

## The State of Canadian Boyhood—Beyond Literacy to a Holistic Approach

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### Abstract

In the new millennium, international interest has developed on the trouble of boys, both in and out of school, with a particular focus on boys’ deficiencies in literacy skills. This interest has prompted research and action plans in Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and to a more regionalized or provincial capacity within Canada, such as in the Toronto District School Board and the province of Ontario. However, in Canada, amidst a popular discourse that underscores the problems facing boys by focusing on literacy, many of the stark and sweeping trends regarding Canadian boys remain obscured. This paper has four major components that are purposely provocative in order to interrogate many widely held assumptions. Firstly, we provide the overall impetus for this paper, background caveats, and the concept of strategic essentialism. Secondly, we introduce a synopsis of several countries’ initiatives to address nationally boys’ problems, and then the prevalent literacy movement seen in the representative province of Ontario, Canada. Thirdly, we produce statistical indicators of school engagement and achievement for Canadian boys as compared to girls, and further patterns regarding their physical and mental health, as an overview of the state of Canadian boyhood. Lastly, we offer several paths for further consideration in Canada, (a) recommending more complex desegregation of the data to understand with more precision which boys are struggling, using an analysis that goes beyond gender to encompass race, class, sexual orientation, disability, and geographical location; (b) offering as an example, an empirical study of adult role models in Canada, and the effects on boys; (c) suggesting a broader social understanding of gender, that is complicit with the boy code; and (d) encouraging movement towards addressing Canadian boys’ issues using the aforementioned trends and recommendations, with not only regional and provincial approaches, but also a national and holistic lens, too.

*Keywords:* strategic essentialism; boys and literacy; boys and mental health; boys and schooling

## The State of Canadian Boyhood—Beyond Literacy to a Holistic Approach

Since the onset of the new millennium, international interest has increased regarding the difficulties facing boys in school, particularly literacy, prompting research and action plans in Australia, England, and increasingly the United States. In Ontario, Canada, efforts to address boys' problems in education continue to focus primarily on literacy, making invisible the myriad problems many boys confront, regarding school achievement and engagement and physical and mental health. Local school boards and even some provincial initiatives are addressing boys' issues in Canada, but as in Ontario, they tend to emphasize literacy. This obscures attaining a big picture of many of the issues confronting Ontarian and Canadian boys in their daily lives. Indeed, though many academic papers attempt to narrow down a concept, in this case we are doing the contrary—providing a holistic lens to the state of Canadian boyhood that extends beyond literacy.

Beyond the ensuing overview of Australia's, England's, the United States', and Canada's mostly boys and literacy movements, Gosse (2012) points out that it is time to broaden the discourse from boys and literacy to a more holistic conversation so more questions may be asked, and creative research undertaken, and to disrupt ongoing assertions about male privilege and power. Those willing to delve into the ways that many males lack situational and systemic power run the risk of being characterized as provocative, interruptive, and/or disruptive in contrast to dominant discourse(s). Ultimately, studying boys (and men) as other than victimizers and the privileged can and does engender moral outrage, whereas the problems of boys and literacy seem a relatively safer, more reasonable site for academic, educational, and media discourse. To interrogate this, Gosse (2012) highlights lagging literacy rates of boys and, moreover, that males suffer significantly higher rates of suicide, incarceration, homelessness, addiction, and workplace injuries and fatalities, as well as derivative buffoon and brutish stereotypes in popular culture, to drive home the vulnerability of many Canadian males. Boys' complex identities become lost in a widespread accusatory, and sometimes befuddled, dialogue of "problem boys," centering on their so-called propensity for misbehaviours or lack of control in class, and their literacy struggles. This serves to reinscribe the stereotypes of the "errant schoolboy" until it likely becomes a negative, self-fulfilling prophecy. In this paper, we suggest that current initiatives for boys continue to lack Connell's (1996) visionary inclusion of discussion of masculinities, power, oppression, and domination. We also show that school board, provincial, national, and international data can promote the development of a holistic lens for better understanding the challenges facing Canadian boys.

Therefore, we employ what is termed *strategic essentialism*, to delve into the complex issues regarding Canadian boys. Introduced by the Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, strategic essentialism involves use of group identity, as a basis for political struggle and praxis (Wolff, 2007). Although Gosse is a poststructuralist, and Arnocky an ecological behaviorist, strategic essentialism allows us to name an extremely complex group—boys, in order to provide a more comprehensive lens, through which to examine what is indeed a heterogeneous group, with varied identities affiliated to intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, geographical location, and language and culture. To further illustrate, the United States Civil Rights movement referenced Blacks, and the early Feminist Movement, women, in order to gain political solidarity, recognition, and also praxis; for years,

Dei (1993) had written about the challenges of Black youths in the Canadian public school system, thereby influencing the recent creation of a Black-focused school in Toronto (Cahis, 2005), despite persistent tensions surrounding race, class, and gender therein (MacDonald, 2011). Although naming is insidiously difficult and complex, it may sometimes achieve transformational goals, subvert commonly accepted knowledge, and afford voice and agency to the voiceless, or bring to light that which is known, but not acknowledged.

Following this introduction, we next present a synopsis of several countries' initiatives to address boys' problems in national ways, in contrast to the predominant literacy movement seen in the Canadian province of Ontario, as representative of Canadian provinces and territories. Then, we produce statistical indicators of school engagement and achievement for Canadian boys, as compared to girls, and further patterns regarding their physical and mental health, as an overview of the state of Canadian boyhood; much of the data stems from the Toronto District School Board, then provincial (largely Ontario), national (including Statistics Canada), and international sources. Finally, we conclude by offering several paths for further consideration in Ontario and all of Canada, recommending: (a) more complex desegregation of the data to understand with more precision which boys are struggling, using an analysis that goes beyond gender to encompass race, class, sexual orientation, disability, and geographical location; (b) an empirical study of adult role models in Canada, and the effects on boys; (c) broader social understanding of gender, that is complicit with the boy code; and (d) encouragement towards addressing boys' issues using the aforementioned trends and recommendations, but with a national and holistic lens, that expands beyond boys and literacy.

### **Synopsis of International Endeavors to Address Boys' and Schooling**

Australia, England, and the United States, have all launched research and in-school programs to address primarily boys' literacy. Some of these endeavors also address boys' so-called troubling behaviors, but fall short of an intersectional identity analysis, and a holistic approach, for notions of traditional literacy dominate, for example, reading, and writing. Perhaps, because of Canada's lack of a federal, governing education body such as the United States Department of Education, and because Canadian education is a provincial responsibility, Canada's efforts regarding boys fall short of a national perspective, highlighting the issue of boys and literacy to the virtual exclusion of other significant types of boys' achievements and engagement in school, and mental and physical health. What follows is a brief overview of major initiatives in these countries, concluding with a snapshot of initiatives within Ontario, as a representative Canadian province.

