

# "Not just boring stories": Reconsidering the gender gap for boys

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By summarizing current research regarding issues that boys face with literacy, this author offers strategies that might help bridge the literacy gap for them.

Do not train boys to learning by force and harshness, but lead them by what amuses them, so that they may better discover the bent of their minds. (Plato)

**My son Gabe** went through almost 12 years of language arts classes without learning to enjoy reading. He was lucky to have a fascination with computers during the years when they were being developed and changing at a speed that kept pace with his attention span. Otherwise, he might have become one of the many unfortunate boys who have fallen through the cracks because of the apparent gender gap in literacy.

In the United States during the 1960s, the women's movement enlightened us about the damage that gender discrimination can cause in the lives of our students. Teachers became detectives on the lookout for subtle forms of discrimination in our texts and in our teaching styles in order to eliminate any hidden bias that might have a negative effect on our students. Being the caring professionals that we are, when we learned that girls were lagging behind boys in the areas of math and science, we researched and learned new

ways to teach girls that encouraged their participation in those fields. We have done, and are continuing to do, a good job in that endeavor. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that at grade 12 there is no significant difference between girls and boys

in science (O'Sullivan, Lauko, Grigg, Qian, & Zhang, 2003), and in math only a small gap exists between the average scale scores of boys and girls, while girls at each grade had higher math scores in 2000 than in 1990 (Santapau, 2001). However, in our zeal to close the gender gap for girls, we may have overlooked the wide gender gap that exists for boys in the area of literacy.

The goal of this article is to shed some light on the problems that exist

with boys and literacy, and to explore how we, their teachers, can examine our practice to eliminate any bias that may be slighting them. As a parent and an educator, I am aware that what children bring to school from home is a key ingredient in the recipe for success. I believe that teachers and parents must work together to bring boys back into the fold of literacy success. Therefore, I begin this article by telling the story of my own son's struggles in literacy. I then present several important themes that emerged from my survey of the research around the issue of boys and literacy. Finally, I present some teaching strategies that incorporate these themes and are promising in our work to help all students

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become strong critical listeners, speakers, readers, and writers.

## Gabe's story

My son Gabe loved books and reading from an early age. I had begun reading to him before he was born and read to him every day. As an early childhood educator, I went overboard creating a print-rich environment that included labeling items in our home in complete sentences. Our guests were often amused that above his clock was a decorative sentence strip with the words "A clock tells us what time it is." I made sure that his dad read to him daily, and we listened to books on tape while Gabe was in the car.

When his kindergarten teacher called and told me I should have been working on his handwriting, I had my first glimpse at the difference between what I called literacy and the literacy skills he would need to be successful in school. During his elementary years, I saw that he was reading and writing, but he was not advancing beyond invented spellings, and his handwriting never improved much. Somewhere between first grade and middle school, Gabe began to tell me that he wasn't a good reader and he didn't like reading, although he insisted that I read *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (1988) because it was "the best book ever written." He was very nervous when he took the required middle school writing test, but he made one of the highest scores in the school. This was another indication that he was "doing the work of literacy" but was somehow not making the connections needed to be successful in his language arts class.

One day when he was in high school, his sister came to me and said Gabe had asked for her help with his literature homework, and she wanted me to know that he couldn't read it. I knew he could read it, so I investigated further and discovered that what she meant was that he was having difficulty writing more than a literal summary of the piece. He didn't understand the symbolism in

the story and therefore failed the assignment. He is, as many boys are, very literal.

When I tried to help Gabe with this problem, he told me again that he didn't read well and he didn't like to read. I asked him how he had learned the complicated computer programming languages C++ and Java, as well as Unix system administration. I knew that he had taught himself by reading because I had purchased the books. Those books were intimidating to me, but Gabe had read and interpreted them. Between books like those and the Internet, he had taught himself to program and design software. He discounted nonfiction reading and discounted his own ability to read and understand text. Soon after that, Gabe dropped out of high school, made a perfect score on the General Educational Development test (GED), and was hired by a major corporation to design software. He has been successfully employed at this job for five years, yet he still says he doesn't "read."

