Boys, literacies and schooling
The dangerous territories of gender-based literacy reform

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Educating boys is currently seen – both globally and locally – to be in crisis. In fact, there is a long history to the question: what about the boys? However, it was not until the 1990s that the question of boys’ education became a matter of public and political concern in a large number of countries around the world, most notably the UK, the USA and Australia.

There are a number of different approaches to troubling questions about boys in schools to be found in the literature. The questions concern the behaviours and identities of boys in schools, covering areas such as school violence and bullying, homophobia, sexism and racism, through to those about boy’s perceived underachievement. In *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement*, Epstein and her colleagues (1988) identify three specific discourses that are called upon in popular and political discussions of the schooling of boys: ‘poor boys’; ‘failing schools, failing boys’; and ‘boys will be boys’. They suggest that it might be more useful to draw, instead, on feminist and profeminist insights in order to understand what is going on in terms of gender relations between boys and girls and amongst boys. Important questions, they suggest, are: what kind of masculinities are being produced in schools, in what ways, and how do they impact upon the education of boys? In other words, there is an urgent need to place boys’ educational experiences within the wider gender relations within the institution and beyond.

Despite the plethora of rather simplistic and often counter-productive ‘solutions’ (such as making classrooms more ‘boy-friendly’ in macho ways) that are coming from governments in different part of the English-speaking world and from some of the more populist writers in the area (e.g. Steve Biddulph), there is a real necessity for a more thoughtful approach to the issues raised by what are quite long-standing problems in the schooling of boys. Approaches for advice to researchers in the field of ‘boys’ underachievement’
by policy makers and by teachers and principals responsible for staff development in their schools are an almost daily event, and many have already tried the more simplistic approaches and found them wanting. There is, therefore, an urgent demand for more along the lines suggested here.

This is not a series of ‘how to do it’ handbooks for working with boys. Rather, the series draws upon a wide range of contemporary theorizing that is rethinking gender relations. While, as editors, we would argue strongly that the issues under discussion here require theorizing, it is equally important that books in the area address the real needs of practitioners as they struggle with day-to-day life in schools and other places where professional meet and must deal with the varied, often troubling, masculinities of boys. Teachers, youth workers and policy makers (not to mention parents of boys – and girls!) are challenged by questions of masculinity. While many, perhaps most, boys are not particularly happy inhabiting the space of the boy who is rough, tough and dangerous to know, the bullying of boys who present themselves as more thoughtful and gentle can be problematic in the extreme. We see a need, then, for a series of books located within institutions, such as education, the family and training/workplace and grounded in practitioners’ everyday experiences. There will be explored from new perspectives that encourage a more reflexive approach to teaching and learning with references to boys and girls.

We aim, in this series, to bring together the best work in the area of masculinity and education from a range of countries. There are obvious differences in education systems and forms of available masculinity, even between English-speaking countries, as well as significant commonalities. We can learn from both of these, not in the sense of saying ‘oh, they do that in Australia, so let’s do it in the UK’ (or vice versa), but rather by comparing and contrasting in order to develop deeper understandings both of the masculinities of boys and of the ways adults, especially professionals, can work with boys and girls in order to reduce those ways of ‘doing boy’ which seem problematic, and to encourage those that are more sustainable (by the boys themselves now and in later life). Thus books in the series address a number of key questions: How can we make sense of the identities and behaviours of those boys who achieve popularity and dominance by behaving in violent ways in school, and who are likely to find themselves in trouble when they are young men out on the streets? How can we address key practitioner concerns how to teach these boys? What do we need to understand about the experiences of girls as well as boys in order to intervene effectively and in ways which do not put boys down or lead them to reject our approaches to their education? What do we need to understand about gender relations in order to teach both boys and girls more effectively? How can we make sense of masculinities in schools through multi-dimensional explanations, which take into account the overlapping social and cultural differences (of, for example, class, ethnicity, dis/ability
and sexuality), as well as those of gender? What are the impacts of larger changes to patterns of employment and globalization on the lives of teachers and students in particular schools and locations? The series, as a whole, aims to provide practitioners with new insights into the changing demands of teaching boys and girls in response to these questions.