#### **Initiatives in Australia**

Trent and Slade (2001) submitted a report to the Parliamentary Enquiry on the Education of Boys entitled "Declining rates of achievement and retention: Perceptions of adolescent males." In this report, based on the views of 1800 adolescent boys, the authors recommend, for instance, a focus in preservice teacher education on understanding the lifestyles, views and aspirations of adolescent males, and how these impact schooling, retention, and achievement. They conclude that the boys interviewed found that the adult world was not genuinely listening to them.

Similarly, a mixed-methods Australian study entitled, *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys*, concluded that more boys than girls are identified as exhibiting negative behaviors and attitudes towards schooling; there was also a view that boys were treated more harshly for infractions, and that some boys are treated disrespectfully by teachers, in general. Amongst the findings, some boys report enjoying class more in single-sex settings, reading more often when given choices of reading materials, and a penchant for engaging in hands-on activities.

Furthermore, a program entitled, *Rock and Water, Working With Boys, Building Fine Men* (Ykema, 2000), was successfully implemented by educators in many Australian schools, but this was not mentioned in either report/study. Developed in Holland as part of the National Advisory Board for the prevention of sexual assault and self-defense in secondary education, and adapted to Australia, this program was originally intended to respond to beliefs that boys were frequently considered a nuisance: difficult to work with, at times annoying, and violent towards others. Educators eventually realized that the real cause of such behavior had not been discussed. Over several years, they developed this guide, which stresses the realization of individual possibilities, the discovery of personal paths towards becoming genuine, and a path characterized by meaningfulness and a sense of direction. It encompasses a workshop/discussion, self-reflection approach, and tackles deconstructing gender stereotypes in school, home, sports, and popular culture. Because it may fall into the cultural stereotype of boys and men as oppressors and sexual deviants, depending on its usages (see Johnstone & Preuss, 2007), caution should be taken to explore all facets of boyhood and manhood, including the positive.

Exploration of approaches that simultaneously delve into literacy, boys' engagement and achievement, and the construction of gendered identities and power (Connell, 1996), may lead to more in-depth social change and improvement in the lot of boys in Australia, and beyond.

### **Initiatives in England**

In England, Younger and Warrington (2005) identified strategies which appear to have the potential to make a difference to boys' (and girls') learning, motivation and engagement with their schooling, and, consequently, to raise levels of academic achievement. Amongst their findings, improving boys' literacy skills also figures strongly, with more effective application of multiple intelligences, development of mentorship programs, and peer leadership opportunities. In keeping with gender awareness, a central focus on the arts across primary schools, with artists-in-residence arrangements, poetry weeks, dance sessions run by professional dancers, and drama productions, which allocated lead roles to disengaged boys, were embraced by certain schools. For any strategy to succeed, they identify leadership support and commitment by all staff, as well as a clearly articulated school climate, where high expectations are the norm, and boys' progress and achievements regularly celebrated.

A separate study by the Training and Development Agency for Schools of the Department for Education (2008) in London, England, found that 35 % of men felt that having a male primary teacher challenged them to work harder at school and 22 % believed that male primary teachers helped build their confidence while they were young. The men surveyed reported that they were more likely to approach male teachers with issues of bullying (50 %), problems at home (29 %) and questions about puberty (24 %). Male primary school teachers

have also acted as fundamental role models to one in two men (48 %). This brings to light another element in the teaching of boys that has yet to be more holistically explored—the debate of male role models in boys’ lives, including not only teachers, but also fathers or father figures, coaches, mentors, and advocates.

In Ontario, Gosse (2011c) debated the notion that any teacher will do as long as they are “good,” drawing from a survey of 223 male teachers, engagement with academic and professional literature, comparisons with the struggle for more diverse racial representation (as in the 90% White teaching staff of the United States), and the historical under-representation of women in law and medicine, for instance. Gosse concludes that school systems maintain a rigid code of White, middle-class norms, in which women have dominance, and males, both pupils and teachers, are stringently held in check, and regularly punished and policed, when interrupting the status quo. Minority teachers, including those that are male, can and do serve as positive role models, bringing their own perspectives and variations of which behaviours are acceptable, and enlarging the idea that teachers and professionals can be other than White, middle-class, and female.

### **Initiatives in the United States**

In the United States, national and progressive initiatives are underway that extend beyond boys and literacy. Judith Kleinfeld (2009) examines the state of American boyhood, using not only the commonly reviewed indicators of school achievement, but also mental health, premature death, injury, delinquency, and arrests. She concludes that boys are in trouble in many areas beyond the lower rates of literacy, including low grades and engagement in school, high dropout from school, and dramatically higher rates of placement in special education, suicide, premature death, injuries, and arrests. Girls, however, suffer from other problems, especially depression, suicidal ideation and attempts, eating disorders, and are less likely to achieve at the very highest levels in mathematics and science.

Kleinfeld is the director of the Boys Project, which has a mission to help young males develop their capabilities and reach the potential, aiming to showcase colleges, schools, teachers, and organizations that have succeeded in engaging young men, increasing their academic success and developing drive and ambition; to educate families, educators and the public about the challenges our young boys are facing; and to develop federal, state, and foundation initiatives that support relevant research and necessary legislative change. The Boys Project counts amongst its Board members William Farrell, author of several renowned books on males and masculinities (see, Farrell, 1993, 2005), Kevin Jennings (2005), well-known advocate for LGBT rights and advocacy, and William Pollock (1998, 2000), author of best-selling books on boyhood and boys’ voices.

At a White House Conference on Helping America’s Youth, Kleinfeld (2006) presented on five powerful strategies for connecting boys to school, as follows: Educate teachers on gender differences in development and learning; start school at a later age for slower developing boys; create “focus schools” which offer nurturing, personalized education; connect boys in groups with caring adults; and respect boys. She also alluded to the success of some single-sex schools, or Charter schools.

The recommendation to educate teacher or teacher candidates resonates with an Icelandic study (Johannesson, 2004), which paradoxically states that although individual differences are more important than gender differences, both in how students learn and even more in how teachers teach, nevertheless, teacher education must prepare teachers to meet needs of both male and female genders, as well as individuals. Primary schoolgirls were thought to be more conscientious and accurate in completing assignments and having the assignments “look nice,” and to be more in need of encouragement in independence and self-confidence; boys, on other hand, were believed to give in “rougher” assignments, to be more aggressive, both physically and in asking questions, more disruptive when uninterested, and in more in need of encouragement in disciplined study habits and manners.

To illustrate Kleinfeld’s inclusion of successful, single-sex schools, at the Excellence Boys Charter School of Bedford-Stuyvesant (Excellence Boys Charter School of Bedford-Stuyvesant, 2012), 90% of 4th graders scored advanced or proficient on the 2009 New York State English Language Arts Exam, and 100% of Excellence Boys scholars in Grades 3-5 scored advanced or proficient on the 2009 Math Exam. High expectations for achievement and behavior, mentoring, the participation of boys in diverse extracurricular activities, and partnering with families, involving regular phone calls and meetings, have been shown to be effective strategies and approaches. Similarly, attending a historically Black all-male college/university, young male students report a greater appreciation and acceptance pertaining to sexual orientation, gender, and socio-economic status, due in part to an environment of high expectations for academic achievement, but also the study and acceptance of diversity (Morehouse College Panel, 2010).

