

Blogging the Boy Problem: Gendered Literacy in the U.S.

In the U.S, the academic, professional, and popular realms alike construct literacy as gendered. Reading is a social act, and children of the reading public are cast as follows: Girls are believed to read a lot and enjoy reading while boys are seen as resistant towards reading and particularly towards school-based literacy. This echoes broader Western notions of reading. As Elaine Millard (1994) states, "In Western societies, reading is presented largely as a girl-preferred activity" (p. 96). Much empirical evidence from academic research studies, which I will discuss in my review of the literature, supports these stereotyped notions of gendered literacy.

In the context of the U.S. educational system, until fairly recently girls were considered disadvantaged in comparison to boys, especially in terms of math and science, and educators and educational researchers made efforts to equalize and increase opportunities for girls. However, since approximately the 1990s, researchers, educators, and the media have turned their attention to boys, particularly to the issue of boys and reading ("the boy problem"), as boys disproportionately tend to express dislike for reading, read less overall than girls, and underachieve as compared to girls on tests of reading. For example, according to the Nation's Report Card (2007), students' reading scores in a U.S. educational survey have reflected a gender gap for the past 15 years. In 2007, fourth grade females' scores were 7 points above boys and eighth grade girls' scores were 10 points above boys' (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Moreover, Scholastic Inc.'s survey of 501 children ages 5-17 from 25 large U.S. cities found that frequency of reading was less for children over 8 and particularly so for boys (Scholastic & Yankelovich, 2008, p. 4) and that the boys surveyed were more likely than girls to have difficulty finding books they enjoy (p. 16). Boys are now perceived as the marginalized sex in education and weaker especially in reading.

Amidst these widespread perceptions of girls as readers and boys as non-readers, a seeming crisis regarding boys and literacy has arisen and spawned a number of blogs related to this topic. Since the boy problem has been constructed as a popular education topic, it has prompted a wide range of popular responses. This study asks: What are the textual and stylistic features of a sample of blogs concerning boys and reading? Do they constitute a genre? What meanings do they communicate? In this study, I will attempt to address all the aspects of Darnton's (1982) communication circuit. Who are the primary authors of these blogs, including educators, authors, and boys themselves? How do they produce the blogs? How do readers receive these blogs, respond to them and appropriate them? To what degree are the blogs intertextual or even collaborative? As ephemera, what sociocultural phenomena do the blogs embody? Moreover, how do they maintain, or, alternatively, disrupt, the gendered values associated with reading? This study is part of a larger project concerned with theorization of gendered literacy.

Works Cited:

Darnton, R. (1982). What is the history of books? *Daedalus* 111: 65-83.
Lee, J., Grigg, W., & Donahue, P. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007* (NCES 2007-496). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics,

Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2007/2007496.asp#section2>

Millard, E. (1994). *Developing readers in the middle years*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Scholastic & Yankelovich. (2008). *2008 Kids & Family Reading Report*. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from <http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/kfrr08web.pdf>