Boys and The English Classroom

Developing Awareness and Strategies for At-Risk Students
Jordan, 16, is extremely quiet; in fact, he rarely talks at all. He refuses to speak in front of his Grade 11 College Preparation English class, and does not contribute to small group discussions. Although unmotivated, Jordan is not disruptive.

Jordan shows an interest in soccer. Jordan does not complete assigned work, even after numerous phone calls home. He will not ask for assistance when he does not understand. He feels frustrated when his teachers help him because he feels the final product isn't his work. He refuses to do tasks that he doesn't want to do, even if it means the difference between a pass or a fail. Jordan gives up quickly and refuses to read books. Despite all of this, the little work that he does reveals some understanding of the material.

Jordan attends class every day. Jordan does not have any special placement under an Identification Placement Review Committee and he does not have an Individual Education Plan.
Anticipated Outcomes

- Gain a better understanding of the effects of gender and social issues on the ability to become literate learners
- Increase awareness of the challenges associated with boys and literacy
- Share resources that support boys and literacy in the English classroom
- Share strategies that appeal to the ways boys learn
- Focus on refinements to our curriculum to support learning and additional supports for boys in the classroom
Factors Influencing Students’ Ability to Become Literate Learners

Studies show that there are many factors that impact literacy development. The three main influences are:

- Gender
- Socio-Economics
- Race
How Gender Impacts Boys & Literacy

"Educators have not been attentive to the complexity of boys, literacy and schooling" (Kehler & Craig, 2005).

• People have developed stereotypical ideas of what it means to be masculine
  o Hence "quick fixes" such as strategies designed with stereotypical boy interests in mind, boy friendly curriculum and a stronger male educator presence are not dealing with the real issue
  o Not all boys are the same; therefore what works for one does not work for all

• The call is being made to eradicate these stereotypes and to treat not just boys, but all students for the individuals that they are
  o It is time for education to get personal! We need to get to know our students, so that we can design programs that work for them
"Socioeconomic status has been a strong predictor of student achievement" (Coleman, 1966).

- Studies continue to support the theory that students in high poverty areas consistently achieve lower test scores than their low poverty counterparts. It was also noted that many of the high poverty subjects came from single parent families (Caldas, 1999).
- Supports must be in place for families of low income and/or single parent homes to ensure that children are getting the same opportunities in education as everyone else.
  - Continuing with breakfast programs and after school tutoring, and opening our eyes to the issues of poverty in our own schools are vital to student success.
The Impact of a Person’s Race

Socio-economic status and race are very closely linked with academic achievement

• "The factor of race or ethnicity is closely associated with that of poverty as a predictor of achievement" (Harkreader & Weathersby, 1998)
• Studies show that there is an increase in the number of single parent homes as well
The Impact of a Person’s Race

How can we help?

• We as educators need to take a person's culture into consideration when we are teaching
  o For example, in Middle Eastern cultures and Asian cultures too much eye contact is inappropriate. In African American and Latino cultures too much eye contact can be seen as "aggressive" or "disrespectful". Yet if a teacher that is not from these cultures tries to communicate with these students, they may mistake respect for inattentiveness or disrespect

• As educators, we need to ensure that we take the time to get to know our students and their backgrounds to ensure that we develop fair and equitable teaching practices especially when communicating with our students
Challenges for Teachers: Identifying Literacy Problems

• Finding the cause of boys’ underachievement when it is often complex and sometimes invisible poses a challenge
  o Socio-economic status, family situation/history, health and nutrition, attitudes, confidence, attendance
  o Underachievement may not have anything to do with actual literacy skills

• Separating behaviour from achievement can be a challenge
  o Behaviour can get in the way of completing work
  o Learning skills and work habits need to reflect behaviour issues, while grades need to reflect achievement
  o Accommodations or differentiation may help reduce the disruptive or unproductive behaviour to increase successful completion of assignments

• Interpreting data may present a challenge
  o Other factors beyond gender need to be considered: socio-economic status, family history, attitude, nutrition, etc.
  o Literacy achievement needs to be assessed looking at more than standardized testing to develop a complete picture
Challenges for Teachers: Authenticity and Engagement

