A Gendered Gap:

The observed literacy underachievement of elementary boy students as compared to the higher literacy performance of girl students.

by

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the literacy gender gap between students who happen to be boys, and their lower literacy scores as compared to students who happen to be girls. The literacy gender gap or gender achievement gap is an issue that has been observed in many different educational systems across the world. Boy students’ literacy skills appear to be lower by about 5-15% than girl students’ literacy skills, when measured on standardized tests. Gender is an important factor in determining students’ literacy achievement, but the author feels there are other factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, which cannot be overlooked. Too many research studies have looked too broadly at the problem, proposing ineffective solutions involving all boys, as well as harming girls struggling with literacy. Three professional teachers in the Toronto, Canada area were interviewed for this paper. Their responses were transcribed and analyzed for Chapter 4: Findings. In the last chapter, there are recommendations for teaching strategies to address boys’ literacy development, as well as a section on limitations of this study and further thoughts.

Keywords: gender achievement gap, literacy, boys, elementary, opportunity gap
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Over the past three decades, researchers have observed a difference between boys’ literacy scores and girls’ scores in educational systems in nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Taylor, 2004; Watson et al., 2010; Senn, 2012). Standardized tests and literacy evaluations have shown girls outperforming boys in reading and writing (Watson et al., 2010). Depending on the country, there is usually about a 5–20% difference, or so-called “literacy gender gap,” between boys’ and girls’ literacy competency, reading test results, and writing achievement (Martino & Kehler, 2007). Between OECD nations’ educational systems, the size of the performance gap varies depending on: how they teach literacy, which countries’ educational systems were studied, which boys were studied, and whether the research included other factors besides gender (such as socioeconomic class, race, or ethnicity).

In the past 25 years, as the issue has gained more public attention, there has been an increase in research conducted on the causes and effects of the literacy gender gap (Taylor, 2004; Martino & Kehler, 2007; Alloway, 2007). The Ontario Ministry of Education published a guide entitled *Me Read? No Way!* (2004), which was compiled from many international studies and successful programs in other educational systems. This guide and the subsequent sequel, *Me Read? And How!* (2009) became vital resources for Ontario teachers who were working on
understanding and addressing the literacy gender gap. One of the successes of both of these
guides were the fourteen strategies and concrete examples offered to help boy students improve
their literacy skills. Furthermore, these two Ontario guides provided some strategies for the three
teacher-participants I interviewed for this paper.

Because I believe teachers’ voices deserve inclusion in more research studies and I
wholeheartedly value teacher opinions, I began this study reviewing research articles about the
literacy gender gap. In the next phase of the research, I will interview three Toronto District
School Board (TDSB) elementary school educators for their perspectives on this trend. I will
always speak with them about their instructional responses, and their observations about the
causes of literacy underachievement among boys. Instead of lumping all boys together into one
homogeneous group, I am particularly interested in research studies and teacher insights on the
question of which boys seem to be struggling the most with learning literacy. In other words, I
focused my literature review and designed my questions to learn more about what other factors
seem to be intersecting with gender to impact boys’ literacy underachievement (e.g. socio-
economic status).

**Purpose of the Study**

During my deliberations on choosing a research topic I discovered across Taylor’s (2002)
article, “Not just boring stories:” reconsidering the gender gap for boys. This article resonated
with me personally and sparked my interest. I decided that the purpose of my study would be to
learn more about the gender literacy gap, explore the range of factors driving it, and to learn how
I as a new elementary school teacher can instructionally respond to this gap through the teaching
methods and strategies I learn from the literature and from a small sample of elementary
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My proposed qualitative study will employ a phenomenological approach to engage the experiences of three educator-participants. A phenomenological study, “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013. p 76). Certainly, I expect to hear a combination of common and disparate perspectives based on these teachers’ unique lived experiences and professional perspectives.

As I enter the teaching profession, this study will be personally beneficial as I learn pedagogical practices recommended by current teachers and researchers. Additionally, I am hopeful that interested educators will also find that the study findings inform their own understanding of the phenomenon of boys’ literacy underachievement and their own literacy education practices.

The research I have encountered indicates that some important pedagogical considerations include: more literacy choices (non-fiction, graphic novels, interactive eBooks, etc.) in all curriculums, a caring learning environment fostering supportive opportunities for reading, writing, and storytelling (journals, group discussions, drama, etc.), the promotion of literacy achievement benefits, and the advancement that reading is important to all boys’ lives.

There is not one single solution to raise the literacy performance of boy students and thus solving the literacy gender gap will be easily “solved.” Nevertheless, I believe there is a great deal to be learned about this topic from scholars who have been studying it and from teachers who are on the frontlines of this phenomenon in schools.

Research Questions

Focusing my topic on the literacy gender gap and boys’ literacy underachievement, my
overarching research question is: How do elementary educators instructionally respond to the perceived impacts of gender on boy learners struggling with literacy underachievement?

Subsidiary research questions include: What do you think are some causes for boys’ underachievement in literacy? Have you noticed which, if any, particular types of populations of boys struggle the most with literacy? What are your thoughts on boys-only classes, book clubs, or spaces?

My research pool will be elementary, public, school educators intentionally teaching different literacy approaches for boy learners. I hope to find these educators in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), with the possibility of expanding my search to include the Toronto Catholic District School Board, or if needed, a Toronto private school for boys. I would like to interview two elementary teachers currently teaching a boys reading club, a boys-only classroom, or working at The Boys Leadership Academy (a public academy located in Toronto). To add a different or potentially broader perspective, I would like to find one educator working for the entire TDSB, primarily focused on the issue of elementary boys struggling with learning literacy. Because I want to one day become an elementary teacher, I am searching for interview participants working with elementary school students.

Background of the Researcher

In the early months of 2013, I volunteered at the Academy in Manayunk (AIM) and witnessed alternative teaching methods for literacy development and engagement. AIM is a private school for grades K-12, founded in 2005 by eight parents of children with language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia (“Mission and Philosophy,” 2013). Volunteering at the AIM Academy near Philadelphia exposed me to
Academic Club Methodology (ACM). I would describe Academic Club Methodology as turning a classroom into a clubhouse. Durham (2010, p. 13) described ACM as a teaching technique, designed by Sally Lieberman Smith at the Washington Laboratory School, which totally immerses a student into a combined history-art-drama curriculum with “integrated thematic teaching units.”

Because I had a rewarding experience while volunteering at AIM, I looked for research studies about the school and Sally L. Smith’s ideas on ACM. However, my search for peer-reviewed research papers was not very successful, and I found few articles specifically on ACM. As I thought about other possible research topics, I looked into dyslexia then finally moved towards questioning why the AIM classes I observed were filled with a large majority of boy students. This line of questioning led me to look into the literacy gender gap, and the academic implications for boys struggling with learning literacy.

On a more personal note, growing up as a boy learner, in a public elementary school system, I always struggled with reading, writing, and spelling to a certain extent. I personally identify with boys struggling with learning literacy. Finding research on the literacy gender gap has been wonderfully revealing and transformational to me, as a learner and as a teacher. Furthermore, I am very interested in finding successful methods to teach literacy to all struggling students, not just boys.

I will try to be as objective and methodical as I am capable of, but I am worried my biases, privileges, and viewpoints might affect my observations, research conclusions, and teacher-participant interviews. When conducting my study, I intend to be cautious in properly acknowledging myself in the multicultural context of Toronto, and understand how different Toronto schools, and students, are from those I experienced during my white, male, rural, U.S.,
middle-class upbringing.

I intend for this study to add to the growing amount of articles and studies on the literacy gender gap, because I would like to contribute new insights to this conversation. I am hopeful that one avenue for that is by zeroing in on teachers’ nuanced perspectives on which boys they observe struggling the most with learning literacy.

For the purposes of equity and diversity, I would like to address the limitations of this study. Unfortunately, I have included research with a more conservative definition a “boy,” and I feel the studies have seriously lacked or addressed transgendered boys or genderqueer boys. It may happen that teachers I sample have these students in their class, but this has certainly been an area that is undeveloped in the scholarly literature. In addition, I feel some of the media attention and reporting directed towards understanding the literacy gender gap has unduly focused too much on white and/or middle class boys. I believe the misguided public believes all boys are currently struggling with learning literacy, instead of focusing on implications of boy learners’ socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic background(s) on their literacy performances.

Overview

In Chapter 2 I review the literature focusing on possible causes of the literacy gender gap, potential strategies or approaches for the classroom, studies that investigated which boys seem to struggle the most, and finally considerations of socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and literacy.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology and procedures used in this study, including information about my sampling of interview participants and data collection instruments.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the three educator-participants in the study and report data addressing my research questions. I use a phenomenological approach to identify running themes
and experiences among the three interview participants.

