HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:
A TEACHER’S VIEW OF MALE STUDENTS

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Ashley Michelle Wineman
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HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:
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Ashley Michelle Wineman

Thesis

Approved:                             Accepted:

Advisor                              Dean of the College
Dr. Sandra Spickard Prettyman        Dr. Mark D. Shermis

Methodologist                        Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. Renee Mudrey-Camino              Dr. George R. Newkome

Committee Member                     Date
Dr. Rebecca A. McElfresh

Department Chair                    
Dr. Susan Olson
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

During childhood, every boy actively constructs his own version of what it means to be a man. Masculinity is a process and is shaped by social means such as relationships with others and interactions within institutions (Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Society expects males to act a specific way according to the normative definition of masculinity. This plays a huge role in how they think, feel, and act (Kimmel, 1996). In turn, masculinity influences and reshapes societal structures, including education (Kimmel, 2000). There is pressure in school to conform to dominant characteristics of manhood. Failure to accomplish these traits might lead to exclusion, but success is tied to incentives (Ferguson, 2000). The idea that masculine qualities are different from those of femininity has been accepted by most of society. Gender inequality is reproduced and gender differences are further exaggerated (Kimmel, 2000).

Masculinity

Although there is one dominant masculinity, there does not exist only one definition of masculinity because men form what it means to them. Masculinity in its plural form is most appropriate since it allows for a multitude of definitions (Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The variety within this word spans over different decades, countries, and even mini-cultures within specific religions. However, the formation of one’s
masculinity is influenced by dominant ideas. America’s normative definition of masculinity contains some of the following popular qualities: young, white, urban, heterosexual, educated, employed, athletic, of good complexion, weight, and height (Kimmel, 1996).

Males constantly compete with the ideal vision of masculinity, as if on an endless quest. They have a relentless drive to prove their manliness against that of all other males in society: fathers, teachers, bosses, friends, and coworkers. This makes same-sex camaraderie a critical piece of manhood. The concept of reputation comes to mind, where boys fear being viewed as weak as or less than manly in others’ eyes. To subside these fears, as author Michael Kimmel put it, American men restrain themselves, project that fear onto others, or flee (Kimmel, 1996). Masculinity is an unremitting test, requiring further achievement and evidence. This causes boys always to be on guard and never at ease. Boys are trapped inside a box, metaphorically, by the pressures to which they must respond (Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Gender in Education

Just as science and writing are learned within the school environment, so also are masculinity and femininity. Author Micheal Kimmel (2000) explained that gender is not determined from biologically inherited traits alone, but is constructed socially, “a fluid assemblage of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from the values, images, and prescriptions we find in the world around us” (p.87). As a mini-community, school provides an environment where children can form their gender. Even within a kindergarten room, students have the opportunity to notice femininity in the homemaking and dolls equipment versus masculinity in the trucks and carpentry tools. If they are not
purposely sex-segregated into different sections of the classroom, there are invisible boundaries and rules. Encouragement to play with the toy which most people deem as gender appropriate and discouragement to playing with anything else comes from teachers, parents, or peers (Kimmel, 2000).

Teachers reinforce gender differences (Kimmel, 2000). Kimmel (2000) noted that in school, boys are perceived as “active, capable of expressing anger, quarrelsome, punitive, alibi-building, and exhibitionistic” (p.154) whereas girls are seen as “affectionate, obedient, responsive, and tenacious” (p.154), all of which are qualities any human being can possess. From these concepts, gender inequality is supported. Females are thought to enjoy reading over males; males are supposed to like science and mathematics more than females. Teachers usually tolerate boys teasing girls, promoting male superiority. Teachers call on boys more and encourage them to try harder. Females get less attention and are scolded more frequently when speaking out in class. This leads to an obvious difference in learning styles, as Peggy Orenstein noticed in a school study, that boys were more engaged in instruction, whereas girls become passive participants (Kimmel, 2000). However, from another angle education is feminized. Teachers expect students to “sit quietly, take naps, raise their hands, be obedient” (Kimmel, 2000, p.160). Boys’ testosterone-driven dispositions meet opposition with this learning style. Studies show boys are more likely to be sent to a child psychologist, diagnosed as hyperactive, made to repeat a grade, suspended, and drop out (Kimmel, 2000).

If that weren’t enough to tip the scales of equality, school curriculum also furthers the imbalance. Studies of books, videos, and other media report gender differences and bias. Males are displayed as the centerpiece, while females are portrayed as
disadvantaged; boys are active, but girls are passive; men express little nurturing and women little goal-setting. Media reiterates gender inequalities. Just like commercials, it is an authoritative voice that persuades (Kimmel, 2000). Curriculum in school is “just one more element in a child’s process of organizing his or her ‘concept formation’ about gender” (Kimmel, 2000, p.158) and “another push toward accepting current arrangements as if they were natural, right, and preordained” (Kimmel, 2000, p.158).

Statement of the Problem

From an educator’s perspective, it is distressing to suspect that the attitudes from both genders of students regarding education have a negative impact on males’ education. Education plays a crucial part in children’s lives: to train them to become responsible and capable members of society. That goal involves learning academic knowledge and discipline. Certainly, there is greater success with the previous objectives when a child, male or female, can focus on what is being taught and is willing to ask questions. Anything that could impede these characteristics and the education process is concerning.

Boys face a burden of proof: to achieve and then relentlessly demonstrate their masculinity. The front which males put on is in reaction to others’ evaluation of them; that means they display what someone else expects, disconnected from their own feelings (Kimmel, 2000). If educators cannot figure out what boys are genuinely thinking, they won’t understand male students. This issue escalates because teachers need to understand their students in order to create methods and programs particular to that group of children. The problem is that gender inequality and student perceptions of masculinity harm males’ opportunity of success with their individual educations.
Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of masculinity in middle school boys, in order to gain insight on male students. There is also intent to investigate if and how boys are the victim of gender inequality. The three themes that form the framework for this purpose are as follows: students as transgressors, students as resistors, and students as over-achievers. Research questions built around these themes are intended to draw out standards students have toward boys in school, in addition to expectations boys hold for themselves. It is my objective to find patterns in relation to the themes that support or contrast my predisposed ideas. The goal continues as the network of patterning forms a set of deductions for each of the three themes. Afterward, I aim to construct the conclusion; this will consist of a system of conjectures from data, along with suggestions. There will be recommendations for teachers and administrators to help them become more aware of and actively sensitive to boys’ masculinity within the school. Education staff members who have an improved understanding of their student body can better prepare curricula and strategies which will help all children, female and male equally, learn more efficiently. It is hoped that a higher percentage of males can be helped to succeed academically as a result. The analysis of this research will lead to recognition and understanding of masculinity issues in education.

Research Questions

My first question is why do some boys disrupt class during instruction time? What does this accomplish for their masculinity? How does it impact the way males and females perceive them? How does it affect their learning? My second question is how does academic accomplishment coupled with good learning habits affect boys’
masculinity? How does it impact the way males and females perceive them? If this compromises hegemonic masculinity, why do the boys continue pursuit? My third question is why are some boys reluctant or opposed to asking for help, in the instructional setting? What does this accomplish for their masculinity? How does it impact the way males and females perceive them? How does it affect their learning?

The Setting for This Study

This study takes place in a public middle school located in a suburban city. The school is composed of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade boys and girls. This study specifically focused on male eighth grade students. These boys are primarily white and economically disadvantaged. There is a small amount of minority students within this community and the school district.

Personal Interest

I am invested in this research on masculinity because of the men in my life. As a female, there are many things I cannot yet would like to understand about my husband, brother, and father in relation to their gender. They are not particularly open about their innermost thoughts, thus my direct firing of questions rarely results in answers to my curiosity. Years into my master’s degree, the matter was compounded when my son was born. I am now all the more determined to understand males, so that I, despite my femininity, can help my baby boy grow to feel successful with masculinity and education and happy and confident in his adulthood; I believe from these things comes competence. I want my son to listen to me not simply because I love him but because I actually have insight into what he is going through with each phase of his life. I do not intend to become all-knowledgeable about masculinity so that I can be like one of the guys. I
would like, however, to be more aware of issues that males face, which females do not. I would like to be sensitive to the specific needs of the men in my life, especially because they tend to keep them hidden. I would like to be not just a better mother, but a better wife, daughter, and sister. I would like my knowledge of the male gender to impact both my actions toward the men in my life and my reactions to their behavior.

A second reason I care so much about this research on masculinity is due to my career as a school teacher. I have taught mathematics at a public middle school for over eight years. My job is to help dozens of students succeed in math, yet I do more; I try to instill positive attitudes, love for learning, common courtesy, consideration of others, sense of humor, and responsibility. School is a micro-community where I observe students from a variety of backgrounds in many different moods and settings. Mostly due to the restrictions of masculinity, I have and continue to see boys failing to reach their academic potential and held back by obstacles. Either in their peers’ eyes or their own view, they do not measure up to societal standards, so they spend extra effort on meeting others’ expectations. This is energy that could be better spent on building up good habits and skills for a strong future. I want to complete this research because I want to better understand my male students. I want to help my male students focus on long-term goals for their future rather than fleeting short-term goals of satisfying their peers. I want to help my male students form a self-image that is confident instead of self-defeating. I want to help my male students recognize the voice inside of them and show them how to rise above others’ opinions. I want to help my male students, just like my son, to feel accomplished with their masculinity and academics, as I believe this will make them happy, confident, and competent adults.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender

Gender is defined by author Michael Kimmel (1996) as “the sets of cultural meanings and prescriptions that each culture attaches to one’s biological sex” (pp. 2-3). It is one of the foundations around which a person’s identity is formed, along with race and class. Gender is not to be confused with sex. Sex refers to the biological characteristics of males and females; this includes cognitive, hormonal, and anatomical aspects. Gender, though, is masculinity and femininity; it describes those biological components with cultural definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman (Kimmel, 2000). It permeates all aspects of our life, organizing family, school, and work. It determines behavioral norms, constraints, and opportunities. Thus, a connection is made between one’s sex and almost all of his human experiences. The formation of gender is multifaceted. A person’s biological make-up plays a role in gender, as well as his upbringing during youth. The interaction itself within which one relates to others also reinforces and shapes gender. In addition, the institutions and structure that organize society impact gender. These four viewpoints integrate to explain gender (Risman, 1998).

The research to explain gender with biology focuses on finding sex differences, with the intention of linking them to behavior. Barbara Risman (1998) stated “There are
numerous theoretical perspectives, but all share the assumption that maleness and femaleness are, or become, properties of individuals” (p.13). Influenced by Darwin, many scientists of the nineteenth century worked at proving that women’s bodies weren’t physically able to handle work and school outside of the home. This research studied reproductive and brain characteristics between males and females. Potentially, the inequality women faced trying to enter the public sphere could be justified as an inescapable part of the laws of nature. These days, biological research still looks for differences between the sexes in the areas of the brain, reproduction, and hormones. There do exist actual documented differences (Kimmel, 2000).

Reproduction is one area of difference. Sociobiologists rationalize that humans with more adaptive reproductive characteristics will leave behind more offspring, and over many cycles of time, their genes are the ones to survive. Genetically, sex difference is within the sex cells. The female has a large egg, in comparison to a very small sperm of the male. Male sperm is produced by the millions, whereas female eggs are cycled one at a time. Men can perpetuate “their genes through promiscuous sex” (Rhode, 1997, p.24), but “women perpetuate their genes by prolonged nurturance of each embryo” (Rhode, 1997, p.24). Sociobiologists argue that women have depended on men through child-bearing years and men have had to go out and find means to support the women and children. This leads scientists to female traits of caretaking and fidelity versus male traits of physical strength, aggression, and promiscuity (Kimmel, 2000).

Maybe the brains of a male and a female are different; this is a second area that scientists have studied. It has been found that males have cognitive advantages over females in mathematics and visual-spatial ability. Conversely, females have superiority
over males in verbal ability and interpersonal skills. One might ask what precisely within the brain is different, thus causing these cognitive distinctions. As Deborah Rhode (1997) put it,

> Over the last two decades, innumerable theories have come and gone. One prominent current hypothesis is that hormonal factors cause the left and right hemispheres to develop differently in males and females, and that the area connecting the hemispheres also varies. (p.27)

Following this assumption, females use both sides of their brain equally, whereas males use the right side predominantly; this would account for males’ and females’ different cognitive strengths. Some professionals think that sex differences in brain structure lead to particular traits in which males or females excel, which in turn leads to sex differences in occupation, status, and achievement (Rhode, 1997).

Some biological research has been devoted to showing sex difference caused by hormonal variances in males and females. There are two crucial times in a person’s life when these chemicals make a large impact: as an embryo when the primary sex characteristics are being formed and during puberty when the secondary sex characteristics are developing. Both males and females have the hormones, testosterone and estrogen, but usually males have more testosterone than females and the converse applies to estrogen. The most convincing evidence that hormones do cause differences between males and females revolves around studies on testosterone. Norman Geschwind and Peter Behan found that developing fetuses are sexed neutrally until a point in time when testosterone is secreted and washed over the brain, causing the fetus to be male, and the absence of this testosterone results in a female. Because this suggests testosterone as a key connection to sex differences, further findings have surfaced. Males have roughly
ten times as much testosterone as females; they also have higher levels of aggressive behavior. In experiments with males, increasing testosterone results in a higher level of aggression, but lowering it by castration will halt aggressive behavior entirely, at least in rodents. Sociobiologists’ research on estrogen has been conducted, however most conclusions center on how females behave in regard to their monthly menstruation cycle rather than looking at how that ties to differences between males and females. Scientists argue that males have more aggression and are more prone to violence than females. Thus, because of differences in these hormonal systems, there exists patriarchy, male dominance, and male attainment (Kimmel, 2000).

Anatomical statistics are numerous: arm span, foot size, head circumference, and more. Scientists find that the typical male is taller, heavier, faster, and stronger than the typical female. This data implies male physical superiority and female fragility, when one is compared against the other. These very concepts underlie gender inequalities: that military is for males only since females physical limitations don’t match the unisex treatment, and athletic funding is unequal because females don’t deserve the equal support in exchange for unequal talent (Rhode, 1997).

Biological research doesn’t provide a solid connection between sex and gender differences. Michael Kimmel (2000) stated,

There are many problems with the research on biological bases for gender difference, and more and greater problems with the extrapolation of those differences to the social world of gender inequality. (p.45)

One problem is the assumption that genes make decisions; many biologists insist that cell make-up controls and holds sway over many aspects of life. Although genes contribute to human decision making, it is not the genes but the person who interacts with others or
the environment during that process. Another problem is the presumption of causal direction from correlation. Even if data proves two variables have a relationship, there exist two different possible directions of cause and effect (Kimmel, 2000). Mentally, there are limited characteristics where researchers find males and females actually differ. Deborah Rhode (1997) pointed out that within these traits, “gender typically accounts for only 5 to 10 percent of the variation between individuals” (p.39). Barbara Risman (1998) believed,

The overreliance on gendered selves as the primary explanation for sexual stratification led many feminist sociologists—myself included—to argue that what appear to be sex differences are really, in Epstein’s terms, ‘deceptive distinctions.’ (p.19)

Risman argued that despite documentation of sex differences, males and females behave in a masculine or feminine manner for other reasons. She also supported other sociologists who identify gender as less of a structure by itself, rather as a social structure that intertwines with environment (Risman, 1998). Even though sex differences do not automatically produce gender differences and gender inequalities, they do deserve some credit. They supply males and females the raw materials which play a role in the creation of their identity, including their gender (Kimmel, 2000).

A person’s upbringing has a powerful effect on gender; children display gender stereotypes at a very young age. No matter what a child’s biological inclination, he or she is influenced by societal signals of sex-appropriate traits, tasks, and behaviors. This gender instruction is typically indirect and subtle. It comes from many directions: parents, teachers, peers, strangers, and even media. Boys and girls pick up cues about sex differences from toys, clothing, occupations, and household tasks. Masculinity involves
independence, assertiveness, competitiveness, and learning how to get ahead. Femininity involves dependence, kindness, and paying attention to appearance and feelings. Many influential theories look into how psychology explains gender (Rhode, 1997).