Assignments and coursework need to be seen as worthwhile and relevant to life beyond the classroom

• Differentiation is key to engaging a broader student-base
  o Choice gives students ownership and control over their learning, making it worthwhile and meaningful

• A wide range of materials covering the topic of study needs to be readily accessible
  o Texts can include: books, e-books, websites, blogs, graphic novels, movies, shorts, advertising, commercials, flyers, magazines, poetry, song, posters, etc.
  o Student input is powerful when choosing materials; funding needs to be available to support learning materials

• Cross-curricular studies increase engagement
  o Using and applying skills from a range of disciplines further engages students and increases skill mastery and confidence
  o Rich performance tasks and inquiry-based learning allow students to adjust their reading and writing to suit their purpose
Challenges for Teachers: Jordan's Case

• Jordan is quiet and refuses to talk - in small groups or large
  - Meeting with previous teachers to dialogue about Jordan may reveal more information about his motivations or interests

• Jordan is disengaged, not disruptive
  - He may fall through the cracks because he is not demanding attention
  - Bringing in themes or topics he is interested in may increase his engagement and participation

• Parental involvement in Jordan’s education appears distant
  - Jordan’s parents seem passive-aggressive regarding his education
  - Family history or situation may require further investigation to be sure that everything is okay

• Jordan does not accept teacher assistance
  - He may benefit from a peer-mentorship arrangement so that assistance isn’t coming from an adult
  - A-tech may be an option if he prefers to use computer technology
Resources: Use of Non-fiction Texts

Boys are “less enthusiastic about reading than girls” and are “less able to understand narrative texts but are better than girls at absorbing informational texts” (Milner & Milner, 2008, p. 220).

- Boys tend to be better at information retrieval than girls are and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes (Me Read? No Way, 2004, p.6)
- Studies show that “highly reluctant readers in the classroom had very rich literate lives outside of school...none of the boys in [the] study rejected literacy. What they did almost universally reject was ‘school literacy’” (Me Read? No Way, 2004, p.7)
- Therefore, non-fiction texts should be readily available in the classroom for boys to read
Resources: Library

Research shows (Millard 2007) that boys are “disadvantaged in academic literacy because of the current reading curriculum, the texts and topics teachers select, and the few books available that boys really like” (Milner & Milner, 2008, p. 220).

• Reading programs in schools often reflect the interests of girls more than those of boys
• There is a limited selection of genres suited to male interest (*Me Read? No Way*, 2004, p.7)
• Resources need to be purchased or borrowed to fit the gap; student input should be solicited when making these acquisitions
• Trips to the school library allow boys to choose their own resource and will “enhance their sense of ownership of, and interest in, the new resources” (*Me Read? No Way*, 2004, p.9).

“A good book for a boy is one he wants to read” (*Me Read? No Way*, p.8)
The arts - drama, dance, music, and the visual arts - can contribute to the development of literacy skills while exposing students to a wide range of experiences.

- Boys “don’t like to talk about books as much as they like to act in response to their reading” (Milner & Milner, 2008, p. 220).
- Incorporating drama in the classroom allows boys the opportunity to visualize stories as they unfold (Me Read? No Way, 2004, p.22)
- “Through the arts, boys can also express and explore emotion in a safe context...[and] increase boys’ understanding and enjoyment of the texts they read” (Me Read? No Way, p.22)

“Those who cannot imagine, cannot read” (Me Read? No Way, p.22)
Society’s constructions of masculinity and femininity prevent boys from participating in the English classroom

- Boys are reluctant to show interest in English from fear of ridicule by their peers, “positioning [themselves] in opposition to femininity and homosexuality” (Kehler & Greig, 2005).

**Teachers should:**
- Challenge constructions of literacy as feminine
- Expand opportunities for representing the self and relating to others in the classroom
- Choose texts that portray positive male and female role models

“Fathers who read will have sons who read” (Me Read? No Way, p.9)
Application of Resources: Jordan

“Jordan shows an interest in soccer…and refuses to read books”

- Use class time to visit the library and select non-fiction texts of interest (soccer, sports, etc.)

