000 *Calgary Herald* article:

If boys have problems now, it's partly because they've been victimized by a gender blindness that was fostered for years by biased academics. That isn't science – it's politics. (0076)

This article presents a whole (inter)discipline as non-objective and unscientific. By calling gender scholars “biased” and claiming they are engaged in “politics” rather than science, the author also presents them as partial towards women and opposed to boys. On a related note, a number of articles make (implicit or explicit) references to a feminist cultural and medial hegemony that allegedly silences voices speaking out for boys. For instance, a 2010 *Vancouver Sun* article claims that trying to address boys' issues runs counter to a contemporary zeitgeist, quoting writer Richard Whitmire:

'It's politically incorrect to watch out for the boys,' he says. 'There's still this

mindset that girls have to be protected and nurtured, that men succeed so well in the marketplace, let's not worry about them.' (0232)

And a 2007 *The Province* article directly argues that “political correctness” suppresses the very debate these authors are pushing in the pages of major newspapers:

Political correctness muzzles debate over feminization of our classrooms  
(0183)

These claims, of course, are contradicted by the existence of years and decades of research and writing on boys, masculinity and schooling – ironically, most often by feminist-leaning researchers – as well as the various magazine specials and bestselling pop-scientific books. By 2010, portraying boys as in need had, in fact, become very much mainstream. In addition to the Bourdieuan “structural amnesia” suffered by journalists, it is the self-stylization as a righteous minority oppressed by an imagined “political correctness” – against all evidence – that lends the arguments of these authors and advocates more credibility and significance and lets them take on an aura of rebelliousness. Thus, this rhetorical device of presenting their own position as an innovative vanguard minority position suppressed by a 'politically correct' establishment allows some of the authors to advocate for more or less explicitly misogynist positions by framing opposition to these very positions as a form “political correctness”. For instance, in a 2006 *Montreal Gazette* op/ed, the author made the following statement:

The problem is that even after the recent flurry of attention about why boys are falling behind, there is still intense social pressure not to talk about biological differences between boys and girls (ask Harvard president Larry Summers). (0166)

Larry Summers is infamous for having argued that biological differences between

the sexes account for at least part of the underrepresentation of women in the sciences – while leading one of the most prestigious universities no less. While it may be true that Summers received major criticism and eventually was forced to step down as Harvard's president following this controversy, it is striking that the author here is trying to paint Summers as the victim of “political correctness” rather than as someone whose positions were judged as incompatible with his role as Harvard president. Despite the problematic fact that arguments rooted in biology actually do play a major role in the discussion about boys and education, the statement that these are being drowned out by the media is a recurrent trope in the discourse.

The 2007 article from *The Province* quoted earlier provides an even more explicit glimpse into the paranoia surrounding the idea that it is feminists who are dismissing even the onsets of a debate about boys and education:

But any public official who dares make [male academic performance] an issue will surely be branded anti-women and swiftly demonized. Such is the tyranny of political correctness. (0183)

Again, despite evidence to the contrary – namely studies about boys and education by the very feminist researchers articles as such decry – the 'boy crisis' advocates are trying to portray themselves as victims of an imagined feminist mainstream. At the same time, these arguments continue to be treated as breaking news, especially since they can be portrayed as counter-intuitive, as Mead (2006) has argued:

The idea that historically privileged boys could be at risk, that boys could be shortchanged, has simply proved too deliciously counterintuitive and 'newsworthy' for newspaper and magazine editors to resist. (14)

It is especially this apparent contradiction of talking about a historically privileged group as disadvantaged that continues to grasp the attention of authors and readers and which can easily be connected rhetorically to broader backlashes against feminism.

#### **4.8. BACKLASH POLITICS**

In framing boys as victims of an educational system allegedly run by women and feminists, some articles make direct attacks on feminist-inspired research and the field of women's and gender studies more broadly, decrying it as unscientific and biased. It can be argued that this rhetorical move serves a dual purpose: On the one hand, the issue of boys' academic underachievement can provide an entry point to a political backlash against feminist achievements more broadly<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, those focused on boy advocacy can relatively easily connect their concerns to and draw from the cultural pool of misconceptions and mischaracterizations about feminism and feminist research that exist in broader society, thereby lending their concerns more legitimacy.

Without engaging with social scientific and feminist research, news media articles regularly take anti-feminist boy advocates such as Christina Hoff Sommers at their word, as for instance this 2000 *Vancouver Sun* article:

[Christina Hoff] Sommers stresses that educational policy has been influenced in sweeping ways by all this bad social science. As a result, it is 'a bad time to be a boy in America.' (0078)

Dismissing the majority of research on gender and education as “bad social

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21 This is done by the 'Men's Rights Movement', for instance, who use the 'boy crisis' discourse as evidence for the existence of a feminist hegemony (see: Bouchard et al. 2003).

science”, the author buys into the narrative that educational institutions are biased towards male students. Sparked by the publication of Sommer's best-selling book 'The War Against Boys', a 2000 *Calgary Herald* article had made a similar argument:

The adolescent girl as victim was pushed by feminist social scientists of the day. Many of us bought into it. I did, until my kids started to grow. Somehow they and their friends weren't following the prescribed stereotypes. (0076)

The author implies that social-scientific research about adolescent girls struggling with self-esteem is nothing more than feminist ideology that was “pushed” for unclear political reasons. Ironically, the author also questions the scientific rigour of feminist research while herself presenting only anecdotal evidence based on her own experiences.

A 2000 *Calgary Herald* opinion piece published about three months later more explicitly questions the merit of research on gender and education and more openly accuses researchers of being ideologues. Moreover, the article suggests that academics and politicians have conspired in shaping the educational system to the detriment of boys:

[That girls have increased their academic performance] can be traced directly to a political decision (based, as such decisions so frequently are, upon ideology and unverified research) that schools were institutionally biased against girls. Unverified or not, on both sides of the border, government swung into action with special programs, scholarships and curricula, even mentoring, to coax girls into areas of study where they were traditionally weak such as mathematics, science and anything mechanical. (0080)

It seems that this author wants to have his cake and eat it, too: On the one hand, the author alleges that the decision to encourage and support girls in pursuing traditionally male subjects such as science, math and engineering was not based in research and reality but instead driven by feminist ideology. On the other hand, however,

by mentioning that programs that support girls in schools have resulted in higher numbers of female students gravitating towards male dominated fields, it implicitly admits that girls must have been turned away from these subjects previously.

Some commentators go even further in their opposition to feminist research and engage in explicitly reactionary politics, such as this 2006 article from *The Gazette*:

During the 1970s, it was believed that gender is a social construct and that gender differences could be eliminated via consciousness-raising. But it turns out gender is not a social construct. Consciousness- raising doesn't turn boys into sensitively poetic pacifists. It just turns many of them into high school and college dropouts who hate reading. (0166)

This passage encapsulates some of the most troubling tropes of the 'boy crisis' discourse that are often spread across articles rather than found in this condensed form in a single paragraph. For one, it claims that feminism, “consciousness-raising” – and implicitly all pedagogies not rooted in stereotyping students along gender lines – result in discouraging male students from academic pursuits. Moreover, the article explicitly proposes throwing out social-constructivist conceptions of gender and returning to biologicistic notions of sex differences. The argument is that all efforts to educate children in ways that allow them to step outside of stereotypical gendered behaviours are doomed to fail, since allegedly “it turns out gender is not a social construct”. If that were indeed the case, the conclusion can only be that all efforts to establish a more gender equal society are illegitimate attempts at social engineering. These passages reveal that concerns about the perceived underachievement of boys can be channelled to serve as a vehicle for anti-feminist and reactionary discourses on gender and diversity.



#### 4.9. RHETORIC OF EQUALITY

Paradoxically, not all arguments that lament a supposed feminization of schools are presented in the same reactionary framework. Instead, often it is feminist and civil rights rhetoric that is (mis)appropriated by those advocating on behalf of boys. One of the most powerful ways in which a number of articles make the argument for adjusting the educational system to serve the needs of boys is by drawing parallels with the situation of girls in previous decades. For instance, a 1999 *Vancouver Sun* article relied on Stephen Easton, researcher for the conservative *Fraser Institute*, to make the following point:

Easton said he hopes the education ministry and schools will look at the ratings and take action to help boys - just as educators decided years back to make special efforts to help girls succeed. (0054)

Innocent as this argument might seem, the claim that the situation of boys parallels that faced by girls in earlier decades serves as an entry point for much more problematic ideas about allegedly feminist schools and is often the first building block in reducing the complexity of why (some) boys actually underperform in schools. Moreover, even though the quote above remains relatively unspecific in its recommendations, the solutions proposed by many voices in the media – and particularly those who have looked to the *Fraser Institute* for answers – are not ones that address the intersections of gender, class and race but instead serve to further obscure the actual issues underlying the 'boy crisis'.

A similar argument that proposes addressing the underachievement of boys by mimicking strategies taken to support girls is made by a 2000 *Calgary Herald* article:

As Canadian educators ponder recent indications that boys are falling behind at school [...], they might consider the very success of the programs which

have led to this spike in accomplishment among young women. More was demanded of them, in some cases cajoled from them and guess what? They delivered. It seems that it's time to do the same for boys. (0080)

More directly than the previous *Vancouver Sun* passage, this quote not only urges society to address the problem of boys' underachievement but provides an interpretation that draws explicit parallels in content and strategy to the underachievement of girls in years past. Although focusing primarily on how to engage students rather than broad institutional changes, the article still insinuates that the “programs” that worked for girls would work for boys now, which can only be taken to imply that the troubles experienced by boys today are essentially of the same nature as those faced by girls previously.

The same article goes even further in using discrimination towards girls as a blueprint for interpreting the current 'boy crisis':

Assuming the best about people as we always do, we presume that equality of opportunity was the goal and that these activists now share our concern at the relative lag of young males. It is time then to remove those institutional biases which hinder young men. (0080)

Here, the underachievement of boys is explicitly framed not as having to do with constructions of masculinity and (some) boys' patterns of behaviour but as an issue of “equality of opportunity”. In other words, the allegation is that the educational system – and the state as the agency who grants rights and chances – does not provide the same opportunities to boys. This point is even more explicitly emphasized with the article's reference to “institutional bias”. The author is thus (mis)appropriating the rhetoric used by groups who have historically been denied full and equal citizenship – such as women as well as racial minorities and the Canadian indigenous population – and ultimately comes

close to framing boys as a new oppressed group.