Sigmund Freud, from early 1900’s, argued that a person became gendered, rather than already having gender within them at birth. He was a pioneer because he looked at male gender scientifically. As author R. W. Connell (2005) put it, Freud let the cat out of the bag. He disrupted the apparently natural object ‘masculinity’, and made an enquiry into its composition both possible and, in a sense, necessary. (p.8)

He thought that how children were treated in their experiences and environment of the family unit influenced gender differences seen in their adulthood. The surroundings and nurturing of children shape their identity, specifically their gender identity. Freud stated that boys and girls must pass through stages, which are initiated and driven by four forces within their psychological foundation and external realities. Persons have wants and must mentally struggle through consequences of feeling satisfied or not satisfied. Freud pointed out both sexes identify mainly with their mother, but gender differences branch off during what he terms the genital stage. Males detach themselves from identifying with their mother and must replace this with their father; females continue attached to their mothers. As children emerge from these stages, masculinity and femininity is successfully accomplished if they have achieved the so-called appropriate sexual orientation of heterosexuality. Kimmel stated that a major problem with Freud’s theory is that homosexuality is seen as incompetence where one failed to identify with their same-sex parent. It doesn’t take into account any other dimensions of gender, such as biology or sociology. Effects of Freud’s theory still can be seen in society. In the
1930’s, a psychological inventory was created to test one’s gender identity by asking questions based on stereotyped behaviors, attitudes, occupations, appearances, books, and even famous people. This Male-Female test was used from the 1940’s and into the 1960’s to determine whether males and females had successfully achieved masculinity or femininity. Homosexuality was even categorized as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association, for a while. Today, stereotypes remain. Failure to demonstrate gender stereotypes deemed appropriate by society often results in assumption of homosexuality; males who display feminine traits or females who display masculine traits are examples of gender nonconformists, in others’ opinion (Kimmel, 2000).

In the mid-1900’s, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg gave their insight into gender. Psychologist Piaget theorized that children are actively involved in their own socialization rather than inheriting their gender passively. He believed people take in new information by means of cognitive filters, figuring out how to process the ideas, working them into their gender identity. Another theory comes from Kohlberg, who built his philosophy off of Piaget’s model. He said that as children are filtering information, one important developmental task is to label themselves, other people, objects, and behaviors as masculine or feminine. Kohlberg, like Piaget, thought that one actively constructs his or her own gender; Kohlberg stressed, however, that this process continues through adulthood, as men and women keep working on appropriate gender behaviors. This concept of gender identity involving a continuous process of construction is still seen today (Kimmel, 2000).

Also in the 1950’s, work on a different theory of gender took place, by means of numerous anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. The goal was to look into the
social aspect of masculinity and femininity; the result is called sex roles. There are two sex roles: male and female. Often misinterpreted as sex differences, sex roles are the set of expectations attached to one’s sex that which they are to display (Connell, 2005). They fulfill society’s needs of production and reproduction. Masculinity is the instrumental role, entailing rationality, autonomy, and competitiveness. Femininity is the expressive role, requiring tenderness and nurturing (Kimmel, 2000). The theory presumes that through socialization, one learns his or her sex role, then that role is internalized psychologically, and then corresponding behaviors are manifested externally. This harmony between social institutions, mentality, and performance reflects satisfactory accomplishment of one’s appropriate sex role. To doubt or go against one’s sex role is inadequacy. In the 1970’s, groups of both females and males expressed concerns that sex roles were oppressive and damaging. Psychologist Joseph Pleck also disagreed with this theory; he adjusted it to his own theory of sex role, which allows for disobedience toward and changes of gender (Connell, 2005). No amount of work with sex role theory can make it a fitting framework for gender. It highlights the socialization of gender, however major problems remain. First, the male and female sex roles are each presented as a single entity, in which all girls and all boys are placed. The variety within masculinity and femininity dependant on class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality is obscured. Second, sex role theories assume gender shaping occurs the same with males as with females; this equivalence does not correspond with the reality of inequality, dominance, and power present between the sexes in society (Kimmel, 2000). Lastly, these theories link action to biological differences. It ignores the direct impact of societal interactions
and institutions themselves (Connell, 2005). Connell (2005) stated, “Role theory exaggerates the degree to which people’s social behaviour is prescribed” (p.26).

If one wants to understand the lives of people in any situation, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote, one ‘must inquire first into the situation surrounding [them].’ Theorists of sex roles and androgyny help us move beyond strictly psychological analyses of gender. But the inability to theorize difference, power, relationality and the institutional dimension of gender means that we will need to build other elements into the discussion. (Kimmel, 2000, p.85)

To study gender completely, identity of individuals must be taken into account because people themselves are gendered. However, gender goes beyond this; gender organizes the structures within which individuals move, act, and live. Individuals find themselves involved in structures such as family, workplaces, schools, situational settings, and power relationships. Further, there exists interplay between individuals and these structures. Kimmel (2000) stated,

These are the processes and experiences that shape our lives. These experiences are shaped by our societies, and we return the favor, helping to reshape our societies. We are gendered people living in gendered societies. (pp.95-96)

Thus gender revolves around three main concepts: identity, institution, and interaction. It is these three factors that produce gender difference and reproduce gender inequality (Kimmel, 2000).

The institutions of family, workplaces, and schools are far from gender-neutral. Kimmel (2000) pointed out that they, “create gendered normative standards, express a gendered institutional logic, and are major factors in the reproduction of gender inequality” (p.94). He explained that there is a cyclical process, where gendered individuals shape those institutions, which in turn reproduce gender inequalities that help mold gender identity. Inside these institutions, there is pressure to display a certain type
of behavior, separate from that individual’s gender. Kimmel noted that often, within
government for example, women who have previously held a high office position seemed
to portray masculine traits more than feminine ones because that specific institution has a
masculine gender. Both genders are expected to express appropriate, corresponding traits
within a certain institution. Failure to comply results in the person appearing deviant and
incompetent (Kimmel, 2000).

One’s gender identity may be masculine or feminine, but those gender traits and
behaviors adjust within different situations. What it means to be masculine at a job
interview versus at an all-male party differs. Kimmel (2000) pointed out that as humans,
“we respond to the world we encounter – shaping, modifying, and creating our identities”
including gender (p.86). Also, the historical and political contexts within which we are at
one certain point in time matter. There exist different forms of masculinity and
femininity that can be produced because gender is not just one’s identity but also the set
of behaviors produced in a specific social situation (Kimmel, 2000).

Hierarchy is another structure that produces gender. Though there are a variety of
masculinities and femininities, there is not equality among them. A singular definition of
both masculinity and femininity is present in society, which acts as a model that all males
and females are measured against. This will be discussed later, in further detail. We
measure ourselves and others measure us; as Kimmel (2000) stated,

we thus come to know what it means to be a man or a woman in American culture
by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others” – racial minorities,
sexual minorities, and so on. (p.91)

Everyone who falls short of this singular definition is subordinated in relation to those
who do fit that specific description. Concerning gender relations, men as a group have
power over women as a group. Similarly, some men have power over other men and some women over other women. Kimmel (2000) reasoned,

> It is impossible to explain gender without adequately understanding power – not because power is the consequence of gender difference, but because power is what produces those gender differences in the first place. (p.92)

The issue of power in gender is controversial, but it is a crucial element to explain how dominance leads to difference. The converse of this results in difference being natural, leading to dominance, and thus being excused as acceptable. Men often disagree that they have little or no power over women. Power, like gender, is a social issue, so it typically is not present within individuals, but rather in groups of society. Men as a group are in power in relation to women as a group. Objective standards, by which people are judged, are masculine. Both males and females are expected to work toward these so-called normal standards, even though they are not gender-neutral. Masculine standards become the human standard. The effect these structures have on gender has large consequences in all arenas of life (Kimmel, 2000).

Gender is also closely linked to people’s actions. According to sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), gender is “a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (p.125). When gender is viewed as something achieved, focus has to shift away from internal characteristics to social elements. While one’s sex depends on biological criteria, sex category is a term describing membership as male or female that is assumed on a daily basis by others who observe them. By behaviors and interaction, a person establishes and sustains his or her identity which is deemed necessary by society. The sex category presumes sex criteria, whether those anatomical characteristics are present or not. Gender is not to be confused with sex
category; femininity and masculinity are the sets of behaviors one displays and controls to bolster claims of membership to a sex category. West and Zimmerman (1987) pointed out that a fitting theory on gender construction must allow for dual directions of gender; gender both helps structure interaction and is a part of its outcome.

When two people first come into contact with one another, gender enters the interaction. To assume genitalia would be present if observed, though hidden from public view, is the basis for sex categorization. West and Zimmerman (1987) gave an example of a young boy who decides that a person in a picture must be a man because he has a penis; of course, the man is clothed, however further investigation reveals the boy’s true reasoning: the person must have male genitalia because he is wearing a suit and tie. This situation illustrates the concept of moral certainty, when one’s sex and sex category are mistaken to be equivalent. Persons are categorized through interaction; they are observed, and if others see them as a member of a certain sex category, then they are automatically categorized as such. First impression is so critical that any test of specific criteria is unnecessary for identification. The exception to this is if some feature surfaces which raises doubt about the originally presumed category. West and Zimmerman (1987) argued, “Not only do we want to know the sex category of those around us, but we presume that others are displaying it for us, in as decisive a fashion as they can” (p.134). Occasionally, a person meets another person whose sex category is ambiguous. When display of behavior fails to give the basis for categorization, appearance factors such as tone of voice and facial hair are assessed (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender isn’t only involved at the start of an interaction, but also its conclusion. The outcome of any interface affects construction of one’s gender. People know that
their actions are subject to judgment and result in how they will be characterized by observers. Thus, as an interaction occurs, behavior is managed according to accountability. West and Zimmerman (1987) stated, “virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature” (p.130). The concept of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.137) is based on the idea that all interaction has an inevitable consequence of gender assessment. This is risky because as much as people desire to assign sex categorization to others, they similarly yearn to preserve their own categorization. Maintaining sex categorization is a continual awareness of its security.

West and Zimmerman (1987) argued,

insofar as a society is partitioned by ‘essential’ differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable. (p.137)

Overall, “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.137) creates differences between females and males; thus these differences are constructed rather than natural and essential. Yet, these differences reinforce what society deems as essentials of masculinity and femininity. This, in turn, reinforces gender inequality. Within any interaction, males are pressured to prove they are essentially masculine, and similarly with females and femininity. Boys learn to work on traits of strength and abilities to affect the environment around them physically. Girls learn to work on traits of appearance and skills to become attractive to others. Every person self-regulates gender by monitoring behavior and gender identity of themselves and others. Because this gender shaping is considered natural, gender inequality is legitimated. West and Zimmerman (1987) stressed that overall “gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with
others” (p.140). Both boys and girls know that these indirect rules of sex categorization in every situation they face are not optional (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender is complex. It is comprised of identity, interaction, and institution. How we understand gender today comes from centuries of theories and studying. There are pieces of sociologists’ rationale today that were taken from those old theories. Also, some false pieces from long ago still linger today, helping reinforce gender inequality and exaggerated gender difference between males and females. As Kimmel (2000) put it, “We are gendered people living gendered lives in a gendered society” (p.107).

Masculinity

Certain traits are supposed to be displayed by males, according to Western societies, and create what is called masculinity. Author Paul Kivel (1984) called this set of expectations the “Act Like a Man” box; boys and men feel pressured to fit into this metaphorical box, and one step outside of it results in name-calling and doubts of masculinity within that particular individual. Some of the expectations are as follows: tough, in-control, no feelings, don’t make mistakes, and have sex. The author also lists feelings that result from pressure to act this way, such as anger, sadness, isolation, excitement, and curiosity. The constant stress to display masculinity, to stay in the box, ends in one of two possibilities; a male is either in the box or not, a winner or a loser. Many males are left outside the box (Kivel, 1984).

Author R.W. Connell stated that there is great diversity both among males and within the life stages of any one particular male, which translates to a variety of masculinities. Notably, because gender is so closely connected with social practice, masculinity is automatically involved with other social structures, namely race and class.
Connell (2005) presented a model to describe the structure of masculinity. It allows for a leading definition of masculinity that supports the pressure Paul Kivel’s “Act Like a Man” box asserts; as well, it justifies how so many males are outside of that figurative box. Many other models of masculinity offer one definition of masculinity; males must fit this definition perfectly, without any alternatives. The problem with this concept, Connell (2005) reasoned, is, “Few men actually match the ‘blueprint’” (p.70) and “What is ‘normative’ about a norm hardly anyone meets? Are we to say the majority of men are unmasculine?” (p.70). Connell’s (2005) model centers around a critical concept: hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity accounts for a hierarchy of masculinities rather than one true masculinity and a variety of other failed masculinities (Connell, 2005).

Masculinity is not an object that can be generalized, but is a feature of a larger framework. Hegemonic masculinity is the temporary, dominant masculinity at one specific time within a specific culture; its leading position is not fixed but replaceable. This is just one of many masculinities; those will be discussed later. The key word dominant suggests a connection to power; often hegemonic masculinity reflects a link between societal norms and groups or organizations in power. Although hegemony by definition is mobile, there are three relations that commonly thread through masculinity. These are power relations, production relations, and emotional relations. Today’s modern gender order in America is male dominant and female subordinate. There exists division of labor, where females are assigned to the domestic arena and males the workplace, public arena. Also, males’ typical sexual desire devoid of emotional attachment differs from how females associate the two aspects. Connell (2005)
illustrated how all other masculinities interact with the hegemonic masculinity through subordination, complicity, and marginalization.

The diversity of masculinity is arranged in hierarchy. If hegemonic masculinity is dominant, then all other masculinities are subordinate. An example in America is the dominance of heterosexual men over homosexual men. Oppression against the subordinate group results, both on an individual and institutional level. Although the hierarchy organization differs within micro-societies of America, homosexual men are consistently positioned at the bottom. Connell noted that also near the bottom are other masculinities that are associated with titles such as wimp, nerd, sissy, jellyfish, ladyfinger, pushover, mother’s boy, and pantywaist. This is an important factor, as it refers to masculinity’s opposition to femininity. The lowest ends of the masculinity spectrum are assimilated to femininity. Further discussion of homophobia within masculinity will be examined later. There exists large groups of males who do not fit into the current definition of hegemonic masculinity, however they support that definition; their masculinities are complicit. Connell (2005) further described, “it is tempting to treat them simply as slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity. But there is often something more definite and carefully crafted than that” (p.79). Negotiation is often necessary in a male’s gender construction, for example, with the introduction of marriage, fatherhood, and community life. Usually this give and take involves a female in this male’s life. These subsidiary masculinities do not hold as much authority as the hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, within the scope of all subsidiary masculinities, there exists relations and hierarchy; some masculinities are secondary to others. These three themes of subordination, complicity, and marginalization help stress that masculinity is
not various male personality types, rather patterns of behavior that are produced in situations where changing circumstances are imminent.

Another important aspect masculinity is the feminist view; hegemonic masculinity grows out of a broader perspective on feminism that calls for a dismantling of power relationships and structures. Hegemonic masculinity puts a group of men in a position of dominance. Feminists have described that males assert their masculinity against others to establish or maintain this superiority. When R.W. Connell (2005) spoke of these politics of gender, he explained that violence can be used; “they usually feel they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right; they are authorized by an ideology of supremacy” (p.83). In today’s society there exists a gender order where males are defensive against change and women desire change. “This is a structural fact, independent of whether men as individuals love or hate women” (Connell, 2005, p.82). Men gain much from their gendered position of power: prestige, higher average income, and the right to command. Gender inequality is very real. As Connell (2005) pointed out,

Men no more than women are chained to the gender patterns they have inherited. Men too can make political choices for a new world of gender relations. Yet those choices are always made in concrete social circumstances, which limit what can be attempted. (p.86)

Hegemonic masculinity changes over time, as does masculinity and gender in general. Taking a look at these changes through American history is important because it reveals the influence that centuries of societal relations and structure have had on modern gender order, including masculinity (Connell, 2005). During the colonization of America
in the late eighteenth century, a dominant masculinity was adopted from Europe. This Genteel Patriarch, as author Michael Kimmel (1996) called it, represents a dignified aristocratic manhood, committed to the British upper-class code of honor and to well-rounded character, with exquisite tastes and manners and refined sensibilities. (p.16)

Masculinity required owning property, having authority over family in the household, and involvement in the church; an example is Thomas Jefferson. There was another leading masculinity inherited from Europe, which Kimmel calls Heroic Artisan. This type of manhood mandated virtue, independence, pride, strong work ethic, and craftsmanship; an example of this would be silversmith Paul Revere. From these two masculinities, we can today see males as in-control and independent. However, as Americans became further autonomous, hegemonic masculinity shifted. This is called the Self-Made Man; a description of this leaves behind romance of existence and takes on activities in the public sphere, being judged by status and wealth. Kimmel (1996) continued,

Mobile, competitive, aggressive in business, the Self-Made Man was also temperamentally restless, chronically insecure, and desperate to achieve a solid grounding for a masculine identity. (p.17)

To this very day, these traits of mobility and insecurity have impacted males. With the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, America and its males wanted to be in charge and have self-control, but this was not possible under British rule. So manliness came to revolve around liberty and ownership of property. To be a man was equivalent to being adult and opposite to being a boy; thus, childish characteristics of irresponsibility and lack of control were shunned. Also shunned were the ways of British masculinity, such as luxury, extravagance, and effeminacy. The term breadwinner now
comes about to describe a male responsibility to take care of his family. Benjamin Franklin is an example of this new hegemonic masculinity. Also new was the constancy that accompanied this manhood; there was constant fear of being feminine or lazy and a constant pursuit to prove otherwise. Giving into temptations of any sort was viewed as failure in these regards. This is just the beginning of changes in masculinity because as America finally has freedom from dependence on Europe, more transformations are inevitable (Kimmel, 1996).