Jordan is extremely quiet, does not speak in front of the class and does not contribute to small group discussions

- Jordan’s lack of participation in class may be influenced by the social constructs of gender; dispel stereotypes and make gender an integral part of the curriculum
- Jordan is not participating in class discussion; incorporating dramatic and visual arts will allow Jordan the opportunity to visualize stories and “do things” in response to readings
Reichert and Hawley (2010) catalogue lessons that work best to heighten boys’ learning:

- Lessons that result in an end product - a booklet, a catapult, a poem, or a comic strip, for example
- Lessons that are structured as competitive games
- Lessons requiring motor activity
- Lessons requiring boys to assume responsibility for the learning of others
- Lessons that require boys to address open questions or unsolved problems
- Lessons that require a combination of competition and teamwork
- Lessons that focus on independent, personal discovery and realization
- Lessons that introduce drama in the form of novelty or surprise
Strategies for Teaching Boys

- Boys in their puberty years need to believe a teacher cares for them as a person before they will allow the teacher to impart knowledge or skills to them (Pickup, 2001, p.2).
- The immense benefits of cooperative group learning not only support the needs of our youth but also accelerate academic learning (Gibbs and Ushijima, 2008, p. 175).

**OUR CASE STUDY:** Should Jordan's introverted personality be a symptom of anxiety within groups, or to perform in an uncomfortable school culture, the Tribes Cooperative Learning structure allows him many strategies and supports to be an active participant as much as he is comfortable. The goal is to engage in the learning environment through whole-class inclusion activities and strategies that appeal to boys' common learning preferences.
Teamwork and Competition: Literature Circles Strategy

Application to Case:

- Relative degrees of teamwork and competition can be varied to maintain a positive spirit and sense of mutuality (Reichert and Hawley, 2010)
- Support Jordan’s oral communication by allowing him to participate by LISTENING rather than SPEAKING until he is ready
- By listening, Jordan can build background knowledge necessary to engage in future discussion
- Jordan will be more responsive to readings that are chosen by him and his group according to interest and leveled to his ability
- Differentiated Instruction can be provided to Jordan by preparing role cards or conversation cards in advance of group meetings to facilitate conversation
- Inclusive environment established by the teacher as facilitator will build rapport and help Jordan transition to active participant

The Importance of Talk around Text:

- Oral language as a foundation, and an ongoing support, for the development of reading and writing skills
- Jordan can select and take ownership of what they read
- Texts can reflect their interests, backgrounds, and reading ability
- Provide occasions to talk in meaningful ways about what they’ve read in a nurturing and supportive environment
- Offer more mixed ability groupings, providing support to think and talk about “big ideas”, words, and ideas in the text
- A spirit of fun and playfulness is maintained
- Self-Evaluations will give Jordan ownership over learning
Teamwork and Competition

“Competitive structures rightly conceived can be a boost to the most effective kinds of mutuality and regard for others” (Reichert and Hawley, 2010)

Tribes Cooperative Learning Environment

- **4 CLASSROOM AGREEMENTS** → Mutual Respect, Attentive Listening, Appreciation Statements/No Put Downs, Right to Pass or Participate
- The teacher as facilitator works with the students to build an ideal learning culture within the classroom:
  - Inclusive
  - Respectful
  - Safe and caring
  - Student centered
- Responsibility to honour and monitor the 4 agreements is transferred from the teacher to the student learning group.
Teamwork and Competition

Case Study: Jordan enjoys soccer, but feels reluctant when asked to participate in classroom activities. To encourage his involvement, the Tribes classroom can provide a safe learning environment for Jordan to participate at his ability level and to collaborate on strategic matters. The following are “boy-friendly” strategies:

Recomposing Literary Tests from scrambled component parts in teams. The incentive for competition are teamwork, kinesthetic learning and bonus marks added to a quiz or assignment.

