The Minds of Boys – Book Review

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Media: Image & Influence
Dr. Considine
Introduction:

In one of the most recent new undertakings in education, researchers are beginning to explore the difference in the way boys and girls learn. Most educators and parents alike have always noticed notable differences in the way our boys and girls develop during their childhood, but have we ever paused to think about the way in which their intelligence develops and what impact this has inside the classroom? If we could prove that new research on the brain shows significant differences in the way that boys and girls learn, what sort of implications could this possibly have on the way we continue to educate our youth? If it is true that boys and girls learn in different ways from one another that is more suitable for each gender, what does this mean for our society? In the book *The Minds of Boys*, by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, the authors show how new brain research proves that boys and girls learn differently and how the current system is not suitable for boys needs. The book offers great advice for educators and parents on proper ways to teach boys in hopes of keeping fewer young men from falling behind in both schools and in life. I think this book provides us with a great opportunity for relating the material within this research to the concepts of media literacy.

Overview:

One of the main aspects of the book’s introduction that I found really interesting was the statistics presented about boys in schools. Some of the statistics that were alarming included:

- Boys make up 80 percent of our discipline problems.
- Of children diagnosed with learning disabilities, 70 percent are boys.
- Over 80 percent of schoolchildren on Ritalin or similar drugs are boys.
- Of high school dropouts, 80 percent are young males.
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, our sons are an average of a year to a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing skills.
- Of children diagnosed with learning disabilities, 70 percent are boys.
- Boys get the majority of D’s and F’s in most schools – in some, as high as 70 percent.

Gurian titled the first chapter as “The Current Crisis” and after reading over these statistics, it is obvious why he chose this chapter’s title. I was shocked while reading over these figures and I kept thinking to myself “this is simply unacceptable”. I wondered how we could let this sort of thing happen and continue within our schools without coming up with some sort of solution to correct this “current crisis”. I used to fit into one of the statistics presented in this chapter as I too used to be a young boy that was diagnosed with a learning disability, and doctors persuaded my parents to put me on a medication called Adderall. The drug was used to “calm me down” as I was labeled as a student that could not focus on sitting in a desk to do school work. My body and my mind insisted that I be an activity based learner free to move around, but the school system required for me to be bound to a chair and desk while paying attention to a teacher at the front of the class. For many students this was an ideal setting, but it simply did not work the same way for me, and so doctors gave me medication in hopes of making my body and mind conform to the system we have set in place.

I obviously was not the only one with this problem as many other boys around our nation’s schools were also forced to take medication in hopes of conforming to our current educational system. Gurian, like myself, questions the way in which we currently teach our boys. Does the current system offer effective ways for boys to learn and be
successful without being seen as a problem? Does the system cater more to the needs of girls than boys, and if so, are we doing anything to offer alternative ways for boys to be on the same level? This is a few of the questions and issues that Gurian and Stevens address within the chapters of this book.

The format of the book provides instructional methods for both educators and parents to provide effective teaching strategies that will benefit boys. The authors give the reader helpful teaching advice that benefits boys by showing you effective learning strategies that are designed with boys in mind. From “providing a boy-friendly learning environment” to the importance and success of “single-gender classes”, the authors provide important steps and strategies that you, the reader, can benefit from in trying to help boys succeed in both the classroom and in their personal lives.

**Relationship to Media Literacy:**

As outlined in *Visual Messages* by David Considine and Gail Haley, media literacy has three key purposes, and these three purposes can certainly be related to *The Minds of Boys*. While reading this book, I attempted to relate the material to the three purposes of media literacy that include preparation, protection, and pleasure.

The first purpose of media literacy is that of preparation. The aim of preparation is to help people learn how to critically analyze and evaluate information. In a sense we are trying to “prepare” our future generations to be cognizant and critical of the world around them. Gurian also uses preparation as a means for motivating parents and educators to step up to the challenge of helping our boys to succeed in schools. One of the effective ways in which Gurian grabs the reader’s attention is by using statistical data
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*The Minds of Boys*

... to defend his arguments. In the first chapter titled “The Current Crisis”, Gurian gives facts about the differences between the academic performance of boys and girls, and he gives an account of a Canadian achievement assessment that was performed in 1993 where it stated that “there were significant differences between males and females in writing achievement”. He also went on to state additional statistics that showed boys to be a year to a year-and-a-half behind girls in reading and writing as well as other academics subjects. Gurian also pointed out that “interestingly, most of the significant findings in Canada, Australia, and England were not reported by the U.S. press”. I think most of us would agree that this is a problem and it is important for the American public to know about where our children stand in terms of their education and what ways we can go about helping them when problems arise. We should hold our media accountable for choosing to not to inform our public of these sorts of stories. If it was important to the people of these other countries, I would suspect that it would be just as, if not more important in our own country. Part of the preparation purpose of media literacy is being able to recognize ways in which to make beneficial changes in order to provide a more fulfilling life for our future generations. It is an obligation that we must hold dear to our hearts, especially in terms of effective education for all of our children.