Capitalism had a large effect on America and masculinity; the economic changes impacted political, social, and ideological aspects. Transportation, education, and banking systems were established. Population expansion forced founding of cities and people to establish residency further westward. Let the irony begin: men were free to go out and find their success, yet they were unstable without the certainty of their estate or membership to their small town. Feelings of excitement were coupled with restlessness; masculinity was no longer inherited and fixed but was earned and erratic. The best arena for male achievement was, and today remains, in the public sphere. This is opposite to the domestic sphere, which females dominate. Since the public sphere is primarily for males, boys and men display or prove masculinity in front of other men. This concept of homosociality was explained by Kimmel (1996), “from fathers and boyhood friends to our teachers, coworkers, and bosses, it is the evaluative eyes of other men that are always upon us, watching, judging” (p.26). With the growth of factory employment, skills that a male possessed were not necessarily enough to be successful or financially secure. Males were mere laborers, which threatened any firm grasp they had on manliness. This resulted in exclusion of women, immigrants, and black slaves from the workplace;
Kimmel (1996) described, “It was as if workplace manhood could only be retained if the workplace had only men in it” (p.32) and non-natives were “subhuman species, born to inferiority and incapable of being true American men” (p.32). Through these changes to hegemonic masculinity within the two centuries of American history, three themes have dominated: self-control, reactive exclusion, and escape (Kimmel, 1996).

Self-Made Man did and still does exert pressure on males to compete with other males, to prove their manhood, leaving no doubts. This constant demonstration of masculinity became a test within societal relationships that exist at work and at home, with women and with men. If one’s masculinity seemed threatened, by the elements around him, he still had to remain or appear to be in-control. If success could not be attained, then a male’s ego revolved around aggression, calculation, and unremitting effort. This was to convince himself and others of his self-control. Self-control even involved sexuality and alcohol consumption. Another way that a male could keep firm grasp on his masculinity, if he felt it was slipping, was to exclude others. Being in opposition to those less masculine than oneself or not masculine at all but feminine was to place themselves in a position of unquestionable masculinity. This was especially reflected in the family unit, with separation of spheres; men were less occupied at home and more involved outside the walls of residency. This further drew a line of inequality between masculinity and femininity, as males were not to develop nurturing and soft characteristics but rather calloused, ambitious, and hard ones which reflected the chaos and commotion of an energetic, egocentric world. Men were naturally rambunctious, and women were moral so they could help calm, soothe, and tame the males. Often, however, males felt their firm grip on masculinity was out of control in addition to feeling
uncertainty over provision for their own children. When the elements of self-control and exclusion failed, men ran away. Escape was a chance to relieve the feminine constraints which were choking masculinity. Manhood was restrained through church, school, responsibility, sexual fidelity, mothers, and wives. Although masculinity involved a process of civilizing, males yearned to break away from self-control; American manhood was equivalent to the repudiation of the feminine. Boys might expect to be refined, but they were also expected to resist. The concept of escape is reflected in the Gold Rush, frontiersmen, pioneers, backwoodsmen, and novels of the sort. Adventure and isolation allowed males to flee temporarily from what Kimmel (1996) described, “a manhood that carries with it the constant burdens of proof” (p.x). Plus, it provided men an opportunity to socialize with other men without any women or to gain automatic masculinity, heroically saving a female in distress. These three concepts of self-control, exclusion, and escape are timeless in masculinity (Kimmel, 1996).

There are other patterns to masculinity, which are seen repeatedly in many interactions and institutions of society: aggression, transgression, homophobia, and male bonding. Of course, there are arguably more existing topics than these. Whether natural to males or not, aggression is seen in the majority of boys from kindergarten and onward. Writers Ellen Jordan and Angela Cowan described how aggression within those first years of school is acted out in warrior narratives, with stories of guns, fighting, and fast cars; the boys believe violence is legitimated because it involves good attempting to overcome evil. There exists conflict, however between the civilized expectations of men and this fantasy of young males. Society, school and teachers specifically, reject warrior narratives and deem them inappropriate for the impending adult society. Boys are
indirectly taught that warrior narratives may remain fantasy through self-indulgence such as recreation and sport; continuation outside these given limitations requires secrecy and denotes deviance. Adult aggression is only appropriate when one is a member of the police or military. Schools teach a masculinity of rationality, male as responsible citizen, the producer and consumer who keeps the capitalist system going, the breadwinner, and caring father of a family. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.90)

The message to males is that school can be masculine as long as life is divided between public and private; the public sphere is for respectability and the private sphere allows for symbolic reenactment of warrior narratives (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Breaking the rules, from slight misbehavior to obscenity, is typically a male phenomenon. Ann Ferguson described this occurrence as a result of hegemonic masculinity construction. Failure to accomplish these socially acceptable traits of manhood could lead to ostracism; success, on the other hand, is rewarded. Ferguson listed three strategies of masculinity, which explain male acts of transgression in a school environment (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

The first is that of heterosexual power, always marked as male. The second involves classroom performances that engage and disrupt the normal direction of the flow of power. The third strategy involves practices of “fighting.” All three involve a “process of iterability”. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.112)

To express anger or insult something is to assert power over that person or institution; in this way, transgression is a way to disidentify and oppose another male, a female, or even a school. The punishment that may result or the observation of this act by others are further manifestations of this male’s attempt to prove his masculinity. Acting out in class challenges and reverses the power from teacher to student; it interrupts the mundane,
predictable daily order. This display of self-expression is equally a display of one’s masculinity. Certain academic weaknesses can even be overshadowed by either the sly manipulation or bold aggression form of disruption. In the end, once a male defies an authority figure, he cannot back down or act passively if he does not want to risk appearing powerless and feminine. Additionally, a male is expected to take care of problems on his own because masculinity requires being in control instead of showing weakness by asking for help; fighting falls under this concept of resolving conflict yourself. Ironically, it opens a temporary window, allowing boys to express non-masculine behavior such as crying and close contact between two males (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Ferguson explained,

>Fighting is about testing and proving your bodily power over another person, both to yourself and to others through the ability to “hurt” someone as well as to experience “hurt.” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.120)

Breaking rules is an avenue for males to signify their masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Pascoe argued that boys often label one another as fag. This gives insight into the connection masculinity has with homophobia (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

>Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of homosexuals, more than the fear that we might (mistakenly) be perceived as gay. It is these, of course, but it is also something deeper. Homophobia is the fear of other men—that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, are not real men. (Kimmel, 1996, p.8)

Pascoe discussed that the term homosexual symbolizes one abandoning his power; due to him allowing himself to be penetrated, his masculinity has become invalid. This comes from the importance of sexuality, particularly heterosexual, assigned to hegemonic masculinity. The numerous masculinities are organized in a hierarchy; the homosexual is
a low-positioned masculinity, but the fag represents the opposite of masculine. Males call each other fag temporarily, regardless of their sexual orientation. The term is used to proclaim one’s masculinity as incompetent. It is the lowest insult a male can receive, implying weakness. This excludes the particular male in question, requiring him to reaffirm his masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Simultaneously, Pascoe described, “’Fag’ may be used as a weapon with which to temporarily assert one’s masculinity by denying it to others” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.133). Fag is a gender meaning, rather than a sexual one, but it does stem from homophobia; males reject the threat and fear of failed masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Homosocial interaction is important to the construction of masculinity. Males highly value having a reputation as indisputably masculine among other males, such as fathers, peers, teachers, coworkers, and bosses. This type of interaction can be camaraderie, fellowship, and intimacy (Kimmel, 1996). The construction of masculinity is an active process, involving social acts. Author Karen Walker looked at some specific aspects of same-sex male friendships. One facet of these interactions is use of the public sphere. Socialization occurs at bars, gyms, clubs, and playgrounds; these often frequent meetings are usually informal in nature and informal in arrangement. A second characteristic is joking (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Peter Lyman described that joking establishes a context where social rules can be temporarily suspended and aggression or tension can be released. In this way, males can escape the pressure and responsibilities of everyday work and family life. The masculine trait of keeping in-control can be acquired and expressed by means of joking, via the customary exchange of insults which one must tolerate (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Walker further
explained teasing; it is also a way for males to discipline or reinforce masculinity between each other, when one displays a conflicting characteristic. Another feature is the way males use the telephone. Its primary function is instrumental, to establish plans or conduct business. Men often lose friendships with others when they no longer need to arrange meetings or side jobs. However, after professional matters have been addressed, most males progress into dialogue about personal topics. When inquired, the majority of men stereotypically stated that male phone conversation is not intimate like that of women. A final point of male interaction is talk about women. They discuss things such as women’s higher housekeeping standards, their desire to shop, the long time it takes them to get dressed, and other stereotypical feminine traits of girlfriends or wives. This evaluative talk about female behavior relieves tensions of men’s family life. Male conversations reinforce gender inequality, contrasting females against males, and often decreeing women’s demands as unmerited (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Masculinity is complex. For some, it is so effortless they may deny the very existence of social constructionism of gender; for others, it is torture having constantly to follow society’s hidden regulations of masculinity and face disapproval from any slight deviation. Daniel Farr grew up being called the low-masculinity term sissy. He was male and wanted to be male, but he was willing and successful with both masculine and feminine traits. In Farr’s words,

In adulthood, many of the gendering events that shape one’s life have been forgotten or minimized. For most, the act of fitting into one’s socially approved gender feels natural-seamless and simple. The social rules about how to behave in the spheres of work, education, and recreation or in the private sphere of the family are so deeply imbedded into our persona we can be unaware of their existence. Not only does one learn how to behave, but how not to behave. These rules and norms unwittingly limit us in our daily lives in how and to whom we
should speak, how we should dress, perhaps even how we should think if we wish to adhere to our ‘natural’ gender. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.137)

He recalls harsh moments when he was suddenly aware of a gender difference reality. To keep free from male peer policing, embarrassment, and exclusion, Daniel had no choice but to conform his masculinity to the pressure of masculinity norms. Ironically today, boys seem liberated to construct their own gender among the huge multiplicity, yet are bound by invisible chains of policy everywhere they look and are evaluated by everyone they meet (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

School and Gender

In the eighteenth century, education in America was intended for males only. Many women desired also to be a part of this educating, but opposers fought against the inclusion of females. Arguments based on biology asserted that girls’ bodies were made for child-rearing not education. If they were exposed to schooling, their brains would grow and bodies shrink, specifically reproductive organs necessary to have babies. Gender inequality was in full-swing. Even some women in Victorian times stated that they did not want to face the rigor of education. Nonetheless, by the turn of the 20th century, females were co-educated with males. Much opposition remained that further reinforced gender inequality. In some colleges, women’s entry resulted in males physically blocking their access into the classroom and heckling. Kimmel (2000) described the irony which much of America faced,

The classroom they had struggled so hard to enter did not exist so much to train them intellectually as it was to ensure social obedience to gender difference. They had entered another gendered classroom. (p.153)
He explained that then and now, schools and their classrooms are filled with numerous variables of gender inequality. It is this inequality which reinforces gender differences (Kimmel, 2000).

In the 1970s, feminists sought sex equity, arguing that public schools perpetuated male dominance and female subordination. The stereotypical differences between the sexes were being indirectly taught. Described by Tyack & Hansot, these feminists contended that this would result in, “the asymmetrical distribution of power, income, and prestige among adult women and men” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.15).

Most teachers and administrators did not believe a problem with sex bias existed. Legal regulations connected to sex discrimination, such as Title IX, were treated by most public schools as unnecessary and distraction. The majority of people were puzzled,

> What was the problem, they asked, if boys behaved like boys and girls like girls? The task of the school was to teach both sexes the same subjects in the same manner, and was this not what was happening? (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.16)

People saw gender differences as natural, therefore they did not perceive sex stereotyping as an issue to be addressed. Researchers had to gather evidence to convince the public that gender inequality existed (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

> The confirmation of sex discrimination revealed many patterns of bias; it was against females. Textbooks presented students with more male characters, historical figures, and heroes. Women who were in these books were more often than not given trivialized or demeaning roles. Sex stereotypes were throughout, portrayed in occupations and behaviors. Even teachers went along with or encouraged sex stereotypical behavior in students. They approached instruction with instruction biased
toward males; they gave them more attention, more criticism, and more rewards. Both teachers and counselors promoted stereotypical courses and careers, according to the sex of the student. There was discrimination within extracurricular activities, as well; they emphasized biased labels, such as aggression in males and meekness in females. The funding was unbalanced, toward those activities with typically male membership. In the earlier half of education, girls were academically ahead of boys, but they fell behind the boys in the last half. In administrative education positions, males dominated, leaving the impression that in society males are the ones in charge, leaving females with subservient positions. Lastly, all these variables that didn’t directly involve teachers went unnoticed by them. As authors David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot describe, school sexism came down to three concepts: patriarchy, sex stereotyping, and institutional sexism. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

“To all the world boys appear to be the favored gender” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.182), but “gender bias is a two-edged sword” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.182). Statistics show that both girls and boys are shortchanged in education. Even though school curricula have been littered with bias against females, the staff and administration is composed of mostly females. Beginning with the Civil War, males left teaching positions for battle, and females filled in the gap. While feminist activists fought for females’ rights, critics against the emasculation of males were also present. Many complained that boys were the new victims, exposed to and taught by feminine role models; this could lead to a compromised manhood (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).
Actual specifics of gender bias against males are as follows. Cognitive skills of reading, writing, and verbal ability in boys develop more slowly than in girls. The academic expectations are aimed toward girls’ abilities, which place boys at a developmental disadvantage. Teachers work to train students to adapt to and become a part of a civilized place, readying them for adult life in society. This type of environment is hard for males to adapt to, especially in youth. Masculinity typically entails high activity, impulsivity, and physicality. These characteristics often play out in rambunctious activity, such as wrestling or running. The feminized, civilized nature of schools looks down on this type of behavior. Therefore, the very essence of males goes unappreciated, their assets seen as liabilities. This discrimination affects boys academically and emotionally. Males feel they are not good enough, as if failures (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Kindlon & Thompson found that

Today many boys face a steady diet of shame and anxiety throughout their elementary school years. From it they learn only to feel bad about themselves and to hate the place that makes them feel that way. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.157)

A chain reaction often continues up into middle and high school, where males do not feel they belong and are no longer motivated to succeed or learn in school. Even some adult men, whether successful later on in life or not, harbor resentment for decades against education and anything remotely connected to it (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

Kindlon & Thompson found the outcome of gender bias against males to be overwhelming. Boys are more likely to be mislabeled as learning disabled and misdiagnosed as having attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder than girls (as cited in
“Gender in Education,” 2002). Sadker & Sadker discovered that boys receive lower grades and have higher dropout rates than females. They have higher levels of academic stress and are referred to the school psychologist four times more often than girls. Boys make up 71 percent of school suspensions. Further, males are more likely to abuse alcohol and illegal drugs. Their suicide rate is two to three times greater than females. Lastly, males are frequently pressured to pursue career choices that are above their level of ability, continuing the struggle with feelings of incompetence and frustration (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

Myra and David Sadker stated that males usually fall into one of two categories: at the top of the class or at the bottom. Society indirectly teaches boys a sense of gender entitlement. In education, these two options are the only ones available to fulfill that entitlement. As ascribed by hegemonic masculinity, boys dominate and stand out, opposite of girls’ submissive role.