What happened to Gabe between kindergarten and high school happens to many boys in the United States. This is not to say that it doesn't happen to girls, or that it happens to all boys, but the professional literature indicates that the majority of boys in the world are struggling in the area of literacy. When boys are not successful in school, their confidence is impaired. They are more likely to endure disciplinary problems, be suspended from classes, or drop out of school (Pollack, 1998). If we do not want to live in a society where a large segment of the population is missing the joy and understandings that are available through literature and critical reading, writing, and thought, then we cannot afford to take these issues lightly.

## What the professional literature confirms

In the same way that we need to promote success for girls in the areas of math and science, we need to promote literacy success for boys. It is important

for educators to look at the unique problems associated with gender so that we can promote learning that helps all of our students evolve into productive world citizens. The latest national test scores show that girls have met or exceeded the reading performance of boys at all age levels. The NAEP reveals that the gap observed between reading scores of fourth-grade males and females in previous years continues to be significant and was larger in 2000 than in 1998. "Female students outperformed male students by 10 points in 2000, regardless of whether accommodations were permitted" (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001, p. 70). This gender gap in literacy is equivalent to about one and a half years of school (Gurian, 1998). In 1985, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) investigated writing achievement across 14 countries and found gender to be the most powerful predictor of performance. In a 1988 IEA study involving 32 nations, girls achieved higher total reading scores in all literacy areas (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Findings of the Educational Testing Service reveal that the gap in writing between eighth-grade males and females is more than six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning (Newkirk, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Newkirk pointed out that this gap between the writing performance of males and females "is comparable to that between Whites and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systematic social and economic discrimination in this country" (p. 295). It is clear that schools are failing to meet the literacy needs of the majority of boys in the United States.

As alarming as these statistics are, I believe there is much that we as literacy educators can do to improve the situation for the boys we are entrusted to teach. Perhaps we might start by broadening our definition of literacy to include what boys are already doing outside of school in the area of literacy and to include the topics about which they are interested. We might also reflect on our practice to question whether we always remember to be sensitive to the individual learning

pace of each boy, as well as his learning style. We then might seek to employ innovative teaching strategies that build upon boys' current interests in ways that are sensitive to their individual developmental and emotional needs.

## **Broadening our definition of literacy**

Many researchers are quick to point out that much of the gender gap in literacy stems from our current narrow definitions of literacy. They point out that boys are making meaning with texts, but are doing so in ways that schools aren't recognizing, such as reading information books, magazines, and Internet sites. On the whole, boys read less fiction than girls. They prefer magazines that are analytical and contain facts more than narrative. These preferences affect their motivation toward school-based reading (Coles & Hall, 2001).

Gabe loved science, and he found his calling in life when he first laid eyes on a computer. He was explaining how computers work using zeros and ones to me while he was in the primary grades, before we owned a computer. After we purchased one, he read information books about computers and visited websites devoted to computer programming. He also enjoyed playing video games and subscribed to magazines devoted to solving the puzzles of various popular video games, but his grades in school indicated that he was a poor reader and he did not enjoy language arts. When I asked him about this, he said, "Reading is boring." He saw reading as an activity he participated in during language arts time and did not include his personal reading for information in that definition. Gabe was reading information books to discover what he wanted to learn about the computer, and he was writing on message boards and in chat rooms to learn more, but he did not connect these acts with the type of reading and writing he did at school.

Coles and Hall (2001) stated, "If we were to broaden current definitions of school literacy, we

might find that boys' vernacular literacies are actually serving boys rather well, although the school system is failing to recognize or to capitalize on this" (p. 219). Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, and Lankshear (2002) further stated that when schools redefine what it means to be literate in modern times, "what children and young people are able to do successfully with language and literacy is given a wider purview, which automatically includes out-of-school literacy practices not normally valued in schools" (p. 93). This "valuing" by the schools would not only change the way statistics report boys' literacy acts, but would increase their literacy skills by broadening their own definitions of literacy. When this broader definition includes what boys are already doing with literacy, it would increase their sense of self-efficacy with reading and writing, encourage them to read and write more, and promote the image of reading as a masculine, as well as a feminine, act. What boys are already doing would provide an entry point from which to scaffold new understandings and build more nuanced reading and writing. They would begin to see themselves as readers and writers in the way that Coles and Hall (2001) described:

Sustained literacy habits are based on the confidence and independence which come from seeing yourself as a reader and writer, someone who has the power to use literacy as a tool, as a means of self-expression and as a means of enjoyment. (p. 220)

If school definitions of literacy were broadened to promote the kinds of literacy that are valued in the home and in the workplace, such as reading for information and computer literacy, boys would be motivated to succeed and improve in these areas (Coles & Hall, 2001). In addition, Probst (2003) made the point that

considering why and how students read those other texts in their lives, those texts that lie outside the books we present them, may give us some ideas about the motives they bring—or fail to bring—to the texts we hope they'll read for us in our classes and afterwards, when they've escaped our clutches. (p. 14)

When I asked Gabe about this idea, he gave the following response:

The Internet was what really made the value of reading sink in for me. In school I never found most of what I was reading to be relevant or helpful to my life at all, just pointless boring stories. When I found the Internet I discovered that reading actually can equate to learning, and therefore can be useful and fun.

## Interest and choice

Millard (1997) "suggests that boys are disadvantaged in academic literacy as a result of current curricular emphases, teacher text and topic choices, and lack of availability of texts that match their interests and needs" (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 14). Likewise, Probst (2003) argued, "If we want [boys] to read carefully and analyze conscientiously, then the works they study have to matter to them" (p. 16). The importance of interest for motivation and learning has been well established in educational and psychological research since the early 1900s. Recent research has defined interest as an interaction between a person and the environment or context. Personal interest in a subject motivates and facilitates the student to process on a deeper level. It is imperative that boys' preferences are addressed in order to foster conditions for learning (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Smith and Wilhelm suggested that literacy needs to be redefined in terms that "help us offer more choices and explore the meanings of different kinds of texts with particular powers to engage and express" (p. 186). However, "evidence abounds that language teachers are more likely to select and use narrative fiction that may be less appealing to boys" (Brozo, 2002, p. 77). When I asked Gabe if his teachers had valued all types of reading, he replied, "Some teachers treated sci-fi books like they were pornography; others were just glad to see reading—period."

So how do we, as teachers, know which texts our boys will find appealing? In an academic discussion between Young and Brozo (2001), Brozo

suggested that "books with traditional male appeal have the greatest likelihood of engendering engagement in reading for boys" (p. 323). However, all boys are unique individuals, and we must be careful not to make stereotypical assumptions about what they will like. I remember when Gabe came home very upset because his first-grade class had been reading a book at school about a little boy named Pierre who didn't care about anything. I knew as an educator that this famous and well-loved Maurice Sendak (1962) book is a favorite among many students, but Gabe was outraged that he should have to read such a cruel story. He told me that I wouldn't want him to read it because it was like some of the violent TV shows that I wouldn't allow him to watch. He had nightmares about it and dreaded reading class until the unit was complete. I was reminded as a teacher that even those books that are considered favorites aren't always appealing to all children. Gabe did not like discussing Pierre's feelings or bad mood, and he shut down emotionally during that class period. When asked what he did enjoy about reading in school, Gabe responded,

I remember that in school on library day I would always get resource books like books about how to make paper airplanes, how to do magic tricks, books about fighter jets, chemistry—stuff that had actual information that I was interested in—not just boring stories. I still prefer that kind of reading.

I am not suggesting that as teachers we shouldn't expose boys to literature that they might not seem interested in or that we should never discuss character feelings. On the contrary, literature is a wonderful way to develop new interests and build new understandings of ourselves and others. What I am suggesting is that the path to these new interests should be scaffolded from boys' current interests. In order for this to occur, teachers must have a keen sensitivity to the personalities and interests of the boys in the class, and boys must be given some choice in the selection of texts.