Most recently in the United States, William Farrell (2011) created a multi-partisan commission of 34 prominent authors, educators, researchers, and practitioners to accomplish three goals: (a) to investigate the status of boys and their journey into manhood, (b) to identify both surface and underlying problems confronting boys and men, and(c) to create a blueprint toward solutions. In 2011, they presented a “Proposal for President Obama to Create a White House Council on Boys to Men: Executive Summary” (Farrell, 2011). The commission identifies five components, with each of the five crisis components potentially handled by a different department of the government, and coordinated at the White House level:

1. Education. Boys are behind girls in almost every subject, especially reading and writing; yet boy-friendly programs (e.g., recess and vocational education) are being curtailed.
2. Jobs. Our sons are not being prepared for jobs where the jobs will be; yet women rarely marry men in unemployment lines.
3. Fatherlessness. A third of boys are raised in father-absent homes; yet boys and girls with significant father involvement do better in more than 25 areas.
4. Physical health. Life expectancy has gone from 1 to 5 years less for males than for females; yet, federal offices of boys and men’s health are non-existent.
5. Emotional health. Boys’ suicide rate goes from equal to girls’ suicide rates to 5 times girls’ between ages 13 and 20, as boys feel the pressures of the male role.

Although there has been no apparent United States federal government action so far, Dr. Farrell is now purported to be lobbying both the White House, and the Romney campaign to create a White House Council on Men and Boys at some point in the future. Therefore, in the United States, awareness of the need for a more holistic approach to boys' education, and social growth, is indeed growing, and at a faster pace than in Canada.

### **Initiatives in Canada**

In Canada, educational discourse, more so than Australia, England, and the United States, continues to privilege the discourse of boys and literacy. To date, there has been no national endeavor to address boys' literacy and no attempt to encompass the broader social, physical and mental health issues confronting many Canadian boys. Though there have been provincial and school board initiatives, they fall short of a holistic view of Canadian boys.

To illustrate, in Ontario in 2002, a conference was held in Toronto entitled, *Garçons Canadiens, Histoires de Silence / Canadian Boys, Hidden Stories*. Co-organized by Toronto psychologist Fred Mathews, this conference was cross-disciplinary and community reaching, involving seminars on such wide-ranging topics as "Male Youth in the Criminal Justice System" (Finlay & Keewatin, 2002), "Young Males and Substance Abuse" (Hall, 2002), and "Sexual Abuse of Boys and the Use of Boys in Pornography" (Gillespie & Leaver, 2002). It also received media attention (Gearson, 2002). However, it has not been replicated since, nor has a national forum specific to male youth been convened.

Incongruously, media debate continues to ebb and flow regarding boys and education. A recent national *Globe and Mail* series on "Failing Boys," addressed sundry topics, such as developmental differences between boys and girls (Hammer, 2010a), the importance of extra-curricular activities for boys (Lorinc, 2010), and whether we are treating boyhood as a disease, with over-medication for ADHD, for example (Abrahams, 2010). Soon thereafter, the national Canadian magazine, *MacLean's*, produced a lengthy article entitled, "Are We Raising our Boys to be Underachieving Men" (Intini, 2010), in which similar issues of academic underachievement, university enrolment, male role models, and the dearth of male teachers were addressed.

Furthermore, although there have been initiatives within provinces and school boards, these mostly focus on boys and literacy, often conflated with boys' apparent lack of motivation. In Ontario, a wide-sweeping study produced a valuable resource entitled, *The Road Ahead: Boys' Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project 2005 to 2008* (Bodkin et al., 2009), involving 145 schools from English-language boards. To paraphrase, within a framework of differentiated instruction, they found a number of useful strategies to motivate boys, and also to increase their literacy skills, including the following: using materials of interest to boys, valuing social interactions and discussion amongst boys, providing boys with choice of reading materials, respecting boys' voices, and the engagement of parents-guardians, and role models from the community. Increased collaboration amongst teachers, and purposeful development of positive school climates, as in England and Australia, were also core components to improvement in boys' literacy in this Ontario study. However, many Ontarian teachers are unaware of this resource, let alone teachers in other parts of Canada.

Similarly, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), one of the largest school boards in North America, has been proactive in addressing the problems facing diverse male pupils. They have produced reports, such as, *Equally Prepared for Life? How Male and Female Students Perform in Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Schools* (Organizational Development/Research and Information Services (TDSB), 2009), and *Single-Sex Schools: A Review of the Literature* (Erling & O'Reilly, 2009). The TDSB created a Gender Education Committee to explore the challenges of diverse girls and boys. Dialogue has in part led to the creation of a Boys' Leadership Academy, which opened September 2012, having garnered provincial political support (Leslie, 2009). Within the TDSB, in addition to many programs of choice, from a Triangle Program for LGBTTIQ students to a choir school, there are also several dozen single-sex classrooms for both boys and girls in over 70 schools. A recent Summer Institute for the Learning of Boys was held, featuring keynote speakers, Douglas Gosse (2010), Avis Glaze, and TDSB Director Christopher Spence, all with background in differentiation, and the particularities of diverse populations of boys.

Some of these TDSB (and international) initiatives partially hinge on a positivist approach, contending that boys have developmental and brain differences from girls, are slower to learn to read, and require more movement and active learning in schools. However, educational expectations may also be lower for boys, and boys may receive less praise than many girls (C. M. Spence, 2006, 2008), as evidenced in the harsher treatment of some boys in the Australian study (Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002). A Boys2Men program in various schools in the TDSB differs from the Australian, Rock and Water, Working with Boys, Building Fine Men (Ykema, 2000) program in that the boys sign up for a mentor who works with them throughout the year to discuss homework, assignments, and test preparation, but is similar in that mentors also provide guidance, helping boys work out their personal and school related challenges so they can build strong character and a sense of pride in themselves (Toronto District School Board, 2012). As in England, too, an infusion of arts in the curricula for boys may help them gain an education that views drama, art, and creativity as normal, rather than gay, sissy, or "for girls." The arts are core to human beings, expression, and fully partaking of life, but highly regulated for boys'—Sports that maintain hegemonic masculine stereotypes, such as hockey and rugby, are encouraged from a young age instead. Once again, we recommend a holistic approach that couples character education with explicit discussions of masculinities, along with literacy endeavors, and high expectations for boys. However, this requires a more holistic lens, as a starting point.

