

From Preschool to Middle School
*The Role of Masculinity in Low-Income Urban
Adolescent Boys' Literacy Skills and
Academic Achievement*

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Competence in literacy skills is a critical component of children's success throughout their schooling careers (Snow, 1991). Literacy research has shown that being read to and talking about books are important precursors to children's literacy development (Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995). Creating a regular routine with books has also been shown to be positively related to later reading skills and academic success (Teale, 1984). However, researchers suggest that the significance of reading for later achievement reflects not only the fact that it is an intellectual activity but also that it is "a profoundly social process, embedded in parent-child relationships, and that frequency and quality of children's book reading experiences are strongly related to the history of other interactive experiences that children share with their parents and other caregivers" (Bus, 2001, p. 41).

Our understanding of the phenomenon of boys' literacy experiences in particular starts from the premise that gendered messages and practices in literacy training can have a profound impact on boys' educational experiences in reading and language arts (as could also be said of girls' experiences in math and science with respect to expectations of femininity). More specifically, we rely on Gee's (2001) sociocultural perspective as a framework to explore boys' early literacy development and subsequent academic achievement. Gee argues for the existence of multiple literacies that include both written and oral languages and that are relevant to indi-

viduals or groups of individuals depending on social and cultural location and entwined in interactive processes with other people. Describing these literacies as “rooted in different socially situated identities” (p. 31), Gee proposes that researchers studying literacy and language development re-frame their investigation to focus on the ways in which individuals and groups develop their literacy skills through the process of working with others to acquire, and participate in, sociocultural practices. Furthermore, Gee (2001) argues that literacy practices are embedded in particular ideological, political, and social contexts. In this analysis, we focus on gender as a particular context for understanding children’s literacy development from a sociocultural perspective.

Overall, there is limited evidence in the literacy research that suggests sex differences between boys and girls in early skill and ability level. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) reviewed a number of empirical studies of reading difficulties that, when viewed together, tend to discount clear gender differences, especially when larger representative samples are included. However, while there are few indicators of gender differences in reading skills and achievement for boys and girls, especially in their early academic years, there are numerous findings of boys’ increased risk for special education placement, retention, and dropout as they proceed through adolescence (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000, 2001).

Popular literature highlighting the plight of boys in school often attributes boys’ literacy-related academic difficulties to the feminization of school curriculum in opposition to boys’ masculine “hard-wiring” or to undue attention paid to girls that takes away needed resources for boys (Gurian, 1999; Pollack, 1998). If we were to believe these hypotheses, we might be rightly concerned about material inequities leading to academic disparities. However, it is important to note that, historically, formal education in this country has been an institution for boys. Only in the twentieth century, when girls were allowed to enroll in public education, was language arts designated as the academic ghetto for girls in order to ensure boys’ domination of science, math, and vocational training (Rury, 1991). The argument that boys are “naturally” at a disadvantage for reading success may actually obscure a trend in which reading is interpreted as a feminine activity in our culture and thus is valued and promoted differently for boys (Askew & Ross, 1988; Kimmel, 2000). This may be especially the case for poor and working-class families where men in the community often have jobs that emphasize manual labor over literacy skills (see

Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987, 1995). Martinez (1998) argues that this focus on individual shortcomings in boys' reading abilities obscures the larger issue of how educators' constructions of gender may influence reading instruction.

The fact that boys are more frequently targeted for special education services may reflect concerns regarding behavior as well as ability, especially given the co-occurrence of reading difficulties with attention problems (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Similarly, the tendency for boys to be retained and/or to drop out of school (Meisels & Liaw, 1993) does not necessarily reflect a lack of cognitive ability, but may be symptomatic of boys' rejection of an academic path to success or choice to pursue employment instead of continuing education. It may also be the fulfillment of a teacher's low expectations. Experiments have shown that teachers can be swayed into believing the inferiority of students based on categorical affiliation (Rosenthal, 1987). In turn, teachers' gender bias can lead to poorer performance for boys in their early literacy development (Palardy, 1998).