A 2003 *National Post* article strikes a similar chord, appealing to notions of fairness and framing the 'boy crisis' as a matter of group-based discrimination by quoting Peter Cowley of the *Fraser Institute*:

'One of the most important things that schools should be doing is minimizing achievement gaps between different groups, nomatter who those different groups are,' says Mr. Cowley. (0120)

By not even explicitly talking about boys in this passage, *Fraser Institute* researcher Cowley manages to appeal to readers' intuition about the moral injustice of unequal treatment of different groups. Boys can be framed as one of various populations that deserve special attention due to the fact that they are supposedly unfairly treated because of their group status. Boys are thus posited as simply one more special interest group alongside women, racial minorities, First Nations or students with special needs.<sup>22</sup>

A 2010 *Globe and Mail* article equally relies on comparing the situation of boys in schools with those of (previously) marginalized populations. When talking about the struggles of boys, the author imagines a counterfactual scenario in which girls are being educated by predominantly male teaching staff:

Imagine how a girl would feel in a school with all male teachers and administrators. Wouldn't something be missing from how those schools understand her needs and communicate with her? (0236)

In addition to reaffirming the notion that boys necessarily lose out in the

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<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is quite striking that even a conservative think tank such as the *Fraser Institute* in this instance appeals to egalitarian notions of equal social outcomes across different subsets of the population, since traditionally the conservative position tends to negate the importance of structure and institutions, presupposes equal opportunity under the law and denies the importance of looking at group outcomes.

educational system because of a relative lack of male educators and administrators, this passage also (mis)appropriates a well-substantiated claim made by marginalized communities for a number of decades and pretends boys face a similar situation today. For decades, women, racial minorities and Indigenous communities have argued that educational institutions do not address the needs of these communities, due to class-, race- and gender-based biases inherent in the institutional structures and *modi operandi*. Amongst other demands, such as adjustments in the curriculum and representation in textbooks, these communities have called for teaching staff that is able to connect with students because of shared identities, histories and backgrounds.

Passages such as the one quoted above implicitly postulate that boys today are in a position similar to that of students from marginalized populations. In doing so, they reduce the complexity of why different groups of students exhibit different educational outcomes and cling to the most general of similarities – mean educational differences vis-a-vis other groups – to claim identical status. What is ignored by or lost on commentators who are equating the situation of boys with that of marginalized communities is an analysis of power and structural factors impacting the lives and educational prospects of these different groups of students. The call for adequate representation within the educational system and measures to adjust schools to speak to these communities were not simply based on the discovery of different patterns of educational outcomes but rather connected to an analysis of how these communities were marginalized in the political and educational systems and in society more broadly. In other words, unequal educational

achievements were analyzed in the context of racism, sexism and settler-colonialism which provide frameworks to understand the historical dominance of middle-class, white male perspectives in Canadian educational institutions and society. In contrast, it is hard to argue that men are marginalized in society due to their gender, not only given that they continue to be the majority in positions of power in politics, education and the economy but also in light of the fact that values, characteristics and habits culturally associated with (white) masculinity remain imperative for success in these fields.

This absence of any sociological or critical analysis of power dynamics and structural forces explains how parts of the newsmedia – as well as large fractions of the men's rights movement and boy advocacy movement – have been able to appropriate feminist rhetoric without embracing the content and underlying framework of feminist critique. Lingard's and Douglas' (1999) contention that the boy crisis discourse exhibits a “rejection of feminism with regard to its relevance to boys’ situation, yet also an appropriation of its methodology” (55), thus needs some adjustment. While they are right in their observation that feminist research on boys and education is being ignored in public debates about gender and education, it is not so much feminist methodology that is being appropriated by the discourse but rather a feminist *rhetoric* devoid of its critical core of analyzing societal power dynamics. As Titus (2004) puts it:

While the claims-makers employ an equal rights rhetoric to argue that boys are shortchanged, they also deny inequality as a social problem when they contend that gender disparities favouring males do not reflect social injustice (Titus 2004:154).

At the same time, it is likely that it is especially this framing of the problem in familiar and intuitive terms and the reduction of complexity that connects with audiences, and that has helped spark the moral panic about boys' education in the first place. Therefore, by appropriating a rhetoric of egalitarianism, the 'boy crisis' discourse manages to propagate the idea that boys are being discriminated against and structurally disadvantaged, as, for instance, in the following quote from a 1999 *Toronto Star* article:

No, [...], the boys are not failing. We are failing them. (0068)

Quite explicitly, the responsibility is shifted from the boys onto the public and the situation is presented as one in which a feminist hegemony has resulted in boys having become one more disadvantaged special interest group, albeit one that is ultimately entitled to outperform other groups. And if they fail to live up to that expectation, the argument implicitly goes, the institution must be at fault.

#### **4.10. SUMMARY**

As has been demonstrated, the media discourse about boys and education takes a leap from reporting on small differences in mean scores between girls and boys to asserting that boys are being discriminated against in the education system. The fact that boys appear to do less well than girls is explained by shifting the blame to the institution, and by drawing on anti-feminist sentiments while at the same time employing a rhetoric of equality that is (mis)appropriated precisely from feminist and other progressive social movements. By bringing together these different tropes – mean gender differences in

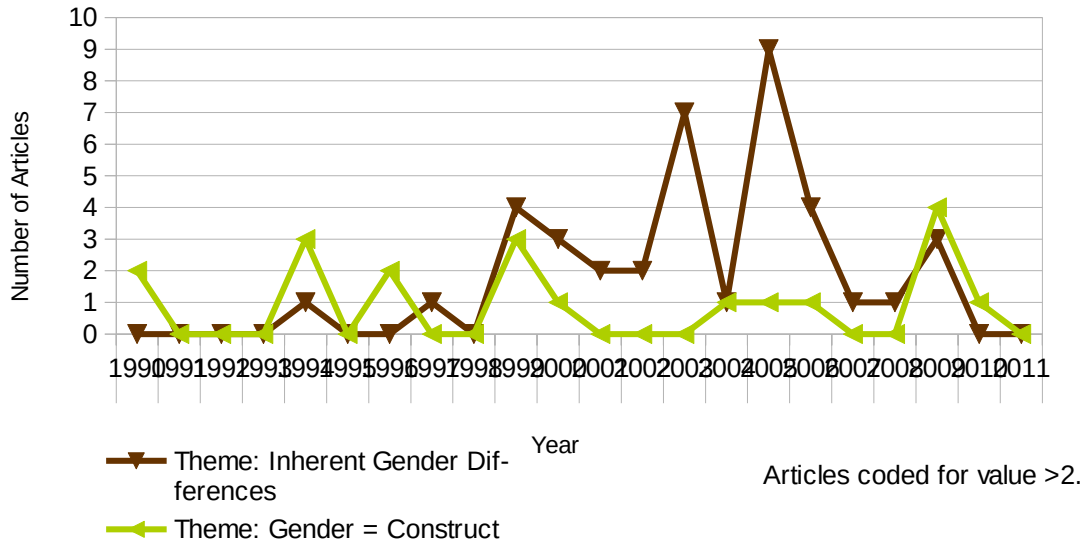
educational achievement, assertions that schools are hostile to boys, notions of feminist cultural hegemony and a rhetoric of anti-discrimination devoid of its sociological analysis – the media discourse is able to portray boys as a new disadvantaged group that is under siege and in need of remedial help. Rather than interrogating how notions of masculinities and their intersections with class-based and racialized systems of power impede the educational achievement of some boys, the underlying assumption that boys are supposed to and entitled to do better than girls is reaffirmed by portraying them as an oppressed group that would be back on top if only the educational institutions – supposedly run by women and feminists – would not hold them back.

## 5. GENDERED STUDENTS, GENDERED BRAINS

Claims that schools supposedly do not adequately address boys' needs only make sense in the context of specific ideas about what boys are and need. It is these constructions of masculinities (and femininities) within media discourses that are the topic of this chapter. Previous literature (Bouchard et al. 2003, Francis & Skelton 2005) suggests that the notion of differently gendered learning styles, strategies and needs for differently gendered children are ubiquitous in the media debates about gender and education. My analysis confirms these trends: Out of my sample of 240 articles, 130 articles make references to “Different Learning Styles”, accounting for more than fifty percent. Moreover, 72 articles include the idea of inherent (biological) differences between students of different genders, while a similar number of 67 articles give some room to ideas of gender being rooted in socialization. However, this pattern of almost equally high numbers for biological and social constructivist arguments disappears when taking into account the amount of space devoted to these arguments. When including only articles where each theme was coded as taking up one full paragraph or more, the themes of inherent differences outnumber social constructivist arguments by a ratio of two to one (see Figure 7). Moreover, there are also differences in terms of chronology regarding the prevalence of these themes. It is especially during the late 1990s and mid- to late 2000s that ideas of inherent gender differences clearly outnumber emphases on socialization, which had held the upper hand – albeit at very low overall levels – until the mid 1990s.



Figure 7: Nature vs Nurture



### 5.1. DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

The view that boys and girls exhibit fundamentally divergent learning styles, needs and preferences is a necessary assumption of articles that argue that recent transformations in the educational system have been harming male students. This 1999 *Vancouver Sun* article, for instance, claims boys automatically struggle in group project settings, which are said to dominate classrooms today:

[H]e says because boys are so competitive, they don't always do well in cooperative learning situations, like team school projects, whereas girls thrive in those environments. (0154)

Here, stereotypes about boys' supposed tendencies toward competition and girls' preference for cooperative settings are taken for granted and used as an explanation for male students' supposed problems in schools. These claims are then linked with a discourse about schools catering to the 'gender needs' of girls, thereby victimizing boys,

as is done in this 2007 article from the same source:

Martin blames the trend on the public schools, which he said switched gears through the 1970s to appeal to the learning style of girls because they weren't doing as well as boys. (0186)

It is worth remembering just how many assumptions are made in this statement. Boys are thought of as doing worse across the board, both genders exhibit fundamentally different learning styles, schools have turned toward catering to girls' supposed 'learning styles' – the “1970s” here serving as a shorthand for changes brought about by the feminist movement. Moreover, changes in pedagogy are portrayed as a zero-sum game: As schools introduce pedagogies supposedly more suited for girls, this is seen as necessarily being to the detriment of boys. That diversifying instructional styles and strategies could benefit students of all genders is not even considered.

Moreover, in order to substantiate the idea of gendered learning styles, some articles engage in revisionist history, and use this concept to explain the introduction of single-gender classes for girls in previous decades, as in this 1997 *Ottawa Citizen* piece:

Ironically, bureaucrats [in previous decades] recognized that 'girls learn differently', and thus, across the country, girls-only classes were established. Incredibly, these same educrats were blind to the fact that, if girls learn differently, boys must do so as well. (0041)

Alluding to the very rhetoric of equality analyzed in the previous chapter, here the argument is made that educators at one point realized that boys and girls exhibit different needs when it comes to education and therefore established girls-only classes. But in doing so, the story goes, they overlooked the self-evident fact that boys also have gender-specific needs that would be well-served by single-gender classes for male students. This

just-so story, however, ignores important details of the historic push for single-gender education for girls that can not be easily translated into arguments for boys-only schooling. First of all, the call for gender-specific classes for girls was less built on the argument of *inherent* gender-specific needs for female students but rather on the insight that the dominance of boys in traditional classrooms served to marginalize girls and drive them away from male-dominated fields such as the sciences. Second of all, on a more abstract level, the call for single-sex education for girls was one that was designed to redress structural inequalities and exclusion of female students against the backdrop of a society historically dominated by men, giving them a space to thrive in the absence of boys. Arguments such as the ones made in the article quoted above display a complete lack of understanding of the power dynamics and historical exclusions that initiatives such as girls-only schooling were designed to address. In this context it is not surprising that research finds no benefits of single-gender schools for boys' achievement levels – some studies even indicating that boys in all-boys settings are doing worse than those studying in coeducational institutions.<sup>23</sup>