Thus, the next section, "Statistical Indicators of School Engagement and Achievement and Mental and Physical Health," may be viewed as a political act born of strategic essentialism—to portray the big picture, to disrupt the privileging of discourse obsessed with boys and misbehaviours, and especially boys and literacy. We produce statistical indicators of school engagement and achievement for Canadian boys as compared to girls along the lines of literacy, but also absent discourse on homework, developmental stages and punishments, dropout rates, and post-secondary enrolment and graduation; in conjunction with this, we inform about physical and mental health—injury and premature death, youth crime, and body-related issues.



## **Statistical Indicators of School Engagement and Achievement and Mental and Physical Health**

### **School Achievement According to School Board, Provincial, and International Assessments**

It is important to note that no measurement of student achievement alone is one hundred percent reliable, or irrefutable. For instance, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a community measure of young children's school readiness based on teachers' assessment of their Kindergarten students. The EDI has five domains: Physical Health and Well-Being, Social Knowledge and Competence, Emotional Health and Maturity, Language Skills and Cognitive Development, and Communication and General Knowledge. The EDI implies, for instance, that children come to school appropriately dressed, fed, and rested; able to hold a pen, climb stairs, and use the washroom independently; are able to follow instructions and get along with peers; and know at least 10 letters of the alphabet, can write simple words and can tell a story about their day in the language of instruction in the classroom (English or French). More than 25% of Canadian children arrive at kindergarten struggling with these and other age appropriate competencies (Kershaw et al., 2010). However, the EDI may be biased towards White, middle-class populations, rather than reflecting the social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic diversity, and immigrant background of many families in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada (Applied Research Branch, September, 2003). Similarly, other provincial and (inter)national tests that will be discussed in the following section may be biased. Children who are vulnerable on the EDI are significantly less likely to even write standardized examinations later in school, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), (Kershaw et al., 2010). Still, some students that do write these tests may still be considered relative newcomers to Canada, or English Language Learners, for instance. Nevertheless, these tests show trends in boys' and girls' achievement from school board, provincial, and (inter)national levels in conjunction with other data in this paper, may be useful in contemplating a more holistic picture of Canadian boyhood.

**Toronto District School Board (TDSB).** Sinay (2009) amalgamates information from the Early Development Instrument, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), to compare the performance of boys and girls in the Toronto District School Board (see Toronto District School Board, 2009, August). Senior Kindergarten (SK) students who scored among the lowest 10% of the student population in Canada on two or more domains are generally considered vulnerable. The Spring 2008 EDI results show that 10% more male SK students (21%) scored very low on two or more domains than female students (11%) scored. The Spring 2008 EDI results also show that gender gaps exist on all five domains in favour of girls. The largest gaps are in the areas of Social Competence (females 9%, males 19%) and Emotional Maturity (female 6%, males 17%).

Likewise, in the board, in Grades 7 and 8, the proportion of female students achieving at or above the provincial standard (Levels 3 and 4) were higher than those of male students, but the differences were relatively lower in Mathematics compared to Reading, Writing, and Science; in Grades 8 and 9, male students have clearly lower performance in all secondary indicators—Grade 9 Credit Accumulation, Grade 9 Science, Geography, Mathematics, English, and the Grade 10 Literacy Test (Brown & Sinay, 2008).

**The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).** The EQAO tracks students' math achievement from Grade 3 to Grade 6, to Grade 9, and students' literacy achievement from Grade 3 to Grade 6, to Grade 10 (The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), 2011). While a somewhat larger percentage of male than female students performed at or above the provincial standard, the gap in favour of male students has decreased since 2010 from eight to five percentage points (p. 20).

Overall, girls in Ontario tend to have better literacy results. A larger percentage of female (54%) than male (46%) students successfully completed the March 2011—Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (p.76). The most common types of writing for boys and girls outside of school were emails and chat messages, and both genders were equal in the amount of work-related writing in which they engaged (p. 76). However, there was a 29% gap in favour of girls for letters, journals, and diaries, a 14% difference for song lyrics and poems, and an 11% gap for stories and fiction (p. 76). More females (29%) than males (22%) indicated that they wrote in English for more than three hours a week outside school (p. 59).

The percentage of students indicating that they do the following every day or almost every day when they are not at school again varies by gender (p. 24): Twenty-three percent of girls and 12% of boys read by themselves; 9% of girls and 39% of boys play video games, with 8% of girls and 36% of boys spending 3 or more hours playing video games daily, too (p. 24); 23% of girls and 38% of boys participate in sports or other physical activities; 17% of girls and 27% of boys work at a paid job; 8% of girls and 13% of boys do mathematics-related activities (e.g., doing mathematics puzzles, preparing for mathematics contests or competitions). Also, a larger percentage of female students (49%) indicated that their parents encouraged them to try their best at school, as compared to 43% of boys (p. 12).

**The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Pan Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP).** The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an assessment of Grade 4 student reading achievement for two major reading purposes—literary and informational, and for four major processes of reading comprehension—retrieving explicitly stated information, making straightforward inferences, interpreting and integrating ideas and information, and evaluating content (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, December 2007, p. 6). Student performance is expressed as a score on a scale from 0 to 1000, with an international average of 500. In Canada, the participating provinces in 2006 were Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec. The gap between girls and boys was lesser in Alberta (8), and British Columbia (9), than in Ontario (13), but highest in Nova Scotia (21). In Ontario, there was also a higher gap between Francophone girls and boys (16), than Anglophone (13). In Ontario, the Anglophone 13-percentage-point difference, favoring girls, was found in reading for both literary and for informational purposes, and in all reading comprehension processes. However, Ontario is among the top countries and provinces with respect to the percentage of students at the advanced and high benchmarks. Overall, in all Canadian provinces, as well as in other countries sampled—with the exception of Luxembourg and Spain, girls performed significantly better than boys did in reading achievement.

Likewise, the pan-Canadian instrument of assessment, with a sample of 30,000, 13-year-old Canadian children, focused the research on both teaching and learning reading strategies, as well as whether students have similar reading competencies across Canadian jurisdictions. This report also concludes that in reading proficiency, Canadian females outperform males by a statistically significant margin (Pan Canadian Assessment Program, 2009, p. 13).

**Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).** The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) sheds light on a range of factors that contribute to successful students, schools and education systems, where reading, mathematics, and literacy skills are widely recognized as prerequisites to efficient learning in adulthood, and for full participation in society. Sixty-five countries and economies participated in PISA 2009, and in Canada, approximately 23,000, 15-year-olds from about 1,000 schools participated across the 10 provinces (Knighton, Nrochu, & Gluszynski, 2010)). According to the PISA, female students significantly outperform male students in literacy in every country and Canadian province (Klinger, Shulha, & Wade-Woolley, 2009). Canadian boys have a much higher incidence of diagnosis with reading difficulties, ranging from 2:1 to 15:1, depending on what assessment tools are used; it is common to have far more boys in remedial reading classes and receiving reading assistance.