Children internalize expectations about gender at an early age and these lessons have implications for their learning and academic trajectories. A study of expectant parents (Grieshaber, 1998) underscored the desire for male children to carry on the family name as well as male responsibility within the family. Even before they were born, these idealized sons were expected to play hard, be competitive, and enjoy the rugged outdoors, and hardly expected to display a bookish fervor for reading. Expectations of conformity to gender roles increase as children enter school. Recent calls for the integration of gender equity in preschool classrooms highlight the problems both boys and girls will face, academically and socially, if they remain immersed in gender-typed classroom environments (Marshall, Robeson & Keefe, 1999). Even as classroom materials for early education become less dominated by images of boys and more evenly inclusive of images of girls, stereotyped images of boys (e.g., as aggressive, argumentative, competitive) are still prevalent in early reading materials and even more so in books geared toward older children (Evans & Davies, 2000).

The progression of stereotypical masculine images that become more evident in children's books across grade levels parallels the process by which boys develop masculine identity. Studies suggest that as boys enter middle school there is greater gender intensification and differences in sex

role attitudes increase (Galambos, Almeida & Petersen, 1990). It is conceivable that gender-bifurcated patterns of literacy training (Millard, 1997) may contribute to the discrepancy between girls' greater proclivity to reading and boys' apparent disinterest (Hall & Coles, 1997), and thus may have implications for boys' academic engagement and achievement.

This chapter investigates how gendered messages and practices in early literacy training may be linked not only to boys' literacy skills but also to their attitudes toward reading, literacy practices, and their academic achievement during middle school. We chose to focus on these questions while collecting data for a study on literacy. Among numerous visits to children at home with their families and at school with their teachers and peers, one particular interaction stood out. A young single mother of two boys, ages 5 and 3, took a break between book reading activities with her older son (the participant in our study) to remark on literacy practices with her boys. She told us that her younger son "doesn't really like to be read to" so she "doesn't do that with him." Although this boy was only three years old, he was given substantial leeway in making decisions that could have critical implications for his educational future. His mother did not consider his dislike of reading unusual or cause for concern. As we reflected upon this mother's offhand remark, we became increasingly interested in how the process by which young children become readers and begin to develop relationships with text might be influenced by gender.

Specifically, our analysis begins with an examination of differences between boys' and girls' early language and literacy ability and later reading engagement and achievement during middle school. Next, we consider three factors that may contribute to boys' literacy skills, their attitudes toward reading (e.g., their beliefs about reading, how they feel about reading), their literary practices (e.g., what they like to read, whether they choose to read in their free time), and their academic achievement. The first factor concerns the distinct patterns in preschool age boys' and girls' cognitive experiences of and sexposure to early book reading. The second factor relates to the social-emotional experiences of preschool literacy practices such as how mothers engage preschool boys and girls during reading activities. These activities might influence the child's conception of reading as a masculine or feminine activity. The third factor considers ways in which boys are socialized toward male gender roles that often emphasize physical over intellectual activities.

Sample and Procedures

Participants were drawn from a sample of ethnically diverse low-income middle school students who have participated in the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education since they were in preschool. This longitudinal research project was originally designed to study precursors to language and literacy development and the influence of the home and of the school on language and literacy development (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991, 2001; Snow, 1991; Snow & Tabors, 1993). As the participants have grown, the research focus has expanded to include investigations of social and psychological components of development that influence academic success.

All 83 participants in the original sample were Head Start eligible (i.e., having household incomes at or below the poverty line) when they began the study at three years of age and were initially recruited from preschool sites across the Northeast rather than from a single school. Out of the original sample, 22 boys and 32 girls completed the 7th grade testing and interview protocol, comprising the core analytic sample for most of the analyses conducted for this chapter. The majority of the participants identified as White (67%), while the remainder of the sample identified as African American (21%), Latino (5%), and bi-racial (7%). Of the original sample, 32% came from homes with single mothers and 39% came from homes where the family received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Over the years, many of the participants' circumstances improved due to changes in their mothers' employment, education, and marital status. Although the level of attrition is relatively high, a review of the sample by year showed that the group characteristics, including the racial composition, of the participants were relatively stable. However, African American boys dropped out in significant numbers, thus limiting our ability to draw any conclusions based on racial or ethnic affiliation.