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23 Research on single-sex education is far from conclusive. First of all, there seems to be little evidence for a clear correlation between gender and preferred learning styles (Martino 2008), calling into question the premise that boys would benefit from a classroom environment that differed significantly from one that girls are exposed to. Secondly, in terms of educational outcomes, those studies that claim to have found higher achievement levels among students enrolled in single-sex schools are typically based on research with private schools, leading critics to argue that higher achievement levels are a result of smaller class sizes, greater school resources as well as exclusion and self-selection processes related to socioeconomic background and cultural capital of their students (Kerr 2010:16; Mills 2004:352): When controlling for these variables, there seems to be no positive effect of single-sex programs on boys' educational outcomes. Conversely, some studies into single-sex education even found that while girls may benefit from a single-sex environment – due to experiencing lower levels of harassment, receiving more attention from teachers and thus developing higher levels of confidence in traditionally male gendered subjects – boys actually stagnate or perform less well than in co-educational classes; ironically leading to an even more pronounced gender gap (Kerr 2010:16). Expanding the view even further, when taking into account social outcomes, there is a strong case to be made against single-sex education, as

Yet, it is the assumption that specific gendered learning styles exist that underlies much of the public debate about gender and education. That these gendered learning differences are thought of as inherent and biological is made explicit by an article published in a 2006 *The Gazette* article:

Dr. Leonard Sax, whose book *Why Gender Matters* is a lucid guide to male and female brain differences, emphasizes that men and women can excel at any subject. They just have to be taught in different ways. (0166)

According to this argument, boys and girls do have the same potential, which is a crucial assumption in this discourse, since otherwise the question might be raised whether boys are simply less talented than girls. But, the argument goes, both genders require different pedagogies and instructions in order to realize their potential. Moreover, it is explicitly not culture but nature – in the form supposed brain differences – that explains the different gender needs of boys and girls. The authors of this newspaper article as well as Dr. Sax, need to gloss over the fact that boys' and girls' achievement levels are far more similar than different – a fact hardly compatible with the assertion that male and female students need fundamentally different teaching styles. As Martino (2008) points out, various studies find “no significant correlation between gender and preferred learning styles”, which means that “caution is needed in assuming that all boys and all girls have different learning style preferences and different interests” (Martino 2008).

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scholars argue that male homosocial environments can – and often do – reproduce and reaffirm gender stereotypes because of their catering to so-called gendered learning differences (Kimmel 2010: 41). Since teachers in these institutions have been found to base their instruction on specific images of masculinity and femininity, they – intentionally or unintentionally – reinforce them, resulting in stronger traditional gender stereotypes, sexist perceptions, and constructions of females on the part of boys as well as more negative behaviour toward gender-nonconforming boys, who therefore experience school as a more hostile space (Martino et al. 2005; Mills 2004).

What is even more problematic about the discourse on inherent gendered learning styles is the fact that even articles that seemingly give a nod towards arguments of socialization ultimately postulate biologicistic foundations as being at the core of gendered achievement gaps, such as this 2000 *National Post* article does:

But according to Sandra Witelson, a professor of neurological psychiatry at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., neither biology nor teaching methodology alone can explain male-female differences in learning. 'We frankly don't know whether genetic, hormonal differences can be displaced by teaching theory,' she said. (0072)

Although the article appears to point towards an unresolved nature vs. nurture debate, at closer inspection, it is clear that biology serves as the end-all be-all argument. When arguing that it is unknown whether “hormonal differences can be displaced by teaching theory”, the article falls back to the notion that biology necessarily pulls in one direction – namely, that of difference – while pedagogy can, at best, attempt to pull in the other, serving as a form of social engineering to make similar what allegedly is different. In other words, according to this line of argument, pedagogy can always only remedy gendered achievement gaps to the extent that it does cater to the imagined inherent differences between boys and girls. Articles such as this again show how much the debate about gendered learning styles is one that is squarely based upon biologicistic, essentialist and evolutionary-psychologist assumptions. The extent to which these ideas of natural differences dominate the discourse will be the focus of the next sections.

## 5.2. PHYSICAL BOYS, FRAGILE BOYS, AND BOYS' INNER DRIVE

In order for the idea of radically divergent learning styles between girls and boys to make sense, students of different genders need to be imagined as virtually different species with fundamentally different traits and 'natures'. One of these supposedly specifically male qualities, according to some commentators, is their physical activity, which is seen as at odds with the requirements of schooling. A 2005 *Calgary Herald* article, for instance, approvingly ran the following quote:

'Girls are very good with pen and paper, sitting, patience. What are boys good at? Moving. So we shouldn't try to make them sit all the time.' (0154)

Reproducing stereotypes about boys' physicality and drive toward being active (while constructing girls as inherently passive and subservient), a lack of concentration and focus in boys is being constructed as something that is outside of their own control, a force of nature that cannot be mitigated but that needs to be accepted and allowed to run its course. This is a conclusion also drawn in a 1999 *Edmonton Journal* article:

[...] 13-year-old [...] Jordan, is doing well in Grade 8, but he could do better, his teacher said, 'if he could only sit still long enough.' Jordan admits he's a fidgeter, full of energy he doesn't have time to burn off during the short breaks in a junior high school day. (0069)

The idea that “burning off” energy – a level of energy that apparently girls necessarily do not possess – is the only solution to this internal drive boys possess is eerily similar to arguments often made about boys' and men's sexuality. Especially by those subscribing to essentialist conceptions of gender rooted in questionable evolutionary-psychological approaches, men and boys are regularly portrayed as driven

by their sexuality, which is imagined as ultimately animalistic and uncontrollable. This 'inner nature' is why men allegedly cannot be expected to easily conform to monogamous relationships – or are portrayed as prone to commit rape<sup>24</sup>. By making a similar argument about boys, distracting classroom behaviour and being unfocused are thus legitimized rather than criticized, and the discussion is shifted away from one about why (some) boys seem not to possess the necessary behavioural tools to succeed in schools to the question of how schools can adjust to these supposedly given and unalterable behaviours. The answer for one *National Post* article from 2005 is consequently equally rooted in essentialist conceptions of masculinity when it suggests that a specific (and implicitly male) type of teacher is the solution to dealing with boys' more active behaviour:

[These teachers] can put up with a little more noise. They don't take things personally. They hold their authority. They might do it through jesting or jibing, and they will eventually lower the boom. (0160)

In other words, some combination of leniency and authority, playfulness and strong-handed leadership is supposed to be the way to deal with male students unable to stay engaged in the classroom. Not only is this model of pedagogy reminiscent of a locker room atmosphere rather than an academic classroom – and the phrasing and context of this quote certainly evokes notions of male educators rather than female teachers – but it is also striking for what goes unmentioned. By proposing that all boys engage in such distracting and boisterous behaviour and by suggesting that allowing this atmosphere to play out – at least until the *laissez faire* style of teaching reverts into its authoritarian opposite – the article is ultimately ignoring the impact such a classroom atmosphere will

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<sup>24</sup> For a critique of this popular-scientific discourse on see, for example: McCaughey 2008.

have on both female and non-conforming male students. These students would likely be further ignored by the teacher as well as intimidated and silenced by both their distracting classmates and the teacher's locker room 'pedagogy', as arguments made by Francis (2000:125) imply.

Paradoxically, articles advocate for both more lenient and more authoritarian teaching styles when it comes to dealing with male students. For instance, this 2003 *National Post* article reiterates the argument that boys need authoritative, even intimidating, teachers in order to keep them in check:

Teachers shouldn't yell at all boys, and they shouldn't yell all the time. School, after all is still school, not boot camp, and boys are still children, not soldiers. Yet teachers shouldn't be afraid to display their displeasure, or even anger, with a misbehaving or underperforming boy. As long as their displays are rational, controlled and part of a clear, authoritative discipline policy, boys will instinctively understand their teachers' aggressiveness is in their best interests. (0116)

Although rhetorically back-tracking from the idea of turning schools into boot camps, this article ultimately presents anger, aggressiveness and screaming at children as sound pedagogical and disciplinary style. But even more than this, these domineering and authoritarian approaches to teaching are supposedly not only in the best interest of boys but boys themselves seem to *know* that these approaches are actually beneficial to them. Essentialist views about boys' inner nature thus comes full circle here: Boys are *both* driven by their inner nature toward aggressive, distracting and physical (mis-)behaviour *and* naturally inclined toward being 'domesticated' through aggressive (and implicitly male) pedagogies.



However, there are also articles that disagree with the view that boys need domineering, strict and potentially hostile learning environments. Interestingly, though, these articles similarly appeal to boys' supposed inner nature. For instance, this 2007 *Vancouver Sun* article argues that the best classroom environment for boys is exactly the opposite of that envisioned by proponents of an authoritarian style of teaching:

Give boys stable, organized, caring settings. Boys react strongly to change; they need to calm down and learn. [Boy advocate Stephen Biddulph argues:] 'Boys are oriented more to managing danger, responding aggressively under threat, and primed to become agitated if there is too much change, threat, or disconnection.' Just as important, teachers should not use put-downs, or criticize boys in front of others. (0187)

It is the very strategies of aggression and put-downs proposed by articles cited earlier that are deemed as inhibiting boys' classroom engagement and performance. What is most striking about this apparently oppositional view on teaching boys is, however, that it shares the same underlying assumptions about what boys are with its pedagogical opponents. In both views, boys are inherently prone toward some version of aggression, an all too familiar stereotype when it comes to men and boys. Implicitly alluding to ideas about men being driven by testosterone or having been neurologically hardwired by evolution toward more aggressive behaviours, boys are portrayed as subject to primal drives outside their conscious control. Although the pedagogical models proposed here could not look any more different on the surface, both approaches start with the assumption that a potential for aggression is what is common and essential to boys.

### 5.3. THE SLOW MATURING BOY

These essentialist notions of masculinity and boyhood also play out in related debates about boys' and girls' maturation and their skill levels at different ages. Various news outlets make the point that one of the reasons why male students supposedly underperform compared to female students is their slower rate of maturation. Boys, they argue, tend to be less mature than their female classmates of the same age, as for example this 1999 *Toronto Star* article does, discussing literacy among students:

Anyway, educators and psychologists have always known that boys and girls develop different skills at different rates. (0068)

It is this taken for granted common-sense knowledge about boys' comparative slower development that is taken up as an explanation in a number of articles and presented as self-evident. This is a trend that holds true across time and is prevalent in a range of different newspapers. Although some of these articles do not explicitly state that this supposed slower maturation rate is rooted in biology, the taken-for-granted nature of these claims and the fact that boys tend to be treated as a single homogenous group clearly suggests that this is the implication. Some of the articles, however, go even further and explicitly link slower development, maturation and lower levels of literacy to supposedly biological differences, as this 2007 *Vancouver Sun* article does:

Recognize that boys' brains develop at a different rate to girls'. Boys don't catch up neurologically until about age 19. (0187)

According to this view, boys are neurologically predisposed to intellectually and emotionally develop at a slower pace than girls. Moreover, this supposed fact about boys'

inner natures is seen as a reality parents and teachers have to accept and adjust their expectations as well as institutional arrangements to.