Literacy (or a lack of it) has been at the heart of much of the recent public and political concern about boys’ school-based achievement and there have been many interventions into this debate – some useful, others not. We are, therefore, delighted to be able to publish this outstanding contribution to thinking about Boys, Literacies and Schooling. Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum and Colin Lankshear do not offer easy answers in what they describe as the ‘dangerous territories of gender-based literacy reform’. Indeed, rightly in our view, they counsel against approaches which give ‘off the shelf’ (apparent) solutions to the alienation that many boys feel in relation to schooling in general and literacy practices in particular. Rather, they take the reader down an intellectually and pedagogically invigorating path towards understanding the dynamics of gender, literacy and other ‘differences that make a difference’ (like socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexuality, indigeneity).

Using accessible language, which is nonetheless theoretically nuanced, they have achieved that rare thing – a book which is at once academically rigorous and practically useful. There are no lesson plans or specific exercises here, but rather accounts of real initiatives, in real schools and a clear analysis of how they did or did not work. These are set within the context of a clear exposition of different ‘mindsets’ with which gender and literacy can be and are approached and an analysis of the likely outcomes from these different approaches. They demand of educationists something more difficult, yet more energizing and more likely to be successful, than the ‘back to basics’ strategies adopted by so many policy makers or the essentialism underpinning tying literacy education to some notion of what (undifferentiated and homogenized) ‘boys’ will like.

The flaw in these approaches is perfectly illustrated by a scene from a school in London researched by the series editors. The children in a Year Five (age 9–10) class were using the only time now available to children in English primary schools to sit and read a book of their own choice – the five or ten minutes during which the teacher took the register. During this time, the researcher (Debbie Epstein) noted one of the boys as being totally absorbed in his book (a novel). At the end of roll call, the teacher said, ‘Now kids, put your books away. It’s time for literacy hour.’ The boy walked, as slowly as he could manage, still reading, from his desk to his drawer to put his book away. Desperate to finish the chapter, he delayed as long as he dared before returning to his desk to spend an hour, divided into short bursts, on the tools of literacy – spelling, ‘comprehension’, phonics.
The authors of *Boys, Literacies and Schooling* argue convincingly that we need to move away from such (often counter-productive) ‘easy answers’. They offer educators a different, more challenging, but ultimately more successful set of strategies. These involve: developing deep knowledge of the particular kids and what they bring to particular classrooms and contexts; starting where the kids (and teachers) are, but moving beyond that through making and enabling connections; being brave enough to experiment with learning processes; and rigorous enough to assess the outcomes realistically. Literacy education is, as they say, ‘always accountable to producing demonstrably better outcomes’ that ‘work for people in the world’ (p. 210). And, as they continue, ‘they will always involve much more than literacy basics and, indeed, literacy outcomes alone’. What this book provides for educators are the tools with which to develop such outcomes, using their highly developed professional skills of analysis and pedagogy, in real classrooms and different contexts. We are proud to have it in this series.

*Debbie Epstein*

*Máirtín Mac an Ghaill*
There are a great many people who have helped us to bring this book to completion and we are grateful to all of them.

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Introduction – Dangerous places: debates about boys, girls, schooling and gender-based literacy reform

An opening story

During the five years 1996–2000 two of the present authors taught in a core subject called ‘Gender as a Social Justice Issue’ taken by students enrolled in primary and secondary teacher preparation projects within an Australian teacher education programme. The subject provided students with opportunities to explore theoretical perspectives relating to gender; to engage with contemporary debates relating to the production and regulation of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’; and to make explicit the impact that gendered norms have on various dimensions of schooling practice. Conscious of the resistance students in this particular rural and rather conservative university bring to this kind of subject matter – and sensitive to the need of spending a lot of time reassuring students that the subject will not be an exercise in male bashing – the teaching team gave students the opportunity in their first tutorial to identify their hopes and fears about the subject.

In the second half of 2000 students seemed particularly willing to take up the invitation to express their opinions about what a gender-based subject might offer. They were clear and direct in articulating what they hoped the subject would explore, and what they hoped it would leave alone. Their desires were neither simple nor homogeneous. They were, however, rather loudly and passionately expressed. Some argued, for example, that they needed to learn more about boys – and masculinity – in order to teach boys more effectively (a real concern because, as everyone knows, boys just aren’t doing well). This group hoped that this tutorial series would help them understand more about natural masculinity. Others felt that they needed to learn more about boys in order to help boys to be less masculine, and they
expressed a desire for strategies that would help them to disrupt boys’ commitment to traditional masculinity.