Data from ten years of longitudinal study were evaluated, including: observational data from child-mother dyads engaged in literacy activities collected when the participants were 4 years old, qualitative interview data collected when the participants were in 6th and 7th grade, and standardized assessments of language and literacy ability and achievement during elementary and middle school. Our analyses focuses in particular on differences between boys' and girls' performance, from kindergarten through 7th grade, on various measures of language and literacy skills, as indicated by standardized tests as well as maternal reports and observations of home

supports for early literacy. We also analyzed teachers' evaluations and participants' self-reports of literacy engagement during middle school. Depending on the year in which data were collected, our sample size ranged from 54 to 72 children. Our primary interest was to compare boys and girls on their ability, early literacy exposure, adolescent literacy practices and motivation for engaging in those practices, and subsequent academic achievement. Table 16.1 provides an overview of the measures used in this analysis and their administration schedule.

Results

Assessment of Gender Differences in Ability and Achievement

To assess differences between boys' and girls' language and literacy ability over the course of the study, we used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) (Dunn & Dunn, 1981), a popular standardized test of receptive vocabulary skill that has been shown to be strongly related to intelligence testing. In general, we found no significant difference between boys and girls, though boys scored slightly higher on the PPVT at each year of testing. Exposure to new words, especially vocabulary that is out of the ordinary, is a critical factor in children's language development (Tabors, Beals & Weizman, 2001). Vocabulary, as measured by PPVT scores, was highly correlated with exposure to "rare word" use in the home (measured during preschool home visit observations), thus boys' higher scores may reflect the fact that boys were exposed to more rare word use at home than girls ($t = 2.59$, p [less than] .01). Related analyses have shown mothers to engage with sons in significantly more science-type talk that includes rare words, which is related to better outcomes in boys' results of tests of science literacy (Tenenbaum et al., under review). It seems that mothers may provide rich language experiences for boys and girls in gender-specific domains and this may have implications for later gender differences in specific subject areas. Nevertheless, boys and girls in the sample appeared to be cognitively matched at early childhood in preparation for language and literacy development. In fact, boys even appear to have a slight advantage that may be related to the type of talk they are exposed to at home.

Although girls and boys were closely matched on measures of language and literacy ability throughout elementary school, gender differences, particularly in performance and academic achievement, began to appear

TABLE 16.1
*Description of Activities and Assessments Used in the Analysis
 by Participants and Years Administered*

Activity/Assessment	Description of Activity/Assessment	Participants Administered	Year(s)
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—PPVT (Dunn & Dunn, 1981)	Standardized assessment of receptive vocabulary, as child identifies pictures that represent vocabulary words.	Child	Kindergarten, 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 7th grades
Book Reading	Task conducted during home visits where mother reads to her child two books supplied by researchers (<i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> and <i>What's Next Baby Bear</i>) and one book of the child's choice	Mother and child	Children age 4
Mother Interview	Interview conducted during home visits including questions about frequency of book reading and number of people who read to child.	Mother	Children were 3, 4, and 5 years old
Mealtime Recording	Conversation recorded by family during a meal time, analyzed for use of rare words.	Mother and child (could also include siblings and other family members)	Children were 3, 4, and 5 years old
Child Interview	Interview conducted during annual school visit including questions about literacy, frequency and enjoyment of book reading, and child's educational future.	Child	Children were in 6th and 7th grades
Teacher-Child Rating Scale—T-CRS (Hightower et al., 1986)	Questions posed to teachers about students' motivation, work habits, and attention.	English Teacher	Children were in 6th and 7th grades
Rochester Assessment Package for Schools—RAPS (Connell, 1996)	Questions posed to students during annual school visit where students rated their effort, attention, and emotional engagement in school.	Child	Children were in 6th and 7th grades

in middle school. For instance, by the time they reached 7th grade, boys were less likely than girls to report liking to read and tended to have lower grades in English. Boys were also rated by their 6th and 7th grade teachers as being less well behaved and as acting out more than the girls ($t = -1.82, p < .08$; $t = 2.31, p < .03$, respectively), and as having more learning difficulties than girls ($t = 1.83, p < .07$), on average. The teachers' reports also suggest that boys were less motivated to achieve, had worse work habits, and were less able to concentrate and follow directions than girls. In addition, the participants' self-reports in sixth grade showed boys as being less engaged than girls ($t = -1.93, p < .06$). Studies with national samples similarly show that boys are less likely than girls to hold positive attitudes about recreational reading, even when controlling for reading ability, and that these differences begin to appear as early as first grade and increase as children get older (McKenna, 2001; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995). As these performance and achievement trends did not appear to be related to ability, we sought to explore how early literacy exposure and later literacy practices might reflect the boys' ongoing socialization toward stereotypical masculine roles. Specifically, we examined: (1) cognitive experiences in preschool literacy practices, (2) socio-emotional experiences of preschool literacy practices, and (3) boys' experiences of gender socialization.

