Research Paper

Boys and Reading

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**Abstract**

According to Peg Tyre, author of The Trouble With Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents & Educators Must Do, “from preschool to college, there are signs that boys are not thriving. They are expelled from preschool at five times the rates of girls, left back in kindergarten and first grade at twice the rates of girls, and they do less homework and get more C’s and D’s” (Trye, 2008, pg. 260). Also in Tyre’s book, after years of researching the “boy” problem, she concludes: “many of the struggles boys face in school originate from their failure to become fluent readers.” From the very earliest assessments, boys’ average scores are lower than the average scores for girls in reading” (Tyre, 2008, pg. 260).

Who is to blame? Are boys harder to instruct? Many teachers say that boys are “resistant, often refusing to engage with the classroom material” (Tyre, 2008, pg. 260). Boys will tell you that they like to read but not the books that teachers choose for their classroom. The gap between what teachers wants boys to be reading and what boys want to read seems very wide. How do we, as teachers close this gap? William Brozo, a leading researcher and Professor of Literacy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia writes, “Teachers will never make significant progress eradicating boys’ difficulty with reading and learning unless they dedicate themselves to discovering boys’ interests and acquainting boys with quality books related to those interests” (Brozo, 2010, pg. 79). “Leading children to experience pleasure in reading and confidence in their ability to read creates voluntary readers” (O’Donnell & Wood, 1992, pg. 6). Teachers should plan their literacy programs and classroom design with this goal in mind. Engaging boys in literacy should be the highest priority when developing reading curricula and seeking to foster independent reading habits. Our research study was set up to discover if these findings held true in a kindergarten and first grade classroom.

**Research Questions**

Our research set out to answer various questions. Do boys in the early education classes of kindergarten and first grade find subject matter to read that they enjoy as much as their female counterparts? Do these young boys like to read and are as confident in reading as their female peers? Do the kindergarten and first grade teachers recognize a difference in reading skills between boys and girls in their classrooms and, if so, what ideas should teachers use to increase interest and motivation in male students? First let us define the importance of reading.

**Introduction**

Reading is the basis for all learning in a classroom. A student cannot have success in any subject matter if they are unable to read the material to participate in the activities and learn the information the written word teaches them. Reading opens the world to everyone. The ability to read is crucial for success both in and out of school. “An actively literate person is constantly thinking, learning, and reflecting, and is assuming the responsibility for continued growth in personal literacy” (O’Donnell & Wood, 1992, pg. 2). As teachers, the way we teach reading and writing in our classroom is critical to the development of “genuine active literacy” in our students (O’Donnell & Wood, 1992, pg. 2). Since research indicates that boys are lagging behind girls in academics and specifically in literacy, how do we as educators find solutions to this problem? How do we make our male students engaged and regular readers?

Helping students to have positive attitudes toward reading is a major goal of all educators. Reading is an essential life skill. It is our responsibility as educators to lay the groundwork and help children develop the skills, as well as the motivation needed for a lifetime of reading. Let’s examine the facts about boys and reading with the literature review.

**Literature Review**

Evidence collected by national tests in the United States, England, Australia and Canada show that boys are being out performed in reading by girls in every age level and every area of reading (Kohn, 2002, pg. 5). In fact, in almost every country in which standardized testing takes place, boys scored lower than girls at every level of reading comprehension (American Association of School Librarians, 2004, pg. 3). In a study done by Cassandra Coddington and John Guthrie (2009) at the University of Maryland, it was discovered that boys perceived reading efficacy as difficult, viewed themselves as unmotivated to read and reported that they were less capable of reading than girls (p. 226). This problem is rarely given attention in the school systems. Jane Kendrick author and researcher, reports that the reading abilities of boys seem to be overlooked (Kendrick, 1999, pg. 3). Kendrick goes on to say that boys’ being behind girls in reading ability has been a widely accepted consequence of being born male (Kendrick, 1999, pg. 4). It has been found that a teacher’s perception of their boys’ ability, perceived difficulty and reading orientation is closely correlated with the perceptions of the male students in that teacher’s class, along with the boys’ motivation to read (Coddington & Guthrie, 2009, pg. 227). The problem arises when we look at the national reading scores of high school students. The average eleventh grade boy is reading three years below the average girl (Sullivan. 2014, pg. xi). He also only averages 2.3 hours of reading per week and a young male student has a 30 percent chance of being in a remedial reading class by the third grade (Sullivan. 2014, pg. xi).

Brozo in his book, To Be A Boy, To Be A Reader, has us consider these sobering facts:

* Boys are three to five times more likely than girls to have learning or reading disabilities placement in schools (Flynn & Rahbar, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).
* Boys in elementary school through high school score significantly lower than girls on standardized measures of reading achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).
* Boys are 50% more likely to be retained a grade than girls (Kleinfeld, 1999; Neckerman, 2004).
* Boys are less likely than girls to take advanced placement examinations and go to college (Francis, 2007; Freeman, 2004; Mortenson, 2008).
* Of the estimated three to seven thousand students who drop out of U.S. high schools each day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008; the majority are boys (Greene & Winters, 2006).
* Five out of six children and adolescents diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are boys (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005).

Why does this happen? Why do girls seem to outperform boys in reading ability?

When it comes down to it, boys and girls read differently and for different reasons and this can be attributed to their anatomy (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 29). While both boys and girls have a corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the two halves and allows communication between the two, boys’ corpus callosum can be more than ten percent smaller than girls’ (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 31). Because of this, boys are more likely to approach a new problem either creatively or analytically, while girls would approach it in a more holistic manner. When the brain becomes overwhelmed, it will shut down and the body quickly follows (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 31). When this happens to boys, they seek a stimulus in their environment such as a bright color, a quick movement, or an interesting sound to wake up their body and brain (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 31). Teachers often discredit this behavior as a child acting out and off task (Sullivan, 2014, pg. 31).