Still others claimed that focusing on boys would only remind them – boys that is – of their marginal status, and that what we needed to do in tutorials like this was learn how to focus on students as *individuals*. A different group expressed the opinion that the whole boys debate was nothing more than the kind of male whinging that women had gotten used to, and that we shouldn’t dignify it with our attention. For these students, girls were living through just another backlash and subjects like this at university should be designed to help teachers negotiate these and other anti-women sentiments. Someone offered the fascinating piece of information that girls could say tongue twisters faster if they were menstruating, and another person replied that anyone making that kind of claim needed to rethink their career path. A noisy group argued that all that gender stuff had been sorted out way back in the seventies and couldn’t we just get on with learning how to teach, and another offered the rather bored-sounding suggestion that we all needed to chill out and keep a sense of humour.

As they had done in previous years, the tutors worked hard to assure the students that the subject was neither anti-male nor anti-feminist. The tutors spoke openly about the nervousness they always felt before entering tutorials, because of the stereotypes people often held about ‘gender studies’ and those who work in the field. Some students acknowledged that they had been concerned about being ‘forced’ to work with left-wing-lunatic-wouldn’t-touch-em-with-a-barge-pole-seventies feminists. Others acknowledged that they would have been more worried if they hadn’t previously met some of the teaching staff and discovered that they were, in fact, just ‘normal women’. One male student captured this attitude well when he said ‘I was a bit anxious before I came – I mean having to work with – and I don’t mean to be rude, but you know, *feminists* and all that – but the tutor, well, she’s *nice* and, we’re even allowed to talk about guys; so I reckon it should, hopefully, be okay.’

Along with all the other perceptions students have expressed about the subject both before and after studying it, this rather startling concession that perhaps a person could be simultaneously a feminist *and* interested in boys’ education and *nice* illustrates a point we have long been aware of: discussing boys’ education is difficult. Teaching gender studies is hard work. Opening up debate about the educational needs of boys *and* girls is time consuming. And going into any of these areas can lead into dangerous territories.

**The focus of the book**

This leads us to the focus for this book: a focus that is at once simple and complex. We are interested in boys in school. More specifically we are
interested in tracing some of the links between boys’ diverse educational and social experiences and their varied and varying literacy levels. This necessarily involves us in exploring the ways in which boys are increasingly represented as the ‘new losers’ in contemporary educational settings and the multiple solutions that have been put forward to meet this ‘new’ gender equity challenge.

While these goals may seem simple enough there are challenges to be overcome and risks to be taken if we are to achieve any of them.

Three challenges are worth mentioning here. First, as is already apparent, discussions focusing on boys, schooling and literacy take us into emotionally charged territories. It would be difficult to find a teacher in Britain, Australasia and North America who has not heard during recent years the plaintive cry, ‘what about the boys?’ It would be similarly difficult to find a teacher who had not heard (or made) the arguments that ‘feminism has gone too far’; that schools are ‘over feminized’ and ‘anti-male’ and that what we need to do for boys is return to a world where their unique male qualities are recognized and valued. Regardless of whether one takes up or rejects this ‘anti-feminist’ and ‘pro-boy’ attitude (and the opposition between feminists/women and boys which it works to construct), the fact remains that there is controversial and highly charged terrain that needs to be negotiated whenever one moves into the boys/school/literacy debate.

Second, debates surrounding boys, schooling and literacy involve a wide range of people. While early gender and schooling projects have largely been initiated and implemented by women (often feminists), concerns about boys’ educational needs have been expressed by a diverse group of people. These include not only those with a background in gender equity but also others – parents, friends, media commentators and an increasing number of men – who are new to the whole area (including some who glimpse an opportunity to air longstanding anti-feminist prejudices).

A third challenge arises from the fact that many of the people who are now involved with the boys’ education debate hold preconceived ideas about the motivations and agendas of other participants in this field. Many who are ‘new’ to the area look suspiciously at those who have a history of working on school-based gender reform projects. If all these ‘newcomers’ have heard about the work of ‘gender equity experts’ is that they have created school environments that discriminate against boys, it is not surprising if they look suspiciously at such ‘experts’. On the other hand, many people with experience of working on gender reform projects have spent years negotiating the indifference or hostility of others. Not surprisingly, they are sceptical when some of these same people (or others who seem to be like them) move into debates focused on boys: is this another backlash? Are girls now meant to suffer?