- Critical reading, read closely, and context meaning making
- Negotiate with teammates and teach themselves
- Healthy comp: bragging rights and bonus for quiz
- Reassemble sonnet reminds them of structure and rhyme scheme, generates discussion

Co - Construct Tests and Learning Goal Criteria

- In small groups using notes and suggested questions construct a multiple choice test
- Analyze previous test questions to detect patterns
- Student discussions during test about the answers probed pretty deeply into the matters at hand with a sense of purpose and clarity lacking in our class discussions
- Boys are more effectively engaged when they can take responsibility for someone else’s learning (Reichert and Hawley, 2010)
Motor Activity

Boys are being penalized for their inability to sit still in a classroom. Movement has been prescribed as an integral part of learning since ancient Greek pedagogues incorporated rhythmic exercise.

The Facts: Boys...

- Are nearly three times as likely as girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- 6.4 million in all--have been diagnosed with ADHD.
- Are kept back in schools at twice the rate of girls.
- Get expelled from preschool nearly five times more often than girls.
- Are diagnosed with learning disorders and attention problems at nearly four times the rate of girls (Lahey, 2013).

Contemporary Observations:

- Boys develop and prefer large-muscle activity to fine motor activity.
- Using large motor activity to “embody” a subject under study (e.g., a Chemical Reaction) is an effective way for kinesthetic learners to embed the learning more deeply in long-term memory (Reichert and Hawley, 2010).

Boys are responsive to motor activity incorporated into ordinary instruction as is seen in strategies such as games, role play, competition and teamwork (Reichert and Hawley, 2010).
Motor Activity Strategies

On The Line ... With Swords

• As a means to engage students with a difficult text, *Romeo and Juliet* (either the stage version or the graphic novel). To bring the action to life students are drilled in the discipline of stage combat using foam swords. Then, they are to act out the scene where Mercutio, Romeo, and Tybalt all duel resulting in the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt.

• Boys are physically engaged with the action of the scene and are "hooked" by the weapons and combat that motivates them to be involved with the scene and its language (Reichert and Hawley, 2010).
Motor Activity: Case Application

• Jordan’s interest in soccer may indicate an interest in a kinesthetic approach to learning material
• His reluctance to participate may indicate some self-consciousness about his skills. To support Jordan during motor activities in the classroom, the teacher should provide him with an explanation of the day’s activities and some options for how he wishes to approach his learning
• For example, he may feel less anxious about approaching the line with his opinion if he can prepare a statement or his ideas ahead of time in class or before class
• Worried that he might look silly during movement activities, Jordan should be allowed to select a partner or to watch other students first and then participate at his own level when comfortable.
• As much as possible, Jordan should be given different kinesthetic approaches to his learning in an activity.
  • Drawing, Writing, Small Manipulative, Acting it Out, etc.
## The Importance of Tribes Inclusion