Cognitive Experiences of Preschool Literacy Practices

In an effort to explain differences in adolescent academic achievement, we tested for distinct patterns in preschool age boys' and girls' cognitive experiences of and exposure to early book reading. We found no significant difference in mothers' reports of preschool daughters' and sons' overall frequency of exposure to book reading; boys and girls were reported to have equal access to books in the home. However, there did appear to be differences in the cognitive feedback that mothers provided to girls and boys during activities in which mothers and their children read three books together, namely *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *What's Next Baby Bear?* and a third book of the child's choice. Specifically, analyses of mother-child interactions during home visits when the children were four years old revealed gender differences in two particularly important variables that are related to later literacy development. The first variable that emerged from these interactions, named "immediate talk," refers to talk directly related to the book as it is being read. The second variable, named

“non-immediate talk,” refers to talk that links topics in the book to the outside world and to past experiences, and draws on general knowledge. The use of non-immediate talk has since been found to be especially critical for fostering comprehension because it helps children begin to make sense of the story as it relates to their everyday lives (see De Temple, 2001).

Our analyses indicate that mothers of boys tended to provide less immediate and non-immediate comments during the book reading activities, as compared with mothers of girls ($t = -1.68, p < .10$). Mothers of boys also tended to request less immediate information and non-immediate information from their sons ($t = -2.00, p < .05$), produce fewer utterances, and engage in less overall book talk with their sons during the book reading activities ($t = -1.69, p < .10$). Likewise, boys appeared to be less verbal than girls during these activities ($t = -1.66, p < .10$). It is conceivable that these differences in the ways in which mothers engage and respond during early childhood reading activities may contribute to the differences we observed between the girls’ and boys’ literacy performance and achievement later in middle school.

Socio-emotional Experiences of Preschool Literacy Practices

A second factor that may contribute to the gender differences in literacy performance and achievement is the socio-emotional experience of early literacy practices. Specifically, we found that in addition to quantitative and qualitative differences in the children’s cognitive experiences of preschool literacy practices, the mothers in our study tended to interact differently with girls and boys during the book reading activities that we observed when the participants were four years old.¹ Although virtually all of the mothers in the study reported regular and consistent book reading with their children and there was no significant difference between frequency of these practices for girls and boys, reports indicate that boys tended to be read to less often and by a lesser variety of people, as compared to girls. Analysis of transcripts from book reading observations in the home follow similar trends, with boys getting less exposure to talk about books, though these differences are not significant. The transcripts also provide greater evidence of a successfully integrated reading routine for girls than for boys. In sum, it seems that while all of the mothers in the study viewed reading with their children as important, they nevertheless

appeared to place less emphasis on this activity for the boys than for the girls. We hypothesize that such differences may ultimately influence the importance boys place on reading, particularly if they come to view reading as a feminine activity.

In order to illustrate ways that children might be exposed to reading routines that are gender-specific, we present transcripts from parent-child dyads. For instance, during our preschool home visits when mothers were asked to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to their child “just as they would normally do if the researchers were not present,” several boys resisted the activity. For example, one boy said, “no because I already read that one before.” Another boy had to be cajoled into sitting still as his mother recounted his protest about a school experience earlier in the week, “Mommy they read me that dumb old caterpillar book again.” In fact, several mothers had to negotiate seating arrangements with their sons, with some boys stubbornly insisting on sitting or standing some distance away from the mother and the book, at the far end of the couch or on the floor or opposite mom with an upside-down view of the book. Even boys such as Ethan,² who enjoyed being read to, were playfully defiant during this activity.

Mother: Do you want me to read this to you?

Ethan: [laughs]

Mother: I’m not reading it to your toes!

Ethan: [laughs again—he is lying down with his feet toward mother]

Mother: Come up here with me! Look at this!

Moreover, 6 of the 22 boys had difficulty even beginning the activity because they were distracted by the presence of toys brought to the visit for another activity (see Katz, 2001). One boy exclaimed, “I just wanna play with the toys, that’s what I wanna do. I see the bag—let me grab it.” The boys’ resistance to the reading activity required redirection and negotiation from researchers and mothers: “Well, how about I read you this story first, okay?” Incidents such as these suggest the lack of appeal that this reading task, and perhaps reading in general, had for these boys, particularly when other activities were available.