To complicate things further, all the key terms at the heart of this debate – boys, gender, literacy and reform – are defined in multiple ways. There
are many ways to think about literacy. There are many ways to conceptualize gender-based reform. There are many variations to the category ‘boy’. It is far from being the homogeneous term it is often represented to be. Issues of race, socio-economic status, location and sexuality intersect with gender to impact on the kinds of schooling and literacy experiences boys (and girls) are likely to have.

It is possibly because of these complexities that discussions around boys, schooling and literacy so regularly become heated and passionate arguments. While there is nothing inherently wrong with either heat or passion, we are well aware how easily an impassioned discussion can degenerate into a heated argument that soon loses sight of the issues at the heart of the debate. More specifically, we are aware of how easily genuine concerns about boys and their educational experiences can get lost in complex and emotionally charged debates that often result when the topic is raised. This is part of the reason for the sub-title of this book: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform. To open up debate around boys, girls, schooling, gender reform and literacy is to enter into a dangerous space where debate can descend into brawling, and where it is difficult indeed to articulate clearly one’s concerns. Moreover, even the most focused and dispassionate exploration of boys and their literacy experiences is challenged to negotiate and engage with the sheer volume and scope of material relevant to the issue. This involves diverse opinions about the nature and origin of the problem, as well as diverse opinions about possible solutions.

Because of this diversity, and the confusion, frustration and anger it readily evokes, one of our primary goals for this book is to provide a detailed map of the various fields that relate to discussions of boys, schooling, gender reform and literacy. We aim also to interpret and identify pathways within these fields that we think have the best chance of promoting the development, implementation and success of literacy programmes that respond to the real needs of boys without generating new problems for girls. This is an important point. Like all who enter the boys/literacy/school debate we have our own beliefs about the ‘real’ problems facing boys, and the ‘best’ ways we can respond. We discuss these beliefs in more detail through the following chapters. It is important, however, that we make our starting point explicit at the outset.

First, we acknowledge that there are significant challenges associated with boys’ education that need to be addressed, and that many of these are longstanding and deeply entrenched in education systems.

Second, we believe these challenges are directly related to the ways schools specifically, and other cultural institutions more generally, circulate understandings about what it means to be a ‘boy’ and a ‘man’. We begin, then, with the belief that narrow and restrictive understandings of normative masculinity have consequences for boys, and that these consequences
include the construction of boys who are regularly alienated from literacy classrooms and literacy experiences.

Third, we are convinced of the need for educationally based programmes that work to contest narrow and limiting understandings of what it means to be a boy and that contribute to improving boys’ access to and enjoyment of literacy lessons. At the same time, however, we accept that this work cannot be seen as separate to work concerned with the educational needs of girls. Boys’ education is fundamentally connected to girls’ education. Hence, educators need to develop an understanding of the ways gender reform in schools and literacy contexts can meet the needs of girls and boys alike. We are, then, committed to providing a framework for thinking about gender reform, literacy and the educational experiences of boys and girls that result in effective, sustainable and transformative schooling practices. We are not at all interested in maintaining traditional frameworks for making sense of boys and their educational and social needs. As a result, this book examines issues to do with the education of girls and boys, and proceeds from the understanding that we cannot focus on issues of masculinity without attending, also, to issues of femininity.

Fourth, we believe that in order to construct such a transformative framework – and for it to be implemented in any sustainable or effective fashion – we need to bring together people, places and ideas that are commonly, if not routinely, kept apart. This involves drawing upon and responding to the diverse groups of people who have discussed explicitly boys’ educational needs. But it also involves making connections with people, ideas and resources that have not figured prominently within the boys’ education debate.

Fifth, notwithstanding the fact that pursuing debates around boys, girls, schooling and literacy can lead us into dangerous – or hostile – terrain, we believe it is important for educators to develop skills to negotiate it. Furthermore, we believe that learning to navigate tricky (and often foreign) spaces has the potential to lead us (and by us we are talking about ourselves as the authors of the book) beyond the immediate danger posed by the unknown, towards futures that become possible only when we take some risks.

