CONSTRUCTIONS OF BOYS IN THE CONTEXT OF EQUITY AND SCHOOLING:
BEYOND “POOR BOYS” AND “PROBLEM BOYS” DISCOURSES
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In many Anglophone contexts, for example, Australia, the UK and the United States, the early to mid-1990s constituted a shift in gender equity and schooling debates from a focus on social justice to a construction of boys as the “new disadvantaged.” The media were particularly effective in mobilizing public concern around a “What about the boys?” backlash. Indeed, somewhat of a moral panic was generated around boys’ schooling performance through headlines that positioned boys as failing at school, as taking a “back seat” to girls, and as losing in the “gender wars.” Boys were positioned as lost, educationally disadvantaged, and in need of special attention. Often such constructions were associated with schools and teachers failing boys. This was attributed to overly feminised education environments. The prevailing view was that feminist reform had gone too far in empowering girls, was now unfair to boys, and should be rectified in favor of boys (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hayes, 2003; Kenway, Willis, Rennie & Blackmore, 1998). Broader masculinity-in-crisis discourses, while similarly sensationalized and partial, added legitimacy to these claims. Arising from young men’s cultural and economic displacement with the global demise of manufacturing industries and the increasing feminization of labor, males were constructed as the
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weaker sex, losing out in both the labor market and in their private lives (Connell, 2002; Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

The “boy turn” in gender equity and schooling debates (Weaver-Hightower, 2003) was also a product of a reshaping of education agendas guided by global sociopolitical trends towards economic rationalism. Neo-liberal imperatives of efficiency, economy and competition produced a greater emphasis in education on standards rather than social justice objectives (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Such imperatives re-articulated equity priorities in schools to emphasize academic outcomes especially in the area of literacy, where boys have traditionally underperformed relative to girls (Lingard, 2003). Indeed, according to Taylor and Henry (2000), literacy skills came to be seen as a panacea in policy addressing issues of academic and social disadvantage. In this climate, with simplistic comparisons of girls outperforming boys on a narrow range of performance indicators, performativity became a catalyst for a “What about the boys?” backlash (Cox, 1995; Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maws, 1998; Francis & Skelton). Fueled by rising anti-feminist sentiment, this backlash enabled a positioning of boys as an educationally disadvantaged group (Hayes, 2003; Lingard).

Constructions of boys as the “new disadvantaged” in education have been strongly condemned by those concerned with gender justice, particularly in their tendency to utilize the inequities experienced by some males to make a case that all males are disadvantaged (Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2009). Along these lines, such constructions are criticized about their distortion of equity issues and their tendency to deflect attention away from issues of genuine disadvantage (Francis & Skelton, 2005). The simplistic gender comparisons that undergird such constructions fail to recognize the ways in which class, race and ethnicity intersect to compound educational disadvantage for both boys and girls (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Connolly, 2004; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). As Connolly argues, the gender gap in achievement “tends to be dwarfed by the much more considerable effects of social class and ethnicity” (p. 208). Simplistic comparisons also ignore the complex patterns of gender and disadvantage that have an impact on boys and girls in different ways. For example, while boys’ under-achievement in literacy is an international concern and certainly restricts their schooling and post-school success, boys still tend to enjoy greater access to and participation in full-time employment and further training relative to girls, this despite girls’ higher school performance and retention rates (Collins, et al. 2000; Francis & Skelton). Boys as a group, relative to girls, also enjoy greater access to positions of power and socio-economic security beyond school. As they have tended to ignore these nuances and circumscribe school priorities to focus on a narrow range of academic indicators, simplistic comparisons have sidelined schools’ emphases on social outcomes (Mahony, 1998).