In his book “Why Johnny Won’t Read”, Michael Sullivan, director of the Weeks of Public Library in Greenland, NH, proposes that educators are more respectful of girls reading preferences than those of boys, meaning teachers are more likely to determine if a book is “good” based on if it is enjoyed by the females in his or her classroom (2004). It has been found that in the United States only one-third of classrooms contain books of genres preferred by boys (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). Some studies show that teachers reflect their reading choices in their classroom library. This is a problem because the majority of teachers in the United States are females (Gambell & Hunter). According to a study done in 1999 by Worthy, Moorman and Turner, when students are faced with a learning environment that does not provide the child’s preferred reading materials they can make one of three choices: reading something outside of their interests; obtaining their preferred materials themselves; or not reading at all (1999). How do we, as teachers, spark that enthusiasm and love of reading for our male students? It is vital that teachers understand the difference between the ways that boys and girls read in order to set up reading programs in their classrooms and create a more inclusive environment for both genders to learn. Our research study was conducted in several classrooms to test these research findings.

**Study Purpose**

The purpose of our study was to examine a kindergarten and first grade classroom, survey educators and survey students to discover what dynamics have the biggest effect on the amount of reading and enjoyment that boys get from reading in the classroom. Also, our study was to compare attitudes and interests of male and female students. Throughout the study, researchers will assume that all of the teachers, students, and other are truthful in their interviews and on the surveys.

**Operational Definitions**

**Reading for Pleasure:** Reading for pleasure means any reading that is primarily for enjoyment. It encompasses a wide range of genres and publications, and includes both fiction and non-fiction.

**Teacher Guided Reading:** Guided reading is an instructional approach that involves a teacher working with a small group of students who demonstrate similar reading behaviors and can all read similar levels of texts. The text is easy enough for students to read with a teacher’s skillful support. The text offers challenges and opportunities for problem solving, but is easy enough for students to read with some fluency. The teacher chooses selections that help students expand their strategies.

**Literacy Center:** An area within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities independently.

**Method**

The design of this study was a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The quantitative data provided evidence of survey results and observing students in choosing their book selection. We collected quantitative data based on precise measurement using structured and validated data collection instruments (e.g., closed-ended student surveys and observations). We had students fill out a survey where we asked five questions with specific answers to choose from (see appendix A). We also timed students using observation technique on how long it took them to select a book to read. Qualitative data provided evidence from teacher open-ended surveys and open-ended student observations. The teacher surveys consisted of ten open-ended questions where teachers were allowed to write as much as they wanted to answer the questions (see appendix B). The other qualitative data we collected was observation by the researchers. Each researcher took notes on six different questions/observations (see appendix C). The researcher is the primary data collection instrument. Student participants will include boys and girls in kindergarten and first grade aged five to eight years old. Teacher participants will include kindergarten and first grade teachers, who have taught for at least 1 year and are currently employed. This population was selected because it fits the parameters of our purpose involving the reading habits and abilities of kindergarten and first grade boys. Limitations that may occur during the research include, but are not limited to, question misunderstandings, time allotted, and a small research pool.

**Results of Student Surveys**

The kindergarten class in which data was collected is located in a suburban neighborhood. The class consisted of 8 boys and 8 girls. The kindergarten students were given a survey in small groups. Questions were read and answers were shared verbally and then documented by researcher. When the survey was conducted 7 boys and 8 girls were in attendance.

The first grade class that this research study was conducted at was at a magnet school in an urban neighborhood. The first grade students were given the survey individually and answers were documented by the teacher. The class consisted of eight boys and eight girls. In this first grade classroom the results seem to follow the research. Here are the charts supporting the data for the kindergarten and first grade student surveys.

Kindergarten Boys Kindergarten Girls

First Grade Boys First Grade Girls

When kindergarteners were asked what topics they like to read 57% of boys said they enjoyed reading books about cars and 43% said they enjoyed reading books about sports, zero boys said they enjoyed reading books about animals. However, 75% of girls said that they enjoyed reading about animals and 25% of girls said they liked to read about sports, zero girls said they liked to read about cars.

First grade boys’ results show they prefer stories about cars (50%), animals (25%), sports (12%), and other (13%). First grade girls, when asked the same interest list as boys showed they choose (38%0 other subjects, followed by (37%) animals, (25%) sports and (0%) stories about cars which was the most preferred book subject by boys.

The results of this question show that boys and girls have very different preferences about what is interesting. The face that we gave them limited choices for the research question limits us from finding true individual preferences of reading material. Our purpose was not to determine individual preferences but to determine a general difference in interests between boys and girls.

Kindergarten Boys Kindergarten Girls

First Grade Boys First Grade Girls

When kindergarten students were asked if they could find selections that they enjoy reading in their classroom, 86% of boys said that they could often find books they enjoyed while 14% of boys said they could never find books they enjoy to read in their classroom. 87.5% of girls said they could often find books they enjoy reading in the classroom, compared to 12.5% of girls who said they could sometimes find book they enjoyed reading in the classroom.

75% of first grade boys felt they could often find books they enjoy while 25% felt they could sometimes find books they liked. In comparison, only 50% of the girls found interesting books often and 37% of the girls felt they never could find books they enjoyed. 13% of the girls answered sometimes they find good books.

This data seems to indicate that the first grade teacher is meeting the reading interests of the boys better than the girls, while the kindergarten teacher is meeting both the boys and girls reading interests fairly equally.

Kindergarten Boys Kindergarten Girls

First Grade Boys First Grade Girls

We asked the students, the same question again in a slightly different way, to verify the answers more thoroughly. The previous data results are supported when the students were asked if they like the book selection in their classroom.

When the kindergarteners were asked if they liked the selection of books in their classroom, 71% of boys and 87.5% of girls said they often like the book selection. 12.5% of girls said they sometimes like the selection of books in their classroom and 29% of boys said they never like the selection of books in their classroom. 88% of the first grade boys replied often while 50% of the first grade girls replied never liking the book selection they have in their classroom. Only 37% of the girls replied often.