In Chapter 5, I describe the limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and I identify areas for further reading and study. I list what I feel are potentially successful strategies for educators to help reach and teach boys struggling with literacy development and engagement.

References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Key Words:

Gender — A social construction generally attributed to masculine people as “boys” or “men” and feminine people as “girls” or “women.” Gender is fluid and changes depending on culture, time-period, or the individual.

Gender-typing — Gendered stereotypes and attributing certain characteristics to a specific gender regardless of validity (Halim, Ruble, Tamis-Lemonda, Shrout, 2013).

Literacy — Reading ability, vocabulary, writing proficiency, and knowledge of words.

Literacy Gender Gap — The observed literacy underachievement of boy students compared to the higher literacy scores of girl students.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature focused on boys struggling with learning literacy. The studies that interested me the most delved into the details of the literacy gender gap, revealing literacy learning is affected by poverty, ethnicity, and racial inequality just as much as, if not more than, the gender of the student. Therefore, I have organized the literature reviews into 4 areas: Possible Causes of the “Literacy Gender Gap,” Potential Strategies or Approaches for the Classroom, Which Boys, and finally Socioeconomic Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Literacy.

I would also like to speak to the social construction of gender and the stereotypes, sexism, and discrimination embedded in gender and the gender binary. I do not support studies, teaching strategies, or research conclusions, which argue for a male-dominated society, an inequitable school environment, or a patriarchal power structure. I want to better understand why certain populations of boys are struggling with learning literacy, in the hope of finding potential strategies to benefit all students. My review of relevant literature aided me immensely in better understanding the nuances of this issue.

Possible Causes of the “Literacy Gender Gap”

To lay the foundations of the “literacy gender gap,” I read studies from researchers, academics, and teachers, which helped me to understand the current academic situation. Many of these articles were a bit too broad and essentialist since they grouped all boys together as one homogenous population. Nevertheless, these studies contrast well with the other researchers focused on the perspective of questioning “which boys” are struggling the most with learning literacy.
In 2004, to help teachers understand the issues of the literacy gender gap, the Ontario Ministry of Education released *Me Read? No Way! A practical guide for improving boys’ literacy skills*. This guide was based on many international documents and studies, and presented the literacy gender gap as a worldwide issue (*Me Read? No Way!,* 2004). The guide found that gender was a factor for boys in determining reading texts as well as motivation to read, stating, “A good book for a boy is one he wants to read.” (*Me Read? No Way!,* 2004, p. 8). This guide provided many practical strategies for Ontario and Canadian teachers to implement in their classrooms, and was read by many educators (all three of my interview participants mentioned this book). *Me Read? No Way!* (2004) was an important Ontario policy documents that raised awareness for the literacy gender gap, and additionally the guide provided thirteen “Strategies for Success” (p. 8).

Disinterest is a culprit for the literacy gender gap, according to Donna Taylor (2004), a U.S. doctoral student. She framed boring literacy as a cause for concern, and attributed uninteresting stories as turning boys off to reading (Taylor, 2004). Taylor (2004) cited a 2000 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and she found few differences between boys and girls when assessing the subjects of science or mathematics. As academic reform, community action, and governmental regulations brought much-needed equality and equity into the classrooms, girls’ mathematics and science scores improved over the past three decades (Taylor, 2004). I believe the social construction of gender, and stereotypes falsely linked with femininity, led to educational institutions viewing girls as inadequate learners of mathematics and science. Fortunately, the Women’s Movement and societal pressures have influenced educational institutions to put many resources into changing the climate of the classroom to better include girls (Taylor, 2004).
Because of the successes made to improve girls’ academic performances, Taylor (2004) wanted to focus attention on boys’ literacy in similar ways employed by the Women’s Movement and academic institutions that helped girls to start reaching gender equality in science and mathematics. Another of Taylor’s (2004) ideas was boys are generally too literal, and they wrestle with aspects commonly found in narrative literacy such as: symbolism, character motivations, empathy, and emotions in general.

By teachers empowering students to choose readings that are interesting and engaging, Taylor (2004) believed the literacy gender gap could shrink, to the benefit of all students, not just boys. She also supported the inclusion of more than just narratives in the curriculum, expanding opinions on what constitutes literacy, and finding creative methods to engage boys with books (Taylor, 2004). This was the first article that sent me on my research quest looking into boys’ literacy challenges and differences. I appreciated Taylor’s (2004) summation of the issue at hand, with facts to back up her ideas, but I feel her conclusions generalized the problem too much for me to get behind.

Nicole Senn (2012), a U.S. grade 1 teacher, believed one cause of the literacy gender gap was boys’ lack of motivation to read. Senn found many struggling boys were actually disinterested, reluctant, literacy learners, which affected their academic performance in school. She cited a study, in a 2001 Gurian & Henley article, that 70% to 80% of students wrestling with a lack of academic motivation are boys (Senn, 2012, p. 212). I was very surprised there is such a huge disparity in motivation between boys and girls.

Furthermore, Senn (2012, p. 212) mentioned a survey sent out by author Ralph Fletcher, which concluded that boys are fully capable of creating great oral stories, but when asked to write down their stories, the same boys became quite hesitant to put pen to paper. It is possible
boys are scared their male peers might view them as uncool for expressing their feelings or emotions (Senn, 2012, p. 213). In questioning why boys lacked academic motivation, Senn (2012) listed 4 possible causes: biology and brain development differences between boys and girls, boys lacking confidence in their reading skills and abilities, boys viewing fictional stories as feminine, and boys becoming disinterested in classroom reading selections. Allowing boys to pick stories that are more entertaining could help boost interest in reading, and possibly combat boys’ gender-typing literacy as a feminine endeavour (Senn, 2012).

I have heard some voices in the media and political realms espouse anti-feminist opinions on possible causes of the literacy gender gap, which I do not support. Nola Alloway, an Australian Dean and the Head of School of Education at James Cook University, wrote about some of these disturbing viewpoints advanced by many conservative politicians, newspaper opinionists, and reporters believing boys failed to keep up with modern girls because of emasculation and a “crumbling concept of a patriarchal society” (Alloway, 2007, p. 584). To me, this is a false narrative and one trying to score political points defending a traditional belief of masculinity. I question the motives of newspapers, print conglomerates, and conservative politicians advancing an agenda attempting to bring boys back into the fold of traditional, 20th Century, ideas of literacy education. I believe some of these media interests are more concerned with a loss of readers, as men have started to read newspapers less and less, than they are concerned with raising literacy rates for both boys and girls. New forms of literacies dominate the 21st Century, so the educational world should become better prepared to teach the students that will inhabit that digital world.

Other thoughts on causes of the literacy gender gap, as believed by Debby Zambo (2007), a teacher at Arizona State University, involved a lack of male archetypes (wise patriarchs, great
kings, brave warriors, independent wildmen, and empathetic lovers) in picture books and elementary literacy programs. Zambo (2007) supported the work of William Brozo in her case study of male archetypes, and applied his findings to her elementary classrooms. I do not agree with Zambo’s thoughts surrounding a lack of male archetypes in boys’ literacy. Zambo (2007) approached the cause of the literacy gender gap as a loss of traditionally male gender constructions, which I believe were male stereotypes detrimental to both boys and girls. While she did support advancing non-traditional ideas of masculinity, such as empathy, intuition, and passion, I do not agree with her notions that boys’ literacy is lacking traditionally masculine role models (Zambo, 2007). Even Zambo (2007, p. 128) stated her ideas were “not based on an empirical study, they, like Brozo’s work, are a reactive approach based upon my experience and interaction with boys.” I think traditionally masculine archetypes inundate all students too much, and I do not support bringing more archetypes into the classroom as a valid approach to enticing boys to read.

In their 2007 paper, Wayne Martino and Michael Kehler (2007), both associate professors at the University of Western Ontario, challenged notions around what teachers and students view as proper masculine qualities. For example, they found that boys tend to can view literacy as outside their understanding of acceptable masculinity, and enforce their beliefs of gender behaviour onto their male peers (Martino & Kehler, 2007). I think boys learn a lot about life from their peers, and sometimes what boys teach each other is not always positive. Because some boys’ felt reading is feminine or unmanly, they seemed to push this stereotype onto their fellow boys (Martino & Kehler, 2007). Peer pressure and gender rigidity can be powerful deterrents to academic development, but teachers should promote the value of literacy achievement, so boys do not fake disinterest as a way of maintaining fabricated and self-imposed
limits they believe should be attributed to their gender.