In contrast, field notes indicated a readiness of many of the girls to participate, as they settled on their mothers’ laps to hear the familiar tale of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Girls were also more commonly and more

dramatically praised during this activity as their mothers engaged in questioning about the book's plot and helped daughters to decode words:

Mother: What do you think happened?

Monica: He grewed and he grewed into a butterfly.

Mother: Jeez, you are smart!

Monica: He was a beautiful butterfly!

Mother: How did you know that?

Monica: Because I [laughs] have it at my school!

Mother: Oh, you're smart!

Mother: Go ahead, look at it and tell me what it says if you can. [as she points to the title]

Emily: Caterpillar!

Mother: The Very . . . [speaking slowly]

Emily: Hungry Caterpillar.

Mother: Very good!

Boys similarly received praise for pointing out the "little egg" and "watermelon" and so forth:

Mother: And what is that? [as she points at the picture]

Greg: A sun.

Mother: Right. He started to look for some food. What is he doing?

Greg: [tries to turn page]

Mother: No no no no no. I didn't touch this yet.

Mother: And one slice of . . . What is this? [points to picture]

Sean: Um . . . [throws arms up and looks at researcher, then hesitates]

Mother: Watermelon.

Sean: Watermelon!

Mother: Good!

However, such praise was sparse and appeared to reflect lower expectations, as shown in the second example in which Sean's mother soon provides him with the answer.

Through these visits that allowed us to watch mothers interact with their children at home, we were able to get a sense of the processes and experiences of book reading in the participants' everyday family routines. There was substantial overlap in boys' and girls' experiences that con-

tributed to language and literacy development. But there was also evidence of subtle patterns of variation that foreshadow gender differences in attitudes toward reading and reading achievement later in life. As it turned out, the academically successful students in our study tended to be girls who practiced and enjoyed both school-related and recreational reading, and have done so from an early age.

Boys' Experiences of Gender Socialization

In addition to cognitive and socio-emotional experiences of early literacy practices, boys' socialization toward male gender roles also appeared to influence their literacy engagement and achievement in middle school. By middle school, one-fourth of the children in the sample had been retained and one-third of the children had received some kind of special services (ranging from reading tutoring to special education placement). However, boys in the sample were no more likely than girls to be at risk for school failure based on these particular markers. While fears for these children's futures are evenly spread between boys and girls, we were surprised by individual cases among the boys in the sample who were in trouble. For instance, whereas girls showing patterns of risk by middle school had exhibited consistent markers of concern throughout their time in our study, boys at risk in middle school included several of the brightest boys in the study.

For example, Ethan, who was especially advanced in his early language and literacy skills, and whose parents and teachers provided strong support and had high expectations for schooling, began to withdraw from academics in sixth grade. When asked whether he thought he'd go on to college, he replied, "I don't really want to. My parents are gonna try and make me." By seventh grade, his aspiration to become an actor was well established and he had already begun going on auditions. The only thing he saw standing in the way of his career was "only my parents . . . um, by saying, like, 'I don't think you should take this job,' you know, or you know, 'you're not paying as much attention on like schoolwork . . . as you are on your acting career,' you know." This boy, who once had engaged wholeheartedly in his school work, no longer saw much value in it.

Ethan, who was also identified by teachers and researchers as a boy of high academic ability and a precocious reader in early elementary school, explained his loss of interest in reading matter-of-factly, "basically (be)cause I used to read a lot and now I just, I just have more stuff to do,

ya know I've got a more complex life, I guess." His standardized test scores on the PPVT measure consistently revealed that his cognitive abilities far exceeded that of other children in the study, even as his grades dropped and he was consequently referred to school counselors. There are a number of reasons for Ethan's downward academic trajectory, including his taking on a more conventional masculine role. What we witnessed in his development over ten years was a change in the value he placed on his literacy skills that corresponded to various clues about his development of a masculine identity. Being a better reader than other students in his class gave him high status in early elementary school, as he gained positive recognition and attention by his teachers. However, this did not benefit him—nor any other boy—in the same way in middle school when simply being smart was more a cause for ridicule than for popularity. As a teenager, Ethan's interview narratives focus on his independence from his parents, his isolation from classmates, and his tough stance against school authorities and peer bullies. The fact that he liked to "read a lot" and from a variety of genres had narrowed down to an interest in reading scripts for acting jobs.