The argument that boys mature more slowly than girls has, of course, important implications in terms of how boys' situation in schools is being conceptualized and what possible solutions society is to take in order to alleviate this problem. A number of articles take up this issue explicitly and thus necessarily negotiate the question of nature vs. nurture, thereby not only revealing striking contradictions in terms of their conceptions of fairness but also laying open how these arguments often imply a certain commitment to notions of biologic determinism. Take, for example, this 2003 *National Post* article:

'By and large, boys lag about a year behind girls in language development,' says Jenkinson, who teaches courses in children's and adolescent literature. 'So right at the start of school it's not a level playing field.' Jenkinson says when boys see early on that it's mainly girls who are the 'good readers,' some get discouraged and decide that reading is 'a girl thing.' As well, reading is a passive, solitary activity in a society that encourages boys to be active and involved in sports. 'It's almost like you can't be a jock and a reader.' (0132)

Although nodding to social constructivist arguments about boys' constructions of masculinity being in conflict with developing into motivated readers that are actually consistent with research (e.g. Askew & Ross 1988), this article still ultimately builds on assumptions about boys' innate tendencies and talents. Rather than treating slower development in literacy as being primarily rooted in masculinity performances and constructions that impact boys from an early age, the influence of culture – in the form of experiences made in schools – is ultimately treated as secondary and as only amplifying trends rooted in biology. Boys are said to enter school at a lower stage of literacy

development and because of their lack in skills then get further reinforcement in their self-concept of not being competent readers. Again, a seemingly natural developmental gap is simply taken for granted. Based on these notions of a maturity gap favouring girls, the author also makes important claims about boys' position in the educational system. According to his argument, schools do not provide a “level playing field” due to the difference in skills between girls and boys at their point of entry into the educational institution. Following this logic, the playing field is not level precisely because it applies the *same* standards to both boys and girls. Conversely, a level playing field according to this reasoning would actually be one that is *tilted* toward uplifting boys – quite the opposite of the term's meaning.

A 2001 *National Post* article is even more explicit in what this 'levelling of the playing field' could look like in practice:

A new report suggests boys should enter kindergarten a year later than girls to give them a greater chance of academic success. [...] Dr. Leonard Sax, author of the report published in *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, urges putting five-year-old girls in with six- year-old boys so that all kindergartners begin school with roughly the same basket of abilities. (0087)

Again it is by accepting these supposed inherent differences and adjusting the institution to them that this problem is to be solved. Levelling the playing field for boys, according to this vision, means treating boys differently from girls and subjecting girls to classrooms where their male classmates are on average one year their senior. Ironically, it seems that within a discourse that is quick to assert that institutional arrangements in the education sector supposedly favour girls, at least some commentators are quite

unapologetic to demand what amounts to a large scale reversed affirmative action program for boys, based on dubious assumptions about inherent gender differences that are not supported by research.

#### **5.4. INHERENT DIFFERENCES AND THE MALE BRAIN**

Until the year 2000, many articles contain only relatively vague references to biologicistic theories of sex difference. A 1999 *Vancouver Sun* piece can serve as an example of this trend.

Arguments include the possibility of gender difference in the cognitive functions of boys and girls. It is possible they take in and process information in different ways, leading educators to question if our curriculum has in-built advantages for one sex over the other. (0058)

Although not talking in terms of certainty, and remaining somewhat cautious in framing these notions as *possible* explanations rather than definitive truths, these articles are still guilty of ultimately pushing the notion of biological differences. This 2000 *National Post* article expresses a similar sentiment:

Elsewhere in academe, biological theories abound to explain the gender gap, including one theory that suggests language acquisition may differ in boys. Another shows how sex-linked traits can influence learning styles. (0072)

Even though arguments of biology are seemingly presented only as 'theories' – that is short of being hard, unquestioned facts – the words 'abound' and 'shows' ultimately undermine the initial balance and end up portraying biology as an explanation that can be taken for granted. In articles published in later years, the confidence in presenting biologicistic arguments of inherent differences between girls and boys as facts grows is

exemplified by this 2003 article from the same newspaper:

Most boys' brains are 'hard-wired,' he explained, to respond to such 'confrontation' with elevated heart rate, increased adrenaline and enhanced alertness. Aggressiveness just naturally draws the best out of boys. [...] The generation-long push to solve perceived social ills such as war, domestic violence and avarice by deprogramming maleness in boys at an early age and in lower grades has failed. Boys cannot be made to be girls by pretending their innate masculinity does not exist, or by attempting to suppress it with zero-tolerance violence policies; no-winner, non-contact games; or doll play. Men and boys are naturally assertive. (0116)

The concept of behaviour, preferences and tendencies being “hard-wired” into differently gendered brains is at the core of most of these essentialist arguments. By appealing to and drawing dubious and simplistic conclusions from (some) neuro-scientific research and couching these in terms that most serious neuro-scientists would reject – such as “hard-wired” – these authors appear to be making statements about facts and cutting edge research. However, these arguments are not much more than stereotypes thinly veiled in pseudo-scientific language. The discourse translates ideas about what boys are supposed to be, and superficial observations of what they empirically are into an origin story of these traits as rooted biology, which explains not only why these traits exists but also why they must be seen as positive and justified.

The idea that it is specifically biological factors – hormones and “hard-wired” brains – that account for male behaviour can be found in a number of articles, such as this 2005 *National Post* interview with boy advocate Michael Gurian:

'We [males] are more aggressive. We are driven by testosterone. [...] I don't think people realize how a lot of this is hard-wired in.' (0160)

It is this assumption of brain differences explaining supposedly inherently

different learning styles between boys and girls that are at the root of the calls for schools to change. This argument is also evident in a 2007 *Vancouver Sun* article:

What we can do is now put the same energy into reviving boys' interest in school, Biddulph says. 'If we make education more tailored to the special gender needs of boys, of their biology and their brain development, they could be much happier.' (0187)

All of these quotes show how deeply entrenched ideas of biological difference are in the public discourse on boys and education, resulting in calls for making schools more 'boy-friendly'. If inherent differences are taken as the starting and the end point of the discussion, these arguments are consistent, of course, as ideas calling for more gender equal processes of socialization are necessarily seen as unrealistic. Moreover, the underlying “valorization of boys’ behaviours produces a limited conceptualization of what boys are like” (Hayes 2003:13).

Moreover, all of these article assume a strong binary between boys and girls and presuppose that children of different genders are vastly dissimilar while at the same time eradicating any variations – of behaviours, preferences, characteristics, and: brains – within each gender category. By erasing the variety within each gender category – and overstating the difference between genders – the public discourse thus ultimately narrows “the focus of concern from boys generally to the defence of particular forms of masculinity,” (Hayes 2003:13) namely stereotypical conceptions of maleness. And rather than proposing pedagogies based on scientific research, the calls for adjusting teaching strategies to imagined brain differences actually “involve masculinising practices which reinscribe what is constructed as a ‘natural’ masculinity” (Martino et al. 2005:248). This

assumption and reinscription of a dichotomous conception of learning styles, behaviour and neurological development is also made explicit in the 2005 *National Post* article quoted earlier:

Brain research indicates about one in seven boys is a bridge brain, his brain is formatted on the female side. (0160)

If we follow this argument, then not only are six out of seven male brains clearly and unambiguously “hard-wired” as male but any deviations from this norm are explained by turning gender-nonconforming children rhetorically into 'inverts'. In other words, rather than assuming that gender – and brains – exhibit variation along a continuum, the author falls back to dichotomous conceptions of gender even when dealing with what in his view must clearly be 'exceptions'.

### **5.5. BOY CULTURE: A COUNTERDISCOUSE OR GENDER AS DESTINY?**

Not all articles (exclusively) turn to biologicistic arguments to account for differently gendered behaviour; some draw on (often simplified versions of) social-constructivist or 'culture' arguments to explain boys' behaviour. The most prevalent idea in this subsample of articles is the notion of a 'boy culture' that discourages boys from trying hard in school or taking up activities culturally associated with femininity, such as this 1999 *Ottawa Citizen* article:

The problem, [Mark Clark of the BC Teachers Federation] theorizes, is that 'too many boys don't seem to even be trying. [...] They have been anesthetized by a 'boy culture' that celebrates bravado, lassitude and stupidity.' (0041)

According to this analysis, boys embrace laziness and stupidity and turn toward



leisure activities rather than staying engaged academically. In its most widespread version, it is specifically notions of boyhood and youthful masculinities that are seen as problematic for boys, as in this 1999 *Vancouver Sun* piece that quotes Wes Imms, doctoral student in Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia:

'There seems to be a culture that is predominant in schools that basically tells boys that it's not cool to be good academically ... to be a man you have to be good at sports, you've got to be tough, you can't cry.' (0056)

According to this argument, boys in school adhere to traditional and simplistic standards of masculinity. However, although making an explicit reference to the word 'man', the article ultimately insinuates that these problematic constructions of masculinity are limited to schools only. Rather than reading boys' gender performances as them (over)conforming to societal definitions of masculinity, it seems to suggest that adolescent masculinities are a form of deviant masculinities limited to schools.

However, the following article from the same newspaper published only about a week later makes a much stronger case for looking at masculinity more holistically:

Indeed the Fraser Institute can suggest all the systemic tinkering they like, none of it will amount to a hill of beans if we don't deal with the larger issue of a 'boy culture', corporate and media driven, which encourages young males to celebrate anti-social dysfunctional behaviour. (0057)

Directly challenging the idea that male underachievement results from a feminized school system – as suggested by the right-wing think tank *Fraser Institute* – the author points out that boys are encouraged to reject academic achievement and instead turn toward limited and limiting notions of masculinity. More importantly, this supposed 'boy culture' is explicitly linked by the author to dominant media messages about masculinity

in our society, framing the issue as one that transcends youth culture or the school system. A number of articles take up these and similar arguments and translate at least some social-scientific findings for their readers, pointing out the importance of school as a space where gender performance is policed in ways that lead some boys to reject working hard in school in order to appear “cool”, such as this 2001 article from *The Gazette*:

One of the ways in which the gap can be usefully explained, he said, is by the sharply different ways in which boys and girls explain their success in school. [...] Girls will attribute their success in school to hard work. If boys do well on an exam, they will say, 'Oh, I hardly studied for it.' They believe that intelligence is innate, and if you have to work hard at something, it's because you're not smart enough. (0097)

And while the former quote focuses exclusively on what is happening in schools, a 2004 article from the same newspaper makes the explicit connection between “coolness”, definitions of masculinity and the rejection of showing effort in schools:

Researchers say the social need to be 'cool' – to fit stereotypical notions of masculinity – leads some boys to restrict their intellectual choices and efforts. For many boys, it was not cool to seem to be working hard. (0136)

A *Calgary Herald* article from 2005 quoted a student who points out the societal scope of this problem and who suggests that put-downs used among boys such as 'nerd' seem to be gendered slurs that simply do not apply to female students:

'It's a societal thing, it's almost acceptable for boys not to be real keeners. It's like a macho thing – guys have to go with the flow. But girls don't seem to have to worry about that stigma – if they're smart, they're not nerdy.' (0154)

Some articles even touch on the connection between constructions of masculinity and the rejection of femininity. For instance, a 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article explicitly points out that boys perform masculinity as an attempt at distancing themselves from

femininity, resulting in them rejecting – and ultimately failing in – 'female' subjects:

Boys tend to construct their masculinity by rejecting all things deemed feminine, like reading and writing. (0088)

Based on this understanding of gender as a social construct and the restrictions it places on children and youths, the *Vancouver Sun* had earlier suggested carving out spaces for trying out more flexible gender arrangements in one of the 1999 articles quoted earlier:

They [boys] want to explore – but rarely get the opportunity – how rigid traditional stereotypes of masculinity rarely fit the reality (and needs) of their own existence. (0058)

In other words, rather than adjusting the school to notions of essentialized male skills or preferences, this article actually calls for allowing for less rigid gender norms and letting children find their way without the pressure to conform to strict notions of masculinity (and femininity). At the same time it is striking that virtually of these quotes have been taken from articles published in the late 1990s to early 2000s, reflecting my findings mentioned earlier that showed biologicistic arguments to outnumber social-constructivist tropes starting shortly before the year 2000. Rather than increasingly pushing back against biological determinism, the 'boy crisis' discourse has instead moved further into this direction as it intensified, despite the fact that more and more scientific research has been published undermining these very arguments.