Disagreeing with the very definition of a boys literacy gap, Anne Watson (2010), a doctoral student from The University of Western Ontario, London, along with Kehler and Martino, believed boys literacy underachievement gained an undue amount of attention from many newspapers, policy makers, and educators (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). The authors felt many research studies pretended all boys were similar and these studies mistakenly concluded all boys suffered from issues with learning literacy (Watson et al., 2010). I enjoyed reading the authors’ critiques of the so-called “Boy Crisis,” as a failure to communicate that not all boys are: falling behind, struggling to find positive male role models, or biologically incapable of performing better (Watson et al., 2010, p. 357).

Another possible cause I explored was the gender breakdown of students with dyslexia. Early studies indicated that dyslexia affected more boys than girls, however Jiménez (et al., 2009) gives evidence that dyslexia affects as many girls, as are boys. Tunmer & Greaney (2010) described dyslexia as a persistent literacy difficulty in word recognition, spelling, writing, pronunciations, and phonological recoding (translating letters into sounds. A possible reason for the disparity of young boy students identified with dyslexia, might have to do more with traits of their gender, than dyslexia actually affecting boys more than girls (Jiménez, 2009).

Jiménez and his co-authors (2009) suggested that the reason over-identification of boys with dyslexia occurred was because of a manifestation of their gender specific behaviour. Teachers and medical professionals usually report boys more often for dyslexia testing than girls, because of the occurrence of hyperactive and impulsive behaviour by the boys (Jiménez et al., 2009). The result is a disproportionate referral rate. This argument presupposes a gender difference in the activity level of boys and girls. When girls display behaviours that mirror that
of aggressive male behaviour, it triggers the referral process and the subsequent diagnosis of a reading disability (Jiménez et al., 2009). Nevertheless, in terms of reading differences causing the literacy gender gap, there is not substantial evidence or observations.

There are many studies, articles, news stories, and dissertations with possible reasons for the current gap between boys and girls’ literacy achievements and engagement. I am concerned there are also many more ideas and opinions focused on the wrong problem, and therefore propose incorrect causes. I support a “which boys” perspective and believe researchers should not lump all boys together as one single population, but identify which potential subgroups or populations are struggling the most with learning literacy.

### Potential Strategies or Approaches for the Classroom

While there are still academic debates over possible causes for literacy gender differences, most researchers appear to have their own ideas on possible teaching strategies or academic approaches. Some of the researchers’ ideas ranged from implementing 21st Century knowledge building digital environments (Sun, Zhang, & Scardamalia, 2010), to improving boys’ motivation to read (Senn, 2012), to reengaging with boys’ personal interests (Taylor, 2004), to even questioning the use of print-based literacies (Alloway, 2007). I am not sure which, if any, potential strategies would work in a classroom, but I appreciate any good ideas and thought put into trying to improve teachers’ literacy practices.

*Even Hockey Players Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning* by David Booth, is a significant book on the issue of boys and literacy that provides insights, strategies, and resources to help build understanding of a complex issue. Booth mentions the complexities of gender and boy students, with him stating, “Even though many English programs centre on masculine texts that
reinforce traditional gender patterns, many boys become alienated from material in these resources” (Booth, 2002, p. 14). When a teacher creates a safe space in valuing boy students for who they are, this practice can become a more effective strategy for helping boys gain a well-rounded sense of masculinity. Understanding where boys are coming from is especially needed for combating a boy’s belief that males do not read books. Some suggestions for enhancing boys’ literacy success are: allowing boys to choose their texts; modelling direct literacy instruction for how to become a good reader; developing and understanding reading principles; inquiry-based learning; and incorporating poetry, drama, and personal storytelling (Booth, 2002). *Even Hockey Players Read* has a “Recommended Books for Boys” section that lists suggested books for boys such as: read-alouds, picture books, easy-readers, series books, novels, word play books, poetry, and non-fiction (Booth, 2002, p. 117-125). Booth’s book is a quick read packed with dozens of classroom strategies, research studies, and practical ideas for improving boys’ literacy skills. Additionally, Booth provides some personal anecdotes about his son, Jay, and the struggles Jay had to overcome to turn into a successful reader.

The *Me Read? No Way!* (2004) guide was successful enough that the Ontario Ministry of Education created a follow-up book called *Me Read? And How!* (2009). The sequel guide continued the discussion started in *Me Read? No Way!,* adding and modifying the “Strategies for Success” to create “Strategies that Work! Inquiry Team Recommendations” (*Me Read? And How!,* 2009, p. 2-4). Another strategy added to the thirteen strategies was “‘Split them up: Using single-sex groupings,’ that represents another method explored by a few teams.” (2009, p. 4). The thirteen strategies are:

1. Have the Right Stuff — Choosing and promoting appropriate classroom resources for boys
2. Help Make it a Habit — Providing frequent opportunities to read and write
3. Teach with Purpose — Understanding boys’ learning styles
4. Embrace the Arts — Using the arts to bring literacy to life
5. Let Them Talk — Appealing to boys’ need for social interaction and talk
6. Find Positive Role Models — Influencing boys’ attitudes through the use of role models
7. Read Between the Lines — Bringing critical-literacy skills into the classroom
8. Keep it Real — Making reading and writing relevant to boys
9. Get the Net — Using technology to engage boys and facilitate their learning
10. Assess for Success — Using appropriate assessment tools for boys
11. Be in Their Corner — The role of the teacher in boys’ literacy
12. Drive the Point Home — Engaging parents in boys’ literacy
13. Build a School-wide Focus — Building literacy beyond the classroom

Many of these “Strategies for Success” are mentioned by other authors’ studies or research papers. In trying to understand the literacy gender gap, I found these three strategies useful: engaging parents in boys’ literacy (p. 70-73), making reading and writing relevant to boys (p. 46-51), and appealing to boys’ need for social interaction and talk (p. 32-37). Parents/Adults are a large factor in helping a student develop early literacy skills. A teacher can provide resources, advice, and support to a parent/adult, and it is vitally important for teachers to build strong relationships with the parents/adults of children struggling with literacy. Writing and reading can be more engaging for boys when the teacher provides authentic assignments from real-world examples. When literacy is brought to life, the boys will understand and participate in reading and writing assignments. Too often boys are told to be quiet and not talk during class, yet oral literacy and storytelling is a fundamental form of literacy that cannot be ignored. A teacher should strive to create accountable talk moments for boy students to question what they read, speak about their thoughts, and express how they feel from reading. Me Read? And How! (2009) is a thorough and effective resource for teachers who want to better understand the literacy gender gap, while providing plenty of ideas for teachers to implement in their classrooms.

The article by Yanqing Sun, Assistant Professor at the Albany Institute for Research in Education, Jianwei Zhang, Assistant Professor at the State University of New York at Albany, and Marlene Scardamalia, Director of the OISE Institute for Knowledge Innovation and
Technology at the University of Toronto, offered a social media strategy to help boys and girls develop better literacy skills (Sun et al., 2010). The authors analysed online communications from 22 students (half boys and half girls) over the course of two years, from grade 3 to grade 4 (Sun et al., 2010). Each student wrote notes in Knowledge Forum, an online knowledge-building environment, where students collectively created and refined their ideas and writings (Sun et al., 2010). Knowledge building environments created an online or offline digital space for students to co-author notes, add keywords, seek questions, provide answers, or gain teacher and peer scaffolding in many areas of learning (Sun et al., 2010). Over two years of study, the students’ online contributions and writings demonstrated an increase in their personal vocabulary, sometimes using words one or two grade levels higher than the grade 4 curriculum (Sun et al., 2010). The scholars were surprised to find the 11 boys’ literacy scores were slightly higher than the girls’ scores (Sun et al., 2010). Knowledge building environments, or social sharing environments, might help improve boys’ literacy.

Knowledge building seems like a wonderful 21st Century inquiry-based tool, advancing shared ideas and learning, along with the ability to improve all students’ reading, vocabulary, and visual literacies (Sun et al., 2010). The authors’ argue for less traditional book selections and better literacy programs including: nonfiction, electronic readings, plenty of graphics, and interesting real world content (Sun et al., 2010). Sun, Zhang, and Scardamalia (2010, p. 5) also support a “boy friendly” curriculum without losing the academic advancements that have enabled girls to succeed over the past decades. As computers and social media become more integrated into 21st Century classrooms, these technologies will only continue to reshape how educators should teach literacy to modern boys and girls.

Along similar lines as Sun and colleagues, Taylor (2004, p. 290) believed teachers and
parents can “bring boys back into the fold of literacy success” and re-engage boys by better meeting their literary interests. Taylor (2004) included an anecdotal story of her son, Gabe, a struggling learner who eventually became a better reader as his interest for computer games grew and he sought more books about computer games. A few of her suggestions involved boys-only reading clubs, specific book selections for boys, and for teachers to include less emotional or narrative texts in the classroom (Taylor, 2004). The strategies put forward by Taylor (2004) could have been better developed and sourced with more research, because her article felt more anecdotal. I believe it is important for boys and girls to access interesting, impactful, and diverse literacies to meet the needs of all students. However, I do not think boys-only reading selections are the magic bullet for solving literacy performance among boys, but it will be interesting to see what my educator-participants think.