Across Canada (Knighton, Nrochu, & Gluszynski, 2010), the reading gap between girls and boys actually increased from 32 score points in 2000, to 34 in 2009, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries' average of 38 points in favor of females. In New Brunswick, the gap favoring females decreased from 48 points to 32 points, and is now in keeping with the Canadian norm.

In mathematics and science, however, Canadian boys outperformed girls by a more modest 12 score points, but there were no significant gender differences in science and mathematics performance in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Ultimately, gender differences in reading and literacy achievement persist for boys, while girls tend to lag behind boys, but less significantly, in mathematics and science.

In sum, in Canada, differences between boys and girls in mathematics and the sciences are negligible, though significant gender gaps exist in literacy. Literacy skills are foundational for young men to achieve post-secondary education, and to function effectively in the 21st century. However, efforts to address boys and literacy tend to be regionalized or provincial. A national perspective and literacy project involving a holistic perspective on our nation's boys might be illuminating, as has occurred to some degree in Australia and England.

### **Engagement According to School Board, Provincial, and (Inter)national Indicators**

**Homework.** In Ontario, in 2011, 67% of girls often or always completed their mathematics homework, compared to 56% of boys (The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), 2011, p. 10). According to a Statistics Canada report by Frenette and Zeman (2007), 8.5% of boys spend no time on homework, compared to only 2.5% of girls. Similarly, only 30.3% of boys spend at least 4 hours per week on homework, compared with 41.2% of

girls. Indeed, among families with two parents, 46% of boys in secondary school in a Quebec study spend less than 1 hour per night on homework, compared to 34% of girls (Bouchard, St-Amant, & Gagnon, 2000).

Overall, Canadian boys tend to be less engaged in school than Canadian girls (Statistics Canada, 2008). When asked whether they got along with teacher most or all of the time, 53.4% of males, and 71.2% of females responded positively. Only 38.3% of boys versus 52.2% of girls indicated that they were interested in what was being taught, and 39.7% of boys versus 61.5% of girls finished their homework on time.

School boards are experimenting with alternative approaches to homework, such as classes designed for homework completion during the regular school day, to create a type of homework-less environment among students who struggle (MacDonald, 2011), and these are often boys.

**Developmental stages and punishments.** In the Toronto District School Board, between 2008-2009, 6,222 boys and 1,757 girls received a suspension (Toronto District School Board, September 17, 2009). Therefore, boys were suspended at 3.54 times the rate as girls, and accounted for 78% of all suspensions. This prompted Director Christopher Spence to endeavor to reduce the number of violent incidents in the board by 10%, and the number of suspensions by 20% (C. Spence, 2010).

Part of the plan involves continuance of a Boys2Men program through which at-risk boys are assigned a male mentor who helps tutor them, and acts as a role model, as well as implementation of single-sex classes. An all-boys leadership academy (MacDonald, 2011) opened in September 2012 on the heels of the public All-Boys Alternative Program at Sir James Loughheed School in Calgary, Alberta, which opened its doors in September 2011 (Ferguson, 2011). An all-boys leadership academy may encourage boys to drop the “cool pose” often present when grouped with girls (Cox, 2006; Pollack, 1998, pp. 23-25) that is contingent on displaying traditional hegemonic macho qualities, including a lack of interest in school and homework, rebellion, autonomy, stoicism, lack of communication, and dismissal of qualities problematically seen as feminine, such as being studious, compassionate, and artistic.

In our current public school systems, although boys appear to respond to praise as much as girls, they may receive it less often (C. Spence, 2008, p. 15). An Australian study also found that some boys were punished more often than girls for the same infractions, and were perceived as being more active than girls (Lingard, et al., 2002, pp. 100-103). This is in keeping with Canadian research from British Columbia that identifies boys as being more physically active, especially at the primary levels (Riley, 2009). Similarly, in Quebec, primary school boys indicate they like school less than girls, but do appreciate the sports and recreational activities (Maltais, Fleuret, & Mougeot, 2009).

Certain researchers contend that boys and girls develop at different biological rates, and in varied cognitive ways, too (Klinger, et al., 2009, pp. 2-3; Norfleet, 2007). In keeping with a widely held anecdotal belief shared among educators and parents-guardians—on average, boys are perceived as often developing verbal, reading, and writing skills at a slower rate than girls

develop these skills, and as having more of a penchant for physical activity. Therefore, the pace of formal literacy programs in Canada, beginning at the Junior Kindergarten level, may disadvantage boys, as does the school propensity for quiet seatwork, and teacher-directed lessons. Indeed, approaches involving (inter)active, tactile, and kinesthetic engagement of boys have been successful in promoting boys' literacy in multiple Ontario schools (Bodkin, et al., 2009)

Furthermore, at any given time, over 33,600 children in British Columbia, and 270,800 children in Canada, may experience ADHD (Schwartz et al., 2007)—and boys are 4 to 9 times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than girls. This begs the question of whether we are medicating boys for what is often perceived as a lesser attention span than girls are, and a yearning for more physical activity. Indeed, some ponder whether we are treating normal boyhood as a disease (Abrahams, 2010).

We contend that it may be our education system that needs to change, rather than the boys. Approaches to teaching boys should explore opportunities for hand-on activities, and more physical and interpersonal interaction. The current take on boys as disproportionately punished and punishable, can be interpreted as a misandric and hegemonic society and school system. Discussion of how boys are marginalized and restricted from sanctions for movement and disproportionate punishments, to over diagnosis of ADHD and other disorders, should be a cornerstone of efforts to improve their education.

**Dropout rates.** Given the lower literacy rates, and the lesser school engagement of many boys, it should come as no surprise that boys also have higher dropout rates in Canada. A dropout is a high school leaver who is not enrolled in high school, and has not completed the requirements for a high school diploma. Boys in the Toronto District School Board graduate in fewer numbers than girls from high school—70% versus 78% (Sinay, 2009), while the gender gap between male and female graduating 17-year-olds is projected at 12-13% (Toronto District School Board, 2009, August). In Canada between 1990-1991, the graduating rates were 19.2% and 14.0% respectively for young men and women; in 1999, 15% of 20-year-old males had not completed high school compared to 9% of females (Statistics Canada, 2008).

While the number of dropouts has decreased for young men, and more dramatically for young women, the majority of dropouts continue to be male, with the share of school leavers who are male increasing from 58.3% in 1990-1991 to 63.7% in 2004-2005 (Bowlby, 2008). Therefore, of the 212,000 dropouts in Canada in 2004-2005, 135,000 were male. This means a total dropout rate of 12.2% for boys compared to 7.2% for girls.

The finding that there are more male than female dropouts holds across provinces, particularly in Quebec, where in 2000-2001, 24% of boys and 11% of girls did not finish their secondary diploma, and dropped out of school (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2003), while in 2004-2005, seven in 10 Quebec dropouts were males (Bowlby, 2008). Furthermore, although the employment rate for dropouts has since trended up (61.7%), it remains well below the employment rate for 20-24-year-olds as a whole (67.8%).