Our data results from these kindergarten and first grade classrooms do not support the literature research. Boys find books they like as often or more often than girls in their classroom library. The results could be because boys may be picking out books to quickly get through reading time and really are not engaging in the reading material as much as girls.

Kindergarten Boys Kindergarten Girls

First Grade Boys First Grade Girls

When the kindergarteners were asked about the difficulty level of reading 86% of boys stated that reading was easy, compared to 62.5% of girls who believed that reading was easy.

14% of boys thought that reading was sometimes difficult, while 25% of girls believed reading was sometimes difficult. One girl, or 12.5%, said that reading was difficult for her. No boys stated that reading was difficult.

When the eight boys in the first grade class were asked if they found reading difficult, sometimes difficult, or easy, the majority (63%) of the boys found it easy, 25% found it sometimes difficult and only 12% found it difficult. Half of the first grade girls (50%) found reading easy, 25% sometimes difficult and 25% found it difficult. Evidently either the boys have a higher opinion of their reading ability than girls or the girls actually seem to struggle more with their reading. If this data is correct then this first grade classroom does not represent the research findings that girls are better readers than boys.

Maybe boys do not challenge themselves enough. In our observations that we will be discussing later, we observed boys often picking out books they had read the day before.

Kindergarten Boys Kindergarten Girls

First Grade Boys First Grade Girls

When the kindergarteners were asked if they liked to read 43% of boys said they liked to read often, 28.5% said they liked to read sometimes and 28.5% said that they never liked to read. 25% of girls like to read often, 37.5% of girls like to read sometimes and 37.5% of girls never like to read.

These results show that the girls who have a harder time reading don’t enjoy reading as much as the girls who find reading easy. In contrast, 6 of the kindergarten boys thought reading was easy, however 2 boys said they never like to read and 2 said they only sometimes like to read. Only half of the boys who thought read was easy, enjoy reading.

The final question of “Do you like to read?” does support the literature research. 37% of the first grade boys and 28.5% of the kindergarten boys said they never like to read. None of the first grade girls (0%) answered never wanting to read. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the first grade girls liked to read sometimes compared to about 25% of both the 1st grade and kindergarten boys. The percentage of students who liked to read often was about the same. This is important because even though the great majority of the boys consider reading easy and the majority of boys say they can find interesting books in their classroom, 37% first grade boys and 29% kindergarten boys say they never like to read.

**Results of Kindergarten Teacher Surveys**

A survey was given to four kindergarten teachers in the suburban elementary school that research was conducted in. All teachers replying to the survey were females. All four teachers had obtained their Master’s degree and one teacher had a Reading Specialist Degree. The teachers were asked what genre that boys like to read, their answers included: animals, sharks, dinosaurs, cars, sports, non-fiction series books, Lego, Skylander, Magic Tree House, David books, books with real pictures, humorous books, and science books.

Teachers were then asked what genres that girls like to read. They answered with the following: fantasy, animal stories, fairy tales, princess stories (Frozen, etc.), fiction and non-fiction books.

When asked how their independent reading areas were set up in their classroom common trends appeared in their answers. All of the teachers said that they provided students with a variety of different genres of books along with a variety of difficulty level books. These books were displayed in an appealing, kid friendly manner so students could find the book that they wanted. Students were able to pick their spots to read and were often provided with a comfortable reading environment (chairs, couches, lamps). Reading areas were placed in quiet parts of the classroom. One teacher provided boxes of books on each table in the classroom. She chose the books in these boxes based on the ability and interests of the students who sit at that specific table.

When asked if there was a difference in the reading abilities of the boys and girls in their class, three of the four teachers said that they did not notice a difference. They stated that they have both boys and girls who read below level and above level. The remaining teacher said that she noticed that girls seem more eager to read and generally progress quicker. Another teacher said that she has noticed that boys are more likely to become frustrated and to give up. She also said that the boys who are in her lower level reading groups tend to show a significant amount of laziness, compared to the girls in that group who remain focused and hard working. Two of the surveyed teachers were aware of the research facts stating that boys were being out performed by girls in reading. However none of the teachers believed that this was true in their classroom.

All of the teachers stated that their test scores showed an equal result of low level boys and low level girls as well as high level boys and high level girls. Three teachers said that this is consistent with their test scores over the last few years of teaching.

Finally, when teachers were asked how they increase motivation and reading interest in male students they provided the following ideas:

· Including a wide variety of nonfiction text

· Including picture books in classroom library

· Including a wide range of reading levels

· Including books consistent with current classroom and world themes

· Including fun reading trackers like monster fingers to engage readers.

· Providing comfy seating to read in.

· Providing plenty of books pertaining specifically to your boys’ interests

· Encouraging parents to read with their son at home

· Encouraging parents to take their sons to libraries or bookstores.

· Allowing boys to talk about what they are reading and connect it to what they have experienced, things they know about and other books they’ve read.

Encouraging parents and siblings to be role models for their boy readers.

**Results of 1st Grade Teacher Surveys**

All three first grader teachers surveyed were female. One had a masters degree in early childhood, one had a masters degree in curriculum and instruction, and the third did not have a masters degree. When asked what type of genres boys like to read two teachers responded non-fiction, the third teacher responded every student is different, but in general boys like to read “boy” books. To her, this would include a lot of non-fiction texts such as books about sports, insects, and dinosaurs. Her first grade boys also enjoy any book that has boys/men as the main character—Wimpy Kid, Captain Underpants, etc.

When asked what genre girls like to read: the first two teacher answered fiction and the third teacher answered “I see my girls being more open to lots of different books. They are not necessarily drawn away from a book because of the gender of the character; however, many of them enjoy books that are targeted to the girl population—Fairy Diaries, My Puppy, Pinkalicious, etc.” Many of these books seem to fit more of the fantasy and fiction genres.