In their seventh grade interviews, 6 of the 22 boys reported that they read "a lot," and when asked why, simply stated that it was an activity they did often. Similarly, the eight girls who reported reading "a lot" also equated it with liking to read a lot, but often provided more elaborate answers about why they liked to read: "I like adventures and stuff like to imagine things." "Because sometimes books are interesting and I just like finding out what the end is going to be." "It fills your mind with stuff, I don't know just gives you ideas." Whereas girls articulated the intellectual journey of reading, boys emphasized the action of reading. For example, in describing his enjoyment of reading, Peter explains:

I like just to read, I usually read it aloud, or I'll read it on tape, and then I'll like read it to the tape and then I'll mark it, and then later on I'll listen to it over again, but I think reading's fun and it teaches you a lot. I'll like have, um, well I usually use my dad's karaoke machine, I'll talk into the microphone. And I'll read the whole of it and I'll record it. And later on I'll play it back.

By making reading a more physically active process, Peter transformed what is usually a solitary and calm activity into boisterous entertainment.

On the other end of the spectrum, both boys and girls who disliked reading were equally likely to describe it as “boring!” However, boys were more vigorous in their responses:

Casey: It’s not fun.

Conrad: It’s just too hard to read. It’s boring. I’d rather play video games.

Jack: I hate it. It’s boring. It like stinks. You sit there with your eyes halfway shut.

Justin: They’re just boring. They just like don’t make sense. They have no adventure.

Just having to talk about reading was a grim prospect for Jack:

Jack: Is this all you do is ask like a ton of boring questions?

Interviewer: Yeah. It’s my job.

Jack: (speaking very slowly and imitating the voice of an old man) Why? I’d—rather—be—in—class—listenin’—to—my—teacher—when—lightning—strikes.

Another reason that boys gave for not reading, which the girls in our sample did not mention, is that it was one of many things in their lives for which they were too busy. Brian, who received strong home support for literacy and chose advanced books for his pleasure reading (*Narrative Biography of Frederick Douglas*), told us, “I hate reading. I don’t like to read books. I don’t have the time. I don’t really take the time to read either.” As they moved through adolescence, the boys seemed to feel that they needed to shoulder more serious responsibilities (such as preparing for employment), while leaving the activities of their childhood behind (such as formal schooling). As boys’ lives begin to be filled with activities outside of school, class requirements seemed oppressive and uninspiring as Brad put it, “Well because now all I’m really reading is like school books and most of them are pretty boring so, like I spend time reading those so I really don’t have time to read anything else.” His reading of Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea* was dry compared with *Bart Simpson’s Guide to Life* and *Freddie Kruger’s Tales of Terror*. Just as there appeared to be gender differences in reading practices, it also seemed that children developed reading preferences that are bifurcated by gender.

Although these boys typically regarded reading as a narrow pursuit that is academic in nature and necessarily dry, there was also evidence in their

interview narratives that their attitudes toward reading could vary across different genres of reading materials such that reading mystery or horror stories could be thought of as fun and therefore not really “reading,” especially when compared to reading assigned texts. In his 6th grade interview, James suggests a distinction between genres:

James: I don’t like to read.

Interviewer: You just don’t, you just really don’t like to read?

James: No, because usually the books that teachers give us to read are boring.

Interviewer: Mmhm. What about reading on your own?

James: That’s a much different story.

When the interviewer pressed James to talk about how much he liked to read school books versus books he chose on his own, he still insisted that he didn’t like to read much because the books he picked were “usually about four hundred pages!” James also pointed out that he was “not a very beginner reader,” indicating some satisfaction with his skill level, as he talked at length about his delight with *Interview with a Vampire* (all the while playing with his fake vampire teeth).

In fact, we heard contradictions between their attitudes about reading and the practices of reading throughout the interviews with the boys. Even as boys expressed disdain for reading, they described books that they enjoyed reading, books that reflected stereotypically masculine adventure and horror stories. For instance, one boy described how “boring” reading was because it “has no adventure” and then talked in detail about the book he was currently enjoying:

Justin: um *The Crossing* . . . um it’s about this immigrant in Mexico. And he’s going North to get a job. Because he’s poor. And he lives in a cardboard box. And he has to cross, is it the Rio Grande? Yeah.