When looking at the purpose of protection, we can certainly relate this purpose to many of the recommendations in *The Minds of Boys*. Gurian gives the reader many recommendations on ways to help boys learn and improve their current situation in schools. He views this as a way of protecting boys in the school system as well as in their personal lives. He points out that when boys fail, and begin to drop out of school, many times they turn to negative influences that may shape the rest of their lives. These
negative influences may include violence and substance abuse, as well as many others.

Part of wanting to help boys (as well as all children) succeed in schools is to give them a sense of purpose and belonging in knowing that they can succeed and thrive in their personal lives. One of my biggest complaints toward schools that teach children is when they begin to segregate children who are not performing at the same level as other children. It is almost as if these children have been “cast off” from the rest of their peers, and when this happens those children who are segregated from their classmates begin to feel bad about their self and they no longer regard themselves as being a normal child. I personally know how this feels after being separated from my classmates in fourth grade. It was no doubt a traumatic experience as I was left wondering about why I was different and about ways in which I did not measure up with my classmates. From that moment on I was labeled as having a learning disability, and the only way to correct it was through medication. Had the teacher taken the time to research ways for children like myself to learn, the outcome could have been different and my parents may have never been persuaded to put me on medication.

Gurian realizes that our system has a problem and we need to protect our young boys from being misdiagnosed. Many times the problem is not necessarily with the individual boy, rather it has to do with how the system in structured in ways for him to learn. We all know that everything does not work for everyone, and that is what makes human beings unique and different. The same can be said for learning strategies and what works best for some, may not work for others. Part of our job as educators is to research ways for all children to learn, and work on ways to protect our children from failing in our educational systems. While reading Gurian’s book, I kept asking myself
“did I fail the system, or did the system fail me”? In media literacy we attempt to protect young people by teaching them the skills to be effective learners, and Gurian also took this purpose as protecting children to be lifelong learners who can succeed. Media literacy and Gurian want parents and educators to know that they are part of the solution in helping to turn the tide of this current problem with our boys, and it will take a lot of work in order to do so, but we owe it to ourselves and to our future generations to give children the best that we can offer in terms of education.

The last purpose of media literacy is that of pleasure. Gurian realizes that if more boys are doing better in our schools, they will gain self-fulfillment by growing to live successful lives. Part of the pleasure that they gain from learning may be a certain interest they found that they may have never knew even existed. It also may come in the form of enjoying different academic areas that they did not enjoy before. In all reality, it could be entire lists of different things that may make a child feel better about his learning, or it could be as simple as one particular thing that may make a child happier about his present situation. Whatever it may be, we seek to provide pleasure for boys by making education an enjoyable experience where they feel connected to the material they are learning as well as the setting in which they are in amongst their peers, teachers, parents, etc. Media literacy has those same goals in trying to get students to locate themselves within their particular environment while focusing on things they can enjoy from their learning. Both media literacy and The Minds of Boys aims to help children become life-long learners.
One of the chapters that really made me interested in this book was chapter two, titled “How Boys Learn”. This chapter dealt with the key differences between the male brain and the female brain, and how those differences can affect a child’s learning ability within the classroom. It also talked about the way classrooms are designed and how this may go against the male brain. One paragraph that really stood out in my mind read “the image of a schoolchild as someone sitting and reading has become the poster image for education, especially in the last fifty years. This is not a bad image, but it is an incomplete match with the way the minds of many of our boys work. Perhaps you have seen the mismatch in your own homes and schools: boys struggling to learn in the ways provided for them, teachers and families becoming frustrated, boys being labeled ‘difficult’ or ‘failures’ and becoming morose with self-doubt.” I could not have agreed more with this image of our current schools and how it affects children. I believe the system is not structured in a way that provides effective learning for boys, and as soon as we go about labeling them as “failures”, we have already began losing those children as they begin to feel unattached from their surroundings. One teacher specifically noticed this in her own school by saying “should we keep trying to change the boys and their energy, or should we change the educational system they find themselves in?” I believe the answer to this question is a resounding “no” to changing our boys, rather I believe we should focus on ways to improve our educational system to where boys can succeed and feel like they are part of something rewarding. Currently I feel we are neglecting this alternative and statistics have shown what the effects can be.
Another chapter that I really enjoyed was “What Parents and Teachers Can Do to Motivate Boys to Learn”. The section within the chapter that I focused on dealt with what teachers can specifically do in order to motivate their students. Gurian starts the chapter by stating “undermotivation, as you know, is being handled by many school systems as a conduct disorder, ADD/ADHD, or a discipline problem. As many of us now realize, it is unfair—even immoral—to label a child diseased with a brain disorder who is in fact a boy going through normal male development or complex male adjustments to a system that is not sure how to serve him. Intuition is one of the wisest and most effective tools a teacher can have.” Gurian then goes into offering effective strategies for teachers to use in helping undermotivated boys. The thing I like most about these strategies is that it really gets the teacher into thinking about ways to alter their teaching methods in order to help struggling boys. I think too many times teachers are quick to give up on a student if they realize that it may take some extra work and time in order to help that student. I have personally heard teachers complain about certain students (usually boys) when talking about problems within their classroom. Rather than taking the time to search for ways to go about helping that student, they are quick to write off the student as having a problem. I can not help but thinking to myself “part of enjoying teaching or wanting to teach should be a strong desire in wanting to help all children succeed”. For the teachers that do have the desire, these ten strategies offer great ways to get the most out of undermotivated student and get them on the right track in their learning process.