When asked how independent reading areas are set up and designed the first teacher replied: that she uses the Daily 5 in her classroom. The students have 5 stations (Read to Self, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, Work on Writing and Word Work) and they are allowed to choose where they go each day. The only one they HAVE to do every day is Read to Self. The second teacher uses literacy stations that are color coded into four groups.  She divides the kids into groups using their reading levels and making sure each group has a range from high to low.  The kids go to their stations according to color where all the activities relate to the spelling and word work they are learning. The third teacher replied: “In my classroom, each student has a “book box” that they use as a portable independent reading area per say. Students are allowed to choose 5 books from our classroom library each week that interest them. At the beginning of the year, the chapter books section is closed, but by 3rd quarter, every student eats up the chance to “check-out” a chapter book. Students then take their book box either to their seat during work time or to the rug during Read-to-self station.”

When asked “Do you see a difference in the reading abilities of boys and girls?” teacher #1 responded that she does not see a difference in first grade, but in the later grades the teachers in her school do. Teacher #2 answered: It depends and varies each year. Some years I have boys who are lower and struggle remembering words, sounds, and reading strategies. Other years I have girls in the same situation. Teacher #3 answered: “I have a different population of students…many of them are well above grade-level because reading is seen as a priority to this population. Overall, I would say I have an equal number of boys and girls in each level of my reading groups. I will say, however, that my lowest two readers are male, and my highest reader is a female. That being said, my third lowest reader is a female, and my second highest reader is a male.”

When asked are you aware national research shows boys are being outperformed in reading by girls at every age level and in every area of reading, all teachers answered yes.

When asked do you find this to be true in your classroom, Teacher #1 replied: no and teacher #2 and 3 replied: yes.

When asked what do your test scores show in your classroom, all three teachers said that their classroom test scores show that some boys score really high, others land in the middle, and some are in lower areas corresponding with the girls in the class. They only see a slight difference in girls reading proficiency being higher than boys according to test scores. They all feel it totally depends on the individual boys and girls in the class.

When asked, what are some ideas to increase motivation and interest for reading in male students, all teachers said they make sure they have books that individual students in their classroom enjoy. All three though it is important for the teacher to get to know all her students individually at the beginning of the year and understand their interests and reading abilities to accommodate all subjects, topics, reading levels and interests that would motivate them to read books in their classroom.

**Observations of Kindergarten Boys**

Each week the boys in the observed kindergarten class are provided with at least one time per day in which they can participate in independent reading. Independent reading times include thirty-minute weekly rotation in literacy stations, one 25-minute rotation per week in daily centers, one daily 40-minute rest time, and anytime the student completes work early.

During these times, students are provided with a comfortable place to read, usually the library center, their towel on the floor or their spot at their table. Students are also given a wide variety of books to choose from in both the classroom library and the book boxes that are placed on each table. These independent reading times were observed for one week.

During the week, each child spends one half hour time slot in the classroom library during literacy stations. Students are placed in pairs during literacy stations and are allowed to read together or independently when in the classroom library. The first thing that majority of the observed boys in the classroom did when they entered that classroom library was chose the stuffed animal that they wanted. Often the stuffed animal became a distraction, as they did not immediately chose a book and were often prompted by the classroom teacher or the paraprofessional in the room to begin reading. A small handful of male students quickly chose a book and began reading. The boys who immediately began reading were consistent with the boys who stated that they enjoyed reading often when asked in the student survey. The boys who took longer to begin reading often chose to talk to their station partner, listen to their partner read, or sit in the library with a closed book. A few boys would choose a book, quickly flip through the pictures and make a new selection. The most popular books chosen by the boys in the library rotation of literacy centers were the class books in which each child had a page. The boys seemed to hold on to these books longer and discuss their reading with their partner more often than with the published picture books in the library.

During the kindergarteners’ rest time, they are given the option to quietly rest or read a book. Students are allowed to choose two books from the classroom library, their book box or their weekly library book to bring to their towel. Students may not get up to choose additional books and must lie quietly for the duration of rest time. This is typically a time for the teacher to get testing, interventions and make up work completed with students. . Typically, all the boys would gather their two books from the library, set up their towel and proceed to lie quietly on their towel for the remainder of rest time. Throughout the week, only three boys were observed consistently reading during this time. These boys tended to choose the same books throughout the week. The chosen books usually consisted of literature that the teacher had read in previous weeks, or pertained to topics that the class had previously discussed. Once these boys had finished reading the selected books, two of them would proceed to lie on their towel, the third would reread the books until rest time was complete.

The kindergarteners’ center time was the last half hour block of the day before dismissal. For first ten days of centers, students are manually rotated through the centers so everyone has the opportunity to explore each center. Once all students have been to each center, students are allowed to choose the center they would like to go to. This is done by random selection. When the teacher calls each child’s name they must pick the center that they would like to play in, as more students are called, the selection becomes more limited. Centers include blocks, art, dramatic play, discovery, computers, math, games, puzzles, classroom library and Legos. The classroom library was typically only chosen by students whose name was called towards the end of the selection. Since there were 16 students and 10 stations in which two students could go to, this left two stations empty each day. During the observed week, classroom library was the least popular center choice. When student did chose the classroom library, they were often by themselves and able to stay focused and reading for the duration of centers. Only two boys chose the classroom library center during the week. Those male students were two of highest leveled readers in the classroom and remained reading during the duration of the center. These boys chose to read books that were at their ability level (short chapter books, books with more

words that pictures). These boys were also eager to discuss what they had read once center time was concluded.

**Observations of 1st Grade Boys**

At the magnet school, first graders don’t have the option of time in the reading center. The teacher does the Daily Five so each student rotates to stations for 20 minutes.

In the first grade classroom we observed at, the students must complete a reading response sheet after reading a book. The sheet asks for title of book, author, how many pages in the book, and what the students’ favorite part was in the book. At the end of the response sheet there is a blank box that allows students to illustrate what their favorite part was in the book.

From our observations we felt that the girls found a book very quickly. Many of the boys took longer selecting a book to read. We observed that most girls were sitting down reading their books well before the majority of the boys found a book and sat down and began reading.