As one teacher at a workshop put it, ‘Boys at school are either in the process of becoming the Establishment or fighting it. Either way, they are the center of attention.’ (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.183)

Constantly knowing and verbally giving answers to teachers’ questions is one way to get attention. Peers look up to that male as a model of success, while teachers and administration give him their effort, time, and praise. Boys tend to look up to heroes more than villains, but only a few will fit into the head of their class. According to Sadker & Sadker,

Some boys cross the line and go from calling out to acting out. On the classroom stage these males take the bad boy role, sometimes using it as a passport to popularity. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.185).
In education, boys as successful or rebellious are two issues that exist within the overarching topic of masculinity. Males who chase academic achievement must deal with nervousness linked to competition against others and the anguish of falling into a position below first place. Those accomplishing their goal, “climb to the head of the class only to discover increasing pressure and the steep price of success” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.183). Teachers often respond to these males as if they are privileged with more intellectual talent and more deserving of a successful future, compared to other boys. Kindlon & Thompson pointed out that these biased expectations often discourage responsibility and encourage overconfidence, within young men (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Sadker & Sadker found that boys categorized as class clowns, troublemakers, and delinquents gain admiration and acceptance from their peers through acts of transgression. To a certain degree they are in control, having the power to undermine a teacher’s authority. Frequently there is a chain reaction of disobedience, with steep costs and lasting impressions. Discipline of boys, contrasted to girls, is often tough and very physical (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Kindlon & Thompson discovered that yelling is typical from teachers and administration (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

The assumption is that yelling helps, especially in communicating dissatisfaction to boys, and that boys don’t suffer from it as much as girls might; Boys typically don’t show that they suffer from yelling because being a boy requires that they not show it. But it hurts. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.159).

In school, teachers traditionally assume and worry that misbehaving males are as wild animals, incapable of self-control and intellectual thinking. Feeling threatened by a boy’s potentially dangerous energy, teachers feel it is necessary to correct and control him with
harsh action; hegemonic masculinity requires a corresponding defiant response. This distorted view of males causes them to feel, “somehow not quite right, even unlovable,” which leads further to, “a kind of emotional isolation that only intensifies their own fears, feelings of unworthiness,” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.167).

Another issue of masculinity that boys must face in school is self-esteem. If their academic competence is lacking, every school day presents situations where others observe the corresponding evidence. Daily learning turns traumatic, and the reaction from peers and teachers wears away males’ self-esteem. Their infrequent opportunities at success are usually overshadowed by other males with greater success. Often, these males cope with low self-esteem by applying the coping mechanisms of rebellion, sarcasm, and negativity. This raises yet another challenge for boys: the cycle of negativity. Sometimes boys’ abundant energy results in negativity from the teacher which, in turn, leads to negativity and further energy in the boys. As authors Kindlon and Thompson put it, “if he starts to hate himself he’ll fall into a hole that he’ll be digging himself out of for the rest of his life” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.166).

With today’s medical advances, many boys are medicated to correct presumed problems with focus in class and bountiful energy. Assuming that male youths are problems that need fixed is yet another facet of education with which many boys have to contend. “All boys fit somewhere on a spectrum of distractibility, impulsivity, and hyperactivity,” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.174). However, some boys are mislabeled and misdiagnosed for having an actual disorder. There are many other potential factors that may be causing a lack of concentration in class such as problems in the family or lack of sleep. Boys are miseducated because gender bias in education
leaves males with just as many losses as privileges (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

I recognize that masculinity might play out differently in different settings and there are other variables that will affect it, like race and social class. This study did not attend to issues such as these. Instead, it specifically looked at males of a suburban school. The boys are primarily white and economically disadvantaged.
Knowing that my thesis was to have an auto-ethnography as its data section was intimidating. I knew it would be a challenge to draw unbiased facts from my students as I needed to balance evidence with memories. As a teacher, I have many recollections tied to emotions. I have pride of boys’ accomplishments and disappointment of boys’ shortcomings. I have reacted and even overreacted with excitement one moment and anger the next. Because I have feelings, I knew I would have to focus on looking for the truth, putting aside any personal sensitivity. On the other hand, as the narrator of a piece on students, I had to face the reality: my close involvement with the subject of this thesis, pupils in my classroom, could put the validity of my data and conclusions into question. I needed checks and balances, so to speak, ensuring accuracy. There had to be structure in order to resist simply writing stories by picking any random memories of male students I had known through the education field. The task was overwhelming. I am the adult who has already learned right from wrong, however these boys are not yet grown up; they are still figuring out what type of man they want to become. Each boy deserves justice, in the sense that I would report what he went through, respecting masculinity, regardless of whether he treated me respectfully and received a passing grade.
My initial attitude, pre-thesis, toward masculinity was naïve. I believed males had little ability to feel emotion. It seemed boy students did not care about their grades or the feelings of others. I thought they had oversized egos and that they did not want help from teachers. I felt the only interests of popular males were sports and females. I was not trying to understand boys better; I assumed boys had to change and try harder. Therefore, I continued teaching from my feminine perspective, which did not allow me to teach both female and male students effectively.

Beginning my thesis, I decided on the topic of masculinity due to a college class I had enrolled in years prior. In this course there were discussions on gender. I still had the book we were assigned to read: *Gendered Society*, by Michael Kimmel. I loved the book, but never reflected on its contents as much as I could have due to personal events in my life that occurred around the same time. As a school teacher, I felt a connection to this topic as gender is an issue in education; students’ lives are affected by both femininity and masculinity. At this point, I decided to read through Kimmel’s book a second time. Masculinity aroused my interest more than femininity because I did not know what it was like to be a male, but I had many men in my life. I was close to my father, brother, husband, and the newest addition of our son. I further read books from the same author, specifically about masculinity and was flooded with new concepts such as the importance of homosocial relationships, homosexuality as failure or alternative, hegemonic masculinity, masculinity in reference to femininity, gender as action, and institutions as gendered. To my surprise, I was very intrigued.

After reading literature regarding masculinity, I considered how my view of masculinity was altered from the start of my thesis journey. I thought about all the males
in my personal life differently. Instead of having a critical attitude against males, due to ignorance, I was beginning to gain insight into emotional and social struggles that they face. This transferred over to my career as a teacher as I acquired instant appreciation for present and past male students. Along with this came guilt that I had judged them unfairly through my feminine outlook, unaware of the hardships they face. I was having a revelation that boys were truly different from girls, although I had not been dealing with them proportional to those differences. This was the source of my drive to learn more about masculinity and I felt a responsibility to figure out how boys interact and in turn, how they learn. It was my belief that I could be a more successful teacher if I could help all types of male students succeed. My mind ran away with the possibility that I could make a difference in the lives of boys that usually fail.

My next step was further research. No matter how many times I suspected that I recognized what Kimmel discussed in my husband, father, or brother, I knew that I had to dig much deeper into scholarly literature in order to become aware of masculinity issues males face and how it affects them. To organize my thoughts on masculinity I sorted the research into three major components: general gender issues, masculinity-specific concepts, and ideas that connect masculinity and schooling. This gave focus to my research. A variety of literary pieces were made available to me from which I narrowed to under 30 books. I limited myself to literature that was copyrighted 1990 and after. I picked a few readers that combined multiple works from a variety of authors. I also chose some books that Kimmel referenced in his own writing. I then traveled in person to the University of Akron, checking out the books on my final list. I ended up requesting a printout of a magazine article that was from the 1980’s and not available for
checkout anymore, but seemed critical to understanding formation of gender. I felt I had a wealth of knowledge, with which to form a solid base for my thesis.

One category at a time, I read literature, formed an outline, and typed Chapter II of my thesis. Within the category on general gender, I felt that I needed to address biological, sociological, and psychological theories and findings about gender formation. Too, I didn’t want to ignore the ideas many scholars had (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2007; Risman, 1998; West and Zimmerman, 1987), regarding gender as a continual reconstruction and interaction with people and institutions within society. I wanted the masculinity component to include theories of dominance, hierarchy, comparison to feminism, and historic traces. These were concepts that I had not been aware of before I studied masculinity. Too, I believe they helped the most in opening my eyes to see males as they really are, beyond the outer façade. I wanted to mention specific issues suggested in the research such as aggression, transgression, homophobia, and male bonding. These were also personally important to include in my thesis because I noticed them in my classroom on a daily basis. Thus, they come into play with the learning process of every male. The third piece, regarding masculinity and education, needed to address the history of schooling intended for males and then discrimination against females. Likewise, I wanted to look into the research of boys’ hardships in education from as many angles as I possibly could: emotionally, intellectually, socially, physically with adults and peers, and both direct and indirect suspected consequences. This part of my paper seemed realistic to me because I am often focused on politics of education and following all the rules that I tend to forget schooling is for the kids. When the students are forgotten, human imperfections of bias and unfairness enter the picture. I was in my research too deep to
shy away from this truth or try to deny that I had a part in discriminating against boys. Throughout my literature review, I made sure to incorporate as much of the scholarly authors’ ideas as possible, preventing the possibility of straying into my own opinions. Focusing on University of Akron’s rules of thesis writing helped me with the prior listed endeavor; specific points that helped me were as follows: avoid use of first-person and everything must be cited.

The next piece was the hardest. Going into Chapter IV, I needed to focus in on themes. Themes were the only way I could pull facts from memories. Helping me through this challenge were articles on the concept of auto-ethnography, by authors David M. Hayano (1979) and Kathy Carter (1993). By this point in my thesis, I was determined to become a better teacher toward male students. I thought regretfully about the boys with whom I had engaged in arguments; I tried to show them that I was the boss. Some boys I even poked fun at in front of others to teach them a lesson when they became too silly themselves. So many males had slipped through the cracks of my own teaching. There were a few boys who stood out in the class, striving to succeed, and I always wondered why it was such a rarity. The others seemed either too stubborn or too quiet to participate. At times I even felt glad if they moved out of the school district as I often felt their success was hopeless. I could recall boys that had personalities which I never understood or had difficulty coping with as their teacher: charming and sly to cursing and insubordinate. The more I thought, the more overwhelmed I became. Yet, my goal was clear: I wanted to help boys learn, with more efficiency than I had in my past years of teaching. To continue my journey away from ignorance, I had to figure out the problem and systematically answer that problem. By focusing on what was bothering
me the most with boys in the classroom, themes for masculinity were chosen: males as transgressors, males as resistors, and males as over-achievers. Soon thereafter, I formed questions I aimed to answer. Some of these questions helped me to concentrate on how peers view males after these particular behaviors are carried out. Other questions helped me hone in on what effect these acts have on the individual who is being categorized, both his education and view of himself.

I really enjoyed this part of my journey. My thesis topic on masculinity really came alive. Although the concept of auto-ethnography was once a struggle, I liked seeing my ignorance toward males melt away. After researching the relevant literature, I had to collect data and come up with patterns according to my themes. I pulled together information on male students and literally laid that information out on the floor. With my son right there beside me, as inspiration, I would find cards of information that had something in common then I would write it down. Next, I laid those cards back down and looked for another set of cards with a pattern. Doing this over and over, for each of my themes, I came to a better understanding of males and masculinity. It was such an eye-opening experience that truly changed me.

Using a pad of paper and months of spare time, I had to brainstorm. I looked at past student papers, school yearbooks, discipline slips, thank you letters, grade books, and rosters; I read the names of students who attended the middle school at which I taught for eight years. I talked to the school guidance counselor, student intervention team members, principal, assistant principal, coaches, and fellow teachers. I went to them to confirm memories, however they also contributed to my memories which I used as more data. My next task was to create a log of numerous memories, triggered by and
regarding these student names. This process had to be lengthy because I did not want to pressure myself to hurry. It was critical to me that my memory be triggered naturally, rather than forcing recollection out of desperation. I needed factual memories, not fictional. I had to keep focused on my three themes: class disruption, academic success, and opposition to help. These themes were the framework of my auto-ethnography; just as a solid presentation needs the backbone of its outline, my data needed this focus. I chose to record only dilemmas, situations, struggles, behaviors, and outcomes that fit into that framework. I recalled students so quiet who refused to ask for help that I had forgotten about them. I remembered students who I gave consequences frequently, but in the end, the consequences were not of any benefit to them. It seemed easy to think of students that were well-behaved and academically successful because they made me feel accomplished as a teacher. When I felt I had ample quantity of memories for each of the three themes, I transitioned from jottings to index cards, numbered on the back side: one student per card.

My next step was to search for patterns with respect to my three themes. No student names could be used so I had to find connections and report data in a broad sense. I physically laid the numbered index cards on the floor. I picked up multiple cards that had something in common; then I came to a conclusion regarding that connection. Then I recorded the finding, along with card numbers so I had capabilities to trace back to the appropriate cards. This process was repeated numerous times, generating conclusions for all three of my themes, addressing the related questions I had formed in advance. Some findings reinforced what I anticipated about masculinity and boys in school, while others were a contradiction of my ideas. I am a narrator, yet my story was formed with
procedure. My arguments are based on the knowledge that was generated through a series of premeditated steps. A framework was laid, themes were formed, and patterns relating back to both of these were obtained. It is this methodical and controlled manner, with which I’ve collected and sorted my data, that guarantees the integrity of that very data and my conclusions in this thesis paper. Surprisingly, I worried about this procedure, but it was a very exciting part of my thesis. I kept running into social issues of masculinity that my male students faced. I could see why they put on a mask, showed anger, acted uncaring, competed against others, could not make mistakes, or transgressed. I started seeing answers to my questions. This further motivated me to keep working on my thesis because I believed that hopeless boys were no longer hopeless. I started feeling like an advocate for male students. I wanted other teachers to gain this insight, too. Even though my data could not be reported one male at a time, being forced to find these connections between groups of boys pushed me to something better. I was anxious to draw final conclusions. The purpose of the following section of this thesis will be to discuss these findings further.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

This study explored the role of masculinity in the school setting, with the goal of obtaining a better understanding of male pupils. The results of the analysis resemble prior research pertaining to masculinity and gender. One concept of gender, critical to this investigation, is “Hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p.76). This is important for understanding the variety of masculinities, how they relate to each other, how issues such as power are involved, and how boys construct masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Masculinity is defined as a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. (Connell, 2005, p.71)

Boys actively construct masculinity in everyday interactions. They do this, fully aware that observing peers will judge their behavior and then assess their gender as successful or not (West & Zimmerman, 1987). “Hegemonic masculinity” is defined as “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell, 2005, p.76). Also needing to be defined, “hegemony” is “the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” (Connell, 2005, p.77). The variety of masculinities is arranged in a hierarchy; hegemonic masculinity is dominant, leaving all other masculinities subordinate. Males are constantly trying to achieve and maintain hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2000).
In order to analyze masculinity, with regard to male students’ quest for hegemonic masculinity, qualitative data was collected. It has been organized into three sections to help address the research questions: male students as transgressors, male students as resistors, and male students as over-achievers. The related questions this study revolved around are:

1. Why do some boys disrupt class during instruction time?

2. Why are some boys reluctant or opposed to asking for help in the instructional setting?

3. How does academic accomplishment coupled with good learning habits affect boys’ masculinity?

Through constant comparison of the data, patterns emerged with reference to each of the questions.

This study is autoethnographic, using recollections of classroom interactions, conversations with colleagues and other school employees. Other contributions to this data were school records, student paperwork, and past yearbooks. The examples used extend beyond these individual males and this school; they are a representation of the broader data encompassing Western Society males. For each example, there exist many more. Data was primarily collected from situations observed in a public middle school, particularly an eighth grade mathematics classroom. Transcription of data involved writing a set of index cards, within which each individual male was documented. Pseudonyms are used for the school and all individuals referenced. Results from specific observations are cited as (ON) for observation note. Results from a collection of memories that are recorded in my notebook are cited as (JN) for journal note. Results
from fellow school employees are cited as (CN) for conversation note. Each of the three themes will be explored below.

Male Students as Transgressors

Three specific questions come to mind when considering the notion of transgression:

1. What does this accomplish for their masculinity?
2. How does it impact the way males and females perceive them?
3. How does it affect their learning?

“Transgress” is defined “to step beyond or across” and “to go beyond the limits set by the divine law” (“Merriam-Webster,” 1994, p.764). Data from this study reveals that boys often put on a “display of power”, which is defined as “a highly strategic attachment to a social category that has political effects” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.111). This attachment involves “narratives of the self and of Other, constructed within and through fantasy and imagination, as well as through repetitious, referential acts” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.111). In other words, males who transgress do not feel their rebellion is voluntary but a requirement. This is because there are social consequences attached to a male’s behavior; peers observe and judge his masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The investigation on boys who transgress in the school classroom revealed that these boys put on a front of power (JN). There were specific behaviors identified that boys displayed in efforts to make others believe they are in-control, but also weaknesses that they were trying to cover up with these behaviors. The ultimate goal was to establish hegemonic masculinity.
Male students who transgress appear confident. Kimmel (2000) explained that gender is not merely the identity of a boy but also the behaviors he chooses to display. Western society expects certain traits from males; they are pressured to be in-control (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). This image is often based on over-confidence that boys utilize to establish power and a masculine sense of self. Four specific methods related to transgressing that boys utilized to demonstrate this confidence include joking, academic avoidance, bullying, and challenging authority (JN).