Despite the fact that some of the articles quoted earlier make relatively strong arguments based on notions of socialization and students negotiating limiting gender norms, only few go as far as the *Vancouver Sun* article quoted above and propose challenging gender norms in schools or beyond. Rather, most articles that encourage

changes in socialization and a reduction of boys' resistance towards activities associated with femininity walk a fine line between challenging rigid gender norms and essentially trying to 'trick' boys into certain desired behaviour by relying on notions of masculinity themselves. Furthermore, more often than not these authors fall back onto (and reduce their argument to) a 'role model' discourse and especially call on fathers to encourage their sons to embrace academic achievement.

A number of articles make the argument that fathers need to use their masculinity in order to convince boys that academic achievement (and reading specifically) are avenues open to them as boys, as exemplified by a 2000 *Vancouver Sun* (0082) and a 2003 *National Post* piece (0132):

'Young boys do not see their fathers, or males in general, reading or writing,' [British Columbia deputy minister of education] Ungerleider said. 'And as a consequence they don't see reading and writing as a 'boy thing' – they see it as a girl thing.' (0082)

Note to dads: To raise a reader, make books 'a guy thing.' (0132)

The over-reliance on immediate role models in the life of boys stands out in this discourse. Rather than questioning broader societal constructions of masculinity, these articles demand that fathers perform their masculinity somewhat differently in order to convince boys that coolness and academic achievement are not mutually exclusive.

Some articles touch on more macro level ideas of role models and gender constructions, although they remain rather vague in their prescriptions, such as this 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article:

Boys tend to idolize rock stars and sports heroes, who don't register at the top

of the class when it comes to education. They need to be persuaded that it's cool to be smart. (0088)

While there is obviously some truth to this statement, the way in which this association of male 'coolness' and smartness is to be established and the reliance on male role models therein often becomes contradictory at least and potentially problematic at worst, as exemplified by the following two 1999 articles from the *Globe and Mail* (0052) and *Vancouver Sun* (0056), respectively:

England is using sports teams in boys' reading promotion. (0052)

He said the government is concerned, and has launched such initiatives as [professional basketball players of the] Vancouver Grizzlies visiting classrooms to tell kids to stay in school. (0056)

On the most obvious level, the attempt at using professional athletes to encourage boys to stay in school is quite contradictory and ironic, since, for the most part, these men embody the very potential for male achievement, fame and wealth *without* academic success. It is doubtful how these men could be effective spokespersons for alternative versions of masculinity when they are appreciated specifically for their athletic prowess and have build their success not on the activities they are supposed to encourage. On a deeper level, this contradiction also clearly points to the limits of drawing on discourses of hegemonic masculinities in order to encourage alternative masculinity performances.

Some of the arguments drawing on quasi-sociological arguments of culture and socialization thus turn into what might be called a 'gender as destiny' approach: Rather than deconstructing gendered patterns of behaviour, preferences and stereotypes, some authors embrace established gendered differences as a means to change some aspects of

boys' behaviour. Avoiding claims about biologic determinism, *gender* is taken as unalterable and something to cater to in order to change undesirable behaviour. Rather than questioning our society's standards and notions of masculinity (and femininity), these authors seem content with proposing athletes as role models for literacy or arguing for the use of superheroes and comic books in order to teach reading to young men, all based on the assumption that boys will connect with these approaches due to the gender constructions they adhere to.

## **5.6. HOMOGENIZING BOYS: THE ABSENCE OF RACE AND CLASS**

As previously discussed, research into gender and education finds that the so-called gender gap is not exhibited to the same degree across different populations of students. Rather, class, race and ethnic background matter when it comes to comparing girls' and boys' achievement in schools. In the US, for instance, the gender gap in college enrolment amongst white middle-class students is merely 2%, whereas women account for 63% of African American and 55% of Hispanic students (Kimmel 2010:25).

Given the importance of race, ethnicity and class when it comes to achievement gaps in education, one might expect that these categories are being discussed in news media articles about the gender gap in education. Indeed, there are articles that point out the relevance of race and class in education, even in a conservative newspaper like the *National Post*, as exemplified by a 2000 article that included the following concluding paragraph:

Apart from the gender gap, the StatsCan study also illuminated ethnic and economic disparities in education. Although the educational outcomes of aboriginal Canadians have improved since the mid-1980s, they remain well below those of the rest of the population, the study said. In 1996, just 6% of the aboriginal population aged 25 to 54 were university graduates, versus 21% of the non-aboriginal population. The study also highlighted low university enrolment among those from lower socio-economic brackets. (0072)

Similarly, a 1999 *Ottawa Citizen* article quoted a study that had pointed out the importance of socioeconomic factors in educational success:

The study on how the family affects children's success in school found that children in higher-income families do substantially better in school, regardless of what happens within their families. (0063)

These two examples show that at least some articles do make the effort to portray gender as just one of several factors that impact educational performance. At the same time, what most of these articles fail to do is link the intersecting relevance of gender, race and class, and to explicitly emphasize that not all boys are falling behind all girls in education. One of the very few articles to address the intersection of these factors is a 2009 *Edmonton Journal* article that concludes with the following passage:

[Stefania Maggi, of the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies at Carleton University] cautions that gender differences alone 'are meaningless' without factoring in the added stresses of social and economic problems. On society's top rungs, boys and girls don't show major differences. These develop, in complex directions, as one goes down the socio-economic ladder. (0208)

Here, we find an explicit reference to the fact that there is no significant gendered achievement gap between boys and girls from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas lower class status is a contributing factor to the gender gap. However, these passages remain exceptions to the rule when it comes to addressing race and class in

achievement gaps in education, as the vast majority of articles ignores these intersecting factors. In my sample only 17 out of 240 articles (ca. 7%) of articles make any reference to race as a factor of analysis at all, and out of these 17, only seven (ca. 3% of all articles) devote more than a few sentences to addressing the issue of race (Figure 8). In other words, more than 90% of articles fail to even acknowledge the fact that not all boys are losing out in education but that race is an important interacting factor.

Similarly, newspapers in my sample do only slightly better when it comes to acknowledging the importance of social class in education. Close to one in six articles (39 out of 240) makes references to social class or socioeconomic factors and its role in educational achievement gaps (Figure 9). Instead and consistent with the discourse's tendency to rely on biologicistic explanations for gender difference, the vast majority of articles ignores or actively dismisses the importance of race and class and instead treats boys and girls as homogenous groups, thereby eradicating diversity within each category and inflating mean differences between male and female students.

Figure 8: Inequalities: Race

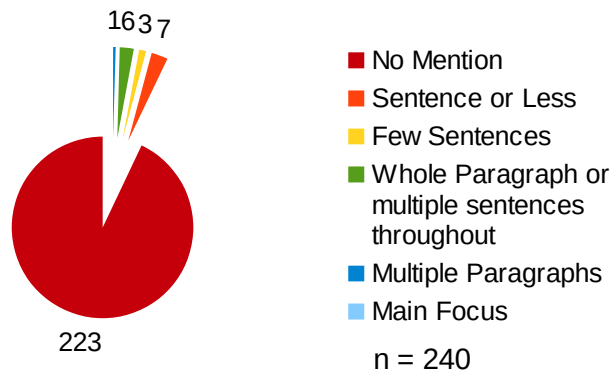
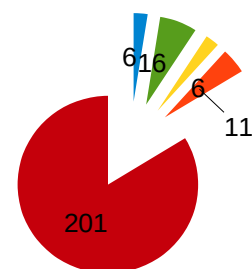


Figure 9: Inequalities: Class





### 5.6.1. Rejecting Race & Class

Not only are race and class simply absent in the vast majority of newspaper articles, but even among those articles that do make mention of these factors, some explicitly deny their importance in shaping the gender gap. For instance, a 1992 *Montreal Gazette* article leads off with the portrait of a 17 year old high school student:

He's not from a rich family. He was born in Quebec. He's male. If, in addition, he were francophone and from an isolated, rural region, his risk of not completing high school could skyrocket, to more than 80 per cent. But what matters most among all these things is the fact that he's male. (0008)

Although the article initially acknowledges the importance of sociological categories of class, region, ethnicity and language, it then quickly de-emphasizes their importance and reduces the story to one that is only about gender. Instead of setting the stage for a nuanced sociological analysis of achievement differences across different populations, this article instead exemplifies a precursor for most media coverage about the so-called 'boy crisis' that was to come over the following two decades.

Rather than simply downplaying the importance of class and race, some commentators go even so far as to deny their significance altogether. For instance, in a 2009 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, psychologist and 'boy advocate' Leonard Sax responded to the question of whether “school-age girls in North America outperform boys regardless of age, socioeconomic status or race” (0224) in the following way:

I shouldn't say race has nothing to do with this because among east Asian and south Asian boys we don't find a gender gap. [...] But when you look at white, black and Spanish speaking kids born on the North American continent you find that most of those boys think caring about school or being passionate about winning the spelling bee is for girls and geeks. (0224)

Although at first acknowledging that some minority and immigrant populations do not exhibit a gender gap, Sax goes on to imply that for the majority of (native Canadian) male students, the gender gap is a reality regardless of other factors. This quote is particularly problematic, even from a rhetorical standpoint. By nodding towards some groups that do not exhibit a gender gap, Sax manages to give the impression that these claims are nuanced enough to establish him as a credible expert. In the second part of this response, he then elegantly avoids making any specific statements about “white, black and Spanish speaking kids” and instead vaguely refers to their supposed dislike of school. Thus, and in concert with his more nuanced claim in the first half of the response, Sax is able to cleverly insinuate that race and class do not matter in the grand scheme of things and that it is gender that trumps all other social factors. Tellingly, he evades the question of social class altogether and instead makes broad claims.

These examples show that there is a clear trend in newspaper coverage to either ignore the questions of race and class or to openly dismiss their importance. It comes as no surprise then that newspaper stories can lead off with statements such as the following:

Your sons are struggling in school owing to poor reading scores. (0025)

By using the phrase “your sons”, this 1995 *Vancouver Sun* article implies from its very beginning that boys across the board are facing similar issues, although this might only be true for a certain subset of the newspapers' readers. Nevertheless, the absence and dismissal of differences amongst boys not only distorts the reality of achievement differences in schools but contributes to public panic about boys' education, that seems to

be fuelled by misconceptions rather than actual evidence. Moreover, ignorance towards the diversity of experiences of different boys has tangible consequences. As Mills (2004) argues for the Australian case, treating boys as one homogenous group tends to work “to the advantage of middle class boys, who [...] have benefited from the substantial amount of resources and time currently being devoted to boys’ education” (Mills 2004:344). Rather than propelling solutions for those most vulnerable in the education system, the 'boy crisis' discourse thus ultimately ends up privileging students who already are privileged in various ways.