We did see the majority of boys, (5 out of 8) repeating books they had just read the day before in the reading center. We did not observe any girls selecting a book previously read.

The boys seemed to concentrate on reading their book quickly. Afterwards they were eager to get the response sheet filled out as fast as they could. Sometimes we observed that they would just open the books to a certain passage and copy that as their answer to the question “What was your favorite part in the book?” They liked to hurry through this part so they could play and talk with others around the room. The girls on the other hand, found books quickly and spent more time reading. They also spent more time writing about their favorite part. The girls’ answers were longer.

**Conclusion/Discussion**

Through our research, we made surprising discovery. In the data we accumulated, we found that first grade boys and kindergarten boys were not falling behind their female peers in reading. Through teacher surveys we concluded that boys and girls in these kindergarten and first grade classrooms perform equally in various areas of reading. It was discovered that both kindergarten and first grade boys found reading easier than the corresponding grade level girls. Both grade level boys also said that they liked to read often, compared to both grade level girls who stated that they only liked to read sometimes. Their teachers stated that they did not see a significant representation of boys who are below girls’ reading ability, but saw an equal number of boys and girls who are above and below reading level in their classroom. Many teachers stated that the test results vary year to year based on the individuals in the classroom.

One explanation that our data did not reflect the literature research was because of the young age group we chose our study on. Students at this age are still not reading at high enough levels for assessment to be detailed enough to determine a gender gap in reading skills. As one first grade teacher pointed out, she did not see gender gap in reading at her grade level, but teachers in the upper elementary grade levels do.

Another explanation for the difference between the literature research and our study might be the ability of young students to truly evaluate the book selection in their classrooms. The boys may think the selection is good because they like to read the same things over and over. The boys may also find reading easy because they pick easy books to read. The girls in these classrooms may choose a larger variety of books and books that are more challenging.

Also, our study was conducted over a very small group of students and did not reflect the diversity of students and classrooms in the nation. The school systems our observations took place in were very supportive of literacy and the teachers had many books in their classrooms as well as a good school library.

One way for teachers to learn the interests of his or her students at the beginning of the school year is by giving students a survey inquiring about their favorite subjects and topics (Allyn, 2001, pg. ). The teacher can use the information gathered by the survey to alter lessons and introduce books in the classroom library or include for read aloud. One of the most beneficial ways teachers can help their readers is by providing students with a broad range of books (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009). Even though our study did not reflect current research, we do believe the experts. Some boys, even in the early grades, have a hard time selecting books to read. I observed this in my first grade class—the boys took about twice as long finding a book to read as the girls did. Teachers could determine in their classroom, what interests the boys have, and set up a “guys rack.” William Brozo, in his book To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader, tells of a friend who did this in his classroom and it helped boys find their books to read faster and easier. His teacher friend found that before he did this, if a boy chose something that other boys or girls deemed a “girls book” the book would likely be returned to the shelf. The student was embarrassed or made fun of by other students. The guy’s rack makes it easy for boys to find books more interesting to them. Girls are also encouraged to pick from the guy’s rack if they want.

It is vital that teachers understand the difference between the ways that boys and girls read in order to make adjustments to their classroom and create a more inclusive environment for both genders to learn. Two of the biggest factors for boys and reading are stress and choice (Sullivan, 2014, pg. xii). Sullivan says, “the boys reading problem is not so much a matter of skill or illiteracy as one of motivation” (Sullivan, 2014, pg. xii). All of the motivational strategies provided by teachers in the teacher survey were consistent with Jane Kendrick’s study of habits of good readers. These habits include providing students a choice or reading material, having a wide range of reading material available, providing students time for independent reading and allowing students time to discuss what they read (Kendrick, 1999, pg.). Implementing these habits into our classrooms and the lives of our male students could provide our boys a level playing field for reading achievement.

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**Appendix A**

**Student Survey:**

1.) Do you find reading: Difficult Sometimes Difficult Easy

2.) Do you like to read? Often Sometimes Never

3.) Do you like the book selection in your classroom?

Often Sometimes Never

4.) Can you find books you enjoy to read in your classroom?

Often Sometimes Never

5.) What types of subjects/things do you like to read?

Stories about animals Stories about cars Stories about Sports

Other:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

**Teacher Interview:**

1.) What is your gender? Male Female

2.) What types of genre do boys like to read?

3.) What types of genre do girls like to read?

4.) How are independent reading areas set up and designed?

5.) Do you see a difference in the reading abilities of boys and girls?

6.) Are you aware national research shows boys are being outperformed in reading by girls at every age level and in every area of reading? Yes No

7.) Do you find this to be true in your classroom? Yes No

8.) What do your test scores show in your classroom?

9.) Other degrees besides Elementary Education?

Reading Specialist Masters Special Education

10.) What are some ideas to increase motivation and interest for reading in male students?

**Appendix C**

**Observation**

1. How long they stay in reading center if they have option
2. How much time actually spent reading
3. How much time selecting reading material
4. How long for girls
5. How many times do boys repeat reading material
6. Fidgeting, talking, walking around (List distractions) Does this happen before or after reading.

Boys and Reading: How Can We Make Our Boys Readers?

Jessica Kuehner

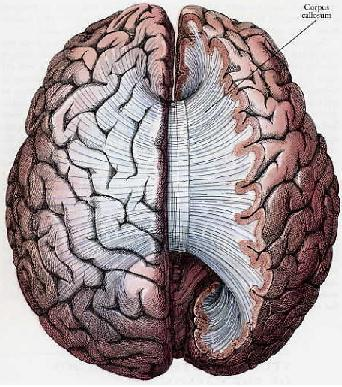
College of Saint Mary

**Abstract:**

As a child is growing up one of the most important skills they learn is reading. Reading is used in every aspect of ones’ life from skimming the back of a cereal box while munching on breakfast to reading a parking ticket found on your windshield after you forget to fill your meter. Reading is perceived by adults to be an enjoyable and, often times, relaxing activity. But surprisingly school-age boys, or boys in kindergarten to grade 6, around the world do not agree. Evidence collected by national tests in the United States, England, Australia and Canada show that boys are being out performed in reading by girls in every age level and every area of reading (Kohn, 2002). In fact, in almost every country in which standardized testing takes place, boys scored lower than girls at every level of reading comprehension (American Association of School Librarians, 2004).