Other possible approaches to the literacy gender gap, put forth by Senn (2012), involved improving boys’ reading motivation. Senn wanted teachers to help convince boys that men are proud readers, promote diverse books or genres that interest boys; provide boys valid purposes for reading or writing; encourage boys to write with humour (voice) and silliness (satire); and to allow boys tap into their kinaesthetic learning potentials by sitting or standing where they desire. The first three ideas, focusing boys’ awareness towards male role models, books of interest, and reasons for literacy, seem like simple strategies I have heard before. Senn’s (2004) latter two ideas, for improving boys’ reading motivation, are interesting ideas that deserve further research on promoting literacy through a sense of humour and linking literacy to one’s body.

Alloway’s (2007) questioning the merits of a primarily print-based literacy education as one possible cause for boys struggling with the traditional content found in printed literacy. She suggested bring more reading devices, eBooks, interactive websites, and other digital sources of
literacy into classrooms as a way to improve boys’ and girls’ reading rates. I really was impressed with Alloway’s arguments for more integration of digital literacies, and less print-based books or static pages.

I look forward to interviewing my three educator-participants, to see what potential strategies and perceived impacts they have witnessed that help boys struggling with learning literacy.

**Which Boys?**

The sources from Alloway (2007), Watson (2010), Martino, and Kehler (2007; 2010) offered strong arguments for further analysing which populations of boys are wrestling the most with learning literacy. Many points addressed by these authors have furthered the debate for alternative ways of analysing the literacy gender gap.

Nola Alloway (2007, p. 582) argued for a “which boys” and ”which girls” approach to view the literacy gender gap. Alloway (2007) believed the data and news reports on literacy gender differences were shabby studies with too broad of a focus, comparing all boys to all girls. Intriguingly she cited research suggesting boys are struggling more with print-based texts than with all literacies in general (Alloway, 2007). Better integrating multimedia and graphics into literacy curriculum could benefit all modern students, regardless of gender; however poverty, the digital divide, and privilege would still remain large factors in creating literacy differences for all students (Alloway, 2007). This wonderful article really made me contemplate which boys are struggling the most with learning literacy.

Pushing for better research-based studies on the literacy gender gap, Wayne Martino and Michael Kehler (2007) questioned the validity of studies grouping all boys together, and
advancing essentialist media narratives blaming public education as emasculating to boys. This was a thought-provoking article that went together well with Alloway’s (2007) article “Swimming against the tide.” Martino and Kehler (2007) did not believe in essentialist theories that grouped all boys together, nor did they subscribe to efforts to try to strengthen the gender binary in public schools. The authors felt policies, based on grouping boys as one homogenous population, could be responsible for reintroducing the gender binary as an ineffective strategy for boys struggling with learning literacy (Martino & Kehler, 2007).

Martino and Kehler (2007) did not believe that studies adequately identified the possible sources of literacy differences; therefore, they did not advocate any single strategy to address the literacy gender gap. The authors did not believe the public school system, with a majority of elementary female teachers, created a “feminization” of boys’ reading interests, literacy learning styles, or masculinity (Martino & Kehler, 2007, p. 407). In fact, both authors supported the research by Alloway, Brown, and Mills which found the literacy gender gap debate ignored ethnicity, privilege, sexuality, nationality, or economic disadvantages (Martino & Kehler, 2007).

I appreciated Martino & Kehler’s (2007, p. 410) envisioning that only judging students by their genders a person might predict a boy to have less literacy competency than a girl, but looking at the socioeconomic factors of the students, a middle class boy could have better literacy achievement than a working class girl. The authors created a wonderful example illustrating the limits of only investigating the gender of boy students struggling with learning literacy, to the detriment of girl students struggling with literacy. The frank language used by Martino and Kehler (2007) was refreshing, and I am glad they included some repugnant quotes from people pushing for a return to the gender binary and traditional masculinity. I really appreciated their critique of mainstream research on the literacy gender gap, and their thought-
provoking questioning of which boys were actually wrestling the most with learning literacy.

Kehler and Martino, along with Watson (2010), their new co-author, continued to advance their support for better research into which boys are struggling the most with literacy education. They wanted more resources and attention directed towards literacy education programs that engaged every student, not just an initiative focused solely on the gender of students (Watson et al., 2010). Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) questioned other researchers literacy gender gap strategies, and found those approaches: lacked awareness of dissimilar gender gaps found in other countries’ educational programs; minimally scrutinized ethnicity, family life, or class background of the students; and failed to investigate which boys, as well as which girls, were underachieving. This article gave me plenty to consider, and many potential questions for my interviewees, especially questions about teacher perceptions of socioeconomic class and poverty.

**Socioeconomic Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Literacy**

Research studies on the literacy gender gap have unduly focused on all boys struggling with learning literacy, regardless of their racial, ethnic, or economic background(s). Included below are some studies linking poverty to literacy performance, and a few addressing poverty and boys’ academic performances.

Watson, Kehler, and Martino’s (2010, p. 357) article mentioned research around racial, economic, and literacy gender gaps combining to create “disturbingly low achievement for poor, black and Hispanic boys.” One study Taylor (2004, p. 292) cited by Newkirk found the literacy gender gap “comparable to that between White and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systematic social and economic discrimination in [the U.S.].”
Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, and Shrout (2013) wanted to study gender-typing (gendered stereotypes) and gender rigidity (strong adherence to gendered stereotypes). For two years, they observed 229 African American, Mexican American, or Dominican American children during the ages of 3 to 5 years old (Halim, Ruble, Tamis-Lemonda, Shrout, 2013). Over the length of the study, they monitored “gender-stereotypical appearance, dress-up play, toy play, and sex segregation” (Halim et al., 2013, p. 1269) at such a young age. The researchers found gender-typing present in all three ethnic groupings of children and observed gender rigidity increased from age 3 to 4.

This study was unique since it was conducted relatively recently in 2013, by four researchers who wanted to study populations neglected by most of the research conducted on the early gender development (Halim et al., 2013). They observed too many studies on gender development which only involved white and middle-class children, without a specific focus or intentional inclusion of ethnicity, class, or multiple years of data (Halim et al., 2013). I was glad to have found this paper, since the authors addressed and disputed unfair narratives of gender development, race, and ethnicity.

It is important and beneficial to my study to include diverse voices’ of researchers, and studies on different populations of male students. This article dovetails well with Alloway (2007) and Martino’s (2004) papers, but I do need to be careful that the authors are not all just referencing each others work, and potentially creating an echo chamber of similar opinions or conclusions.

Further Thoughts

The literacy gender gap is an issue worthy of inquiry and debate. While there are many
possible causes for the gap, there are just as many potentially successful strategies to help teachers reach boy learners. I believe the better strategies for raising literacy rates for all students, will be approaches that do not focus solely on the gender of the students, but one that also address economic status, race, and ethnicity. Because I want to dig deeper into teacher strategies for the literacy gender gap, I have decided to conduct my study and interviews around the topic of perceived impacts of gender on elementary boy students’ literacy development and engagement.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

I conducted a qualitative research study drawing on characteristics of the phenomenological approach and using the interview method. For my qualitative research study, I cited a variety of qualitative, peer-reviewed research studies, as well as some quantitative data (Chapter 2).

Face-to-face interviews are an important part of a qualitative study, and the three interviews will help to prioritize the voices of teachers and educators working everyday with this issue of a literacy gender gap (Creswell, 2013). By conducting interviews with my three educator-participants, I engaged in deep and professional conversations that opened windows into actual educators’ thoughts and beliefs. Interviews are a way of valuing the work of the participants, and treating them as the experts, they are (Creswell, 2013).

I interviewed three elementary educators currently working with boy students struggling with learning literacy. I conducted these face-to-face interviews in person, and recorded the conversation to transcribe everything discussed. I asked a series of questions and follow-ups to breach the subject of the literacy gender gap, and to structure the discussion around the participants’ strategies and perspectives. (Please see Appendix B to review the interview questions).

Instruments of Data Collection:

I conducted three informal, face-to-face interviews with two teachers from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), in Toronto, Canada, and one teacher from the Toronto Catholic
District School Board (TCDSB). I recorded the interviews on a mobile phone device and transcribed them for further data analysis. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I coded the interviews to find similarities and differences between the three educator-participants.

