



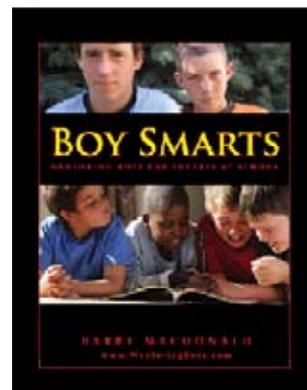
BOYS CAN WRITE!

Over many years of being in the educational trenches, I have noticed more and more how many of boys' struggles in school revolve around traditional definitions of literacy. This past month I responded to outer and inner promptings, moving into what was both a new direction and a natural extension of my work. I launched a workshop entitled *Boys Can Write!* focussed on boys' literacy needs, strengths, and struggles.

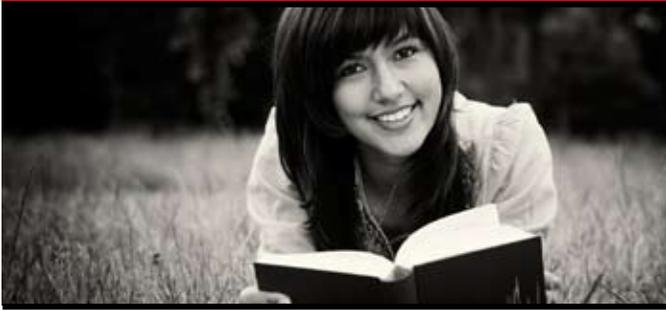
Having just witnessed the creativity and passion of so many parents, educators, and mentors around literacy challenges in this workshop, I am still feeling buoyed by the electric excitement and ideas we collectively generated. In particular I would like to remark that I felt very privileged that we could hear voices of those who do not always get much airtime in our busy schools.

It is all too common that distressed parents and students may feel that their concerns and perspectives on school are not heard. We began this workshop with my interviewing two real students—a sister and brother who have had very different experiences in high school—and their very real mom.

For this month's newsletter, in the hopes of continuing the conversation with more people, I am offering the almost unedited post-workshop reflections of Libby—the articulate sister of a very capable brother Mike whose strengths do not register as easily as Libby's in a conventional school system.



LIBBY'S POST-WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS



Several years of presenting to students in school did not prepare me for the audience of teachers I addressed at the Boys' Conference just yesterday. That they had come seeking advancement was worrying enough, but incomparable to the sudden realization that I had not before stood beside my own brother, shoulder by shoulder, to present our gifts in such a public way. Mike and I are biologically closer than I am to any other being on earth; we have shared both nature and nurture throughout our lives, but to many we must appear to be from opposite sides of the universe.

Before we introduced Barry MacDonald, both Mike and I briefly spoke about our individual impressions of schooling, and about our experiences with writing. When I shared how my need to write seemed almost involuntary—like breathing—and that I wrote daily to process my feelings and thoughts, I was comforted as teachers leaned forward to support me, and I imagined that they were also appreciating their collective influence on me.

While Mike did not elbow me for his turn in an obvious way, I felt the invisible prompting, and as he was the reason we were there, I stepped aside. Mike immediately leaned casually on his stool to begin his hesitant comments about schooling. He spoke about his many frustrations with learning at school, his increased distancing from school, and how schooling was but a necessary requirement for him, with no more significance than washing clothes. He made it clear that he'd not have gone to school if our mother did not insist upon it. His impromptu remarks had the teachers immediately engaged, but I am used to this quality in my brother: reticent in school but strong and quietly compelling in life.

After thanking us both for our introductory remarks, Barry started with his questions to me. My mother claims that both Mike and I have distinct ways of getting our points across: me with long-winded fast-talking sentences and Mike with his *get to it* no-nonsense clarity. Although I am a voracious reader now, I had early difficulties with reading that Barry questioned me about. I described the eventual moments of eureka that set me on my path of literacy. We briefly explored how it was now often challenging for me to be the one in the classroom waiting at the finish line for everyone else to catch up.