In a study done by Cassandra Coddington and John Guthrie (2009) of University of Maryland, it was discovered that boys perceived reading efficacy as difficult, viewed themselves as unmotivated to read and reported that they were less efficacious for reading than girls (p. 226) . This problem is rarely given attention in the school systems; Jane Kendrick reports that the reading abilities of boys seem to be overlooked (Kendrick, 1999). Kendrick goes on to say that boys being behind girls in reading ability has been a widely accepted consequence of being born male (Kendrick, 1999). It has been found that a teacher’s perception of their boys’ efficacy, perceived difficulty and reading orientation is closely correlated with the perceptions of the male students in that teacher’s class along with the boys’ motivation to read (Coddington & Guthrie, 2009, p. 227).

The problem arises when we look at the national reading scores of high school students. The average eleventh grade boy is reading three years below the average girl (Sullivan. 2014, p xi). He also only averages 2.3 hours of reading per week and has a 30 percent chance of being in a remedial reading class by the third grade (Sullivan. 2014, p xi).



When it comes down to it, boy and girls read differently and for different reasons (Sullivan, 2014, p 29). Some of the differences in the way that boys read can be attributed to their anatomy. While both boys and girls have a corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the two halves and allows communication between the two, boys’ can be more than ten percent smaller than girls’ (Sullivan, 2014, p 31). Because of this, boys are more likely to approach a new problem either creatively or analytically, while girls would approach it in a more holistic manner. While this fact is insignificant in most aspects of life, language receptors in the brain are spread among both hemispheres requiring the use of both sides of the brain (Sullivan, 2014, pg 31).

When the brain becomes overwhelmed, it will shut down and the body quickly follows (Sullivan, 2014, p 31). When this happens to boys, they seek a stimulus in their environment such as a bright color, a quick movement, or an interesting sound to wake up their body and brain (Sullivan, 2014, p 31). Teachers often discredit this behavior as a child acting out or being off task (Sullivan, 2014, p 31).

It is vital that teachers understand the differences between the ways that boys and girls read in order to make adjustments to their classroom and create a more inclusive environment for both genders to learn. While girls can sit curled up in a bean bag for the entire forty-five minutes of silent reading, it might be more logical to provide boys with iPods to listen to music, fidgets to play with, or an open layout where boys can pace. When teachers put these accommodations in place they are creating environments that allow for boys to excel and succeed in the literacy world. Teachers who create boy-friendly environments have taken the first step to promote reading in the lives of the boys in their classrooms.

In this literature review I will discuss the problems associated with boys not reading. I will talk about who is directly involved when it comes to influencing boys to read, why boys are choosing not to read and what changes teachers and parents alike can make to promote reading in boys. Boys are graduating at a lower rate than girls, only 65% of males will graduate with a high school career (Jennings, 2011). Between the years of 1967 and 200, the enrollment rate of males traditional (18 to 24 years-old) males attending college decreased from 44.7% to 40.9% (Jennings, 2011). On top of that, in all fifty states there are more females graduating with bachelor’s degrees (Jennings, 2011). Because of these factors, men are falling behind in the workforce partially due to their educational deficits (Jennings, 2011).

While a world in which women are more successful in an educational environment then men in not necessarily a bad thing, it is important for both men and women to be successful. By the year 2020, President Obama would like for all adult Americans to have at least one year of higher education or career training as well as the highest number of college graduates in the world (Jennings, 2011). For this to happen, boys are required to graduate from high schools across the nation. Obama has said, “The countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.” (Jennings, 2011).

While reading is an essential life skill there are also many reasons in which it is important for boys to read. According to the Center on Education Policy,

To begin with perhaps the largest question; why do boys not like to read? According to Michael Sullivan, author of “Raising Boy Readers”, two of the biggest factors are stress and choice (2014, p xii). Sullivan says “the boys reading problem is not so much a matter of skill or illiteracy as one of motivation, what we call aliteracy.” (2014, p xii). Boys in the average classroom pick up on the high amount of stress regarding their reading ability, reading methods, debates between whole word and phonics and their lack of motivation and make a decision to avoid the stress and in turn avoid becoming a life-long reader (2014, p xii). Jane Kendricks’ study of the habits of good readers details four common traits found in boys who enjoy reading. These characteristics are student choice of reading materials; availability of reading materials; time for reading; and time to talk about what they read (Kendrick, 1999). Establishing these four characteristics into the lives of our boy readers’ teachers and parents can provide a brighter outlook in the future of their readers.

Sullivan emphasizes the importance of letting boys feel like they have control over their reading (Sullivan pg xii). Too many times boys are told what to read and when to read it, Sullivan says that boys that read well feel like they have more control over their own reading (Sullivan, 2014, p. xi).

According to Louisa Melton and Winston Pickett (1997) “students who are allowed to select their own material, then given a chance to read silently for a period each day, develop reading skills more quickly than those who are given only assigned reading.” (p 25). Sullivan discusses the scale he uses to help understand gender and reading:

“When it comes to gender and reading, I like to talk about what I call the GI Joe-Barbie spectrum. Think about a broad range of behaviors and characteristics from the most prototypically boy traits on one side (the GI Joe end of the spectrum), to the most prototypically girl traits on the other side (the Barbie end of the spectrum).

Now most children will not be found anywhere near the edges. Kids just aren’t that easy to pigeonhole. In fact, you will find boys showing reading characteristics even over on the half of the spectrum that we would consider to be more associated with girls, and that is fine. What is important is that a lot of boys will fall in a big bell curve right in the middle of the boy half of the spectrum. That is why we consider these behaviors to be generally boylike.” (2014, p x-xi).