**Participant Criteria**

When deciding on sample participants, I searched for expert educators who had at least 5 years experience teaching in public school systems of Toronto, and who met my minimum requirements. These requirements will included: an acknowledgement the existence of a literacy gender gap; a development and implementation of strategies for teaching literacy to boys; an involvement in personal development on the topic of the literacy gender gap; and experience teaching a diverse range of students in terms of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and race.

Because I want to one day become an elementary teacher, I searched for interview participants working with elementary school students.

**Recruitment procedures**

To find my participants, I contacted my colleagues, friends, and extended family members for suggestions. I conducted my interviews in December 2014, January 2015, and February 2015.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I recorded my three interviews on my computer and smartphone. Two of the interviews I did using the Skype video streaming application. After recording the interviews, I transcribed word-for-word on my computer. I then coded every line of the transcriptions. I used different
colours and strikethroughs to code the themes and subthemes in the interviews. I then copied these colour-coded quotes into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet so I could have all three participants’ quotes organized under each theme or subtheme. Once I coded and copied all the quotes into one document, I was able to notice which themes were mentioned the most, as well as which themes had the most agreement, disagreement, or differing strategies.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

I used the University of Toronto ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). For ethical purposes, I am protecting the confidentiality of participants, using pseudonyms to disguise their identities, and encrypting the interview audio files. I allowed my three educator-participants to exercise their options to withdraw from the research study at any time, for any reason. I used the OISE letter of consent template to construct my own consent letter for the participants to sign (included in the Appendix A). The letter of consent required a signature, and listed all the rights and agreements of the interviewee.

I did not want to misrepresent the voices of the three participants, so to address this concern I let the participants see my interview questions beforehand, reviewed the interview transcripts, and made changes to this report where they deemed necessary. By respecting their privacy and dignity, the participants were able to pass any question they did not want to answer.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to my qualitative study. Some of the limitations are: the scope of the masters study project; the small sample size of only three interview participants; the pool of
participants only including educators, not parents or students; and the timing limitations. Because of the smaller scope of the study, I did not learn as much as I had hoped to, but the educator-participant interviews were very enlightening. However, since I only included three interview participants in this study, the interviews only address a small viewpoint of the massive topic of gender, literacy, socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and whole host of other issues.

I am aware that my biases, privileges, and viewpoints might have affected my observations, research conclusions, and even my interviews of the teacher-participants. Furthermore, I hope none of the research I read, or interviews I conducted, do not advance any misogynist or sexist views. I understand the privileges that boys, men, and I have in this society. I recognize the amazing gains girls and women have fought for, and I do not want those gains to be lost. The literacy gender gap is an important issue, but teachers must also help all of their students struggling with learning literacy, regardless of the gender of the student.

**Strengths of the methodology**

One of the largest benefits of interviewing educators is prioritizing teachers’ voices. Too often researchers, working at universities, are the majority of voices on a topic, and they construct the vast majority of opinions on most areas of study. By promoting and valuing teachers, educators, and academic administrators, this study will bring important thoughts and opinions to a wider audience than an elementary classroom. Over the course of a long career, teachers learn a great amount from personal classroom experiences and are able to practice a variety of teaching strategies. I take joy in reporting and listening to those years of classroom experience and useful strategies from master teachers. I hope to create a strong research study, and look forward to other teachers reading and applying my findings to their own classrooms.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

In conducting my research, I interviewed two public school teachers and one catholic public school teacher from the greater Toronto area. Attached in the Appendix 2 are the questions I used for the interviews. For this paper, I am using aliases for the participant names to protect their anonymity and as part of my letter of consent for the interviews. I found similarities between the three participants and my Chapter 2 Literature Review. I felt the participants were in very much in agreement the majority of the time, but I observed a few differences between their beliefs, answers, and professional practices.

Throughout my three interviews, I found many similarities between boys and girls approaches to learning literacy, as well as differences between those genders. From the interviews, I came to understand three significant areas to the literacy development of both genders. Parental/adult involvement seemed incredibly important to developing strong and active readers, since parents are equal, partners with teachers in helping children become successful literacy learners. Motivation is vital for students to persist through literacy learning, picking up new books, and choosing literature that meets and extends their interests. Non-traditional texts such as eBooks, graphic novels, or websites can be more engaging, relatable, and technological than traditional texts such as paperback books.

Therefore, the five themes that emerged from the participants are: Gender Issues: Gender Neutrality & Differences; Parent & Adult Involvement; Teacher Considerations; Student Interests & Non-traditional Texts; and Student Behaviour. Chapter 4 is organized into these five themes, with subthemes included in each theme. Quotes from interview participants are included when appropriate. However, before getting into my themes I would like to include some
information about each participant.

Participant 1 is “Kinder,” a kindergarten teacher. Kinder has taught for the many decades, and has been at his current school for the past 15 years. Throughout his career, he taught hundreds of early learners, and practiced a strong literacy program in his classroom. Kinder teaches at an urban school with a range of students from different and diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds. While Kinder’s school is located in a gentrifying area of Toronto, many students in his class come from households at or below the poverty level.

Participant 2 is “Librarian,” a grade 4 and 5 teacher. Librarian taught for over a decade as a classroom teacher for grades 4, 5, and 6 as well as a teacher-librarian for all grades of her elementary school. As a teacher-librarian, she organized literacy programs and content to meet the needs of girls and boys in the elementary student population. Librarian teaches at an innercity school from a lower socioeconomic area of Toronto, with a diverse amount of students attending the school, or travelling in to attend her school. Librarian’s school has a low ratio of books to students.

Participant 3, “Junior,” was a grade 8 literacy teacher for three years, and currently works as an English Language Learner instructor for half of his day. During Junior’s three years of grade eight literacy, he taught in school located in a higher socioeconomic area of Toronto. About 30% of students were from a single-parent household, were new immigrants, and/or were located on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Many students had East Asian heritage, but the majority of the students were from European heritage and had a middle-class or upper-middle-class background. Junior commented that 70% of the students were high achievers with well-educated parents.
THEME 1: Gender Issues: Gender Neutrality & Gender Differences

Students come to school with their genders; usually their genders have formed at an early age. Teachers cannot ignore or disregard their students’ genders, whether their students are boys, girls, transgender, genderqueer, or other genders. Because gender is a social construction, it is partially built inside a child’s head from societal output and role restrictions (Booth, 2002). In order to look at the gender gap in literacy, I wanted to ask my participants about their experiences with boys and literacy. Additionally I wanted to know how boys acted differently from girls, and gauge the participants’ thoughts on gender issues. In the theme of gender neutrality and gender differences, participant subthemes are grouped into: gender neutrality; gender differences; gender conformity; and male conflict.

1.1 Gender Neutrality

Kinder spoke about a push in Toronto schools to recognize and practice gender neutrality. Teachers and administrators are consciously using gender neutral language and avoiding gendered phrasing such as: identifying all students with the phrases “boys & girls” or “ladies & gentlemen”; using “guys” as blanket terms referring to everyone; or calling boys “ladies” as a derogatory term against boy students acting emotional. Kinder spoke about starting to change his language and practices around identifying and separating students by his gender assumptions. This quote by Kinder demonstrates a change to a more diverse way of practicing non-gender based pedagogy.

I watch a lot of [videos on Youtube.com] . . . and actually looking at transgendered children and the damage, it does to them in terms of male-female stereotypes. I actually know a few transgendered people, and I’m thinking what am I doing? . . . Now I really try to use the child’s name or be non-gender based. (Kinder)
There are also many similarities between students who identify as boys or girls. Boys and girls read many of the same books, and prefer many of the same authors or genres. Librarian commented that she found a lot of girl students who were interested in realistic fiction that many of her boy students also enjoyed. Librarian even commented that many of her educational strategies to encourage reluctant girl readers worked in similar ways with reluctant boy readers.

The thing that I have noticed, and maybe it is true or maybe it is not. If it works for boys, it will work for girls. My reluctant female readers, if I use the same strategies with them, as I have with the boys, they tend to work. (Librarian)

1.2 Gender Differences

While all three participants agreed there were similarities between boy and girl students, they additionally spoke about observed differences. Girl students appear to choose from a wide variety of literature, whereas boy students seemed to have more limited choices when selecting books. Kinder spoke about his students and noticed:

Whereas girls when they do borrow a book, the girls choose from a wide variety. The boys it tends to be the photographic books, the science books, that stereotypical bikes, tools, animals, that kind of thing. Science-based. Whereas the girls are looking at more fiction, as opposed to non-fiction. My highest readers tend to be girls. (Kinder)

The participants noticed students who are boys tend to prefer more non-fiction texts, when compared to students who are girls. Junior observed his boy students responded positively to texts with male protagonists, but did not respond as positively to texts with female protagonists. Frequently, girls read or listened to texts with protagonists of any gender, and did not object to male lead characters to the degree boys took issue with female lead characters. Librarian commented that there are always exceptions, and many boys did enjoyed books with strong female protagonists such as Katniss from *The Hunger Games* series of books, written by Suzanne Collins. Librarian commented on a girl student of hers.
My one student who is super into Eric Walters, she would claim that she is not a reader but it is just the genre. She didn’t like the same genres like most of the other girls in the class. She was into realistic fiction that was based on true events; she was very much into what would be stereotyped as “boy reading.” (Librarian)

Junior observed that boy students who struggled with literacy were also likely to struggle with other subjects.