#### **5.6.2. Markers of Middle-Class Status & Whiteness**

Although race and class are mostly absent from the media discourse in explicit ways, coded, implicit and unconscious markers of whiteness and middle-class status at times enter the debate through the backdoor. One of the effects of not addressing the fact that systems of class-based and racialized inequality impact the educational prospects of (male) students is that it seems as though all boys suffer equally under an education system supposedly set up to benefit (all) girls. In a second step, the claim that this topic concerns all boys then is at times taken up by commentators and authors to imply the 'boy crisis' is one that applies to the boys of their own social milieu, as evidenced in the perspective from which some of the articles are being written. This observation is consistent with McCready's argument about popular 'boy crisis' books, whose authors “from their privileged white, middle-class, heterosexual standpoints [...] may truly believe

that race, class, gender, and sexuality don't matter significantly” or who may downplay the differences among boys “so as not to alienate their primary base of readers, who could be described, arguably, as heterosexual, middle-class, white women, who are mothers of sons” (McCready 2010:90).

One of the ways in which implicit markers of race and class play out in the discourse are references to Canada's 'national sport' of hockey. For instance, articles debate recruiting professional hockey players as spokesmen for getting boys to stay in school, or, like this 2003 *National Post* article, propose hockey as a topic in class to motivate boys to read:

Instead, [David Booth, professor of education at the University of Toronto] said, teachers should focus on making literature relevant and interesting to boys. For example, if they are reading a fictional story about hockey, the teachers could pull out the hockey section of the newspaper. (0114)

Prof. Booth – according to the article, author of the book 'Even Hockey Players Read' – assumes that boys are naturally interested in hockey and thus fails to take into account the specific (and limited) cultural appeal of the sport. While hockey certainly plays a dominant part in Canadian (male) culture, it is important to point out that the sport does not speak to all segments of society equally. More specifically, the sport tends to be less important to communities of colour as well as immigrant populations, both because it lacks history and cultural meaning within some of these communities and because of hockey's history of racism and cultural association with whiteness (e.g. Gillis 2007; Lorenz & Murray 2014; Poniatowski & Whiteside 2012). To use hockey as the supposedly common interest of all Canadian boys thus ignores the realities of a

multicultural Canada and indicates how perspectives from mainstream hegemonic locations are shaping the discourse about the boy crisis.

Another example of the lack of reflection about their own limited perspective can be found in a 2000 *Calgary Herald* article, in which the author tries to disprove social scientific research about the specific struggles of girls in education – and more particularly, a lack of self-confidence – by referring to anecdotes from her own life:

The adolescent girl as victim was pushed by feminist social scientists of the day. Many of us bought into it. I did, until my kids started to grow. Somehow they and their friends weren't following the prescribed stereotypes. My daughter, never one to shun away from being heard, just kept on being heard, and heard, and heard. At 13, she's wonderfully self-possessed, vibrant and full of life. So are her female friends. [...] Have I somehow managed, against all societal odds, to have raised a well-balanced daughter? (0076)

Apart from the fact that her daughter's self-confidence might very well be the result of an empowering socialization that responded to these very dangers, more importantly here, the author is completely ignorant about her own positionality and perspective. The author of the article, Sidney Sharpe, is a former college professor who left academia to pursue a career as a writer and journalist and is the author of multiple books (Alberta Writers 2015). Given her biography, it is fair to assume that her daughter grew up in a middle-class environment, was exposed to a range of opportunities from an early age and experienced a strong and successful female role model in the form of her mother. To conclude that girls today are no longer facing self-esteem issues based on the character her daughter exhibits clearly ignores all the privileges she could afford for her daughter. In other words, rather than having raised a well-balanced daughter “against all

societal odds”, the societal odds have, in fact, not been stacked against her daughter after all. However, this is the case because of racial and class-based privilege, and not because of her gender, as Sharpe tries to insinuate.

Another marker of a certain degree of elitism and middle-class bias is evident in a number of articles that use the example of award ceremonies to make their point about the struggles of boys. For instance, a 1997 *Ottawa Citizen* article included the following:

Writing in the latest edition of *Teacher*, the BCTF's official publication, Mr. Clarke recalls a recent awards ceremony he attended. 'The names struck me first: Stephanie, Kelly, Vivian, Marie, Leslie. I looked to confirm what my ears were telling me. At least two-thirds of those students receiving year-end awards were girls. Where were the boys? What had they been doing?' (0041)

Although the general trope of the media discourse about the 'boy crisis' tends to be about male high school dropouts and lower numbers of men in postsecondary education, articles like this suddenly focus on the high-achieving students instead, thus not only fuelling the idea that it is boys from all walks of life that are struggling but also distracting from the importance of race and class.

One of the most explicit examples of how the debate is at times being steered away from students at the lower end of the achievement spectrum – and by implication from minority and working class students – can be found in a 2007 *Vancouver Sun* interview with 'boy advocate' Steve Biddulph, who argues:

'We're so concerned about kids getting a middle C right across the board that we're not meeting the needs of kids who are exceptional [...]' (0187)

In an article that discusses the gender gap in education, the problem is thus being framed as one that particularly concerns high achieving students.

It is fair to assume that these implicit stories of privilege that some articles create and the ignorance toward the authors' own class-based and unmarked racial positionality ultimately serves to not only play into the myth that all boys are equally affected by the so-called 'boy crisis' but also serves as fuel for a white middle-class moral panic about boys' education.

### **5.7. GENDER AS SUBSTITUTE FOR INDIVIDUALITY**

While the discourse on the 'boy crisis' tends to homogenize students of the same gender into one coherent category by way of appealing to biologicistic notions of gender difference, some articles at the same time draw on discourses of individuality and individual needs when arguing for the need to strengthen boys' education. For instance, a 1999 *Vancouver Sun* article quotes *Fraser Institute* researcher Stephen Easton:

'It's time to focus on the individual more than what has been done up until now,' Easton said. (0054)

This passage is the only reference to individual differences between students in an article that otherwise exclusively speaks of *gender* differences. How this tension between ideas of individuality and gender difference is resolved becomes clear in a 2006 *National Post* article that equally relies on voices from the *Fraser Institute* to make its point:

'One of the jobs of the teacher is to take into account the characteristics of the student in the class and do whatever it takes, in terms of how they teach and what they teach, to take those differences into account,' said Peter Cowley, the Fraser Institute's director of school performance results. 'If there were some differences in the ways that boys and girls learn, and teachers successfully and effectively took those differences into account, then one would expect that the gender gap would be relatively small.' (0165)

While the first part of this quote stresses the need for teachers to take into account learning differences between individual students, the second part makes explicit what types of differences the *Fraser Institute* is referring to: Rather than acknowledging varying learning styles and strategies across students of all genders, the assumption is that it is *gender* that is the dividing line between different learning styles. Instead of individual students learning differently, it is supposedly gender that accounts for a specific needs in terms of pedagogies, as argued in this 2010 *Globe and Mail* article:

Boys and girls learn differently: There are many individual exceptions, of course. But an understanding of gender differences should inform teaching practice. (0236)

The rather progressive demand for teaching to the individual is immediately translated here into one that pushes for gender segregation, all supposedly in the name of individuality. Instead of teaching to one 'average student', diversifying pedagogies to speak to the average male student on the one hand and the average female students on the other hand is presented as the solution. That pedagogies relying on gender stereotypes are likely to further alienated those students that do not neatly fit these supposed gendered learning styles, of course, goes unmentioned.

In addition to using gender as a stand-in for individuality and thereby furthering binary discourses of gender, the talk of individuality and its connection to gender also serve a different purpose. In a 2009 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, for instance, boy advocate Leonard Sax had the following to say:

'I wouldn't say for a second that every boy learns one way, every girl another, or that every child should be in a single-sex classroom. But I do believe that



every parent should have a choice.' (0224)

Sax, whose theory of gendered education is based on the conviction that brain differences account for different learning styles, here manages to couch his call for single-sex classrooms in a rhetoric of individual choice. Moreover, he also implicitly furthers a neoliberal project of school privatization. A 2000 *National Post* article had made this connection between gender segregated schooling and “school choice” much clearer:

For this reason, Prof. Holmes favours 'school choice,' which refers to various policies, such as tax-funded vouchers, that give parents increased power to select the types of schools in which their children are educated. (0072)

In other words, gender-segregated instruction is first posited as a timely alternative to traditional public schools as it supposedly accounts for the individual needs of each student. In a second step then, it is private charter schools that are introduced as being able to provide these alternatives. Rather than community-based and community-controlled public schools, choice and individuality is here presented in a market-framework that is supposedly the answer to the imagined 'boy crisis'. Mirroring Naomi Klein's (2007) notion of “Disaster Capitalism”, which describes how corporations have found ways to financially benefit from man-made and ecological catastrophes, a moral panic about boys and education thus serves as an entry point for a commodification of education. By homogenizing boys into a coherent category with supposedly special needs that are not being met by an allegedly “feminized” system of public education, privatization of schools can thus be proposed as a promising alternative, resulting in public money being steered into the hands of private corporations.

## 5.8. SUMMARY

As I have shown, the media debate about boys and education relies on the notion of education as a zero-sum game and the assumption of inherent and significant differences between male and female students. Starting with the belief that boys and girls are inherently different in their leaning styles, preferences and ultimately their biology, authors can only come to the conclusion that an improvement in girls' educational prospects must necessarily harm boys and that what benefits female learners must automatically be to the detriment of male students. Based on these tropes, boys are imagined as one coherent group with the same needs and characteristics, thereby eliminating any similarities between the genders as well as erasing all diversity of performances, experiences and needs within each gender category. This is reflected in the virtual absence of any acknowledgement of differences along the axes of race and class, although the importance of class-based and racialized systems of power in impacting students' educational chances and achievement are well established in social science research. Yet, while the troubles of working-class and racialized boys are made invisible as being the result of the intersections of race, class and gender, the way in which their test scores and graduation rates impact overall mean differences between boys and girls are (mis)taken as evidence of male students underachieving across the board. Lastly and most ironically, this panic about boys falling behind is expressed as an implicitly white and middle-class panic about 'our boys', making those who are most underserved by the education system as well as the specific issues they are facing invisible yet again.

## **6. CONCLUSION: TALKING GENDER INSTEAD OF TALKING CAPITALISM**

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the idea that girls are allegedly outperforming boys by huge margins in schools is often translated into the argument that schools today are run by women and for the benefit of girls, a notion that is then again linked to the myth of a feminist takeover of society. These arguments in turn rely on the construction of fundamental – and often supposedly natural – differences between men and women, which implies a conception of education as a zero-sum game: What benefits girls is necessarily seen as detrimental to boys.