*Joking as Means of Transgression.*

Joking allows males to display power. Telling jokes is a means of conveying emotion or tension normal to life (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The class clown is a label used for the student who frequently initiates jokes in school. His joke becomes a sort of entertainment, “theater of domination in everyday life” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.154). Joking demands and establishes social bonds through aggression and laughter. Shared aggression is a means by which a group of boys can release stress while asserting their solidarity. In this way the class clown is a hero and a leader. Gestures such as voice, facial expressions, and catch phrases send the message that what is said is indeed a joke and not serious. Therefore, typical consequences, from both teacher and peers, are often withheld. This makes joking a safe method for construction of masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). So boys joke because it is a way to display aggression and power while relieving tension. This technique is a means of proving one’s masculinity, with the ever-present goal of achieving and maintaining hegemonic masculinity.
As an example, Chris walked behind me, during instruction, to get a tissue off a nearby table; out of the corner of my eye, I could see him mocking me and dancing (ON). Chris is an example of a class clown who makes others laugh. He and his circle of friends reinforced their friendship with joking. He was revered because he demonstrated aggression and power and helped relieve their anxiety. So peers in the classroom observed his behavior and assessed him as successful with regard to his masculinity. On the down side, however, Chris’s focus was on establishing hegemonic masculinity rather than academic achievement. This may have negatively affected his comprehension of the mathematical concepts that were currently being taught (JN).

Another aspect of joking surfaced which I didn’t expect: the sexual nature of some jokes. Author Peter Lyman states that the function of sexist jokes is to “control the threat that individual men might form intimate emotional bonds with women” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.159). Males view friendship with women as loss of power and control; sexual jokes separate intimacy from sex by defining male relationships as intimate and female relationships as sexual only. Too, friendship with women is associated with inevitable responsibilities of family and work. Sexist jokes express aggression toward women. In this way, sexual joking serves as a withdrawal from mundane everyday life in which frustration about responsibilities may be safely expressed (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

For example, a different student, Andrew, raised his hand during instruction. After being called on, he loudly stated that it was “nippily cold” outside today (ON). Andrew, like Chris, fits the description of a class clown. His friends bonded and let go of anxiety with every chuckle that came from his humor. Different from Chris, though,
Andrew’s joke referred to sex characteristics of a woman’s body, her breasts (JN). It was not just the joke but the joke’s sexual nature that led to temporary relief from stress and reinforcement of Andrew’s bond with his male peers. Further supporting this point, it was the males who laughed, not the females.

There were other gender issues that played a role in Andrew’s joking. Femininity is viewed as subordinate to masculinity; the homosexual masculinities are positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men, and gayness is frequently assimilated to femininity (Connell, 2005). When a male excludes or behaves in opposition to those less masculine than oneself, which includes females, they place themselves in a position of unquestionable masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). Andrew’s aggression was directed toward females, which placed him in opposition to femininity. Like many males, Andrew no doubt faced constant pressure to prove his masculinity, striving for hegemony. His joke was an attempt to exalt himself to that position of dominance (JN). Andrew’s sexist joke may have affected his education. If he was temporarily withdrawn from all his frustration attached to masculinity, his attention toward academics may have also been absent. The same may have resulted while his thoughts and efforts were focused on achieving hegemonic masculinity. Done repeatedly, this could have lowered his comprehension of class content and eventually his academic achievement (JN).

With both Chris and Andrew, academic discussion was broken up as students erupted into giggling; off-topic conversations ensued (ON). The student behavior was intended to cause laughter from everyone, even the teacher. It disrupted class learning and brought attention to the student initiating the joke; the boy had temporarily taken
power away from the teacher in authority. This puts that male in control. I think boys gain more praise and are credited with more power from male peers when the teacher is a woman (JN) because one method of establishing masculinity is subordination of females (Connell, 2005). Students who observe a male joking assess the situation and see him victorious at displaying aggression and power; it is decided that this male has successfully achieved masculinity. Boys constantly reinforce their masculinity in this manner, aiming to achieve and maintain hegemonic masculinity (JN).

A fellow teacher mentioned that she enjoys some humor in her classroom, even joking back with her students, but complained that too many boys cross the line, joking inappropriately or at inappropriate times (CN). While these boys often exhibit behaviors that “cross the line”, the majority of them earn letter grades which reflect academic success. They are accustomed to success in school and pleasing adults in positions of authority. However, they want to avoid lowering their status of masculinity (ON). On the hierarchy that arranges the diversity of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity leads and the others are left subordinate. Intelligence is often associated with eagerness to learn, which is viewed negatively and lowly on that hierarchy. These boys fear being labeled “nerd” due to their academic success; they risk oppression and ostracism that come from peers (Connell, 2005). The rebelliousness of joking is used as a mask to overshadow their believed weakness. The masculine characteristic of power protects these male from others assigning them to a further subordinate masculinity. These boys strive to attain and preserve hegemonic masculinity. However, in the process of hiding his scholarly strength and accomplishment, a male could smother his own enthusiasm for
learning. This, in turn, might lead to lowered academic effort and decline in academic achievement (JN).

**Avoidance as Means of Transgression.**

Academic avoidance is another way that male students can lessen the gender pressure they face (JN). Masculinity includes heavy burdens: relentless struggle to achieve and demonstrate hegemony. Males worry less about their inner personality and more about the possession of qualities which society claims to be masculine. Males today are similar to the early American “Self-Made Man” (Kimmel, 1996, p.26).

Kimmel described the Self-Made Man as having a proving ground in the public sphere, where manhood had to be proved in the eyes of other men; efforts of proof were constant in front of fathers, coworkers, friends, and bosses who were scrutinizing their every move. The Self-Made Man is similar to man today; he does not count on fixed masculinity, rather success is temporary and has to be earned (Kimmel, 1996). Likewise, hegemonic masculinity is mobile and replaceable; it relates to the dominant masculinity at one specific time within a specific culture (Connell, 2005).

A male actively and independently tries to make his own success. Thus, proving manhood is an endless struggle, causing males to be restless, insecure, and competitive. If a boy falls short of achieving dominant traits of masculinity for others to observe, he will still feel pressure to appear in-control of his masculinity. Today, the scenario for males is similar to what it was back in early America; “it was full of competitors. Two choices seemed possible: Stay and compete, or try to escape” (Kimmel, 1996, p.44). If acquisition or proof of hegemonic masculinity seems impossible, a male will often look for a way out, away from the competition. One method of escape is to avoid attention;
this can be accomplished by isolation or a physical leave of absence. If a boy’s display of masculinity is lacking altogether, no one can observe his failure. Not participating in class activities is a form of escape. When a male student feels he cannot appear successful and establish hegemony in his masculinity, the only option is to withdraw (Kimmel, 1996).

As an example, Justin would come to class more often than not without critical pieces of equipment, such as a writing utensil, paper, or the textbook. Yet, he was very capable of remembering to bring these items. A rewards system was even set up by his teachers and a school counselor to motivate Justin to bring his materials to class. Yet, he still consistently came to class unprepared for academic work. When he was called on to participate, he truly had limitations to do so because he was missing the proper tools (ON). Justin is an example of attempting escape from the burdens of masculinity. No matter how hard adults tried to motivate him, he did not want to compete aggressively against the other boys because he did not think he would achieve or demonstrate hegemonic masculinity. His intelligence level was neither high nor low, but the chances for him making mistakes with mathematical problems were present. He possibly dreaded giving a wrong answer; this would have actively proved him unsuccessful in front of his peers (JN).

Avoidance was the technique Justin used to defend himself against failure with regard to masculinity. Perhaps his peers would not assign him to a subordinate masculinity if his weaknesses were not made known (JN). However, establishing hegemonic masculinity involves action (West & Zimmerman, 1987). So Justin’s efforts to be inactive were in vain. He could never maintain a dominant status of masculinity
because he never created one to begin with. Justin’s academic potential was put in jeopardy with his techniques of avoidance. He withdrew from verbal and written participation in class. This might have led to withdrawn mental participation. This lowered his chance of math comprehension, which then hurt his chances to achieve in school (JN).

Another issue that occurs with the technique of avoidance is challenging the teacher’s authority. Class participation is teacher initiated; he or she expects the student to display his knowledge in front of an audience of judging peers. When a teacher demands that an inactive learner contribute to class, he or she fully knows the boy may “demonstrate their ineptitude or lack of preparation” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.114). Author Ann Ferguson called these “command performances” where it is “predictable in the outcome of who has and gets respect, who is in control, who succeeds, who fails” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.114).

In school, sometimes a teacher gives a defiant male student an ultimatum for not obeying their demands. If that demand involves answering a problem that he is not able to answer correctly, he is at a crossroads. Males can submit to teacher authority or challenge their authority. If he listens to the teacher, he will “lose what he perceives as the edge in the struggle” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.115). To lose to the teacher is humiliating for males; it would be considered a display of passive behavior (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Passiveness is associated with femininity, which would hold males back in their efforts to establish hegemonic masculinity. This situation could further worsen if the student failed to answer the question correctly, in addition to having submitted to the teacher (Kimmel, 2000). There is another possible outcome to a
teacher/student face-off. Males can verbally engage in a power struggle with a teacher. “Authority is teased, challenged, even occasionally toppled” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.115) when a boy pupil continues his refusal to comply with the teacher. When power is reversed from a person of authority to a student, he is viewed by his peers as successful and earns their praise. For some males, “this is a moment of gratification in a day that brings few” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.115).

For example, Wayne was a boy who firmly refused to work on or answer math problems; this might have been because he did not want his peers to see him participate. When told again to contribute academically, there was still consistent noncompliance. The rejection would vary: ignore with silence, determined “no”, blame me for picking on him, claim that he doesn’t know, lay his head on the desk due to supposed exhaustion, and hold his stomach and grimace his face because he feels sick (ON). The excuses were many and wide-ranging, but they had obstinacy in common. At times, he was threatened with consequences or scolded in front of his peers. Wayne rarely backed down to teacher authority. More intimidation from the teacher seemed to encourage him all the more to talk back and oppose the teacher (ON). Wayne’s opportunities to engage verbally in a battle with the teacher gave him the chance to gain power. Through the evaluative eyes of many peers, this success sometimes helped him to achieve hegemonic masculinity because he was in control (JN).

Another issue enters the picture: Wayne’s life was chaotic. He moved often, his mother and father were recently divorced, his family’s home had recently been burglarized, and he was experiencing exclusion from peers because they said he acted “too ghetto” to fit in (ON). Because he was not experiencing any success or control in
his personal life, he probably craved success and control by any other means possible. Thus, to win a power struggle with the teacher must have meant a lot to him; his emotions and mental thoughts were both intertwined with his decisions and behavior. With so much importance placed on achieving power and striving for hegemony, Wayne gave much of his energy and focus, during math class, to social and political elements related to construction of masculinity. Academic performance in the form of practicing homework problems or taking part in class discussions rarely occurred. This risked his academic achievement because his chances to learn were not utilized to their full potential (JN).

Many of my colleagues send boys out into the hallway as a consequence for refusing to participate. Many yell at and berate them both inside and out of the classroom because the student is so firm in his resolution of a passive role (CN). Often teachers and administrators feel that boys must receive tough discipline; yelling is typical (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). They often feel the need to correct and control any impulsive or rambunctious activity. This is because the feminized, civilized nature of schools looks down on this type of behavior (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). These males, like Justin and Wayne, try their best to avoid attention during instruction. But, when the teacher threatens this desire, the resulting struggle between student and teacher can be blown out of proportion: there may be high energy from the adolescent male versus a screaming teacher who thinks he or she must dominate the out of control “wild animal” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.167). The male student will probably not easily be submissive to the teacher. The teacher’s dramatic display of power may result in a corresponding defiant response. If the boy surrenders to the
teacher’s authority, he gives up his chance to display power. Most likely, given the chance, males who already have weakness, such as lack of intelligence or control in their life will choose to challenge the teacher’s authority. Although potentially damaging to their education, it is an opportunity to achieve hegemonic masculinity (JN).

_Bullying as Means of Transgression._

Bullying is another tactic used to establish power. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity to which others are subordinated. “We thus come to know what it means to be a man by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of ‘others’” (Kimmel, 2000, p.91). Hegemonic masculinity is sometimes contrasted with femininity; “masculinity, in effect, is defined as non-femininity” (Connell, 2005, p.70). Similarly, if one male implies that another male is weak in some aspect of masculinity, he is placing himself in opposition to that other male (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The purpose of excluding another male is to place oneself, by contrast, in a higher position, a position of unquestionable masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). Author R.W. Connell (2005) described this as subordination; there is a hierarchy of masculinities, with some secondary to others. Each male strives to establish his own masculinity in a dominant position: hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Males even resort to name-calling if they are trying to degrade another male’s masculinity. Teasing other boys is a display of superiority and power. To show ultimate contempt, according to Pascoe, a male must call the other male a girl or liken his behavior to femininity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The label “fag” is the worst name a male can be called; “this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that’s like saying that you’re nothing” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.128). Fag is a
gender meaning, rather than a sexual one. It stems from homophobia: males reject the threat and fear of failed masculinity, and homosexuality, linked to femininity, is considered very low on the hierarchy of masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

As an example, Alex and Mark threw insults to each another about appearance. The climax was when Alex called Mark a “fag”, followed by Mark telling Alex, “Fuck you.” (ON). Both boys tried to establish their own masculinity by displaying power; this was done with the use of name-calling. They each tried to assert their own masculinity in opposition to the other’s masculinity, which they had just degraded. The label “fag” is a major insult. By using this name, Alex established absolute denial of Mark’s masculinity, connecting him to femininity. Thus, Alex’s masculinity in contrast to Mark’s appeared dominant. Alex did this with the goal of establishing hegemonic masculinity or at least to appear as possessing hegemonic masculinity (JN).

Another gender issue is at play: restoration of one’s masculinity. Once Mark’s masculinity was flawed in front of an audience of peers, he felt pressure to restore his masculinity back to its prior status. Authors Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) explained that even though people desire to assess others’ gender, they have just as strong a yearning to preserve their own gender. Mark had to retaliate, to reaffirm his masculinity. His use of the phrase “Fuck you” is important to consider. This message involves one of the traits typical to hegemonic masculinity: sexual power (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Because Mark asserted his sexual power, to dominate a woman or not, he was proclaiming his power and sexual success. He was trying to reestablish his recently blemished masculinity. Just like Alex, Mark ultimately wanted to
achieve hegemonic masculinity. These boys are willing to go as far as name-calling because they want so badly to achieve success with masculinity. They both come from families with divorced parents, lack of discipline, lack of attention, and lack of financial means. Since their lives do not have constancy, they probably feel powerless and out-of-control. This chaos quite possibly motivates them to try and attain hegemonic masculinity. However, I think that bullying male peers is not conducive to establishing hegemonic masculinity (JN).

These examples of bullying showed that when insults are given, the victim may reciprocate with further insults. If this occurs, males will spend time building their masculinity back up to where it was before the insult happened. This is time that could have been spent trying to prove hegemony successfully. In addition, this extra time spent repairing their bruised masculinity may have harmed their overall academic achievement. The reason for this is because lowered attention and concentration on scholarly material can impede comprehension of content area concepts (JN).

Female students are also bullied by intimidation and harassment. Teasing girls shows opposition to femininity. It also displays traits of hegemonic masculinity such as insensitivity, power, and control (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Establishing a separation from females has always been a means of placing oneself in a position of superiority and undeniable masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). This is evident in the example of Jimmy, who constantly expressed an overly confident attitude in relation to girls. He talked negatively about his own sister, girls around him in class, and female teachers. Other males tended to degrade him in order to place themselves in a position of dominance (ON). Because he lacked hegemonic masculinity, his masculinity already
appeared inadequate; he was probably a target for teasing. To place his masculinity in a position of dominance, he needed to position himself in opposition to a gender group, which was even less successful than him regarding masculinity. Since females are contrasted with males, they were an easy target for Jimmy (JN). His exclusion of them was possibly made easier because girls appear “powerless and victimizable” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.113). Teasing girls allowed him to display power, insensitivity, and control; it helped him appear successful. He was striving to achieve hegemonic masculinity (JN).