I think that my struggling readers were also struggling math students and science students. Whereas girls could be both. [A girl] who was struggling in math might be strong in writing, and vice versa. I think boys are more blanket all or nothing. The girls would be more of a mixed bag. (Junior)

Junior and librarian both acknowledged their boy students were less willing than girls to initiate booktalk with the other boy students or the teacher.

I found though that the book talks themselves were difficult. Not the content, but just pulling it out of the boys. The excitement was there when they all got the books, I bought eight copies, they all got their own, they were like ‘oh this is cool,’ looking at the pictures, and just kind of flipping through it, but to have any meaningful discussion around, they kind of didn’t know how to do that. It was very teacher-led, teacher-driven, and then one word responses. (Junior)

1.3 Gender Conformity

Students still appear to come to school with their own preconceived notions of acceptable gender expressions. Librarian described her girl students as “teacher-pleasers” who were more likely than boys to read something the teacher requested, chose, or assigned. Librarian said, “[Girls] know the expectations; they have to read.” The librarian spoke about a previous experience with gender conformity that she had in her library. She decided to create a “boy” bin of books that was blue, and a “girl” bin of books that was pink. She put books that she considered more masculine in the pink girl bin, and books she considered more feminine in the blue bin. This experiment did not last long and confused the students.

The kids were like; I think this is mixed up. And I was like, who’s to say? The kids just
felt that I was weird and they took what they want. Well the book bins was one of those short thing, because they would just fix it. So you would have to go back and keep switching things because they just got it in their head, no this isn’t the way it is supposed to be. So I thought it was counter-productive, so I did get rid of it. (Librarian)

1.4 Male Conflict

Kinder wondered what role the media plays in promoting male conflict and violence in literacy. He found that his students who happened to be boys were more interested in superhero literature or comics with physical confrontations. Some of the students’ parents complained about the conflict and fights in the literature, so Kinder tried to foster a safer space environment free from violence and weapons. Junior commented that his boy students did not enjoy fictional literature as much as non-fiction, but if there was male conflict in the fictional literature then they were more likely to engage with the story.

Going to the library, some of the boys, now and again would grab a book about sharks or a book about weaponry or history of war. Fiction? No, unless it was a story that had some sort of male conflict or action, or science fiction. (Junior)

Junior noticed how much his students spoke about video games during school hours, and attributed the game, Call of Duty, as piquing boy students’ interest in war and weapons. Junior tried to use the boys’ interest in male conflict to find more academically relevant lessons, having the most success when reading the book The Outsiders. He also created a productive and engaging writing assignment about current conflicts around the world and child soldiers involved in horrific wars.

It’s just about trying to find a way to weave it in. We did read stuff about child soldiers, and that was fascinating and they loved that stuff. That was interesting. (Junior)
Theme 2: Parent and Adult Involvement

A parent, guardian, family member, or adult has a substantial impact on literacy development of a child. Parents/Adults are usually the first literacy teachers for their child, and their support can be from supplying texts, to teaching the alphabet, to encouraging writing skills, to reading aloud to the child. Teachers and parents can forge a powerful relationship, especially when they respect each other, listen to one another, and have the student/child well being in mind. This theme looks at what parents/adults bring into the parent-teacher relationship in terms of literacy development for boys struggling with reading. In the theme of parent, adult, and teacher contributions, participant subthemes are grouped into: parent, guardian, sibling, or adult contributions; and opportunity.

2.1 Parent, Guardian, Sibling, or Adult Involvement

The participants all spoke highly of parent, guardian, sibling, or adult involvement with the child’s literacy development and education. If there were a culture of reading in the household, the student, regardless of gender, would benefit from home involvement and exposure to literacy. Kinder acknowledged the educational gains a parent or adult can help foster before the children arrived to his kindergarten class.

I find my kids who have really really solid beginning reader skills. There is a lot of parental engagement. They have read to their kids. The kids already come to school knowing print is left-to-right, top-to-bottom. They already have strategies like looking at the pictures to figure out what the words are. Most kids whom, you send a borrow-a-book home, it comes back, and it hasn’t even been taken out to the bag. And you go. “Oh.” (Kinder)

Librarian shared an anecdotal observation about one of the boy students in her class and the contribution his sibling had on his reading development.

You can’t put enough importance on the home aspect and having that support at home,
whether it is parental or sibling. I had one boy who made such great gains in his reading, but it was his older sister who was reading with him. She made a point of reading to him, and that made a huge impact. (Librarian)

Parental involvement is incredibly important for a child’s literacy development. It seems very important that the parent/adult should create and model a positive literacy home environment.

2.2 Opportunity

The consensus among the participants was not all students, regardless of gender, had the same opportunities because of factors such as socioeconomics or ethnocultural backgrounds. Some students might have struggled with literacy because they lacked access to books or the ability to visit a library on their own. Junior observed there was a greater amount of challenges that boys from innercity schools faced, compared to boys from a more affluent areas.

If you’re a boy in an innercity school, you’re going to have much more challenges in overcoming literacy . . . I think there are a lot more supports in place in different socioeconomic neighbourhoods. So there is that element. (Junior)

THEME 3: Teacher Contributions

Besides a parent/adult, teachers are probably the strongest supports for helping to develop a child’s literacy skills. Every teacher has a wide variety of strategies they use to improve each student’s reading and writing capabilities. As students pass through a teacher’s classroom every year, some literacy strategies are more effective than others are. There is not one perfect strategy for all boys, because just as boys are not all the same, no two teachers are the same either. I wanted to hear about the three participants successes and struggles in addressing boys’ issues with literacy. In the theme of teacher strategies, participant subthemes are grouped into: special education and resource reading programs; inquiry-based learning; separate classes;
attention/behavioural; persistence; and booktalk.

3.1 Special Education and Resource Reading Programs

The entirety of the group noticed their special education classes, for students with exceptionalities, seemed to have majorities of boy students. Kinder said, “The majority of the people who went to reading recovery at our school were boys.” Students have about three months of reading recovery classes to bring up their literacy skills. Kinder spoke about early identification of struggling readers, and how that process had changed over the years.

Last year our whole focus was on early literacy, and trying to get our [Developmental Reading Assessment] scores higher. Because in kindergarten by the time they exit [senior kindergarten], the expectation is that kids will be at a level 6. Ten years ago, it was a level 2. Then they said smaller class sizes. Then with implementation of [full-day kindergarten], they bumped it up to 4. And about three years ago, they bumped it up to 6. So by the time kids exit [kindergarten], they need to be really solid beginning readers, or else they flag them at-risk. (Kinder)

3.2 Inquiry-based Learning

Kinder has switched his class to an inquiry-based learning approach that is more geared to listening to student voices. Inquiry is a hard process to plan for, because you are observing and following the students’ interests. With inquiry-based learning, Kinder found his students reading more, especially the boys struggling with literacy.

Especially with the drive to go to inquiry-based learning, if students are becoming engaged in inquiry, you can find reading that will dovetail that, come along side, and hopefully because they are engaged in the inquiry, they will also be engaged in the literacy instruction that parallels it. (Kinder)

3.3 Separate Classes

All three participants were unsure of the results of creating boys-only classes for specific
subjects such as literacy. Junior saw the immediate benefit of separating classes by gender in order to select books that were more engaging for the specific gender of the boys-only or girls-only classes. Librarian mentioned the inadequate comparison of boys-only private schools to boys-only public schools.

Of course, their achievement is different. If it is a whole boys school they are going to be the most well behaved, the brightest kids, and if they don’t toe the line, they are asked to leave. Whereas in public education we take everyone. (Librarian)

Librarian also pointed out that just separating students by gender does not solve many issues with struggling boy readers. From Librarian’s personal experience teaching an all-girl class, she still had struggling girl readers.