One of the chapters that I really had questions about before reading was the incorporation of single-gender classrooms. While Gurian has many statistics to back his claims about how single-gender classrooms work, I also think it is important for boys and
girls to learn together. Gurian mentions that boys and girls are around each other outside of school and how this prevents them from missing out on socialization with the opposite sex, but I still think boys and girls would be missing a natural learning experience if they are taken away from each other in the school classroom setting. I think part of the reason I feel this way is because I have not personally witnessed a single-gender classroom school. Although I do see the many benefits that Gurian offers within the text of this chapter, I still have my doubts on many issues concerning single-gender classes. We do not live in a single-gender workforce, and I think single-gender classrooms would be taking away from a natural learning experience of boys and girls learning to work together toward common goals.

**Relationship to Communication Theories:**

Different communication theories can be applied to this book and one of the first theories I want to focus on includes the social learning theory. I think the claims in this book go along with key concepts of the social learning theory which include imitation of superiors, and role model behavior. Gurian mentions that many times children will try to imitate their elders and the behavior of each respected role models influences the behavior of the child. Gurian notes that it is important for parents and educators to take the opportunity to spend quality time with their children/students in order for them to develop different learning skills. Gurian stated how important this is by saying “every parent has certainly sensed this – how profound is our adult responsibility for the child’s future; how little time we actually have, just a few years, to set the right foundation for the love of learning.” This relates directly with the social learning theory as children
learn how to interact with others and what roles they should take on by learning from their superiors as well as each other.

Another communication theory I believe can be applied to this book includes the reader response/reception theory. This theory deals with how the reader can see their self within the framework of the text and whether or not they can relate to the actual reading. I think many readers can relate to this reading, especially someone with a background such as myself. Part of the reason why I found a real interest in this book was because that I could picture myself within the text and the different examples that Gurian used throughout the book. When you have experienced a lot of what Gurian writes about, or if you have heard about a lot of the different examples Gurian used, it becomes easier to relate to the material in an attempt to understand what the author is writing about or giving reference to. I believe many people, especially young men, who have experienced a lot of the same experiences I had as a struggling child in elementary school would also be able to put themselves within the text of this book as they read. I feel that as a result of being able to relate to this book by using the reader response/reception theory, I now have a better understanding of the author’s main points within this book.

Conclusion:

I found this book to be very interesting in its approach toward the issue at hand. I have often thought about the problems within our school systems and what we should do in order to correct them. One of the biggest problems that I feel our schools face is the issue of how we can help all students to succeed. I do not believe you have to look far in order to realize that there is a problem when the majority of students who are on
medications or labeled as “dysfunctional” or “learning disabled” are young boys. I have a hard time believing that boys are at the root of all problems within our schools and that more boys than girls are genuinely in need of medication to help them learn. I have often wondered how our school systems are set up and if they could do anything to help children learn in a way that suits them best. After reading taking several media literacy classes and reading different material about our educational systems, I have realized that every instructional method does not work for every single person. We are all different and therefore we require different means of instruction in order to learn. In other words, we may all reach the same ending point, but we all took different directions to get there. I believe Gurian’s work really points this out by showing us different methods of instruction and different ways to go about effectively teaching young boys. His work was well-researched and I thought he provided a good framework for anyone interested in solutions for helping boys to succeed in schools. This success in schools will later pave the way for success in life and it is important for all of us to uphold our responsibility in helping every child to realize that they can succeed.