These discourses also reveal implicit conceptions of the place of women and men in society and reflect how societal changes (cultural, demographic and economic) are interpreted in gender terms. The panic about boys' supposed underachievement in education is thus being connected to larger stories about men's changing roles in society, as well as economic transformations of the past decades. However, the story more often than not is one that causally links women's increase in opportunities to the socioeconomic prospects of middle- and working class men, imaging both education and the workplace as zero-sum games and battlefields of a battle of the sexes.

### **6.1. DISPENSABLE MEN**

One of the most central tropes of the 'boy crisis' discourse is a panic about men becoming irrelevant, exemplified by this 1992 *Montreal Gazette* piece:

'If you were simply to project these trends [of more women than men enrolling in universities] ahead to the year 2050, you would eliminate boys and men from the work force.' That's what Norman Henchey, professor emeritus of educational policy at McGill University, calls the nightmare scenario. 'What the current trends mean is that girls alone will end up with the skills needed in a technological society and you'll have large numbers of unemployed, angry and frustrated men. [...].' (0008)

This “nightmare scenario”, of course, is only that: A counterfactual projection based either on very bad social science or motivated by political bias. To project a short-term statistical trend – here: the rising number of women on college campuses from the 1970s to the early 1990s, which happened to coincide with major societal changes in terms of the expansion of opportunities for women – 50 years into the future is, of course, highly problematic and unscientific. Apart from the misguided and misleading social-scientific forecasts, this passage reveals, however, a very deep panic about the prospects of men. According to the professor, boys and men are at risk of becoming virtually expendable, as it is supposedly “girls alone” who will be able to adapt to a changing society and who will acquire the credentials necessary for the workplaces of tomorrow. That these scenarios that are meant to induce panic have not even remotely materialized – even 20 years after the publication of this article – has already been discussed. Despite male angst about being replaced by women in the workplace, men still out-earn women and hold the vast majority of positions of power in the economy and politics.

In addition to these concern about men becoming insignificant materially and economically, some commentators argue that men also suffer on a psychological and emotional level, as evident in this 2006 *Montreal Gazette* article:

Michael Gurian, a family therapist and author of *The Minds of Boys*, identifies multiple causes for a lack of ambition among young men. During the past decade in particular, he said, men have lost their sense of relevance. [...] 'The feminist revolution is not a cause, but it is part of this. [...].' (0168)

That women have become increasingly successful in Western societies and that previously all-male spaces and scripts of masculinity have been eroding is turned into a story about male loss, victimization and legitimate grievance. The concern about boys supposedly losing out today is thus “based on the perception of loss and the need to regain ground lost to girls” (Hayes 2003:10).

What lies below the surface of statements such as Gurian's can best be described as what Michael Kimmel calls “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2013:23), a feeling of being denied something that one – or one's group – 'deserves' to possess. As he points out, paradoxically, this “sense of being entitled is a marker not of depravation [sic] but of privilege” (Kimmel 2013:24). In other words, it is not those lacking in material goods or access to opportunities who feel aggrieved but those who (used to be able to) take these privileges for granted and those who are now clinging onto them, turning to reactionary politics as an the attempt to conserve or restore former privileges.

This sense of aggrieved entitlement is probably nowhere more explicit than in the 1992 *Montreal Gazette* article discussed earlier:

'... Things can tilt very rapidly,' [Henchey] said. 'A father complains to his son that he has been passed over for promotion and the job goes to a woman. These attitudes are easily communicated. There may be a kind of male crisis. Men traditionally have found their identity in their jobs. I am convinced that what Marc Lepine did was the extreme expression of what a lot of people felt.' (0008)

Men are portrayed here as naturally harbouring resentments against those women who are making strides in the workplace. Instead of analyzing the observation that male identity tends to be rooted in their careers as a problematic aspect of culturally dominant constructions of masculinity, Henchey takes this for granted, thus validating the sense of loss men apparently experienced when women enter fields they had previously been restricted from. Similarly, Henchey does not question or even recognize the underlying sense of entitlement on the part of the male worker in his story: In Henchey's cautionary tale, the father and the rival female worker are not simply competitors for a promotion but instead the promotion is a priori seen as rightfully belonging to the male worker; and the reality of not being promoted is experienced not as a case of coming in second in a fair competition but as a case of being deprived of what was already his.

Similarly, the next passage of the newspaper article even comes close to excusing the massacre perpetrated by Marc Lépine as an expression of a shared frustration amongst Canadian men. Less than three years prior to the publication of this newspaper article, Lépine had murdered 14 women at Montreal's *École Polytechnique* in a misogynist shooting spree, motivated (as stated in his suicide letter) by his obsession with the idea that feminist women had ruined his life – and that of men more generally – by allegedly transforming society into one that disadvantaged men. In an act of ultimate and violent aggrieved entitlement, he murdered the young women who occupied positions that in his mind were rightfully his – namely, that of being students at an engineering school he himself had failed to gain admission to. Instead of connecting the speculation that such

acts of extreme misogynist violence are indicative of a more widely shared resentment towards women on the part of men, the article quoted above ultimately ends up lending credence to such male frustrations through its failure to contradict the sexist and anti-feminist myths inherent in such discourses. In an article that is primarily concerned with boys and men allegedly falling behind, readers will be quick to understand these passages about men's anger as stories of legitimate rather than misguided resentment and aggression. Instead of either zeroing in on limited and limiting cultural notions of masculinity or on investigating the economic transformations that impact the career prospects of (some) men, the article ends up reiterating arguments that connect male underachievement in education and men's unstable employment situations to the expansion of opportunities for women, furthering ideas of education and careers as zero-sum gender games and thus fuelling the notion of a 'battle of the sexes'.

## **6.2. AN ECONOMIC STORY TURNED GENDER**

The “aggrieved entitlement” apparent in the previous articles reveals just how much the debate about boys' education is fundamentally rooted in a moral panic about the economic prospects of boys and men – and, by extension, the national economy. In other words, it is no coincidence that the public concern about a gender gap allegedly favouring girls surfaces amidst decades of stagnating wages, limited upward mobility for middle and working class individuals, the off-shoring, outsourcing and subcontracting of manufacturing jobs and economic neoliberalism. However, rather than problematizing

these economic and political transformations, they are taken for granted as forces of nature within the 'boy crisis' discourse, and instead it is the supposed underachievement of men and boys that is being focused on. Moreover, instead of employing social class as a category of analysis, it is gender that is imagined as the most important variable, as men's stagnating socioeconomic status is being contrasted not to corporate profits but to women's expanding opportunities relative to prior decades.

That the panic about boys' education is as much – if not more so – a misguided attempt at making sense of economic changes as it is a genuine debate about the educational experience of male students is revealed by the fact that numerous articles refer to economic imperatives – without ever engaging with their origins or trajectory – when making the case for investing in the education of boys. For instance, this 1995 *Toronto Star* article references the disappearance of careers in economic sectors – presumably manufacturing – that required little educational credentials:

[W]e only can conclude that our educational system is failing its male students - and that the implications for these young men's future in a world where semi-skilled jobs are fast disappearing are serious indeed. (0021)

According to this article, schools, colleges and universities are not adequately preparing its male students for workplaces that will require specific skills as well as high school and post-secondary degrees. Transformations in the economy, according to this article, have to be matched by educational changes when it comes to boys. Passages like this even tacitly (and correctly) admit that education had not been as crucial to men's success in the past. As some scholars have argued, it is not so much male



underachievement that is new, but rather its correlation with long-term economic crises (Jackson 1998).

The most direct reference to changes in the economy and the labour market probably comes from a 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article, which states:

Why the fuss now? Because the blue-collar world with entry-level jobs requiring little education is vanishing as fast as you can say A, B, C. (0088)

What initially stands out about this passage is the fact that it explicitly references the disappearance of manufacturing jobs that used to provide steady employment for less educated (primarily male) workers. However, the article goes on to argue:

Young men have had higher unemployment than women in the past four years. The percentage of Canadian men between 25 and 34 with low earnings (less than \$21,000) rose to 41 per cent in 1993 from 22 per cent in 1976. Men make up only 40 per cent of new hires in the civil service. (0088)

These passages can serve as prime examples of how a story about a changing economy is turned into one about gender. Here, comparisons between men's current economic prospects and those of a prior generation of workers are interspersed with comparisons between men and women today. Although no explicit causal connections are being drawn between the increased opportunities for women (relative to the past) and the decrease in economic security for men, statements like this ultimately deflect attention away from issues of economic forces and instead put gender front and centre. Rather than engaging the public in a debate about the potential erosion of the economic foundation of the middle- and working class, the article presents men – not workers overall – as the actual and potential losers of these societal developments. Economic problems of post-

fordist societies are thus at the same time being individualized and gendered: It is men who have to catch up to the requirements of today, and it is individual men who have to be more adequately prepared for competition on the labour market.

This panic about men falling behind is one both about the life prospects of individual men as well as one about the future of the nation. On the individual level, men are being presented as a population destined to suffer in the future, as indicated by the following headline of a 2010 *Vancouver Sun* article:

Boys left behind in school – and then in life (0232)

Here, the achievement gap in education is directly translated into an indicator of male students' future more generally. Being “left behind” also has a triple meaning here, as boys are being portrayed as *competitively* lagging behind girls in achievement, as *temporally* being left behind in not being prepared for the labour market of today, and as *literally* left behind (and alone) by women, who – as the article will go on to argue – are statistically reluctant to marry men with lower career prospects.

This notion of men struggling economically has been taken up by a number of articles over the years, like this 1999 *Globe and Mail* article:

University admissions ratios in this country are about 55 to 45 in favour of girls. The ratios at U.S. schools are nearer 60 to 40. Not going to university means fewer higher-education-linked jobs, less money, a harder life for the men of the future. (0052)

This passage similarly connects the relative lack of university education to future male suffering, and, more importantly, does so by invoking a gendered comparison. Although it is not quite clear whether the author is arguing that men in the future will

have a “harder life” compared to men today, compared to men that do attend university, or compared to women, the quote at the very least leaves open the interpretation that a competition between the sexes is one contributing factor to men facing an insecure future. Although not all of these articles establish definitive causality between women's increased opportunities and projections of future male economic insecurity, the fact that gender comparison are made in the same breath as concerns about men's socioeconomic prospects, at the very least shows that the impact of economic transformations are being translated rhetorically into a zero-sum game between men and women, with both genders competing for scarce resources.