Another boy, Jack, told us that he “hate[s]” reading because it “stinks,” but then went on to tell about how “I read a couple *Goosebumps*. Those are easy, I finish those in an hour.” He also recalled finishing *It* by Stephen King, which would not necessarily be an easy read for this boy in special education placement. Even boys who claimed they did not like to read, and actually avoided reading books, were avid fans of sports magazines

(*Sports Illustrated*, *Skateboarding World*) and admitted to reading biographies of sports stars.

Clearly, the discrepancy between the boys' claims that they do not like to read and their apparent enjoyment of reading on some occasions is linked to some extent to the genres of their reading materials. However, the boys' contradictory responses also raise the question of whether heightened pressures to accommodate masculine stereotypes in middle school may lead boys to take on a tough guy attitude toward reading and other school-related activities. For instance, Paul, who was identified early on for special education services, described how difficulties with reading could lead to ridicule from classmates (undermining his dignity and thus perhaps his masculinity):

Well, first of all, books you know, they got a lot of big words, some books have little words, but you have to get used to reading. I just don't, we don't read a lot in class. Because if I read in a class, everyone, they start laughing if you make a mistake on a word.

While boys may enjoy being the class clown to gain attention, and may be unconcerned with calling out a potentially wrong answer (Orenstein, 1994; Spencer, Porche & Tolman, under review), that is quite different from being laughed at or labeled as "dumb." Boys may be sensitive about the way they are perceived by peers regarding their identity as readers and therefore try to avoid being teased for making mistakes, like Paul, or picked on for being a good reader, like Ethan, or simply for reading too much or reading girls' books. Viewed from a sociocultural perspective, boys' positive engagement in literacy experiences is embedded in masculine socialization, so that their connection to reading is bound to masculine hobbies and activities. As Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found, boys reported more enjoyment and interest in reading books and magazines unrelated to school assignments, on topics such as sports, cars, adventure and so on. Reading was identified as valuable in the sense that it allowed the boys to gain immediate information, such as sports scores and other news, or to solve problems, such as providing hints for winning at video games.

Although the boys in our sample appeared to have different tastes in reading materials and possibly even a different orientation to reading, as compared to girls, they were nonetheless engaged in literacy practices in

ways that reflected both masculine interests and the fact that other activities take priority over reading in their busy and complex lives. The risk for boys is therefore not lower reading ability but their narrow and formal interpretation of acceptable reading practices. The academic reading that the boys in this low-income sample reject is an activity that is essential for school success and adult reading proficiency (Snow, 2002). While educators might appreciate any kind of reading that a child does outside of school, limited exposure and resistance to a wider variety of materials connected to reading proficiency may undermine academic achievement (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999), even as it firmly reinforces a masculine identity. As Brad explains, "I don't really like the classics and stuff but some of them are okay like *Robin Hood* and *Treasure Island*. But I mostly like, just like adventure and uh mysteries and horror stories." School success and transition to higher education is dependent upon proficiency in comprehension skills across subject areas. Boys, like Brad, who only want to read adventure stories, also deny themselves opportunities to improve their literacy skills; their masculine identity is not likely to be challenged by using this strategy, but neither is their intellectual ability.

Pathways and Meanings

The goal of this study was to learn about the development of children's reading practices in and out of school, and particularly ways in which early interpersonal literacy practices at home may contribute to later gender differences in reading practices and academic achievement among the participants in our study. In addition to highlighting differences in the interpersonal aspects of early literacy practices, an analysis of the interview data also revealed differences in the intrapersonal processes, such as the ways in which individuals respond to various genres of reading materials. For this low-income sample we found that boys and girls started out equally matched on language and literacy ability and early academic achievement measures. This suggests that boys are not innately poor readers any more than girls are innately good at reading. We also found that boys and girls received a similar frequency of exposure to early reading activities. Thus, based on evidence of stable cognitive ability, we would not expect differences in later academic achievement.