**Post-secondary education enrollment and graduation: Entering the professions.** In the Toronto District School Board, boys are less likely (29%) to confirm an offer of admission to Ontario universities than are girls (41%); However, both male and female students are equally as likely to confirm an offer at community colleges (Sinay, 2009). In Ontario, about equal numbers expect to earn an undergraduate degree (11-12%) but more girls expect to earn a graduate or professional university degree (e.g., master's, doctorate or medical degree)—22% of girls compared to only 13% of boys (The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), 2011); however, 28% of boys expect to get vocational or technical training, compared to just 18% of girls.

In Canada as a whole, among 19-year old youth in 2003, 38.8% of girls had attended university, compared with only 25.7% of boys; however, young men and women were about equally likely to attend college (Frenette & Zeman, 2007). A recent study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), an arm's-length agency of the Government of Ontario, finds that overall post-secondary completion rates are marked by a 16 percentage point gap between men and women, with young women more likely to graduate (Card, Payne, & Sechel, 2011). The university application rates of females rose from 41% in 1994 to 52% in 2006, compared to that of males, which rose from 32% to 39% during the same period.

The average Canadian university campus is 58% female, up from 51% in 1988-89, and women comprise about 51% of the graduate level students, too (Intini, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2008). As of 1998, more women than men obtain both bachelors and masters degrees, while slightly more men earn doctorates (Statistics Canada, 2008).

However, while men dominate in mathematics, computer and information sciences, a majority of women are enrolled in the humanities; visual and performing arts, communications technologies; physical and life sciences, and technologies; agriculture, natural resources and conservation. Further, women are a majority in the professional schools of education, business, management and public administration (Statistics Canada, 2008-2009), and also medicine (Intini, 2010; Jamieson, 2007; Wentz, 2003).

In sum, education indicators show clear discrepancies between the achievement and engagement of males and females in education. Similar to Canadian boys, American boys are punished more often in school, overdiagnosed with ADHD, do less homework, are less connected and engaged in education, drop out of school at higher rates, and attend university less than girls (Tyre, 2008). This problematic North American phenomenon should not be ignored. We contend that further mental and physical health indicators should simultaneously be addressed, as follows, in order to understand holistically Canadian boys, and their social trajectories.

### **Mental and Physical Health**

Achievement and engagement in school are also largely linked to, and predictors of, health and well-being. Therefore, next among male and female Canadian youth, we explore issues of injury and premature death; assault, homicide, and suicide; youth crime; and body-related issues.

**Injury and premature death.** Being male is unequivocally the most significant demographic risk-factor for premature death in developed countries (Kruger & Nesse, 2004). In Canada, suicide, coronary heart disease, drug or alcohol abuse, violence, and accidents pose a significantly greater risk to male versus female youth (Kalben, 2000; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003). Canadian male youth are also at greater risk than female youth to incur physical injury. For instance, an average of 24.4% of male versus 20% of female students in Grades 6 through 10 reported missing one or more days of school, or usual activities, due to an injury (Pickett, 2008).

Police-reported violence reveals that family-related sexual offenses against girls are reported at 4 times that of boys, while non-sexual physical assault is equally reported (Statistics Canada, 2011). Furthermore, growing evidence indicates that the numbers of female perpetrators of sexual violence against boys and girls may be greater than previously believed, and overall sexual violence against boys may be under-reported in Canada (see Female sex offenders, 1998-2012). There may also be more male victims in the 4- to 7- year-old range on child pornographic databases, which men and women appear to be running in equal numbers (Gillespie & Leaver, 2002).

Females' risk of physical injury increases with age between Grades 6 and 10 (Pickett, 2008), but it is important to note that in general, Canadian boys experience more overall injuries than girls (Kohen, Soubhi, & Raina, 2000). The principle cause of injury during youth is sport-related injury (Pickett, 2008), which may be some indication as to why males, more than females, are affected. Single motherhood is also a significant risk factor for boys' experiences of injury (Kohen, et al., 2000). Indeed, males across all age groups are more likely to die, and tend to die earlier than females (Manuel & Hockin, 2000).

**Assault, homicide, and suicide.** In general, males are more likely to die from various forms of assault throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as compared to females (Statistics Canada, 2008). In Canada, 76% of homicide victims are male, whereas 24% of victims are female. Moreover, approximately 90% of accused perpetrators of homicide are male (Beattie, 2009). The median age of accused males has fallen from 29 in 2002 to 25 in 2008, while the age of accused females has increased from 28 in 2002 to 32 in 2008. It is also noteworthy that male victims tend to be younger than are female victims (Li, 2008); for instance, in 2007, the median age of male homicide victims was 29.5, compared to 35.5 for female victims (Li, 2008). Such sex ratios speak to the disproportionate risk that males face with regard to mortality in Canadian culture.

In Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds, accounting for nearly 1/4 of all deaths (Statistics Canada, 2010b, 2010c). Suicide rates among boys and girls are roughly equal, until ages 10-19 (Statistics Canada, 2010b, 2010c), when some the pressures of trying to "become a man" heighten for boys with the onset of puberty, and homophobia is frequently used to police boys' identities towards a narrow concept of heterosexuality and manliness (Dorais & Lajeunesse, 2004). Then, boys and girls differ in terms of both completed suicide and attempted suicide. Completed suicides become approximately 4 times more frequent among boys, whereas attempted suicides are approximately 1.5 times more frequent among girls (Langlois & Morrison, 2002). Inuit males aged 15 to 24 may have a suicide rate 40 times that of their peers in the rest of Canada (White, 2011).

In a prospective longitudinal study of 1031 street youth living in Montreal, 22 of the 26 individuals who died over the study period were male, and 4 female. One male died of unidentified causes, one of heart disease, one of hepatitis A, and 2 males died of unintentional injury, while 5 males died of drug overdose compared to 3 females, and 12 males died of suicide compared to 1 female (Roy et al., 2004). The disproportionate rates of suicide between Canadian males and females may be related to the degree of social integration and support that is available to male youth during this developmental time period; females are more likely to give and receive social support (Maxim & Keane, 1992). Canadian males may similarly also experience a somewhat lower sense of belonging to their local communities (Statistics Canada, 2010a).

**Youth crime.** A disconcerting factor affecting male vulnerability is the differential rate of offending behavior between the sexes. In 2006, 84 Canadian youth (0.1% of all young offenders) were implicated in 54 homicides. Of these youth, 72 were male versus 12 female (Li, 2007). Since record keeping of this statistic began in 1961, this was the highest Canadian youth homicide rate ever to be noted. Similarly, in 2007, 74 young Canadians (between the ages of 12 and 17) were accused of homicide (Li, 2008). Moreover, gang involvement was reported in 22% of homicide cases in which a youth was accused (Li, 2007). In Canada, an overwhelming majority of youth gang members are male (94%) (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007). Gang involvement is a significant risk factor for youth criminal behavior. For instance, gun violence is more prominent among street gangs with members who are under the age of 30; as many as 18.7% of boys (ages 14 to 17) in Montréal and 15.1% in Toronto have brought a gun to school. Formal criminal charges were also more likely to be filed against male compared to female offenders; extrajudicial measures (e.g., police warnings) were taken against 55% of male youth implicated in a crime compared with 64% of female youth implicated in a crime (Li, 2007). Since the 2002 introduction of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YJCA), reductions in charge rates have been more prominent for female than male youth (-31% and -25% respectively), (Statistics Canada, October 23, 2007).