Overall, I do not think Jimmy actually achieved hegemonic masculinity. He certainly kept pursuing it, but he was too busy bullying girls to establish male bonding, and those are the peers who assess his masculinity. That may have spoiled his chances to get positive attention from male students; the girls, whom he teased, probably would not favorably judge his masculinity, either. Like Alex and Mark, Jimmy’s family life did not have consistency, so his objective was to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Even if he kept falling short of his goal, he may have hoped to appear dominant and in-control. Also similar to Alex and Mark, I think bullying worked against Jimmy’s comprehension of mathematics. His focus was on teasing girls instead of concepts being taught in class. It may have been hard for Jimmy to learn from the female teacher if he could not take her seriously when he would rather harass her, too. This probably put his academic achievement in danger (JN).

*Challenging Authority as Means of Transgression.*

Challenging authority was another tactic of transgression used to disrupt class. School contains many limitations for males. It tends to be a feminine environment,
fitting for passive students; teachers often scold because of high activity levels and low levels of impulse control that are normal for boys. Many assets of males revolve around physicality, which work very well outdoors, but are usually banned within the learning environment (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). While girls’ nurturing tendency is developed, boys’ “warrior” tendency (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.82) is altered. “Warrior narratives” is defined as “narratives that assume that violence is legitimate and justified when it occurs within a struggle between good and evil” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.82). School indirectly teaches males that warrior narratives are inappropriate in society. Males are supposed to control their aggression and adopt traits of responsibility and rationality. There are few exceptions to this rule. Otherwise, continuation of these warrior narratives denotes deviance (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Males are exposed to numerous other civilizing processes via church and women. There is a natural yearning to break free from these restrictions (Kimmel, 1996). Sometimes, males resist teacher and school authority as a means of rebellion. In this manner, a male can display independence and appear powerful and in-control. Dominance over the person or institution of authority proves masculinity and attempts to establish hegemonic masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

As an example, one student, Shaun usually refused to participate with in-class activities. He would throw pencils across the room, steal other students’ papers, boldly refuse to work, attempt to copy answers out of the teacher answer key, and make socially unacceptable comments such as “This school sucks” or “You are ugly”. One, by one, I took away privileges and assigned consequences, attempting to impel him to obedience. On one occasion, he proceeded to call me “bitch”. Eventually he persuaded his mother to
enroll him in an Online school program, and he was gone for the rest of that school year (ON). Shaun could be described as a delinquent; “delinquent” is defined as, “a person who offends by neglect or violation of duty or of law” (“Merriam-Webster”, 1994, p.205). So much of his behavior was violation against school or classroom rules. He displayed power and appeared in control because he undermined authority of teachers and school officials. Like all males, he was striving toward acquisition of hegemonic masculinity. His behavior disrupted the normal classroom routine and normal direction of power (JN).

Another important but sad part of the example of Shaun is that he had a troubled life. He lived with his mom and his father left years prior, establishing a new life and new family, where he embraced his children, but barely had a relationship with Shaun. His grades were typically failing grades, and he may have thought the rest of his personal life was failing, too (JN). He had anger, which he vented through rebellion. His rebellion expressed “his rejection, his disidentification with the school that he devalues as worthless” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.113). His use of the word “bitch” may indicate another gender issue; this particular foul word is one that usually degrades a female. Aggression can also be displayed by asserting one’s sexual power. To imply domination over a female “mocks the authority of the teacher to give him orders” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.113). Shaun may have been denouncing my worth as an authority figure, making it clear that he did not need or want my teaching (JN).

I do not think Shaun could have established success with masculinity because his behavior was extreme. Hegemony is based on leading, popular ideals (Connell, 2005); Shaun was too radical for other boys to accept or praise him. Because masculinity is
based on peer judgment, his efforts to achieve were probably ineffective. Additionally, Shaun’s delinquency may have been detrimental to his scholarly potential. Due to Shaun’s perceived lack of confidence in the school and teachers, he most likely was not willing to exert himself physically, emotionally, or mentally for the sake of learning. He may have stunted his intellectual growth if he never got to explore the wealth of knowledge in the classroom (JN).

Males are supposed to take care of problems by themselves, so portraying independence is also a display of masculinity. The unofficial masculine code is that “if someone hits you, you should solve the problem yourself rather than showing weakness and calling an adult to intervene” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.117). Girls are expected to ask for assistance; thus, asking for help is characteristic to femininity. So fighting seems like a logical solution to boys. Another reason fighting seems like a good idea is if students have a hard time trusting. Although some adolescents see authority figures of society as working on their behalf, for others “adults are not seen as having any real power to effectively change the relations among kids” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.117).

Fighting also offers a way to prove who has greater physical strength, further proof of masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). One of the school counselors agreed with the research. She said that Ryan was sent to her by the principal, enraged and wanting to bring justice by fighting another student. Although she calmed him down, he refused to have a mediation session with her and that other boy; he said that he would handle it by himself (CN). Teachers were supposed to watch Ryan because he was mentally unstable. His grades were spiraling out of control, his mother died a few
years past, and his father was usually off to work second shift when Ryan came home from school. He was an angry young male who had been through a lot of emotional trauma. If he spoke, it was usually mean-spirited; occasionally we saw joy in Ryan. Certainly, he desired to cover the pain and powerless aspects of his life. His threats to engage in fighting were not surprising because he wanted to appear powerful, in-control, and dominant. Fighting was a way he knew he would earn approval from his peers because it was an example of being in charge, taking care of problems on his own. If he asked for help, peers would judge him as helpless, feminine; it would not raise his masculinity to a dominant position. His annoyances and irritating comments of intimidation to others were possibly comments to initiate an altercation (JN).

Like most males, Ryan wanted to establish and maintain hegemonic masculinity. As was the case with Shaun, Ryan’s form of transgression was so extreme that it only drew negative attention from both male and female peers. His non-traditional behavior drove away other students so there was more isolation from peers than there was acceptance. I think Ryan’s mental capacity to learn was consumed by thoughts of analysis on handling his own problems: what he should do, how he should do it, and whether or not he should do it. Little attention and focus was left for comprehension of mathematical concepts. His academic performance and achievement most likely suffered (JN).

Author Ann Ferguson explains that breaking the rules is the only perceived option for boys who face ostracism from failure to achieve the normative traits of masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Like all males, the boys of these examples aspired to achieve and maintain hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). These male
students fell short of their goal, but they continued their pursuit, nonetheless. They seemed desperate to cover over that instability, whether lack of intelligence or lack of security in their personal life, as if it meant their survival. The techniques of transgression helped cover their weaknesses. These methods included: joking, avoidance, bullying, and challenging authority. Through use of these techniques, the students appeared in power, in control, and dominant. The downside was that peers could still see glimpses of failure in those males’ masculinity. Additionally, the techniques of transgression seemed to have had a negative impact on academic achievement. Thus, it could be said that these boys’ efforts to cover over weaknesses were futile.

Male Students as Resistors

Three specific questions that come to mind when considering the notion of resistance:

1. What does this accomplish for their masculinity?
2. How does it impact the way males and females perceive them?
3. How does it affect their learning?

“Resist” is defined “to oppose” and “to withstand the force or effect of” (“Merriam-Webster”, 1994, p. 625). Data from this study reveals that boys often try to appear successful. Just like in early American times when the capitalist market emerged, man is often defined by “success in the market, individual achievement, mobility, wealth (…) success must be earned, manhood must be proved” (Kimmel, 1996, p.23). There were specific behaviors identified that boys displayed in efforts to make others believe they are successful, but also weaknesses that they were trying to cover up with these behaviors.
Boys who decline academic assistance appear nonchalant.

From a very early age, boys are told to “Act Like a Man.” Even though they have all the normal human feelings of love, excitement, sadness, confusion, anger, curiosity, pain, frustration, humiliation, shame, grief, resentment, loneliness, low self-worth, and self-doubt, they are taught to hide the feelings and appear to be tough and in control. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.148)

These are some of the dominant characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. This singular description of masculinity is a model for all men (Kimmel, 2000). This is the “model against which we are expected to measure ourselves” (Kimmel, 2000, p.11). In school, every interaction carries with it the consequence of judgment. Based on observation of behavior, peers assess one’s masculinity as successful or not (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The boys in this investigation construct an image of how they want others to view them. This image is often based on aloofness that boys utilized to establish success and a masculine sense of self. Two specific groups utilized to demonstrate this aloofness include boys who are typically not accepted by their peers and boys who are accepted by the majority of their peers (JN).

Resistance From Males Not Accepted by Peers.

Some males who resist help in class fail to possess the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is dominant, and the other masculinities are subordinate (Connell, 2005). Masculinity is assessed by peers, through daily interaction and behavior (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Failure to achieve success, in relation to masculinity, often results in exclusion. This is a social issue because other people decide whether or not a male student is socially acceptable (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The rigid expectations of hegemonic masculinity can be described as a box, metaphorically. Every time a boy steps outside of this box, failing to display those
expectations, he is categorized as inadequate, a loser. So males are pressured to keep inside the box (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Boys “are constantly challenging each other, putting each other down, hitting each other, testing to see who is in the box. They are never at ease, always on guard” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.149). It is within this framework that peers assess and police boys’ masculinity. Participation in class is risky because every interaction could result in a possible negative gender assessment (West & Zimmerman). Males face constant pressure to prove their masculinity as successful (Kimmel, 1996). Never asking for help at school accomplishes two things: it lessens the anxiety to display hegemony and removes the possibility of displaying further weaknesses in connection to one’s masculinity (Kimmel, 1996).

As an example, Michael was a student who rarely participated in class activities or volunteered his answers in a discussion. He was obese and had poor hygiene habits. He actually smelled foul due to lack of bathing; dandruff was visible on his hair. Other students constantly joked about wanting to spray perfume or air freshener nearby him (ON). Even teachers reported his problem with hygiene to the school counselor and principal (CN). Michael’s lack of proper hygiene and so-called unattractive exterior was not up to par with expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Students harassed, teased, and bullied him relentlessly. This was a form of peer policing. Because Michael’s peers deemed him socially unacceptable, he was considered inadequate. Already excluded as subordinate, Michael did not want to lower the status of his masculinity any further. Like all males, he still desired the acquisition of hegemonic masculinity. Since the odds of this happening were unlikely, Michael tried to appear successful. By resisting participation, including asking for help, there was little interaction with which his peers
could use to label him negatively. It was as if he wanted to be invisible in the classroom. He may have thought that if his peers could not reveal additional weaknesses, they could not consider him a failure. Further, if the absence of failure could be equivalent to automatic success, Michael just might earn some power or dominance. In his eyes, that quite possibly was his only hope of grasping hegemonic masculinity (JN).

Michael did not ask the teacher for assistance; it was his perceived last resort to establishing and maintaining hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps he achieved escape, in the sense that his aloofness made him invisible to some students. However, this could not cover up his visible exterior or odor, which others utilized to label him inadequate. He did not achieve his goal because students refused to accept him, a social outcast (JN). Because proving one’s masculinity involves action (West & Zimmerman, 1987), Michael’s attempt to appear successful by not drawing attention to himself was ineffective. Not asking for or resisting assistance probably had a detrimental impact on Michael’s comprehension of mathematical concepts. Although his intelligence was not low (ON), learning requires asking for clarification when confusion arises; surely, his academic achievement was harmed (JN).

Another issue involved with boys resisting assistance from the teacher is low self-esteem. For a male with low self-esteem, school is “a series of traumas for him, in which he experienced his self-esteem as being attacked daily” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.171). This is especially true of boys who lack academic competence. Each learning event opens the potential for a mistake, followed by negative assessment from peers and teachers (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Peers who observe this display of failure will probably judge their masculinity as unsuccessful (Kimmel,
This impacts a boy’s emotions. Oftentimes a cycle of negativity is born that does not easily go away. “If he starts to hate himself he’ll fall into a hole that he’ll be digging himself out of for the rest of his life” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.166).

As an example, Paul struggled through every math class just to comprehend the basics. It was his first year out of a special education math class and into a mainstream one. Every question, homework, and test was difficult for Paul to complete. He suffered from low self-esteem. His negative view of himself was compounded further when he gave incorrect answers. He kept quiet in class, rarely volunteering answers or asking for help (ON). Like Michael, Paul had weaknesses, regarding masculinity. He made mistakes and he felt inadequate, whether or not peers assessed him as such. His resistance to help was most likely intended to avoid revealing failure to peers. Paul may have thought that avoiding failure would allow him to appear successful and cover over his academic weakness (JN).

Paul resisted teacher help. As a student who had previously been in special education classes, he truly needed that extra assistance. His goal was to cover up his academic weakness with the appearance of success, by means of not interacting or drawing attention to himself. Paul probably achieved his goal with the majority of his peers. Unlike Michael’s obvious exterior cues of weakness, Paul’s weakness was mainly internal. However, the ultimate goal is reaching out to achieve hegemonic masculinity; the problem is that to establish or maintain hegemonic masculinity, proof and action are required (West & Zimmerman, 1987), which Paul failed to display. Resistance to asking for teacher help with academics more than likely had a negative impact on his academic achievement. He struggled with mathematical concepts to start with; not participating in
any aspect of class, including questioning, possibly held him back from gaining a better understanding of the math material (JN).

*Resistance From Males Accepted by Peers.*

A second group of males who oppose help in class possess many traits of hegemonic masculinity. They are well-liked by their peers. One of the expectations of males, along with hegemony, is not to make mistakes. Instead, they are supposed to be successful (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). When two people interact with each other or one person displays a certain behavior, observing peers evaluate the male(s) involved. Through each assessment, the security of a male’s masculinity is at stake. In other words, males are constantly aware of the struggle they have to maintain the status or level of their masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). If the security of a male’s masculinity is in jeopardy, the technique of escape, through avoidance, can be utilized (Kimmel, 1996).

For example, Tyler was popular with male and female peers. He was an athlete, made others laugh, and was very outgoing outside of the classroom. However, during class instruction, he sat very quietly, avoiding teacher and attention and participation. When asked if he had any questions, he usually turned down the opportunity to speak out. He was passive in the classroom, but very outgoing outside of the classroom. Tyler had a less-than-average academic ability in mathematics (ON). His well-established hegemonic masculinity was in danger of being marred by this academic weakness. If he made mistakes in front of their peers, his high gender status would be lowered. By opposing help from the teacher, he escaped or got out of situations where his academic
weakness might be revealed. Opposing help was a technique for him to appear successful, covering the flaw of his masculinity (JN).

Ultimately, Tyler avoided asking for help in order to maintain hegemonic masculinity. For the most part, he achieved his objective. There were a few times, when he was forced to participate an answer aloud to the class, that he did make a mistake. So then Tyler had to reestablish his dominance with regard to masculinity. Because of his low-academic achievement status, Tyler needed further comprehension of mathematical content. Even though he was forced to contribute to class activities, asking questions would have helped him reach full potential in understanding concepts. Opposition to help was probably harmful to Tyler’s education (JN).

Another important issue to teacher help is its connection to femininity. Hegemonic masculinity requires being in control and taking care of oneself. Girls are presumed to be weak, less aggressive, and needier. Therefore, girls are expected to ask a teacher for help (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Femininity is sometimes used to define masculinity; they are oppositional to each other (Kimmel, 2000). The lowest ends of the masculinity hierarchy are associated with femininity (Connell, 2005). It is only reasonable then that males view asking for help as incompatible with hegemonic masculinity (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). If a male does ask for help, it will negatively affect the gender assessment he receives from his peers (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

As an example, Kevin was a student who was on the football team, had many male friends, and was well-liked by the females. Walking around the room, I noticed he frequently missed many problems on daily homework assignments. However, when I
asked the class to speak up and tell me which problems they still needed help with, he
never spoke up. There were even occasions when he would turn around in his desk to ask
the neighboring student a question, but still opposed teacher help (ON). Kevin was used
to positive attention from other students and teachers. He had already achieved
hegemonic masculinity. With a high level of intellectual ability, he easily could have
added insight to class discussion and volunteer answers which are correct. Kevin feared
that his academic strength might hold him back from maintaining his dominant
masculinity. This could happen if he displayed zeal and emotion toward his education.
That is probably why he opposed help. He did not want to appear “nerdy”; this would
link him to feminine characteristics. Observing peers might negatively assess his
behavior, tarnishing his hegemonic masculinity (JN).

The purpose of Kevin opposing help was to avoid an over-abundance of academic
attention. This could ruin his well-established hegemonic masculinity. He was trying to
cover over his eagerness toward education by acting as if he did not really care all that
much about academics. He seemed to maintain the status of his masculinity. Ironically,
he may not have realized that maintaining his scholarly status would be very unlikely
because he opposed help and was not fully participating in class. His resistance to help
may have lowered his academic achievement; it probably kept him from reaching his full
potential (JN).