Notwithstanding these issues, boys’ under-performance came to be constructed from the mid 1990s in the media, popular literature and educational policy within three dominant discourses: “poor boys,” “failing schools, failing boys,” and “boys will be boys” (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). The “poor boys” discourse tended to attribute blame for boys’ supposed under-achievement to exces-
sively feminized teaching environments that were seen as favoring girls, while the “failing schools, failing boys” discourse tended to assign blame to overly managerial and outcomes-focused school curricula. Within the “boys will be boys” discourse, boys’ under-performance, particularly their antipathy towards school or their “laddish” behaviors, were understood along predetermined lines as natural and fixed elements of their biology. Such discourses have been strongly criticized in their construction of boys as victims of schools and feminist progress, in their promotion of conventional manifestations of “boyness,” and in their abdication of responsibility for boys’ behavior away from boys (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005). In this respect, all three discourses promoted a view of boys’ under-performance “as something extrinsic to them, for example, the fault of poor teaching [or] an uninteresting or ‘feminised’ curriculum” (Francis & Skelton, p. 47).

These essentializing discourses, according to Francis (2006; see also Francis & Skelton, 2005), while still evident in schooling policy and practice, have shifted in recent times. Increasingly managerialist and standards-oriented cultures in schools have generated two new discourses: the “problem boy” discourse—which constructs boys as suffering from social exclusion and low self-esteem—and the “at-risk boy”—whose behavior is medicalized and individualized as “phobias,” “syndromes” and “disorders.” Such discourses, Francis and Skelton (2005) argue, construct boys as both threats to, and victims of, society. Where the problem boy’s antisocial or anti-school behaviors are constructed as a problem and a threat, the “at risk” boy is understood to be vulnerable and in need of support. Both discourses are seen to be tied to movements towards individualist neoliberalism within education policy and the blame for boys’ underachievement, unlike the earlier constructions of boys, tends to be individualized. However, while the “at risk” discourses tend to position boys sympathetically as victims in need of help, the “problem boy” tends to be demonized in public and policy discourse (Francis & Skelton).

These discourses have been highly influential in terms of shaping gender reform in schools. However, given the marked difference between the rhetoric and the reality of boys’ underachievement, such reform has been problematic. As Connolly (2004) argues, the lack of attention to the complexities of gender equity and schooling achievement has led to the development of strategies based on a distorted understanding of boys’ problems. For example, school reform stemming from constructions of boys as naturally “laddish” or victims of overly feminized classrooms within the “boys will be boys” or “poor boys” discourses includes increasing the number of single-sex classrooms for boys, making curriculum and teaching more “masculine,” and increasing the number of male teachers in schools. These “boy-friendly” strategies, while effective in enhancing some boys’ educational outcomes, have been counter-productive in terms of homogenizing all boys’ interests and behaviours as similar, failing to acknowledge gender diversity, and reinforcing conventional constructions of gender based on difference and opposition. Needless to say, in their reflection of a recuperative masculinity politics, Mills, Martino and Lingard (2009) note that such strategies have not had a posi-
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tive impact on the school experiences of many girls and marginalised boys (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard et al., 2002). Gender reforms stemming from constructions of boys within the "at risk" or "problem boy" discourses are similarly problematic. In relation to the latter discourse, for example, assumptions of boys as threatening or dangerous have led to tighter surveillance and social control of boys in schools (Francis & Skelton). Such models of authority, however, as is well recognized, tend to further incite, rather than change, boys' threatening behaviors (Lingard et al.; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005).

A central concern with all of these discourses is the ways in which boys' educational under-performance is dislocated from broader gendered power relations that continue to privilege "the masculine." As those concerned with gender justice have argued for some time, the social construction of gender (and in particular boys' investments in dominant constructions of masculinity) has a significant impact on their school (under)performance (Connolly, 2004; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Keddie & Mills, 2007; Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). As Connolly argues, boys' educational under-performance, notwithstanding the intervening factors of class and ethnicity, can be attributed to how dominant constructions of masculinity are appropriated and reproduced in their lives. Moving beyond essentializing discourses that position boys as victims of schooling, their biology or society, requires challenging and reconstructing these dominant masculinities. Such an approach necessitates moving beyond restrictive discourses that attempt to construct boys as "knowable" and therefore predictable and controllable.

What is required is a critical theory of recognition (Fraser, 1997) that sees the "blind spots" and distortions in gender equity priorities created by essentializing discourses about boys and education. Such an approach necessitates a theorizing of gender identities as constructed through complex and contradictory social relations that are fluid, contingent and amenable to change. Against this backdrop, a problematizing and transforming of the gendered contexts, structures and discourses that contribute to boys' and girls' under-achievement can begin.