Even with [an] all girl class, there are girls who are underachieving in literacy. Just because you are a girl, it does not necessarily mean you will achieve in literacy. (Librarian)

**THEME 4: Student Interests and Non-traditional Texts**

When learning literacy, a boy should have motivation, engagement, and passion. Struggling readers have a hard enough time learning how to read. Teachers might want to be wary of making a struggling boy reader exert so much effort on a book that is uninterested or boring. The teacher might find less resistance or reluctance to read, when they are able to have a conversation with the boy reader, and find texts that truly peak the interests. I wanted to ask my participants about their thoughts on student interests and non-traditional texts that might satisfy a boy's interests. In the theme of student interests, participant subthemes are grouped into: personal interest; graphic novels; and video games.

**4.1 Personal Interest**

Altogether, the participants remarked on the importance of teachers to supply students
with interesting texts. Librarian related her thoughts on listening to student voices and noticing what literacies, the students enjoy. She acknowledged many of the texts provided by school libraries, classroom book collections, or personal teacher books might not be the most engaging texts for boys. Librarian said girl students were able to overcome reading texts without as much engagement or personal interest, as boy students.

That is something that I guess that most students have to overcome, but I think it is particularly difficult for boys, especially if they are not into narrative stories. That engagement piece isn’t there, so if the engagement isn’t there it becomes more difficult in that sense. (Librarian)

Junior said there were direct correlations between high interest books and the amount of work he received from his boy students.

Whereas the boys, if I didn’t get buy-in, I’d get maybe 20% of the work. Or two boys out of ten who would do it. So I had to go out of my way to pick stories and find stuff, like oh, a war story, or a story about a kid who has to fight a bully. Stuff that would appeal to adolescent boys. (Junior)

Librarian and Junior both mentioned literacy gap resources they had used in their teaching practice to help boy students become more engaged. Junior used *Me Read, No Way* (2004) and Librarian mentioned *Even Hockey Players Read* (2002) as two significant resources that supported better practices with boy readers. They tried to implement boys reading clubs, but were not able to sustain the clubs over the course of the first year of practice.

**4.2 Graphic Novels**

Junior found graphic novels were engaging for his boy students. He read one of the original graphic novels, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and had some success. Junior said graphic novels are a possibility for student engagement, “But you can only use that every so often. Eventually you have to read a longer piece.” Librarian has taught with graphic novels for many
years and seen the students’ interest levels rising, especially among girls as well.

For a while there I would have said boys are more into graphic novels, but over the last few years I have been seeing a lot more girls getting in to comics. (Librarian)

4.3 Video Games

Junior’s class had grade seven and eight boys (ages 12 to 13), so they had access to more video games in their homes. Junior felt that video games were starting to replace books and magazines at home, and he definitely found his students talking about video games far more than books.

With the boys, really what was on their minds was their passion for video games. They would talk about video games all the time. So nobody would bring up books, it would just be video games video games video games. (Junior)

Kinder found a gender divide among his students when it came time to use the computer during class.

PBSkids.com have really interesting games, but to play the games you have to be able to read. [Boys] are more interested in that than the girls. The girls have no interest. My girls never use the computer. They would rather use the iPad. (Kinder)

Librarian used video game interest as an access point to promote literacy that was specifically about video games. From books about the game Minecraft, to websites that gave gaming tips, Librarian found her students reading texts above their grade level so they could accomplish more in a video game.

With things like some video games being more mainstream there are a lot more books being written in that kind of theme or genre. So, you see a lot more boys reading those kinds of books. Any Minecraft book for example . . . I do run a Minecraft club, even though it is a mixed gender club it does have a majority of boys. I find they are all reading the Minecraft books voraciously, which tend to be above grade level for most of them because the language is quite technical. (Librarian)
THEME 5: Student Behaviour

For my first and final theme, I wanted to explore student behaviour to help understand what boys are truly struggling against on their path towards literacy competency. In the Gender Issues theme, the participants spoke about differences between students who are gendered as boys or gendered as girls. It is probably accurate to say there are definite differences between boys and girls. I wanted to dig into the differences and try to find out how boys might be at a disadvantage because of their gendered male behaviours. For this theme, I asked my participants to explain any behaviour they observed with their struggling boy students. In the theme of student behaviour, participant subthemes are grouped into: attention; and persistence.

5.1 Attention

Junior spoke about attention and how the boys struggling with literacy would look for distractions from their work.

The struggling boys would just look for any distraction, like in the library trips, when they were taking out silly books, just try to make jokes in a little group, anything that would create a distraction in class. (Junior)

Kinder found one of his boy students with attention and behavioural issues was able to focus on reading much better when sitting next to someone who kept the child on track.

I put him beside the same girl everyday. He needs that consistency. She tolerates his behaviour. She role models for him about using your finger for reading, that type of thing. She is a really good influence. (Kinder)

5.2 Persistence

All three participants stressed the importance of persistence in finding the will power to continue reading or writing. Kinder shared a wonderful story about a student who was able to
read and write, but had little motivation to exhibit those skills. Kinder sat down with the boy student and negotiated a work schedule together.

Well it was like illustrating his poem book, and he said, No, I don’t want to do it. And so he started to cry, and I said well look, it’s actually not a choice. This is something you have to do every week, and he said yeah, but I would rather build and that kind of thing. And I said to him, Okay, here’s the deal. On Mondays this is what you have to do; you have to illustrate your poem book, you have to do your writing, and you have to complete whatever math activity we are doing. Then, you can have the free choice. He actually is okay with that. (Kinder)

Librarian argued that boy students might not have had the persistence that her girl students had, but this needs to change so both genders are achieving to their highest potentials.

I think there are a lot of societal constructs around [persistence]. Whether it is just as I was saying with the girls, girls are just expected to behave a certain way and therefore they live up to that expectation. If the expectation is that well we are not going to push the boys because boys don’t like to read. Well then, how is that going to change anything?
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

The interview participants all recognized the issue of boys underperforming girls in literacy, and all tried many different strategies to boost boys’ literacy skills. They approached the problem through the practice of first helping and identifying struggling readers. Secondly, the participants found that the majority of their struggling readers were boys. I had hoped to find a main cause for boys’ literacy underperformance, but in completing this project, I have more questions than answers. I did find many wonderful strategies in my research and from my interviews. Tackling the issue of the so-called literacy gender gap will probably include a variety of different strategies and not all will be successful with every boy or girl student.

My themes were Gender Issues: Gender Neutrality & Differences; Parent & Adult Involvement; Teacher Considerations; Student Interests & Non-traditional Texts; and Student Behaviour. Educators should walk a fine line between acknowledging gender differences when appropriate, yet practicing gender neutrality when speaking to groups of students. Gender stereotypes, gender-typing, and enforcing traditional masculine roles might factor into a boy’s decision (or indecision) to read more often (Martino, 2003). If a boy does not believe reading is important to his life, or possibly even believe males do not read, he might lose motivation and the persistence to learn literacy (Booth, 2002). A teacher should be aware that not all boys, but those boys struggling the most, would need extra support and guidance to help them foster a love of reading.

Junior stressed how important a parent/adult is in a child’s literacy skills. The teacher and the parent/adult must work together. From David Booth’s book Even Hockey Plays Read, he said, “The more parents know about the school, and the more teachers know about the home, the
greater the chance of developing the child’s print power.” (Booth, 2002, p. 99). The parent/adult must be focused on their child’s literacy development. They should be instilling a passion for learning in their child, especially if the child is struggling with reading. A child should not be turned on to reading in the classroom, then go home and have a parent/adult turn them off to reading. The parent/adult should build a home life that is conducive to fostering an expectation of literacy, and a drive to improve the child’s reading development. Even though economically well-off parents are more likely to reproduce well-educated children, that does not mean a child is destined to struggle with literacy because of the socioeconomic or ethnocultural background of their parents (McIntosh & Munk, 2012). Lack of access to literacy at home and not enough time spent reading with a parent/adult are hindrances to literacy development, but could be overcome with free libraries, free websites, sibling or family involvement, reading & re-reading whatever few children’s books are available, borrowing books from a teacher or another parent, or a wide variety of ideas to bring more literacy into the home.

Teachers have a large role to play in the literacy development of the students in their classrooms. One of the biggest things a teacher can do is communicate effectively with the parent/adult of a boy (or girl) student struggling with literacy. The teacher should advocate the student reads 5 to 15 minutes a day, every day, to help expose the student to more literacy. Additionally, inquiry-based learning is vitally important to help students explore and achieve on their own (Berghoff, 1998). Furthermore, teacher-led booktalk is not as good as student-led booktalk, and it can be hard to sustain without student participation.

Struggling boy and girl readers should be allowed to practice their literacy development with texts that are highly engaging and interesting for each individual reader. Those engaging texts might be non-fiction texts, graphic novels, digital forms of literacy, social media, or other
non-traditional texts. The participants I interviewed supplied individual boys with personally engaging texts almost as accommodations or modifications to help each boy succeed on their own. For boy students, the teacher might want to provide texts about video games, popular cultural, or culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Watson, et al, 2010). Just as Kinder negotiated with one of his reluctant readings, it is important for teachers to be willing and open to negotiating with struggling readers to find successful work schedules or literacy expectations.