Most boys try to reinforce or acquire hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).
These males tried to appear successful by the absence of effort and emotion. They were
opposed to teacher help, with the purpose of hiding their weakness, whether it was a lack
or eagerness toward academic competence (JN). This brings to mind homophobia, which
is described as “the fear of other men-that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, are not real men” (Kimmel, 1996, p.8). They were worried their peers would discover a hidden weakness of their masculinity. Only the male students who had already established hegemonic masculinity were able to claim that dominant position; they did not constantly maintain that position. The male students whose masculinity originated in a position of subordination were never able to achieve hegemonic masculinity. For both groups of male students, peers were able to see through the appearance of success to real and present weaknesses which were a part of their identities. Furthermore, help is a crucial piece to a male’s education. Opposition to help had an injurious affect on these boys’ academic achievement. Their attempts to cover over weaknesses usually did not work.

Male Students as Over-Achievers

Two specific questions come to mind when considering the notion of academic achievement:

1. How does it impact the way males and females perceive them?

2. If this compromises hegemonic masculinity, why do the boys continue pursuit?

“Achieve” is defined “to gain by work or effort” (“Merriam-Webster”, 1994, p.24). Data from this study reveals that boys often try to appear confident. Author Michael Kimmel explains that when boys hit adolescence they gain more academic confidence because they “learn that they are supposed to be in power, and thus begin to act like it” (Kimmel, 2000, p.161). However this confidence is actually over-confidence; these boys overvalue their academic ability (Kimmel, 2000). There were specific behaviors identified that
boys displayed in efforts to make others believe they are successful, but also weaknesses that they were trying to cover up with these behaviors.

Male students who have academic success appear confident. Paul Kivel’s findings are that Western society pressures males to be free of mistakes and in-control (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Every action is judged by observing peers. Therefore, boys often think before they act, in regards to how other males will assess their masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Most males aspire either to establish or maintain hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2000). In this way, behavior is controlled according to accountability (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The boys in this investigation construct an image of how they want others to view them. This image is often based on privilege that boys utilize to establish power and a masculine sense of self. Two specific methods related to achievement that boys utilized to demonstrate this privilege include competition and responsibility (JN).

*Academic Achievement and Competition.*

There are boys who have greater intellectual skill than their peers. Some have to work very hard for this, while others are born with ability (JN). Gender is something one does; it happens constantly in interaction with others. Males are pressured to prove their masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In society, boys seem to be the favored gender (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). A male has a position of privilege and power, which gives him dominance over the female (Kimmel, 2000). Connected to this, boys expect to get attention. Girls vie for attention too, but it is perceived as illegitimate behavior. As the teacher described it in the referral form, the girl is “demanding attention.” The prevailing cultural framework denies her the rights for dramatic public display. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.116)
So when boys demand attention, observing peers perceive it as normal and natural, a display of dominance. Dominance is a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2000). To get attention, male students tend to be in one of two categories: academically successful or a classroom disturbance. “The starring roles of hero and villain are usually reserved for the boys” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.183). Oftentimes for boys with achievement in education, they display competitiveness. Since America’s beginning, males have strived to acquire dominance, not just compared to females but to other males. “Society was chock full of equals—which is another way of saying it was full of competitors” (Kimmel, 1996, p.44). Boys compete for teacher attention.

Boys start by raising their hands, but if the teacher does not call on them, the more assertive literally call on themselves, shouting out the answers, sometimes even interrupting the teacher midsentence. But not every boy can be at the head of the class. Only a few rise to the very top. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.184)

Because of this pressure to compete and prove themselves the best, males feel frustration and despair (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Behavior is not only assessed to establish but also to preserve it. Therefore, academically successful males, if they already possess hegemonic masculinity, have to actively maintain their current masculinity status (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

As an example, Steven proudly completed all homework assignments and passed his tests with high scores in mathematics. Every question I asked his hand would quickly fly up into the air. If I did not call on him, he said it was unfair of me. Steven also expressed disgust against the other student whom I did choose to answer the question; this aggression was stronger against male peers than female peers. More than a few times, he would seem annoyed with waiting for me to call on him, with his hand raised;
he would impatiently yell reveal the answer to the class. Once he earned a “B” letter grade on a test; he expressed so much anger for receiving less than an “A” letter grade. Steven even bragged about the excellence of his achievements. He was rewarded with honors such as Student of the Month and invitation to the annual Academic Luncheon (ON).

Steven displayed aggression, competitiveness, pride, and arrogance. These are all characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. To keep up his successful sense of masculinity, he had to remain one of the best students in the class, academically. In accord with this, he behaved out of desperation. He was territorial against any other male who would take the glory of answering a question instead of him. He directed anger toward the teacher who dared to neglect his so-called privilege to unveil solutions. He most likely wanted to show off his scholarly talent; again, he needed to sustain his level of masculinity among his observing peers. It probably was not enough for Steven to solve problems because active construction of one’s masculinity involves action; no one could assess his behavior and masculinity if he did not actively participate. This relates to his arrogance. His pride possibly fueled Steven so he could be an advocate for himself, maintaining his masculinity. Arrogance and aggression made him very competitive in class. This is why he was so mad to earn that low test grade. Other male students, in comparison, would love to receive a “B” because that is a successful, passing score. However, Steven competitively could not accept this grade as success; it was lower than the best grade of an “A”. Anything below the best was probably failure, in his eyes. That could have been detrimental if other males judged him as less dominant, subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (JN).
With both arrogance and anxiety, Steven appeared confident. He was somewhat confident because his intelligence gave him the feeling of dominance over others with less academic ability. It was as if his intellectual edge gave him membership into an elite group of boys. He probably felt strong, whereas he viewed the rest of the boys as wimpy. On the other hand, at times Steven became frustrated, pressured to keep up this scholarly success, constantly worrying that he might make mistakes or fail to prove his dominance enough to his observing peers. In this way, he was constantly nervous, feeling accountable with his behavior in class. Steven more than likely maintained hegemonic masculinity, portraying many dominant traits of masculinity. However, his zealous concern toward achieving and education may have frequently earned him negative gender assessment or the label “nerd”; he had to work hard to display dominance while also appearing cool and in-control. I believe his competitive nature sometimes crossed the line into obsessive, out-of-control behavior. Steven’s enthusiasm was beneficial to his academic achievement. His objective was to listen, learn, and participate in class; this no doubt continually increased his potential to successfully comprehend mathematical concepts (JN).

*Academic Achievement and Responsibility.*

Another group of boys who achieve success in education are modest with their pride. Society has a civilized expectation of men. Although boys are often active and independent, schools require them to be quiet and conforming. “In an uneasy compromise, many walk a tightrope between compliance and rebellion. To keep the balance, schools go the extra mile for males and give them more resources and attention” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.183). Teachers look to outstanding male
students with high expectations, confident that they one day successfully contribute to the community or lead the nation. Boys face two options: to support or fight the systems that run society (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.185). There exists an argument that

the world since the Enlightenment, a ‘civil society’ has been established. Men now rule not as fathers but as brothers, able to compete with one another, but presenting a united front against those outside the group. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.81)

This civil society is a way of life and a set of rules which teachers and schooling try to impress upon all male students from kindergarten through high school. It “redefines the brawling and feuding long seen as essential characteristics of masculinity as deviant, even criminal” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.81). School aims indirectly to teach boys that adult aggression is only necessary in recreation and sport; the exception to this is police or military careers. There occurs a contest in the classroom between two opposing ideas of masculinity: that of violence being acceptable, justified and that of civil traits. Civil traits revolve around themes of rationality and responsibility. Thus a masculinity of rationality, responsibility, and maturity is encouraged (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Examples of this mature masculinity include “male as responsible citizen, producer and consumer who keeps the capitalist system going, the breadwinner, and caring father” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.90). Also involved here is the idea of “separation of spheres”, which Michael Kimmel (1996) describes as the two different functions that home and public play in a male’s life; work in the public sphere is harsh and busy, whereas domestic arrangements of the home sphere are meant for his relaxation (p.52). So males can express violent types of characteristics such as
aggression and competition, as long as it stays within their private life, during their spare time. Within the public part of their life, at work or at school, they must display self-control and compliance.

Boys who aspire to become one of the brothers who wield power in the public world of civil society ultimately realize that conformity to rationality and responsibility, to the demands of the school, is the price they must pay. (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.90)

One might think that a male who is willing to comply cannot have hegemony in regards to his masculinity. However, R.W. Connell’s (2005) term “complicity” describes how a male can associate with hegemony, without completely embodying hegemonic masculinity (p.79). It is similar to the difference between males who are playing out on the football field versus males who cheer football games on TV. There are elements, changes in a male’s life that involve compromises within his masculinity; marriage and fatherhood are situations where a male more than likely negotiate his forceful dominance because of his wife and children (Connell, 2005).

An example of compromising hegemonic masculinity for one of responsibility is Kyle. He was a quiet student in the advanced mathematics class. He always had his assignments finished, paid attention in class no matter what distractions existed, cooperated with teachers, and participated in every class activity. Once, when another student, Greg, did not have his homework completed for the whole week straight, Kyle rolled his eyes to express disapproval of the immaturity. Another interesting aspect of Kyle was that he earned “A” grades but did not volunteer to answer every time a question was raised by the teacher. Similar to Steven, Kyle displayed frustration when he received a letter grade lower than an “A”. In contrast to Steven’s outspoken arrogance, Kyle
humbly helped fellow peers to comprehend math concepts. The exception to this was his disregard to students who showed academic apathy (ON). Kyle portrayed many characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. His academic success meant that he rarely made mistakes. He was also in a position of dominance because his intelligence gave him membership into a privileged group of students labeled “smart.” When there was any sort of scholarly challenge between him and another student, he held his own because he had pride, competitiveness, and self-control. For the majority of the time, observing peers could not see qualities that caused negative gender assessment of Kyle. The problem, with regard to hegemony, was Kyle’s compromise. He appeared to be well-trained in displaying masculinity of rationality and responsibility. This can be seen in his submission to teachers, when he did not join in with or initiate class disturbance. Kyle also had a passive personality, not aggressively trying to volunteer every answer or disrespectfully interrupt the teacher. He did not appear to need attention, as did Steven. Rather, he probably had intrinsic motivation. His objective was to attain a mature, civilized masculinity in comparison to what youths deem as masculine. He did not actively threaten his peers with his academic talent, but he did not actively reinforce his level of masculinity much at all (JN). Both girls and boys did not seem threatened by his academic talent. This group of boys is proud in a modest manner; they take charge of their education and are confident that this will build a foundation to ensure success with their future (JN).

Kyle tried to always portray confidence. He no doubt believed that he could someday become one of “the brothers” (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007, p.81). who make an impact on and are in charge of society. Even if his adolescent peers did not see
him display hegemony enough to assess his gender positively, he seemed to still have
faith in the education system, always trying to gain further mathematical knowledge and
excel academically. I do not think Kyle attained hegemonic masculinity because he
lacked cutthroat competition and aggression. There still existed many masculinities
subordinate to his; he was still in a position of dominance, to some degree. Although he
probably cared about others’ opinions of himself, as do all males, he was very aware of
and concerned with building a solid foundation to ensure future, lasting success. Thus,
Kyle, whether given positive or negative gender judgment, doubtlessly kept striving
toward academic achievement (JN).

Male students who are over-achievers display pride (JN). The concept of
reputation comes to mind because these boys tend to have a high-status masculinity and
they fear being discovered as weak in others’ eyes (Kimmel, 1996). Thus, they face an
unremitting test, to keep trying to portray behavior that proves their academic dominance
(as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). There is stress every day that peers will uncover
some sort of scholastic failure. Their masculinity is based on being in control and not
making mistakes, so every test, every vocalized answer, every report card brings that fear
to reality. The potential failure is embarrassing. The downside is that they are so
engrossed in their educational success that peers possibly assign them to a masculinity
which is subordinate to hegemonic masculinity. However, the benefit of their intellectual
confidence is that it encourages academic achievement (JN).

Male students as transgressors, male students as resistors, and male students as
over-achievers were the three main themes of this investigation. These themes explore
the role of masculinity in the school setting, in order to obtain advanced insight into male
students. Of the boys studied, displayed behaviors in attempt to hide weaknesses and their peers’ reactions will be analyzed. This data will be used to form conclusions about how boys’ efforts to establish and maintain hegemonic masculinity effect their academic achievement. Then corroborating suggestions will be arranged for teachers and administrators, including techniques that promote sensitivity to the adversity boys face in school.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Summary

This study examined the role of masculinity in middle school boys in effort to gain insight into male students. Masculinity is an active progression, shaped by social means such as contact with others and communications within institutions (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). The formation of one’s masculinity is influenced by dominant ideas of society (Kimmel, 2006). This creates a situation prevalent in school with adolescents: boys are constantly alert, pressured to achieve hegemonic masculinity and prove it to observers (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Ultimately, the objective of this investigation was to gain an increased understanding about middle school masculinities in order to create suggestions which might help teachers better understand their male students.

Qualitative methods were used to study the ways in which masculinity played out in the classroom and what that means for boys and schooling. This study is an autoethnography that utilized recollections of classroom interactions, conversations with colleagues and other school employees. The patterns that emerged revolved around the ways in which boys act as transgressors, resistors, or achievers. These are topics that have a bearing on achievement and are common sights in the classroom.
The findings of this investigation revealed inconsistency within males’ display of and reaction to masculinity. Some forms of masculinity were helpful to learning while others were barriers to learning. Consistent with past research, all the boys in this study were influenced by the pressure of establishing and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. “Hegemonic masculinity” is defined as “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell, 2005, p.76). The variety of masculinities is arranged in a hierarchy; hegemonic masculinity is dominant, leaving all other masculinities subordinate (Kimmel, 2000).

Assessment of their masculinity was performed by their peers, who watch their every move. The male students purposely behaved in such a way that they would appear to possess society’s dominant traits of masculinity. These displayed behaviors, intended to prove their masculinity, were also meant to cover up their weaknesses. The boys were afraid that their peers would discover their shortcomings, earning them a negative gender assessment, masculinity subordinate to hegemonic masculinity.

Boys who were transgressors interrupted the normal flow of class learning. They behaved so as to appear confident and in control. Some excluded others or challenged authority to force themselves into a position of dominance in relation to those they subordinated. They did this to achieve hegemony with regard to masculinity. Their manifestation of power also hid their weaknesses because perceived failure could put their chances of earning high-status masculinity in jeopardy. Weaknesses included academic mistakes and insecurity in their personal life. They put so much effort and concern toward establishing hegemonic masculinity that they invested little of themselves into their learning in the classroom; this harmed their academic achievement.
A similar group of boys who resisted help acted with accountability: they avoided educational action and drawing attention to themselves because they knew that others would judge their masculinity. They tried to appear successful by not letting others see their failure. The nonchalance was intended to overshadow their lack of achievement with personal and academic matters. The objective, by means of resisting help, was either to establish or maintain hegemonic masculinity. Boys who had already attained hegemonic masculinity would sometimes make mistakes in front of their peers; their masculinity was injured, but they usually earned it back. Boys who were assessed as subordinate, in terms of masculinity, never established hegemony. However, all males who resisted help in class were their own enemy, academically. Their mental focus and physical energy is by and large spent trying to impress others versus humbly asking for help. Therefore, endeavoring to comprehend scholarly concepts and achieve academically is all but lost. This is no doubt devastating to these boys’ chance of learning and, in turn, their education.

A third group of boys, those who are academically successful, want to appear confident. They assert dominance over other males, with the goal of achieving and maintaining hegemonic masculinity. They face the constant stress of reaffirming their success, but the risk of making mistakes is ever-present. Males as over-achievers have one critical difference between them and the other males: although pressured by their peers’ gender assessment, they are not enslaved to attaining hegemony. Rather, these male students are also motivated by principles of competition and responsibility. These are variations of masculinity, connected to hegemony, which compromise dominance. Ultimately, these boys want to achieve academic excellence for the sake of their pride.
and a successful future, even if it means giving up hegemonic masculinity. They strive for further academic achievement. They participate whole-heartedly in their own education. Although this involves pleasing observing peers, it simultaneously encourages helpful learning techniques. This supports and increases their scholarly accomplishment.