However, differences do appear beyond early childhood that seem to reflect gender socialization, which may be inadvertently linked to the *qual-*

ity of literacy experiences for boys and girls. For instance, a closer look at the early childhood data suggests the subtle beginnings of a divergence in approach to reading with girls compared to boys. During the preschool book reading activity, boys spent less time talking with their mothers about the books they were reading and mothers requested less information of them compared to girls. This pattern of talking about books may be related to boys' middle school interviews, in which they tend to elaborate less on the process of reading, compared to girls. This divergence may be exacerbated by the internalization of masculine and feminine ideologies which has been found to intensify in adolescence (Galambos, Almeida & Petersen, 1990). This would explain the growing disparity in literacy engagement and achievement for boys and girls as they move through adolescence.

As much as they can be enjoyable social activities between parent and child, early book reading experiences also establish a routine that prepares the child for later classroom practices meant to foster reading proficiency. Examples from preschool transcripts of boys and girls in this low-income sample suggest that early literacy practices for boys may include less encouragement and help with decoding, as well as less active questioning and discussion about text, that promotes understanding and prepares them for later academic success. Based on our study, mothers' experiences of reading with boys do not seem to provide the same sense of day-to-day routine or degree of challenge as with girls. In adolescence, the absence in school of reading material that is appealing to boys may also reinforce beliefs about reading as a feminine activity, especially if materials that appeal to girls (such as fictional narratives which include attention to the emotional lives and relationships of characters) are plentiful in the curriculum (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999).

Contrary to recent popular discourse that attributes boys' academic struggles to attention paid to girls' issues, data from our study offer a much more complex and perhaps puzzling story of boys' trajectories of achievement. In our sample, statistical tests of measures of language, cognitive ability, and home support of early literacy show no difference between boys and girls. Standardized assessments of language and literacy ability continue to show no difference between boys and girls as they progress through school—both for students on successful and less successful (e.g., special education placement and retention) trajectories. However, by middle school, significant differences begin to appear in teachers' assessments of boys as being less interested in learning and in

having more discipline problems. These emergent differences may reflect messages about masculinity that may not directly imply a lack of emphasis on literacy, but rather, promulgate encouragement of other activities that are more reflective of conventional masculine activities, for instance, play, sports, and action. As Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) point out in their ethnography of middle school, popular boys tend to be those who participate in extracurricular sports activities, who are seen as tough and competitive. Reading, which is considered a more demure activity, may be seen by boys as being incompatible with this desired image. In a culture of adolescence that does not value academic achievement, and in a culture of masculinity that does not value reading, boys like Ethan, who are intelligent, may become discouraged in their academic pursuits, and boys like Paul, who are self-conscious about making mistakes, may, in their efforts to avoid being ridiculed, miss opportunities to develop their reading skills.

The early routines parents establish in reading to their sons may not communicate as strong an emphasis on literacy, and by extension, academic success in language arts, as that which girls receive. This is not to say that boys are not encouraged to do well in school. Rather, there are stronger expectations that they do well in academic domains that are traditionally masculine, such as math and science, or excel in vocational programs that provide job skills. Similarly, while boys may not have less exposure to reading, the choice of reading material that is narrowly geared toward masculine ideals and reinforces stereotypical masculine behavior seems less likely to enhance a balanced set of skills necessary for academic success.

Our educational system goes to great lengths to establish itself as gender neutral, yet responses to reading and math difficulties, whether conscious or unconscious, are quite different and may ultimately put boys and girls at risk in various academic domains. For instance, much attention is paid to the remediation of reading difficulties common for boys, such as dyslexia, but not to the remediation of math learning difficulties common for girls, such as dyscalculia. In both cases, the potential influence of gender role expectation should be considered seriously in our diagnoses and subsequent interventions in these arenas. Parents and educators seriously committed to the preparation of children's success in school and beyond do students a disservice by attending to their needs without consideration of the greater social context in which learning takes place. Gender is one of the most imposing aspects of this social context but remains relatively under-explored. Through increased investigation, gender may provide a

lens with which to understand how and why learning may or may not take place and may serve as a starting point for engaging boys in reading activities that are vital to their success in an increasingly information-based society.

NOTES

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1. Activities were planned with mothers because of their role as primary caretaker in each of the families we visited; in one-third of the families, they were the sole caretaker. We do not suggest that mothers should be judged as exclusively responsible for reading socialization. We would argue that fathers play as much a part in gendered messages for children through their presence and absence during literacy activities; however, we do not have observational data with male caretakers.

2. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality of participants.

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