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADOLESCENT TASKS</th>
<th>THE PROCESS OF TRIBES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self- Actualization</td>
<td>builds personal identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal Locus of Control</td>
<td>affirms and practices independent thinking within peer groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self – Esteem</td>
<td>develops positive self esteem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>teaches and practices collaborative skills so that learning groups work well together</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>strategies for inclusion, presentation of self and discovering of gifts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self – control</td>
<td>trains students in supportive peer-to-peer feedback</td>
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<td>Active Participation</td>
<td>• cooperative and constructivist active learning methods</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• engages students actively through strategies that give influence and a sense of being valued</td>
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<td>Belonging / Inclusion</td>
<td>Structures long term membership of groups in every classroom</td>
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<td>Pro-social behaviors</td>
<td>trains adults to model and have students reflect on caring character qualities</td>
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<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>teaches 12 communication skills</td>
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<td>ADOLESCENT TASKS</td>
<td>TRIBES STRATEGIES SUPPORT JORDAN BY:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self- Actualization</td>
<td>• Jordan will discover a sense of identity by developing his specific talents and gifts within student-centered strategies</td>
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| Internal Locus of Control     | • Jordan desires independent thought and work and will be given multiple opportunities to develop his thinking within groups at a comfortable pace  
                                 • Giving Jordan responsibility within groups will teach him interdependence and self-responsibility |
| Self – Esteem                 | • Explicit instruction of valuing diversity within the classroom will promote Jordan’s self-image – encourages him to be more vocal |
| Collaboration                 | • Jordan will practice and develop collaborative skills so that he can feel assured that the groups will work well together |
| Identity                      | • Jordan’s interests, including soccer, maybe presented as he is comfortable and celebrated for his individual gifts |
| Self – control                | • His positive classroom behavior will be used as a model for other group members and will empower his leadership skills |
| Active Participation          | • Jordan will have more influence and sense of active participation through strategies that use cooperative learning methods |
| Belonging / Inclusion         | • Gives Jordan a sense of long term membership in a learning community and assures him that he, like everyone else, will experience positive peer interactions |
| Pro-social behaviors          | • He will learn caring character qualities and more about positive masculinity in various strategies including those that are “boy friendly” |
| Communication Skills          | • Jordan’s anxiousness in groups will gradually dissipate with more explicit teaching of communication skills in whole and small groups |
The Ministry of Education promotes at least one resource that is focused on helping teachers engage boys in the English classroom: *Me Read! No Way!*

Suggestions are to pick appropriate resources and texts to meet current curriculum guidelines:

- Books that reflect their image of themselves
- Books that make them laugh and appeal to sense of mischief
- Fiction focused on action, not emotions
- Books in a series
- Science-fiction or fantasy
Oral language is the foundation for literacy development” (Me, Read? No Way, 2004)

• Allow boys the opportunity to talk and be social as much as possible
• The curriculum has a strong focus on oral performance, but this will only appeal to certain types of boys (those who like attention and present traditional ideas of masculinity); caution is needed for boys who don’t fit that description, so teachers should be willing to make modifications for some of the expectations
• Boys perform best with short, structured tasks; they don’t do well with open-ended questions
• Oral performances being done in groups can help boys
Curriculum Changes or Implications:
Ministry Focus and Recommendations

(Continued from previous slide)

• Non-traditional: newspapers, magazines, comic books, baseball cards, instruction manuals
• Non-print resources (i.e. CD-ROMs), easy-to-read books to build fluency and provide enjoyment
• Provide texts with positive role models
• Have cross-curricular approaches, especially those that highlight the arts
  • Storytelling, dance, art, music, drawing, drama
• Use real-world themes to integrate literacy instruction throughout the curriculum
  • Real-world themes allow cross-curricular connections
• Make use of the media strand (boys like technology)
Curriculum Changes or Implications: Words of Caution - Balance is Needed!

- Some researchers push to reach only a certain type of boy - one that exhibits traditional masculine image. By doing so, this neglects boys who do not fit the stereotypical male image, any struggling girls, and students from other cultures.
- The Ministry’s promotion of resources such as *Me Read! No Way!* is a concern because it is perceived as a quick fix without truly understanding all of the gender dynamics at play in the classroom.
- Some researchers want “more nuanced understanding of what constitutes good teaching and effective learning in schools for all students” (*Boys and Schooling*, 2009)
- Need to make gender issues an integral part of the curriculum.
Curriculum Changes or Implications: How this Affects Jordan

• Jordan can be encouraged to pick material that suit his interests for independent reading tasks
  • If he is interested in soccer, he could read a book that relates to a soccer player
• Any oral presentations become very stressful for Jordan, so his teacher should arrange alternative presentation formats for him other than in front of the whole class.
  • He could either pre-record his presentation using a snowball microphone or present just in front of the teacher
• Jordan should be encouraged to read books that aren’t specifically associated with his personal interests (i.e, whole class texts). This would acknowledge that there will be diverse interests in the classroom that have to be accounted for as well.
  • However, his teacher should make use of pre-reading activities to help him make connections to the text prior to reading it. Also, any teaching strategies that are used could also be designed to engage him (see previous slides for suggestions)
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