When it was Mike's turn up in front of the teachers, he immediately settled back in the chair and answered Barry's first question with a simple, "Yep." The laughter that followed was the sound of two hundred scholars really experiencing the difference between two totally different types of learners: my highly verbal reflections and Mike's punchy directness. Sensing that schooling made Mike feel *less than*, Barry immediately shifted the discussion away from schooling and onto the remarkable achievements that filled Mike's life outside of school, particularly with lifeguarding. After describing his real-life rescues, including two incidents where Mike



BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

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better to build
boys than to
mend men!*

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was responsible for saving the **REAL** lives of children, I noticed my brother sit a bit taller in his chair. I suspect that the English 11 teacher who failed Mike last year and his current English 11 teacher (where he was again failing this year) did not know about this side of my brother, nor about the cards of appreciation he received from parents of the children he rescued, the administration of the aquatic facilities he worked in, or the students he taught Bronze Medallion and Bronze Cross to at UBC. I loved how Barry teased Mike about which UBC faculty he taught at. While some in the audience may have been caught off guard, Barry really highlighted how our biases about academic learning can limit our views of a particular learner.

Eventually, Barry returned his questioning to schooling and my brother's answers returned to his usual succinct verbal style. It became pointedly clear that beyond friendships and sports, there were very few redeeming qualities to schooling for Mike. When he moves quietly out the door in the still dark hours of the morning to weight train with his ruby team, the result of his efforts are almost immediately evident in the quality of his game play, whereas when he struggles to write an English paper, and only receive a two out of six, there is simply no sense of accomplishment in that for him.

Mike described how too many words feels like "an assault" and he becomes overwhelmed, lost in the process of translating those words. Like math for me, barrages of words do not compute for him. Mom and I have long worried about Mike feeling criticized that he wasn't good enough at school, that he wasn't trying hard enough at school, and that he was of limited worth at school. In my own naive 15 year old way I can't help but think that over the years all this **professional** criticism has discouraged him greatly.

After acknowledging Mike's contributions, Barry thanked Mike, who moved to sit beside me on the floor while our mother took the stage. Noticing that Mike chose to sit right beside me, I felt a small glow, proud of the different ways we are both capable.

In the days leading up to our interview, Mom and I had several conversations about what Barry might ask us and how we might each reply. We even tried to tell Mike what we thought he should say, but he would have nothing to do with this analytical planning. In the end, we reached the epiphany that whereas I thrived with traditional classroom learning, Mike did not.

When Barry interviewed Barbara (my mom), she described the many denigrating comments that teachers offered about Mike over the years: that he was too active, too impulsive, and way too aggressive. I felt sadness that his amazing talents were not reflected in his report card grades or in comments at parent-teacher meetings.

NEW workshop for parents & teachers to attend together...



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FOR TEACHERS & PARENTS

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There is nothing like being on stage to bring clarity and intensity to a moment. I knew that my mom was speaking from her heart as I could hear her voice quivering ever so slightly. She emphasized, "Just because a boy wasn't ticking off the academic completion boxes at a particular age did not mean that he was not capable of learning, not capable of finding his way, or not worthy of our loving attention. I am worried that with non-academic students like Mike we can forget all too quickly about the world that waits for them beyond school gates."

I am limited by time and space here, but it is worth acknowledging that after years of mom replying to teachers, "Oh thank you. I'll speak to Mike about that," she had finally reached her limit. I shivered as she described a recent meeting with the vice-principal and how she had decided not to pretend to *fix* Mike any more. In the office she waited patiently for the VP to offer her own plan of action. When my mom reported how, after a long silence, the VP said, "Most parents would be concerned about their son's attendance," as if to shame my mom into taking responsibility away from the school, I saw the audience sit up. Mom described how she had decided she would no longer be pushed around by the school authority, and her relationship with her son was more important than anyone's learning outcomes. She told the VP that Mike had worth, that it was the school's job to support him in English 11 and English 12, not to bully him out of the school.