In his book “Why Johnny Won’t Read”, Sullivan proposes that educators are more respectful of girls reading preferences than those of boys, meaning teachers are more likely to determine if a book is “good” based on if it is enjoyed by the females in his or her classroom (2004). It has been found that in the United States only one-third of classroom contain books of genres preferred by boys (Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). Some studies show that teachers reflect their reading choices in their classroom library; this is a problem because a majority of teachers in the United States are females (Gambell & Hunter). Including a variety of books that are considered “boy books” and “girl books” will benefit both male and female students (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009).

“Boy books” include, but are not limited to: cartoons, comics, sports pages, science fiction and special interest books (Katz, Crampton & Sokal. p. 4-8.). However it is important to keep in mind that there is no specific genre that all boys like, just as there is not specific genre that all boys will dislike.

Choosing books that your boys will enjoy comes down to how well a teacher or parent knows the boy of concern. One way for teachers to learn the interests of his or her students at the beginning of the school year is by giving students a survey inquiring about their favorite subjects and topics (Allyn, 2011). The teacher can use the information gathered by the survey to alter lessons, introduce books in the classroom library or include for read aloud.

According to a study done in 1999 by Worthy, Moorman and Turner, when students are faced with a learning environment that does not provide the child’s preferred reading materials that can make one of three choices: reading something outside of their interests, obtaining their preferred materials themselves, or not reading at all (1999). While many schools do have a limited selection of reading materials that interest boys such as magazines or encyclopedias school libraries often do not allow students to check these materials out. One of the most beneficial ways teachers can help their readers is by providing students with a broad range of books (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009).

Once boys have been provided with their desired reading materials it is crucial that they are given time to read (Kendrick, 1999). This time should be gauged to what is appropriate for the reader, but can range anywhere from ten to thirty minutes. The main focus of this reading time should be to show the reader that there are different purposes for reading, including for pleasure (Kendrick, 1999). This practice should not only be present in the classroom, it is important that boys have the opportunity to read what they want for pleasure in the home environment as well. During this time, the adult in the boy reader’s life should not be doing other tasks, by sitting in the same room as the child reading the adult is providing a reading role model for the child by validating that reading can be done for fun.

Although teachers generally implicate most of the reading curriculum that children encounter, families of the child have the most influential role (Kohn, 2002). Reading is often portrayed as a feminine activity, when asked who reads the most in their family, children most frequently name female family members including their mothers, sisters and grandmothers (Kahn). When a father was mentioned it was for a specific purpose like reading information that pertains to his work instead of as an enjoyable activity (Millard, 1997). Sullivan notes that just because boys aren’t seeing men read, does not mean that it is not happening. He said that most men read in isolation (2014, p 73). It is also believed that because the traditional role of a male is seen as tough and lacking emotion, boys are unwilling and unable to connect to text (American Association of School Librarians, 2004).

David Booth combined a list of four factors in which fathers exhibit that influence their sons to feel the same way:

1. Reading and physical activity are defined as mutually exclusive.
2. Fictional narrative is rejected.
3. Reading is seen as a forced activity, like homework.
4. Interest in math and science is viewed as opposition to literature (Booth 2002).

When these behaviors are exhibited unknowingly by fathers, sons are making the conscious decision that reading is something that they should not be proud of doing. Sullivan says that a great way to encourage boys to read is by holding a book club strictly for boys (2014, p 74). He says not to hold the meetings in a home like environment, but to hold them at a place that would promote a fun learning environment like a pizza shop or ice cream store. He also encourages meetings to be held in environments that relate to the book, for example at a car manufacturing plant if reading about cars or an Air and Space museum if reading about airplanes. (2014, p 74). By connecting reading with something that boys tend to enjoy, we are opening up our male students’ eyes to the possibilities of reading.

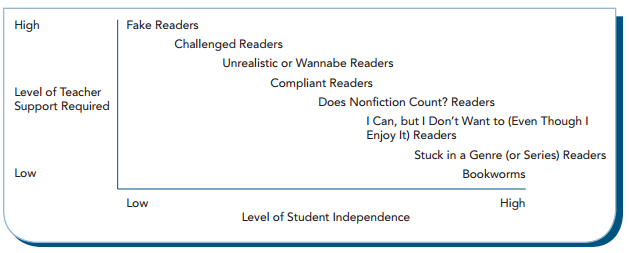
Adults can take reading time a step further by reading aloud to boys. Several researchers have noted that reading aloud to students is the single most important thing an adult can do to encourage reading in boys (Trelease, 1989. Carbo and Cole, 1995). When adults read to children, they show the child that reading is something that can provide enjoyment as well as learning to many people. Make reading aloud for children fun by bringing in various guests, like a member of a local sports team, another teacher, family member or community helpers to read to your children. When boys see members of their community proudly and willingly participating in reading it becomes more acceptable to read (Sullivan). Guest readers can also answer questions about the importance of reading in the boy’s future and the role of reading in various types of work. It is important that those who are reading to children are enthusiastic and show a love for literature in order to shine a positive light on reading.

The final essential part of harboring good reading habits in boys is encouraging them to talk about what they are reading. One of the most effective ways for students to receive book suggestions is through word of mouth and media. Teachers can use this information by providing different opportunities for boys to discuss what boys they did and did not enjoy. Suggestions include book talks, book blogs, and writing book ratings after completing a book or having a quick book conversation with a friend about what they enjoyed.

Talking about books with boys should not be limited to the classroom. Parents can encourage their sons to talk about books by having him choose a book that the entire family will read. The family can host weekly or even daily book talks to talk about what they liked and disliked about the chapter they completed. Book discussions can start as soon as boys being talking as well. When reading to their sons, parents should ask them questions about what is going on in the books, how various parts of the book make him feel or what his favorite part of the book was. Parents should allow this conversation to naturally progress into what the child would like to talk about and try to make connections back to the book when necessary.

The 1998 National Report Card, conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, showed that children who had the opportunity to share what they have read with family or friends had higher average reading scores that those who did not talk about their reading activities (NAEP, 1998,p. 5). Providing opportunities for children to discuss what their learning can open many learning opportunities in the classroom or at home.