### **6.3. A NATION OF MEN**

In addition to worries about the socioeconomic fallout of a lack of education for individual men, the public discourse is also concerned with how the supposed lack of skills on the side of men will affect the national economy, as evident in passages from a 2007 *The Province* article (0183) and a 2009 *Globe and Mail* piece (0211):

An increasingly under-educated inventory of disengaged and isolated young males is unlikely to be in our collective best interest. (0183)

If boys still think physical labour and a Grade 11 education will stand them in good stead, they and the nation's economy are in trouble. (0211)

Both of these quotes suggest that in addition to setting themselves up for precarious futures individually, the supposed lack in male achievement is of national significance, as it jeopardizes the domestic economy. In the same vein, a 2007 *Calgary*

*Herald* articles sees the underachievement of boys as a sign of a nation in trouble:

A society lacking a solid base of highly educated women is not healthy, but the same goes for one without educated men. (0188)

Employing a medical metaphor, the nation is imagined as an organism that requires all of its elements to be functional in order for its success. The fact that fewer men than women are attending university is thus being portrayed as a sign of a diseased nation with implications for all its members. Moreover, these article seem to buy into the idea of a 'skills gap', the belief that economic troubles and unemployment are the results of (male) workers not possessing the required skills to be gainfully employed. This trope is even more visible in the following segment from a 2001 *National Post* article:

[Paul Cappon, Director- General of the Council of Ministers of Education] added that if the downturn is left unchecked, boys' mediocre reading skills will burden the Canadian economy, which increasingly relies on language-based skills. 'We are losing a segment of the workforce. If boys are less literate than girls, they will be less productive in the knowledge economy, and that will cost all of society.' Traditional male trades such as construction and electronics now require workers to read and understand information on computers, he added. (0098)

This passages reveals a very specific understanding of economic and labour market processes. Rather than discussing the loss of (unionized, middle-class or manufacturing) jobs in the neoliberal and post-fordist era, it is supposedly rather “a segment of the workforce” that is being lost; not employment opportunities are unavailable but employable workers. Despite the fact that studies consistently show (e.g. Levine 2013) that a lack in jobs is responsible for high unemployment rates, arguments such as this put the blame exclusively on the (prospective) employees, as though higher

education would ensure gainful employment for all. In other words, quotes like this reveal that the concern about boys' education in large part is rooted in distorted attempts at understanding and addressing the economic transformation of the past decades. This interpretation of economic changes through the framework of gender is nowhere more explicit than in a 2009 *Globe and Mail* interview with boy advocate Dr. Leonard Sax:

'If you look at what countries aren't affected by that achievement gap you see China, India and Brazil. And where's the highest economic growth? China, India and Brazil. I would assert that one of the reasons we are losing our competitive edge ... is that their men are driven to succeed and ours are not.'  
(0224)

This passage exemplifies a very limited and common-sense understanding of economic processes. Not only is economic growth taken as the primary indicator of a functioning economy but differences in economic growth of semi-peripheral economies are compared to Western economies in order to establish a panic about the economic future and competitiveness of the core capitalist powers. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of a society is imagined as the function of a competition between national economies, and the (potential) negative impacts of current economic transformations on the domestic economy and the prospects of workers are portrayed as resulting from employees not being up to par to the competition. Lastly, this competition between national economies is constructed as a contest between the nation's *men*. Economic crises are thus rhetorically turned into a crisis of masculinity: Because men are allegedly losing their positions of power, their roles as breadwinners and their masculinity, the national economy as a whole is allegedly set up to plummet.

Lastly, the passage quoted above also implies a troubling stance on gender equality: The countries mentioned by Sax rank 85<sup>th</sup> (Brazil), 101<sup>st</sup> (China) and 136<sup>th</sup> (India) on the Gender Inequality Index of the United Nations' 2013 Human Development Report (UNDP 2013:158). According to his argument then, countries that exhibit medium to low levels of gender equality – in contrast to Canada or the US who consistently rank among the top 15 – are to be seen as exemplary when it comes to economic success. In other words, Sax's logic implies that gender equality is disadvantageous to the success of national economies and that societal transformations that have brought an expansion of opportunities for women are jeopardizing economic growth and security. Passages such as this not only show that the 'boy panic' can be understood as a moral panic and a distorted interpretation of current economic transformations but they also reveal the underlying conceptions about men's and women's roles in society. Sax's argument assumes that prior historical gender arrangements had been more beneficial for the nation and its citizens. This assumption thus appeals to a “neoconservative desire for 'simpler times' when people 'knew their roles' in society” (Martino et al. 2009:7) and implies a commitment to traditional gender relations and the men-as-breadwinner model, albeit in a slightly transformed and rhetorically modernized version.

This premise that it is men who are supposed to focus on employment and careers, rather than women, is even apparent in articles that at first glance seem to be advocating for an expansion of opportunity for women, such as this 2005 *National Post* interview with Michael Gurian who argues:

'The greatest distraction for our girls is not math and science ... it's that there's no support for stepping out (from the work world) when they want to have their own children. We have to think about what our kids (will be) doing at 30 when they want to have children. I don't think we have a good model for female life in an industrial culture.' (0160)

Apart from the fact that Gurian is perpetuating the myth that (all) girls are doing fine in schools today, this passage is noteworthy for the thinly veiled prescriptive statements about the role of women in society. Although Gurian touches on an important issue that women have been faced with for decades – namely, balancing employment outside of the home and raising children – he frames the problem as an exclusively *female* issue. While it is undoubtedly true that capitalism (or, as he calls it: “industrial culture”) does not have an adequate response to the question of how to raise children and navigate household labour – apart from delegating all these unpaid tasks to the female half of the population – Gurian explicitly identifies these activities as part of “female life”. Instead of proposing a transformation of both femininity and masculinity that would allow for a more equitable sharing in these tasks, his implicit solution is to look for ways to retain women's responsibility for childcare and household today.

Thus, just as Leonard Sax's primary concern is to defend and restore men's predominance in the labour force in a time where the progress women have achieved is irreversible, Gurian similarly concerns himself with preserving the traditional role of women, albeit in a somewhat modernized way that allows for their participation on the labour market as long as it is compatible with their taken-for-granted responsibility as housewives and mothers.

#### 6.4. SYNOPSIS

This study has shown that the 'boy crisis in education' discourse in Canadian print media largely tends to be out of touch with findings from the social sciences and instead reproduces conceptions of education as a zero-sum game, notions of inherent and biological differences between male and female learners and a backlash discourse against feminism that constructs movements for gender equality as hostile to men and boys. Mean differences in achievement levels by male and female students are translated into assumptions about women holding power over educational institutions and holding male students back. This argument, in turn, is made within the context of a backlash discourse against feminism that allows authors to portray women as having won equality and having changed society to the detriment of men. Moreover, boys are thus presented as a new disadvantaged group by (mis)appropriating feminist rhetoric without engaging in feminist and sociological analysis and by erasing differences between different groups of boys while overstating differences between male and female students. This construction of a strict gender binary that is at the core of the discourse often relies on arguments of inherent differences that portray boys and girls as fundamentally different in their learning styles and brain development. Thus, as gender constructions – and especially masculinity – are perceived as unalterable,<sup>25</sup> it is educational institutions that are called upon to change in ways that benefit boys.

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<sup>25</sup> Despite shifts in the conceptions of femininity and the expansion of opportunities for women driving the achievement levels of female students in the first place.



Lastly, I also argue that the 'boy crisis' debate can best be understood both as a political backlash against feminism and as a misguided attempt at understanding current economic transformations and crises through a gender lens. Paralleling Stuart Hall's insight that in capitalist societies race tends to be the “modality in which class is lived, the medium through which class relations are experienced” (Hall 1980:341), here it is gender that serves as the medium through which class relations and economic transformations are being (mis)experienced. In other words, frustrations with the socioeconomic status quo and anxieties about an insecure economic future are translated into “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2014) on the part of men; a feeling of not only 'deserving' privileges in society but of 'deserving' these privileges over women. It is this “backlash” (Faludi 1991) against gender equality, resulting from men perceiving the economic downturn as being rooted in women gaining ground, that ultimately finds its expression in the discourse about boys and education.

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## APPENDIX: CODE BOOK

Variable	Codes:	Definition/ Rule:
Article Number		
Length	(count words)	
Article Title		
Name of Newspaper	Vancouver Sun The Province (Vancouver) Calgary Herald Edmonton Journal Winnipeg Free Press Toronto Star Ottawa Citizen The Gazette (Montreal) The Globe and Mail National Post	
Month of Publication		
Year of Publication		
Author: Name		
Author: Gender	male female other unknown	Inferred from name and/or explicit mentions of gender in article.
Author: Position/ Occupation	unknown Journalist Editor Guest author: Teacher Guest author: Principal Guest Author: Academic Guest Author: Parent Guest Author: other Newswire Service (AP etc.)	Determined by identification provided in article, database or inferred from article content if reference to own positionality is provided ("in my work as a teacher in primary school, I..."). Still no information: unknown.

Overall Topic/ Primary Topic of Article	Gender Difference in Achievement	'Factual' articles reporting on data on gender difference in educational achievement.
	Girls catching up	Girls narrowing the gender gap in educational achievement. Emphasis on girls improving.
	Boys losing out in Education	Articles that emphasize, focus on boys falling behind. Emphasis on boys failing.
	Single-Sex Education	Articles concerned with the question of single-sex education.
	Girls behind	Articles that emphasize, focus on girls falling behind. Emphasis on girls failing.
Overall Gender Focus of Article  → Coding determined by the question whether article clearly focuses on one gender.	Boys	Primarily concerned with boys' problems or success.
	Girls	Primarily concerned with girls' problems or success.
	Both	Gender Differences in general; different needs of both. Both genders focused on equally.
	Other	Articles primarily focusing on other topic than gender.

<p>Factors of inequality?</p> <p>→ What factors of inequality does the article talk about? (multiple codes per article possible)</p> <p><i>Code for Space:</i>  0= No Mention  1= Sentence or less  2= Few Sentences  3= One Paragraph  4= Throughout  5= Main Focus</p>	Gender	Gender Differences in Achievement, Test Scores, Enrollment Numbers, Drop-Out Rates
	Race/ minority status	Including Indigenous Youth.
	Social Class	Socioeconomic Status, Income, Parents' Education,
	Sexual Orientation	LGBQ, Questioning
	Gender-Nonconforming Behaviour	Trans* and Inter* youth, students not conforming according to hegemonic masculinity/ femininity.
	(Dis)ability	
	Language	Non-Native Speaking Youth, French/ English.
	Regional	(inter- & intra-province; city vs rural, etc.)
	Public vs Private Schools	
	Age/ Development	Differences according to age, maturity, progression through the school system.
<p>Themes</p> <p>→ Multiple codes per article possible.</p> <p><i>AND: Code for Space:</i>  0= No Mention  1= Sentence or less  2= Few Sentences  3= One Paragraph  4= Throughout  5= Main Focus</p>	Girls = lagging behind	Girls behind in test scores, achievement.
	Girls = improving	Girls shown as improving, catching up in test scores.
	Girls discriminated against	Girls discriminated against by school system, teachers, male students, parents, media messages, textbook representation, society in general.
	Boys falling behind	Boys being outperformed by girls, falling behind test scores, reading ability, enrollment in post-secondary education.

Boys as 'New Disadvantaged'	As victims, being discriminated in schools, by teachers, by female students.
Fault of Women/ Feminists	Women/ Feminists blamed for the struggles of boys in education.
School System as feminized	School systems portrayed as serving girls' needs; incl. too many female teachers, learning styles/ classroom organization/ topics portrayed as suited for girls.
Lack of Male/ Female Role Models	Absence of female/ male teachers, other role models.
Different Gendered Learning Styles	Boys and girls portrayed as learning differently.
Inherent Gender Differences	Biology, Brains, 'boys will be boys', inherent psychological differences.
Social Construction of Gender	Articles explicitly emphasizing that gender is a social construct that children learn and reproduce. Emphasis on how this gender construction shapes educational experience, performance.
No Gender Crisis	Articles that emphasize that there is no significant gender difference.