Whence, Dangerous Territories. While we have personally experienced gender equity debates as danger zones within which discussion can quickly become argument and good ideas are easily rejected, this isn’t the only meaning that can be assigned to ‘danger’. In the safety-conscious decade of the 1990s it became common for us to warn ourselves and, more particularly, our children about dangerous things, dangerous places, dangerous people. Kids in schools know all about the danger posed by strangers, drugs, poisons, the sun, the rain, traffic, bullies and sitting too close to the TV. Marketing and corporate discourses have also introduced us to the dangers of standing still: of failing to innovate, failing to move, failing to change with the times.
Within different discourses – or ways of communicating that are associated with particular contexts and beliefs – therefore, danger is associated with both the new and the old. There is nothing inherently dangerous about where we are or, indeed, anything inherently risky about other locations. Following an unknown and dangerous pathway doesn’t always bring disaster: it can lead to new and better locations, new and better lives. And staying where we are isn’t always bad: it can give us time to marshal our resources and reflect upon what to do next. The trick, it seems, is to know which choices are going to lead us to where we ultimately want to go.

In using the term ‘danger’ throughout this book we want to signal much more than just the risks of following some pathways. We want also to indicate the productive value of taking risks, exploring the unknown and letting go of the familiar and the ‘safe’. This involves embracing ‘dangerous possibilities’ and seeing these not so much as risky but, rather, as risqué: that is to say, as lively, animated, spirited and capable of moving us beyond immediate dangers into new ways of thinking about and ‘doing’ gender reform in literacy contexts.

We have a definite agenda here. The old, familiar and comforting models around literacy, schooling and gender have not taken us where we want to go. Schools and literacy classrooms have produced and reproduced narrow and limiting understandings about what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl. This has had real – and really dangerous – consequences for our kids, our societies, ourselves.

In this context we can choose to stay within familiar and ‘safe’ territories or we can try other paths – or, more accurately, a network of paths – that take us beyond the limitations of culturally bounded, institutional governed, dominant discourses, towards new, and as yet ungoverned, cultural spaces. Audre Lorde (1990: 286) makes a passionate statement about the political importance of new ways of thinking, new ways of acting. She identifies a need for

new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recriminations, lamentations, and suspicion.

In this book we take up the challenge of finding a productive and effective way to speak about the complex and emotional issues surrounding boys, literacy and schooling. To achieve this goal we seek to explore ideas, practices and ways of knowing that are unfamiliar to many people. We are committed to letting go of familiar and known responses in favour of the unknown and the risky. We will make connections between people and practices that are commonly kept apart. We will move beyond the limitations commonly
associated with stereotypical notions of boys, girls, schooling and literacy. And we will use whatever theoretical resources support us in this undertaking. In this way, we are positioning ourselves as what Rosi Braidotti (1994a: 23) has described as ‘intellectual nomads’: people interested in crossing boundaries, and committed to ‘the act of going’.

With all this in mind we have structured the book in a way we believe will allow us to navigate successfully the complex terrain while working towards a transformative model for thinking about and going towards new ways of dealing with literacy in schools.

In Chapter 1 we distinguish between what can loosely be described as the rhetoric and the realities surrounding the current ‘what about the boys?’ debate. We identify risks associated with overly emotional or inflammatory discussions around the needs/rights of boys (and girls) and the ‘real’ challenges that educators concerned with the literacy experiences of boys and girls now face. In naming our desire to distinguish between what might loosely be termed ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’, two further challenges immediately become apparent. First, we have learned over the past twenty years that there are few genuinely homogeneous categories in the world. To speak of ‘boys’, ‘schools’ and ‘literacy’ as though they are unified and unproblematic categories is therefore a dangerous and, indeed, meaningless gesture. In working to map the experiences of boys within schools generally and literacy classrooms more explicitly, therefore, we are aware of the need to provide multiple maps which are able to identify and acknowledge the existence of many, many different boys, who are located differently within many, many different schools and who experience many, many different versions of literacy.

Consequently, we cannot, in fact, identify the ‘real’ experiences of boys in literacy classrooms. Any such attempt is doomed before it begins. We will attempt, however, to map common and recurring patterns of experience. In Chapter 2 our overarching goal is to identify the context to be negotiated by any attempt to conceptualize gender-based literacy reform. To respond to this context and the ‘real’ challenges it poses, educators need a range of conceptual and practical resources. To this end, Chapter 2 reviews the strengths and limitations of various ‘solutions’ advanced in answer to the boys/literacy crisis. We align ourselves with those resources that can be seen as transformative in intent and possibility. We discuss the characteristics of this transformative mindset and make explicit the ways in which the theoretical resources that have helped to produce it can assist in making sense of various approaches to gender reform and various perspectives on literacy.

In Chapters 3 and 4 we explore the articulation between these theoretical perspectives and various literacy mindsets.