While personal interest is important, teachers and parents/adults can promote boy students' persistence behaviour. Play is important to boys, so literacy might need to be more playful, humorous, or exciting to boys to buy into improving their reading skills. Self-motivation and persistence are required to progress and be successful in literacy (Luo & Hughes, 2009). Play can be more important to boys than academics, with play adding to procrastination in finishing school work, reading books, or writing assignments. The three participants all commented that girls appeared to be more mature, more focused, more independent, and do not have to be as engaged as boys in order to pay attention or read boring texts. The boys struggling with literacy or literacy engagement will find ways to distract themselves and not have to confront or acknowledge their reading or writing issues. If a boy is not engaged, they might rush their work, fake reading, and or not treat their academics seriously. Motivation, engagement, fun challenging texts, and curiosity all aid boys with their literacy development.

**Implications/Recommendations:**

I would want to develop a curriculum and professional practice that meets the engagement levels that struggling boy readers need, while fostering a positive masculinity or gender-neutrality that embraces boys/men as readers and writers. Teachers should watch their
own language and use gender neutral language to help deconstruct negative gender stereotypes, especially gender-typing boys as non-readers. Too often boys respond and choose literature or non-fiction books focused on violence, war, fighting, or excessive conflict, potentially because of traditional male gender roles. As a new teacher, I would really want to avoid this type of literature or subject matter. However, at some point it is probably more important that the boys struggling the most with literacy start reading something, even if all they want to read are books reinforcing traditional male roles. I would hope I could steer boy students away from such stereotypically male literature, because I think deep down in societal masculinity there is an aversion to reading fictional books that have a wider variety of emotions beyond angst, anger, or violent interactions.

In their classrooms, teachers should provide more non-traditional texts such as graphic novels, social media, websites, e-books, or video games as texts. Comics or graphic novels are not always educational or teachable, so professional discretion must be applied to provide academic graphical texts to boy readers. Teachers must work with parents/adults to help provide access to books and most importantly, time in front of books, to help children with their reading skills.

It might be more important for boy’s to succeed in literacy class than girls to succeed, because without a competence with literacy boys will struggle in other subjects such as math, science, social studies, etc. Literacy improvement can come with persistence and grit, but if boys are giving up too quickly on literature, they find too boring, then their lack of literacy skills will affect the entire academic career. One of the more successful strategies to foster a love of reading is to find particularly what boy readers might want to read, and supplying those texts specifically for those readers. To find texts for boys, there are bibliographies or reading lists created and
published by professional educators, which supply books titles for boys’ interests (Booth, 2002; Redford, 2015). In trying to raise male engagement with literacy, I would seek out texts with plenty of humour, science facts, weird trivia, and video game subject matter. It is important to remember not all boys are alike and they do not all like the same things. From *Boys’ Literacy Attainment* the authors wrote, “It is clear that an approach that ignores differentiation among boys and in their literacy successes and failures would offer few possibilities for implementing effective change” (Booth et. al, N.D., p. 7). There is not one ‘kind’ of book for all boys, and within the world of choosing books for boys, a teacher must consider differentiated instruction along with texts for reluctant readers (Booth, 2002).

Gender is an important factor in determining students’ literacy achievement, but I feel other factors such, as socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity cannot be overlooked. The gender gap in literacy is just one piece of the puzzle in addressing the opportunity gap, where students with less societal opportunities are struggling in all subjects compared to students with more opportunities or privileges. A teacher cannot and should not unteach gender, so they must understand how gender affects they students’ academic performances. Because gender affects everyone differently, the teacher should attempt to understand students individually, and find their interests. A teacher must walk a fine line with constantly using gender-neutral language in their classroom, while sometimes knowing when to appropriately use gendered language with students.

While I believe there is some type of systemic cause for the literacy gender gap, I am not sure there is one solution to help all boy students. I think teachers should assess each student individually, then develop, and implement individual strategies or what each student needs for success. A teacher must work with the parent/adult to give a struggling reader a variety of
strategies, texts, and motivation to read. Finally, as a teacher, I am not here to make the gifted students a little less bored; I am here to help the struggling learners find their gifts and build a passion for knowledge.

**Limitations**

As I listed before in Chapter 3, there are limitations to my qualitative study. I felt the limited scope of the masters study project created too small of a sample size with only three interview participants. The viewpoints of three interviewees address only a small amount of the massive topic of gender, literacy, socioeconomics, race, ethnicity, culture, and whole host of other issues.

Additionally my biases, privileges, and viewpoints could contaminate my observations, research conclusions, and even my interviews of the teacher-participants. Furthermore, I do not want this paper to advance any misogynist or sexist views, and I hope my writing is non-oppressive. I understand the privileges that boys, men, and I have in this society. I recognize the amazing gains girls and women have fought for, and I do not want those gains to be lost. The literacy gender gap is an issue that affects so many boys’ academics, and teachers must help all students struggling with learning literacy, regardless of the gender of the student.

Finally, I wanted to restate that I used a more conservative definition a “boy,” and I feel the studies and interviews I used have unfortunately lacked many strategies for transgendered boys or genderqueer boys. This is certainly an area that is undeveloped in the scholarly literature and I have felt this limitation in my study.
Further study

The literacy gender gap is an issue worthy of inquiry and debate. While there are many possible causes for the gap, there are just as many potentially successful strategies to help teachers reach boy learners. I believe the better strategies for raising literacy rates for all students, will be approaches that do not focus solely on the gender of the students, but one that also address economic status, race, and ethnicity. Because I wanted to dig deeper into teacher strategies for the literacy gender gap, I conducted my study and interviews on the topic of perceived impacts of gender on elementary boy students’ literacy development and engagement. I have gained many strategies I would love to implement in my future classroom, and I look forward to reading further studies on the literacy gender gap. After conducting this study, my biggest wonder is about systemic masculinity, and whether traditional male gender roles cause boys to believe, men do not read. This is certainly a topic that might need to be explored in a delicate and unbiased way, but one area I would love to know more about.
REFERENCES


A GENDERED GAP

Types: Association with Long-Term Achievement Trajectories


APPENDIX A

Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: Monday, January 5th, 2015

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and I am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the literacy gender gap (the observed literacy underachievement of boy students compared to the higher literacy scores of girl students) for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major research assignment for my program. I think that your knowledge, experience, and voice will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Mary Lynn Tessaro. My research supervisor is Dr. Larry Swartz. The purpose of this requirement is to allow me to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40-minute interview that will be digitally recorded for audio. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people
who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the digital recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. I will protect your personal data, recorded interview, and email correspondence with encryption in a secure location. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy with the ability to make changes.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Shannon Dunham
A GENDERED GAP

Researcher’s name: Shannon Dunham

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Instructor’s name: Dr. Mary Lynn Tessaro

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Research supervisor’s name: Dr. Larry Swartz

Phone number: 416-978-2396 Email: larry.swartz@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Shannon Dunham and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date: ___________________
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Introduction or Preliminary Questions
   
a. How long have you taught in the Toronto public school system?

b. Which grades have you taught?

c. Which grades are you currently teaching?

d. Can you briefly describe the diversity of the student population of your classroom?

e. What is the gender ratio of boys to girls in your current or most recent class?

2. What similarities and differences have you observed between girl and boy readers?

3. From your experiences, how would you describe the ease or difficulty of literacy achievements for boys compared to girls?

4. What do you think are some causes for boys’ underachievement in literacy?

5. Have you noticed any trends with boy students’ literacy development - positive or negative - that are different from previous years?

6. Do perceptions of masculinity or non-masculinity in certain genres or forms of writing have an impact on boy readers and their literacy achievements?

7. How do you instructionally respond to the ways in which gender assumptions have an affect on boy students?
   
a. How do you promote literacy engagement and interest for all students in your classroom?

8. What strategies, if any, might you use that would be unique to the boy readers in your classroom?

9. Has the entrance of less conventional reading materials (comics, e-readers, electronic
games, etc.) into the classroom helped or hindered boys’ literacy development?

10. What benefits or limitations have you observed when you have organized or separated your classroom by gender grouping for academic subjects, lessons, or activities during regular school hours?

11. What are your thoughts on boys-only classes, book clubs, or spaces?

12. What advice would you give to a beginning educator to address any issues with boys and literacy?

13. From your experiences, do different populations of boys face different challenges in overcoming struggles with literacy?

   a. In your opinion, which boys are facing greater challenges in relation to overcoming struggles with literacy?

14. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to add to the conversation?