**Body-related issues.** Canadian girls tend to be more dissatisfied with their bodies than are Canadian boys (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Olmsted & McFarlane, 2004). Thus, it may be of little surprise that eating disorders (e.g., anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa) are often considered primarily female problems. For example, between the ages of 5 and 12, Canadian females are approximately 6 times more likely than males to be diagnosed with bulimia or anorexia nervosa (Pinhas, Morris, Crosby, & Katzman, 2011). Furthermore, this differential sex ratio becomes even greater in the older adolescence and adulthood population, whereby females are approximately 10 times more likely to be diagnosed with an eating disorder than their male counterparts (Katzman, Morris, & Pinhas, 2004). Nearly 1/3 of adolescent girls in Ontario engage in dieting behaviours in order to lose weight (Jones, Bennett, Olmsted, Lawson, & Rodin, 2001), and adolescent girls compared to boys in Grades 6 through 10 are less likely to engage in the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity at least 5 days per week (Boyce, 2008).

Although the plight of Canadian girls has been underscored within the body-image and eating disorders literature, only recently has attention been paid to the unique challenges facing Canadian boys regarding body image and related food and exercise behaviours, all of which can impact their overall physical and mental health. Indeed, eating disordered behaviors are linked to more likelihood of cigarette, amphetamine, and cocaine use among boys and girls in Grades 7-12



in British Columbia (Parkes, Saewyc, Cox, & MacKay, 2008). Research suggests that boys, more than girls, experience pressure to gain weight and muscle mass (Davis, Karvinen, & McCreary, 2005; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Some males experience a drive for muscularity that is closely linked to neuroticism and perfectionism, as well as to health-risk behaviors such as the use of anabolic steroids and excessive weight training (see Davis et al., 2005). Recently, Boyce (2004) found that 4% of boys in Grades 9 and 10 utilized anabolic steroids. Moreover, boys high in the drive for muscularity report more depression and poorer self-esteem than boys low in this drive. The same relationships are not found for females (McCreary & Sasse, 2000), suggesting that boys, too, may be at significant risk for deleterious consequences of poor body image.

### **Several Paths for Further Consideration in Canada**

Therefore, in a number of indicators of school achievement as well as mental and physical health, there are significant problems confronting many Canadian boys. In this section, we provide some pathways that may be explored in order to address some of these issues. We hope this paper, and the pathways we propose, may lead to more discussion amongst researchers, educational administrators and teachers, government officials, and boys and their families, which ultimately lead to transformation.

### **More Complex Desegregation of the Data**

To gain a more precise understanding regarding which boys are struggling, we propose an analysis that goes beyond gender to encompass race, class, sexual orientation, disability, geographical location, and language and culture. Mead (2006) contends that poor Black and Hispanic boys in the United States are at the greatest for reading difficulties. However, she neglects to address the many other indicators of social and academic difficulty, as we have outlined in this paper. In the TDSB, some students from the English-speaking Caribbean, Central and South America/Mexico, and Eastern Africa, as well as those speaking Portuguese, Spanish, and Somali, appear to be disproportionately at risk for underachievement in school (Brown, 2006). Martino (2011) points out that representation of underachievement along class, ethnicity, and race lines does not mean causation. Kleinfeld (2009) similarly states that poor Black and Hispanic boys and young men are particularly at risk in the United States.

Therefore, we recommend that further analysis of Canadian boys take into account significant issues and intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, geographical location, and/or language and culture. Then action plans may be holistically designed, cognizant of the overall trends in boys' education, physical and mental health, but also tailored to certain (sub)groups who are particularly at risk.

### **An Empirical Study of Adult Role Models in Canada, and the Effects on Boys**

Being a teacher of colour does not guarantee that one may best respond to the needs of students of colour (Villegas & Davis, 2007). Correspondingly, being a male teacher does not guarantee that one may better respond to the needs of diverse boys, whether in Australia, Canada, or elsewhere (Gosse & Facchinetti, 2011). However, in the United States, Harper (2012) reports a common view among Black males who achieved higher education, "Many participants

felt teachers (especially White women), were incapable of engaging meaningfully with more than one or a few Black male students at a time..."(p. 10). Also, being male may allow some male teachers to better appreciate the similar experiences of boyhood that their male pupils experience; some male teachers, contrary to popular belief, also report a less authoritarian, and a more humorous, playful teaching and classroom management style, compared to some of their female colleagues (Gosse, 2011a). Some postulate that the overwhelmingly female teaching and administrative staff of schools may be a contributing factor to some boys' social and academic problems, a kind of increasing feminization of the teaching field (see Nikiforuk, 2004; Wallace, 2006). This implies the contested notion that some women may have more difficulty than some men relating to boys, boys' behaviours, and boys' modes of learning. This belief is reflected in research conducted in Canadian francophone schools. Researchers postulate that in early childhood, francophone boys learn to be curious, resourceful, and creative, whereas in primary school, traits associated with the primarily female staff and administration, and girls in general, are validated—calmness, concentration, and compassion; Women teachers may employ teaching and methods that worked best for them, thereby privileging the girls (Maltais, et al., 2009). This needs to be more fully explored in Canadian research.

Furthermore, although there is a call for more male teachers, a belief persists that women are under-represented in administrative roles in education (see Steffenhagen, 2011). However, the claim that men dominate in education is itself suspect. In British Columbia, female administrators, which counts directors of instruction, supervisors of instruction, teacher consultants, coordinators, helping teachers, other instructional supports, testing & assessment professional staff, vice principals, and principals, number 1706 compared to 1584 males, or just over half (British Columbia Ministry of Education, February 2008, p. 44). Moreover, combined female vice-principals and principals outnumber males in the same administrative positions in Prince Edward Island at 58% ( R. MacRae, personal communication, December 15, 2008). In New Brunswick, 53% percent of principals, and 61% of vice-principals are female (B. Robichaud, personal communication, 2008). In Ontario, and similarly in most areas of North America, men represent only 1 in 10 primary/junior teachers, and fewer than 1 in 3 secondary teachers (Bernard, Hill, Falter, & Wilson, 2004). In Canada, according to Statistics Canada (Elementary-Secondary Education Project, 2008), the total of full- and part-time teachers stands at 108,267 male and 267,788 female. Most compellingly, nationally in Canada, there is a majority of female school principals and administrators of elementary and secondary education at 53%, or 15, 335 females and 13, 680 males (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Therefore, the erroneous belief surrounding the dominance of men in educational leadership roles may serve two problematic purposes—to shift attention away from the dwindling numbers of male teachers, and away from the phenomenon of the predominantly White, middle-class, able-bodied and female teaching and administrative staff (Gosse, 2011c). Perhaps we should engage in more public discussion of hiring more diverse male and female teachers overall, according to sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, for instance. The educational workforce under-represents Canada's racial diversity, and the number of teachers of colour is falling (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). This dialogue has been occurring in the United States for some time (Hammer, 2010b; Staff, October 2004).