To encourage these reading habits it is important that boys are put in an environment in which they will feel comfortable and encouraged. One way of doing this is through differentiated independent reading (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). There are many types of readers that boys can be classified as, ranging from a “fake reader” to a “bookworm” (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). By understanding where boys fall on this scale teachers and parents can implement better instruction and support for the reader (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Below is a diagram of various types of disengaged readers.

This diagram shows the relationship between the level of teachers support a child requires, verse the level of a student’s independence (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). It is important to note that the more independence a reader has and the less support a child has from a teacher generally shows a higher level of enjoyment from reading (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). However, a child closer to the “fake reader” side of the spectrum will not become a better reader without the support of a teacher (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). 

Teachers can provide support for their male students by first being open minded in their classroom (Senn). Teachers must keep in mind the overall goal: getting boys to *want* to read. Many parents and teachers often forget that read is reading. They discredit boys for reading things like video game manuals, magazines and baseball cards because the child does not have a novel in his hands (Senn). Researchers suggest starting with what is known that a boy likes to read and expanding upon that topic appropriately (Allyn). For example, if a child strictly reads video game manuals, provide him with a book series based off of a popular video game like the Minecraft Manuals or Lego Ninjago books or a nonfiction book about how video game consoles work. From there topics could be broadened to fantasy or nonfiction books about computer programming.

Teachers and parents who have positive attitudes and outlooks on reading in the classroom tend to have better readers (Freedmon, 2003). In a study completed in 2003 by Beverly Freedmon, it was found that most kindergarten teachers believed the girls in their classrooms were better readers than the boys and boys were less ready for kindergarten than the average six year-old girl (p. 5). When researchers looked at the reading test scores of the students in the surveyed class, they found the teacher’s feelings to be consistent with what test scores showed (Freedmon, 2003). Research has shown that students often perform to the standards set before them by their teachers (Ulper, 2011). If a teacher sets standards low and make exceptions for his or her class, the class will perform on a lower level than a class in which a teacher holds his or her students accountable for their actions and school work (Ulper, 2011).

Other strategies teachers can use include associating what boys are reading with existing knowledge (Schwartz, 2002). This is a simple step that teachers can take to teach boys beginning comprehension skills. By connecting existing knowledge to current literature, boys also express more interest and enthusiasm towards what they are reading.

Teachers can also help boys learn beginning reading skills by letting them follow along on paper to help connect spoken sounds with the symbol combinations they see (Schwartz, 2002). Boys will also gain confidence in reading when they are given the opportunity to read aloud without interruption and corrections (Schwartz, 2002).

One more extreme way of encouraging reading in boys has been seen in single-sex classrooms. Research has shown that male-only classrooms have shown significant improvements in boys reading scores (Stotsky, Denny & Tschepikow, 2010). Compared to the mix gender class at an Arkansas Elementary School who lost eight points on their standardized literacy test, a male-only class at the same school showed an improvement of fifty-six points (Stotsky, Denny & Tschepikow, 2010). Teachers of the all-male classroom noted that not only were boys less distracted in class, but there were more opportunities to cater to the various interests of the boys. Reading was no longer seen as a feminine activity because everyone who was in the classroom was male and the boys were more comfortable talking about the books they were reading because they felt less pressure from the girls in their class (Stotsky, Denny & Tschepikow, 2010).

While having all schools convert to single-sex classes strictly to benefit boys’ reading scores is unlikely, a change in the education world needs to be made for the sake of our male student’s futures. Providing boys with literacy positive reading environments is the easiest way to make improvements in their goal of lifelong reading. Giving our boys, and even girls, various devices like fidgets, open lays out and iPod or allowing students to read in a position and location that they find most comfortable are easy steps to promote reading as a positive experience.

Coming into class with an unbiased eye will make your classroom a more gender-inclusive place. Including books and learning materials aimed towards genres that boys enjoy will give male students a feeling of importance the minute they walk into the classroom. Supporting the habits of good readers throughout the classroom and curriculum is vital to encouraging boys to read as well. Giving boys a variety of reading materials and genres to choose from avoids the feelings of books being forced upon them, ultimately making reading a more enjoyable experience.

Identifying the type of reader the boys in a classroom are and providing assistance to them as necessary will make independent reading time more productive for boys. It is vital that boys are given time each day to choose a piece of literature of their liking to read. This time should be uninterrupted and an appropriate length for the children involved.

It is important to remain patient with boy readers. While we might not consider an owner’s manual for a car literature, reading is still reading. Take what we know that boys like to read and build off of what the boys in your classroom are showing you. Incorporate that topic into other content areas to make the topic of cars more significant and engaging for boys. Getting to know the likes and dislikes of the students in your classroom helps you to become a better teacher in many aspects.

This topic was incredibly important to me after spending a summer as the lead teacher of a school age program. While I understood the importance of reading and literature during the summer months, I under estimated the struggles that I would encounter while trying to get my 14 boys to read when they would rather be playing.

The summer was a learning experience for me and I unknowingly incorporated many of these strategies into my teaching. We would go the library once a week and I expected all of my students to choose picture books and fun novels. However a majority of my boys went straight for the nonfiction section of the library. Week after week these boys would swap nonfiction books about lightening, cobras, and race cars. I took this information and incorporated it into our daily activities. We partner read with nonfiction animal books and created posters to share what we learned, we read books as a class that related to the field trip that we went on for that specific week.

I saw a significant difference in the willingness of the boys in my class to read by the end of the summer when I was willing to make changes to my expectations of reading. This proves the various strategies that I discovered while researching this topic. Part of being a good teacher is making the adjustments needed to allow for your students to succeed. Changing your view points from to enrich the lives of the boys in your classroom will not only help them succeed in your classroom, but also though high school and into their professional careers. To quote Dr. Seuss’s I Can Read With My Eyes Shut, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn the more places you’ll go.”

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