This investigation also revealed how peer adolescents viewed males in connection to masculinity. The data brought to light that some males were admired and others were disliked. There were also differences between how male peers and female peers perceive these boys. Boys who utilized transgression in efforts to establish hegemonic masculinity gained attention from both boys and girls. For the majority, boy observers approved the behavior, even encouraging and cheering them on. The exception was extreme rebellion, where a few peers expressed silent or verbal dissatisfaction. Most girls liked the comedy provided by light-hearted transgression, but they were disgusted by bullying and medium to extreme cases of insubordination. Through the evaluative eyes of peers, boys with mild transgression were likely to achieve hegemony, but boys with extreme cases of class disruption were not likely to gain that position of dominance. Boys who resisted participation in education worked hard to evade attention from peers altogether. Tactics used to avoid academic involvement often resulted in eccentric behavior; this drew negative attention to these students. The majority of both boys and girls disapproved of these males. It was unlikely that they would acquire hegemonic masculinity; rather they were assigned to another subordinate form of masculinity. Thus, fellow students disliked or never attempted getting to know them. The final group of boys studied in this investigation was over-achievers in the scholarly sense. Although some peers disliked their professed superiority, both male and female peers positively noted these boys’
dominant characteristics of competition and success. A few peers even viewed their assistance with difficult academic concepts as a benefit. In this way, hegemonic masculinity was highly attainable through their peers’ assessment. The only exception to this was that these males could be overly enthusiastic toward education, a characteristic that could result in negative gender judgement of being too sensitive.

Discussion

R.W. Connell referred to a hierarchy of masculinities, where one reigns dominant and the others are subordinate (Connell, 2005). All males who fall short of this leading definition of masculinity are expected to work toward its traits (Kimmel, 2000). Male students are separated into two groups: those at the top of the class and those at the bottom. Everyone knows that only a few can fit into the head of the class (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Findings of this investigation discovered that boys with academic success competitively continued striving to produce correct answers; they seemed to possess arrogance as if their responsibility was to respond to all the teacher’s questions. These males were the students always volunteering in class, expecting recognition from teachers and feeling privileged. On the other end of the spectrum, this study found that boys who did not achieve academic success avoided answering questions; some showed abhorrence to education and authority altogether. Because they felt too academically incompetent to compete, they stepped aside for the “successful” students to fuel the class with participation and responses.

Gender is something one does; academic participation is one form of this. Males feel pressured to prove their masculinity in front of peers, and it carries with it the incentive of earning a positive gender assessment: hegemonic masculinity (West &
Zimmerman, 1987). This is where competitiveness plays a role. Since America’s beginning, males have strived to acquire dominance, not just compared to females but to other males. “Society was chock full of equals—which is another way of saying it was full of competitors” (Kimmel, 1996, p.44). This competition can be seen in the classroom, with academics:

Boys start by raising their hands, but if the teacher does not call on them, the more assertive literally call on themselves, shouting out the answers, sometimes even interrupting the teacher midsentence. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.184)

As seen from this excerpt, pressure to compete and prove themselves the best can motivate males to participate zealously in the learning process. This would no doubt increase academic achievement for all students.

Academically successful males possess or at least display confidence and dominance in efforts to maintain their current masculinity status. They are competitive. In contrast, academically resistant males withdraw from class participation, lacking confidence. They possibly have no desire to compete because they feel no possibility to overpower or succeed, in comparison to the egotistical, domineering over-achievers.

For both groups to work toward academic achievement there must be an equalizing of the disparity between these two groups. Healthy competition can be an asset in the classroom, increasing academic achievement, if all males participate. A recommendation is to incorporate a system of randomly calling on students. If students see that everyone contributes, the concept of volunteering will not be a variable. The extremely competitive nature of over-confident males who show off their intelligence will lesson. Also, the opportunities of apathetic males who escape from participation will
diminish. Realistically, pressure to increase masculinity status cannot be eradicated, but it can be lessened. If this plan is used from the beginning of the school year and on a consistent basis, cooperation will multiply and competition will shrink. Ultimately, the goal is for all students to partake of the power struggle of masculinity: to achieve and maintain hegemonic masculinity. This way, time and energy will be spent on academics as a byproduct of competition, which in turn allows for increased achievement.

Aspects of gender have an effect on every interaction, but the outcome of every interaction is likewise assessed, resulting in how others characterize someone. Thus, a male displays behavior, with regard to what his peers will view and how they will judge his masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Demonstrating one’s own masculinity revolves around competition. A boy can assert his own masculinity by being in opposition to males less masculine than him or females who are the reverse of masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). It is no wonder that this study revealed issues of ego, power, escape, and exclusion. Males yearn to achieve and prove their masculinity in the view of onlookers; this priority takes much time and attention during class instruction. It also causes arguments and physical altercations between boys fighting to figure out who is more masculine. For males to focus on educational accomplishments their attention must be redirected. A suggestion is to implement a classroom management plan that addresses the issues of masculinity while being sensitive to male students. Although each administrator and teacher has freedom to create their own style of discipline, a few points of advice must be considered as part of this management plan. Most masculinities are subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2000). Thus, many male adolescents suffer from feelings of inadequacy. This can lead a boy to feeling bad about himself;
those feelings can transform into negativity and defiant behavior (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). When boys’ emotional energy is channeled into action, they often get loud and physical. However, if the emotions are painful and transgression begins, such as can happen with low self-esteem, normal expressions of energy meet with negative responses from the teacher. Like a “pressure cooker”, this just builds more emotional pressure. If they are unable to verbalize their feelings, which most boys do not, the cycle of further negativity between student and teacher continues (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.173). The repercussions of such negativity are surely harmful to a boy’s academic achievement. As authors Kindlon and Thompson put it, “if he starts to hate himself he’ll fall into a hole that he’ll be digging himself out of for the rest of his life” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.166).

In addition to potential self-esteem, boys may face biased treatment with regard to class management. Although many would claim that boys are the favored gender, statistics show that both girls and boys are shortchanged in education (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). For example, a typical strategy for classroom management is yelling. Kindlon & Thompson explained,

The assumption is that yelling helps, especially in communicating dissatisfaction to boys, and that boys don’t suffer from it as much as girls might; Boys typically don’t show that they suffer from yelling because being a boy requires that they not show it. But it hurts. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.159).

Teachers discipline males more harshly than females, mistake a rebellious male as “a wild animal-out of control and incapable of responsible behavior or intelligent thought” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.167).
The trouble with this boy-view in classroom management philosophy is that if teachers are set up by our deepest assumptions to view a boy’s energy and activity as ‘wild’ and threatening, then we feel justified in responding with harsh action, correcting or reprimanding him more than necessary, or becoming ferociously controlling and determined to ‘whip him into shape.’ (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.159)

This often results in further transgression from the male student because his response will be one of confrontation rather than be controlled by the teacher (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002).

A further problem of gender bias against boys is the learning environment itself. Teachers work to train students to adapt to and become a part of a civilized place, readying them for adult life in society. According to Kindlon and Thompson, this type of environment “seems rigged against boys, against the higher activity level and lower level of impulse control that is normal for boys” (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.155). The feminized nature of school looks down on this type of behavior. Therefore, the very essence of males goes unappreciated, their assets seen as liabilities. This discrimination affects boys academically and emotionally. Males feel they are not good enough, as if they are failures (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002). Kindlon & Thompson found that

Today many boys face a steady diet of shame and anxiety throughout their elementary school years. From it they learn only to feel bad about themselves and to hate the place that makes them feel that way. (as cited in “Gender in Education,” 2002, p.157)

Discipline should involve showing care and sympathy for the boy. Outbursts of anger about them, embarrassing or berating their character, disciplining in front of peers, and statements that lower his worth as a person need to be avoided just for the purpose of making him civilized. Teachers must try to understand the underlying problem,
addressing the male as a student who needs redirection, rather than a beast who needs to be tamed. Teachers could and should also try to be a good role model for students; they can show behavior and reasoning that is acceptable, instead of only pointing out what is unacceptable. In this way, the cycle of negativity and low self-esteem can be broken, allowing for a positive attitude and larger potential to achieve academically. It is not that males should not be disciplined, but that their self-esteem, with relation to their gender and masculinity, ought not to be demolished.

Males also need to feel independence rather than relying on another for assistance. They want to be in control. This is not to say that boys should be allowed to demand control, but that the teacher ought to realize the boy will probably act defensively. If transgression occurs, power is already shifting from adult to adolescent; further threatening from the adult is simply another challenge that the student cannot back down from or suddenly act passively (as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2007). Discipline should not make a male student feel “boxed into a corner” because he will see it as a challenge to rebel even further. Examples of this are demanding he do something, ultimatum type comments, or presenting consequences as if he is awful and deserves to suffer. Punishments ought to be discussed before transgression occurs; consistent follow through with these will serve as a preventative measure for the other students, reminding them of the reality. Too, when consequences are necessary, they should be presented without words of anger or hatred, but simply as the reaction end of a cause and effect situation.
Beyond Hegemonic Masculinity

The journey of writing this thesis on masculinity has opened my eyes, as a teacher, to the specific needs of males and their drive to establish and maintain hegemonic masculinity. Previous to this study, I was ignorant to issues males face that relate to masculinity. I thought males were cold and uncaring. When they misbehaved, I thought I needed to yell to “whip them into shape”. I believed the problem of transgression and apathy in school was that of boys, nothing I could alter. My uninformed feminine outlook held me back from understanding dynamics of males’ construction of their gender. Now with this knowledge, I feel that I will have a better sense of the social pressure and anxiety males deal with. As a teacher, this has made a difference in my life. I am aware that males are typically engrossed in establishing or maintaining hegemonic masculinity. To do this, they are constantly behaving for their peers to observe them, according to how they want to be viewed. Gaining dominance and power is an endless striving for males; it tends to take priority over other aspects of their lives, even academic success. I realize that aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as competition and exclusion play a role in the arena of education; there are some circumstances when I can work with these instead of fighting against them, to increase academic participation. In this way, I can use masculinity to my advantage, as the teacher, to guide all students toward increased academic achievement.

To understand the elements of construction of gender is one thing, but to point out gender inequality and elements of privilege and dominance goes a step further in the right direction. As a teacher, there are impromptu moments that occur in the middle of class instruction; they are not written down in the lesson plans but they are invaluable,
nonetheless. All students, no matter what gender or level of masculinity status they possess, can and should be helped to understand these gender politics issues of power and dominance, beyond the surface level. When a male student raises his hand to answer a question, and eagerness turns to bullying, that is a moment that I can take advantage of; fighting my own urge to quiet him by calling on him to answer, I can challenge feelings of privilege. When a homosexual male student is given a rude, oppressive comment from another male, that is another moment I can take advantage of; instead of ignoring the typical “boys will be boys” harsh peer policing, I can challenge the principles of exclusion and subordination. When a male student says sexually-natured things to a female student, that provides yet another moment I can take advantage of; rather than a simple scolding to the boy, I can challenge the oppressive aspect of homosocial bonding. When students are put down and treated lowly because other students feel superior to put them in that position, inequality of gender continues and boys and girls believe that exaggerated gender differences are reality. My favorite teaching technique is one of inquiry. To challenge entrenched student gender and masculinity beliefs, I would hold back scolding and yelling. I would ask questions: Why cannot Todd answer the question?; Is Jim less of a person than you are?; Are we not all special here?; Why cannot you tell a joke that we all could laugh along with? Then I think issues of hatred tied to power should be lightly addressed, on frequent occasions, such as Hitler. There are people who thought their actions were justified, yet they were blinded to murder with no regret. I could even try a test on the classes without telling them until afterward; I could call on girls more than boys. Upon hearing complaints, there could be a class discussion on bias and how today there is bias that is invisible. This would open students’ minds to
power and inequality and the idea that it can be dangerous when inequality exists and nobody even notices the imbalance. As a teacher, my job is to help students to become society members who can contribute to the community. Certainly, exposing potentially harmful elements of social structure needs to be included in this objective. I want to do my part to help these students, boy and girls, to become confident adults.

As a mother, my awakening to masculinity means so much to me. If I understand what my son is going through, he may be more open to discuss his frustrations with me. I can celebrate his personal and academic accomplishments, along life’s way, with him, knowing that he has had many social obstacles to work through to reach that point. Overall, I can be more empathetic to my son and his struggles; the school environment will no doubt be a large portion of this, as masculinity is constructed on a daily basis within this institution. Ultimately, I want to help him be a happy and competent young man. My love for my child is not any bigger, due to this thesis, but my ability to have the tools to actively demonstrate that love has grown.

Putting together the love of my son with my sincere interest to help students, the idea of what I eventually would like to see, regarding masculinity, comes to mind. I can utilize aspects of hegemonic masculinity to increase student academic achievement. I can also reveal the unfair and unequal dynamics of power within hegemonic masculinity to my students, using inquiry and discussion. There is still something quite concerning about this. Are the social structures of this country so rigid that hegemonic masculinity, as it stands today must be accepted? Is the only answer to gender inequality awareness followed by accommodation for male students? Is there a step beyond helping students
cope, understand, and dismantle the elements of masculinity? What lies beyond hegemonic masculinity?

So many problems arise in the school arena from transgression, resistance, and over-achieving. These themes are all linked to hegemonic masculinity and the constant striving to achieve it. Hegemonic masculinity is a power structure that is controlling, and the results tend to be detrimental to increased academic achievement for students. Schools and teachers are in a position to address this problem. It must be addressed in order for there to be opportunity for change, in regards to the matter of hegemonic masculinity. Today’s leading masculinity is characterized by power, over-confidence, pride, aggression, and competition; it encourages participation in sports, work, and recreation and a lack thereof in emotional intimacy with women or childcare. One way to address this is for schools to hold a series of staff meetings, presenting issues of and related to masculinity. Just as my biased ideas of ignorance were revealed and my eyes were opened, teachers and administrators need to be made aware of hegemonic masculinity, the construction of gender, inequality, and dominance. Once teachers know about hegemonic masculinity, they can challenge gender bias and inequality and power within students, on a case-by-case basis.

Another way to go beyond hegemonic masculinity is to challenge the present traits of hegemonic masculinity. Schools could hold a series of assemblies where guest speakers, males and females, adults and high schoolers, portray a variety of non-leading masculinities and femininities, showcasing in what way they have achieved some level of success, despite its subordination. If students are exposed to people who are confident and happy in a manner besides what others expect and assume, they will be more open to
non-traditional forms of gender. If gender freedom is an option for students, they may begin to behave according to who they truly want to become, rather than who they feel pressured by others to become. As an example, a boy student may be impressed by seeing a male guest speaker who is a stay-at-home daddy with a wife who works full-time; someday, the boy himself may have a family of his own and actively do laundry, grocery shopping, and bathe and diaper the children. The more that rigid structures of hegemonic masculinity can be questioned and challenged, the more that they can be altered. At least boys can be willing to step outside the boundaries of what others deem as socially acceptable.

Suggestions for Further Research

Including teachers’, administrators’, and students’ viewpoints and experiences would be an interesting avenue for future research. It would also be beneficial to have studies which collect other forms of data, such as interviews, to add depth to the understanding. It would be revealing to find out how teachers treat academically successful versus academically non-successful male students. Boys’ education could also benefit from results of how administrators manage behavior, both positive and negative, of males, based on their forms of masculinity. Student insight could help expose biases that exist which school staff members do not even realize or admit.

Another opportunity to gain further insight into males and masculinity is to investigate male students who are athletes on school or community sports teams. Athletes tend to typify the hegemonic definition of masculinity, yet there are probably specific dynamics for and differences within this group of boys regarding masculinity. The research could look into what constructing one’s gender involves specifically within
the team in areas such as practices, games, and pep rallies. Additionally, individual players ought to be investigated outside of the game atmosphere.

Conclusion

Certain forms of masculinity, such as rebellion, are barriers to learning. Other forms of masculinity, such as scholarly over-achieving, support academic achievement. Additionally, while this norm supports academic achievement, it does not support the acquisition of the hegemonic norm. This inequality among boys in school does not lead to an equal opportunity for them to earn an education. In turn, male adolescents’ chances of graduation from high school and future career are uncertain and could be in danger.

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) describe gender as an action that is accomplished routinely in everyday interaction. It is something that one achieves. Thus, boys constantly focus on social elements, others’ behavior, and their own behavior. This focus cannot be removed; it is a natural aspect of growing up to be a man and even continues in adulthood. Therefore, because establishing one’s masculinity impacts his education, for better or worse, there must be understanding. Teachers, administrators, and other school staff members need to become aware of the role that masculinity plays in the education of male students. Schools could lesson males’ social focus by employing techniques which are sensitive to masculinity in efforts to improve their focus on academics. The problem cannot be ignored; preferably it can be understood and appreciated, giving boys the prescriptive solution they deserve and need.
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