### **Broader Social Understanding of Gender Complicity With the Boy Code**

To become a “man,” Gosse (2012) argues, and many others, that males still must undergo a rigorous, even punishing process of socialization, whereby boys and men are forced to repress many emotions, and attain autonomy at all costs. Indeed, “manhood” may be such a shaky state that it is unattainable for any significant period, and must be constantly re-earned. Risky behaviors, including suicide, dramatically increase when boys enter adolescence and young adulthood, for this is when uncompromising pressures to become “a real man” intensify. It is time we confront the implicit and explicit ways that society—including men and women of diverse backgrounds, affiliations, and identities—contribute to maintaining status quo options surrounding what it is to be a boy or a man.

Pollack (1998) describes a so-called “Boy Code” which delineates traditional gender roles for boys, in which—like “sturdy oaks”—boys are encouraged to be stoic, stable, independent, and never show weakness; boys are pressured to achieve status, dominance, and power, and to avoid shame at all costs (pp. 23-25). Perhaps the most damaging aspect of the Boy Code is that boys are taught to inhibit expression of feelings or urges erroneously seen as “feminine,” such expressions as warmth, dependence, and empathy. Finally, boys are destructively led to believe that they should act macho, even to the point of violence, and engage in risky behaviors that could injure themselves or others—like their role models in popular culture from wrestling, hockey, and football, to action movies and video games. Reading and dissecting laborious novels via stylistic devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and personification, whilst writing multiple intrapersonal journal entries, the fodder of many a secondary school English language arts and literature curriculum, are not high on the list of acceptable (or interesting) behaviours for many boys, nor is engagement in the arts.

Additionally, in a longstanding Western tradition of courtly love (Wollock, 2011), boys are taught to “win” the approval and love of girls and women, and thereby attain a momentary place of prestige in society, through what are often self-destructive, dangerous physical and psychological acts, from going to war to punishing their bodies in hockey. The quieter, scholarly boy still lags behind the impulsive, admired jock/warrior, in the bombardment of images from popular culture, whether in the Matrix series, or the newer pop cultural representations of female warriors, and their lesser consorts (Gosse, 2011d).

We contend that initiatives to counteract boys’ problems with literacy, and beyond, should include discussion of how hegemonic and sacrificial masculinities inhibit boys from more success in the progressively cerebral 21st century, that values intra- and interpersonal collaborative and decision making skills, traits normally encouraged in females. Programs such as Boys2Men and Rock and Water, could be synthesized with this new focus, and then tested over time. The common threads of boys’ need for more physical activity in schools, and leadership and development of sense of community via extracurricular activities, would be core to any such initiative, as well as a drive to refocus boys towards creativity, expression, integrity, and the arts.

### **A National and Holistic Lens**

A better grasp of the state of Canadian boyhood is needed, moving beyond literacy to a holistic approach. There is no doubt that though both male and female Canadian youth suffer from

academic and social problems, a number of prominent issues remain for boys and young men. Boys tend to have more significant literacy problems than girls, while there are slight and inconsistent differences between boys and girls regarding mathematics and science. Our Canadian educational system appears to punish boys from an early age for acting like boys—displaying curiosity, questioning, acting ‘silly’ and, instead, diagnoses them with ADHD, or places them in special education and behavioral classes, where boys compose the vast majority of pupils. Researchers, teachers, and parents-guardians, concur that many boys seem to prefer more hands on, face to face, group or paired interactions in school, but predominantly teacher-directed classes remain the norm (see Toppo, 2007). Along with this, many believe that boys tend to have developmental differences in maturity and language skills.

Some contend that boys may be confronted with a more passive, receptive, and rule-focused, or controlling way of teaching and learning, with the predominantly female teaching personnel and administration of primary-elementary schools. Boys also appear to gain less teacher approval, and are punished and suspended far more often than girls. Likewise, on a whole, boys’ relationships with teachers, and their engagement with schooling, including attitudes towards the curriculum and homework, is less favorable than those of girls. Boys drop out of school in greater numbers than girls do, which has significant, lifelong financial, health, and citizenship implications.

Furthermore, Canadian boys are at greater risk for experiencing assaults, injuries, and premature death, including suicide. This finding underscores the need to develop intervention programs tailored to the male population, with a holistic focus on prevention. For instance, although it is known that males are more likely than females to commit suicide at every age, the reasons behind such drastic action differ between the sexes. Males are more likely than females to kill themselves over job and status loss, whereas females are more likely to kill themselves over a romantic break-up (Saad, 2007). Some argue that males are also less effective than females in coping with negative feelings, which may factor into their greater risk of suicide (Olson, 2011).

This can be related to the Boy Code, and we recommend that programs be developed that incorporate discussion of masculinities, race, and class, in particular, so that hegemonic and sacrificially types of masculinities may be better understood. Students, teachers, and families may then become metacognitive in a society bombarded by negative images and role models for boys—Black and Hispanic boys in particular, in North America.

Issues of body image, though typically thought of as being a primarily female problem, are now understood to affect Canadian males, as well. The societal pressure to attain the prototypically ideal masculine physique (i.e., leanness and muscularity) parallels the pressure faced by females to be thin. Although great strides have been made toward identifying the physical and mental health correlations of the drive for muscularity among Canadian male youth, a notable androcentric bias exists pertaining to the amount of attention paid to female versus male body-image issues. The majority of research and treatment program development for body image related disorders focuses on female-typical problems. This is particularly disconcerting because male-typical body issues, such as muscle-dysmorphia, may be more difficult to identify compared to anorexia or bulimia nervosa (Leone, Sedory, & Gray, 2005). In turn, there may be a

significant risk of males with body-image issues going untreated, that we need to better understand and address.

In sum, there are indeed efforts underway to better contemplate the journeys of Canadian boys, and to a limited extent, to better understand which boys are particularly at risk, as stated, including in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia (see Bastien, Vallerand, & Meyer, 2010; Bodkin, et al., 2009; Gosse, 2011b; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Thompson & Ungerleider, 2004). However, perhaps due to our decentralized, provincial education systems, unlike England, Australia, and the budding Boys Project in the United States, we seem to be concentrating on boys and literacy. We lack a national, holistic perspective, and thus, the creation of an effective national Canadian taskforce, involving all provinces and territories, who may then tailor programs to specific sub-groups of boys.

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