The hour went by quickly. I left hoping that the teachers would walk away with a little more understanding and compassion for boys like Mike. As I imagined the rest of the day and Barry addressing all those **Get Boys Writing** strategies, I also hoped that the boys and girls entrusted into those teachers' care would also walk away from school feeling a little taller and more capable, as I did.

Libby



While each learner is unique, there are ways in which the different experiences of Libby and Mike in the school system exemplify the different experiences some boys and some girls at extreme ends of the gender continuum have in our schools. Libby's learning style is highly engaged and verbal, while her more reticent brother is highly physical, oriented toward more concrete goals, as in rugby. This is not to say that Libby cannot also play rugby if she chooses, or that Mike must avoid writing at all costs. However, since Libby's strengths fit more easily than Mike's with conventional school assessments, Mike's learning strengths are falling beneath the radar, and his learning needs are not being adequately addressed at school. Now as he is going through the final stages of puberty, repeated messages he hears that he is not good enough are making him angry.

To help Libby and Mike both develop their full potential, we need to respect and affirm the ways in which they both may easily shine.

In addition, Barbara's story highlights the importance of building stronger bridges between school and home communities. Barbara has assumed responsibility for speaking to her son, but, like many parents, she feels she must be careful not to antagonize school personnel by questioning too much, fearful that her questioning could make things worse for Mike. Parents like Barbara who wish to support their sons as well as their daughters must be supported in turn.

Learning to listen well is a life-long process, and we educators must listen to parents who have the courage to speak in our schools, from their hearts as well as their minds. We must begin with exploratory dialogue as we make room for more voices.

Regardless of the controversy around how to best teach boys who struggle with written output, I know that the more parents learn about what works best at any given time, the better they can mentor their boys for success at school.

Some parents of preschoolers who may be reading this might be interested in my Saturday workshop aimed toward parents of young sons: *Smart Start for Boys*.

At this workshop parents will learn about boys' development, and the pressures put on boys to submit to the boy code and to be *manly* in a narrowly defined way. Most importantly, they will also learn about how to encourage literacy in their sons' lives and how to support their success in school.

Just as Barbara gained confidence to question teacher authority by learning about educational best practices, parents at my *Start Smart for Boys* workshop will learn how to advocate for boys who encounter educational stumbling blocks.

We need to bring our collective energy, imagination, and sensitivity to work with boys' and girls' literacy from the earliest grades.

I feel heartened that the many teachers who attended the *Boys Can Write!* workshop have shared with colleagues the creative ways that they are facilitating multiple literacies in the classroom, and in particular how they are responding compassionately to boys who struggle to get words on paper or a computer screen. These teachers want to hear from parents like Barbara, and to help boys like Mike to find their way.

In fact next month's newsletter will highlight several of these teachers' stories and how they creatively get boys writing.

And thank you, Libby, Mike, Barbara, and to all those who engaged in our ongoing dialogue about literacy, and about our shared commitment to learning. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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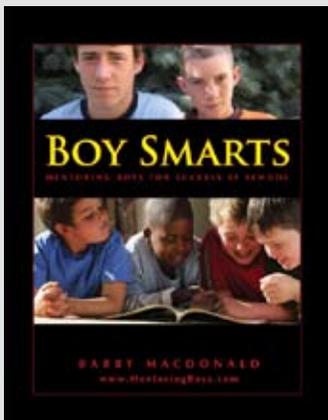
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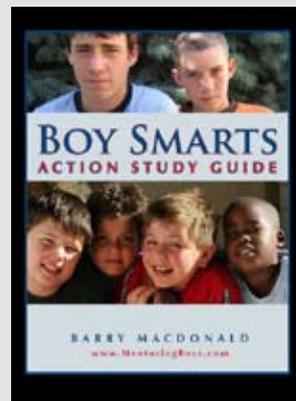
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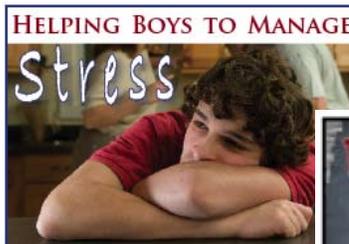
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