Chapter 5 builds on the theoretical resources relating to literacy and gender reform explored in the earlier chapters to tell two different stories
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about possible responses relating to boys and their literacy needs. The chapter compares and contrasts essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives on gender-based literacy reform and highlights some of the dangers and possibilities associated with each.

Building on this distinction, Chapters 6 and 7 explore in more detail the risks and potential associated with two common strategies used to shape transformative literacy practice: the use of technology and the attempt to respond to generationally specific interests. In reviewing both the potential and the limitations of technologically mediated or generationally targeted literacy practice we will highlight the difference between those implementations which contribute to the critique and transformation of limiting gender norms, and those which work to reinforce and reinscribe these same traditions. These chapters also explore challenges associated with implementing and sustaining any kind of gender reform project in what is often described as a ‘post-feminist’ age.

In the concluding chapter we acknowledge the very real challenges associated with attempting systematic gender-based literacy reform and offer some final images for helping to conceptualize and sustain this work.

Our aim throughout is to examine ways in which various mindsets relating to gender, masculinity, gender reform, literacy, technology and popular culture can either open up or close down new conceptualizations of what it means to be a boy, and what it means to be literate. We will identify those mindsets that appear to us to have most to offer diverse groups of people concerned with the educational needs, experiences and outcomes of the boys and girls in contemporary schools. These include parents, teachers, students, media personalities, community members, those who are new to gender debates and those who have worked in the field for years.

Our data come from a range of places. We draw on various research projects we have conducted since 1997. We employ vignettes taken from our collective experiences in education over the past ten years. We use ‘imaginary conversations’ and anecdotes put together to capture the tenor of particular school-based literacy or gender reform projects. We also extract from a wide range of materials collected at schools and school forums over the past ten years.

It is important to note that throughout the book we explore practices associated predominantly with school-based literacies: that is, the kinds of literacies most commonly measured, benchmarked and assessed within western schooling systems. We also identify, however, a range of non-school literacy performances and highlight the importance of links between everyday literacies and classroom practices.

Our commitment to making new connections, and taking risks, relates not only to practices inside schools, or to conversations among academics. One of our fundamental goals, indeed, is to make connections between the ideas, beliefs and practices of academics, teachers, parents, kids and
community members. For this reason we have tried to make the book as accessible as possible, while trying to stay close to traditions of academic writing. This is a dangerous move that risks satisfying no one at all! It is, however, something that is important to try to do. Rather than trying to have the proverbial foot in both camps, we are interested in the possibility of doing away with rigid distinctions that would construct camps as distinct, oppositional and fundamentally different from each other in the first place. We are not claiming that we have left behind all academic discourse. Nor, indeed, do we believe this is necessary. Despite common stereotypes, teachers are not anti-theory, and teacher educators are not inherently out of touch. We have tried to make the relevance of various theoretical concepts as explicit as possible and hope to demonstrate that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. In this way we hope to help to strengthen connections between those who are positioned by their involvement in close and personal relationships with boys, girls, schools and school-based literacy practices, and those who are positioned by working in universities.

Two final points are important. We will argue that any attempt to engage with the literacy needs or experiences of boys must attend to the multiplicity of the category 'boys' and to the diverse ways masculinity is experienced and negotiated within any school. Consequently, it is not possible to advance one-size-fits-all strategies for reform. There is no single literacy worksheet that can meet the needs of every classroom. There is, in short, no quick fix. Nevertheless, we believe there are ways to move forward. Throughout the book we present stories of gender-based literacy reform that emphasize possibilities for change and that celebrate alternative, multiple and literate performances of school-based masculinity.

Each such story relates to specific cultural, historical and social circumstances. Hence, we do not conceptualize this book as any kind of ‘final word’ or ‘real story’ on boys, schooling and literacy. The book is intended to function as a starting point, not an ending. We hope the book will provide those new to the debate with an orientation to a complex terrain, while also indicating some new and challenging pathways for those who have negotiated the space for a longer time. Out of respect for both these groups we have tried to avoid, in the various chapters, lengthy recitations of statistics or data reported elsewhere, and have included, instead, summaries of key material and indications of useful sources for those wishing to pursue a particular issue or idea in more depth.

Finally, our decisions about what to include and leave out, and about what to highlight and downplay, were influenced first and foremost by knowing that it is the boys and girls at the heart of our discussion who will live with the consequences of our ability (or inability) to have productive conversations, make new connections and negotiate risky and dangerous places in our attempts to respond to their individual and collective needs. They are worth the risk.