It has been well documented that giving students choice and control in reading material plays an important role in involvement with and enjoyment of reading and in fostering voluntary reading. Brozo (2002) stated, "Choice and control are two ingredients commonly missing in instruction provided to adolescent boys who are not reading as would be expected for their grade level and who are disinterested and reluctant readers" (p. 18). The opportunity for students to select their own reading materials promotes increased positive feelings about reading and improved achievement (Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Smith and Wilhelm (2002), in their recent study of boys, discovered that "boys almost universally felt that school denied them choice and control and therefore any sense of personal agency or competence" (p. 109). The boys in their study did not see reading as a way to develop new interests but rather as a way to feed and nurture existing interests. They also found that, despite all that, the boys still believed in the importance of school. This means that teachers have less of an obstacle to face when trying to engage learners if they can tap into existing student interests, build on them to develop new interests, and show students the connection of learning to their lives (Smith & Wilhelm).

## Expanding our teaching styles

In addition to broadening our definition of literacy to include activities and topics of interest to boys, we need to develop and implement innovative teaching approaches to address our boys' specific needs as students. This may mean providing numerous opportunities for hands-on learning and problem solving as well as interactive teaching (Pollack, 1998). In her research, Millard (1997) found that

boys and girls not only chose different kinds of fiction but they were oriented to receive the same books in different ways. Boys read with an eye to finding out new information, even from their fiction; girls enjoyed the dissection of relationships. (p. 160)

Coles and Hall (2001) found that boys' literacy choices tend to give greater emphasis to taking information from the text and analyzing it rather than analyzing motivation or characterization. We can take advantage of this desire to analyze by explicitly teaching boys how to read and write. Pirie (2002) described the way some males feel inadequate when reading fiction:

To some men, more comfortable with the literal and the explicit, it seems that both poems and women expect you to read between the lines. What teachers see as subtlety or implication sometimes gets translated in boys' minds into a blind hunt for secret messages and the perverse notion that literature has hidden meanings. What kind of nutty person would try to hide meaning? Why can't they just come out and tell you what they mean? (p. 82)

I don't mean to imply that we should stop seeking emotional responses or teaching the subtleties of good literature, but rather that we should add to our teaching repertoire the explicit teaching of these subtleties and of what good readers and writers do. As Pirie (2002) explained, "When these reading activities are made explicit through think-alouds and other forms of classroom instruction, poorer readers suddenly have a chance to see these secret habits and try them out for themselves" (p. 82). If we expand our teaching styles to address our boys' specific needs as readers and writers, I believe that we can become "mediators between boys and a richer world of reading" (Pirie, p. 87). Studies have shown that

boys will go to great lengths to establish themselves as "not female" and follow what their peer group establishes as gender-specific behavior.... This is particularly true if the activities involve effort and the chance of failure, for incompetence and expending effort are also seen as unmasculine. (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 13)

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that the young men in their study shared these feelings and "gravitated to activities in which they felt sufficient competence to have a feeling of control" (p. 30). They found that the young men in their

study also wanted to be challenged, "but they wanted to be challenged in contexts in which they felt confident of improvement, if not success. If the challenge seemed too great, they tended to avoid it, instead returning to a domain in which they felt more confident" (Smith & Wilhelm, p. 37). Our teaching styles need to include activities in which boys will feel confident and successful.

It is generally assumed that boys do not enjoy discussing feelings. Some studies indicate that boys are reluctant to discuss feelings because they may be seen as feminine (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Kindlon and Thompson (1999) pointed out that although there is evidence that, in fact, boys react to emotions to a greater degree than girls, they do not have the "emotional literacy" to discuss their feelings or the feelings of others. They contended that many boys are not encouraged from an early age to be emotionally literate in the way that girls are, so we must teach them.

We build emotional literacy, first, by being able to identify and name our emotions; second, by recognizing the emotional content of voice and facial expression, or body language; and third, by understanding the situations or reactions that produce emotional states. (p. 5)

Pirie (2002) pointed out that teachers in the United States often use a discussion of feelings as a motivational activity when sometimes the sequence should be reversed to help those students who need to start with something more concrete. He suggested constructing a curriculum that allows feelings to build over time in order to construct a larger cognitive structure that would lead to deeper learning.

From the point of view of feelings, it allows for related experiences—reading, writing, discussion, thinking—to accumulate over time, so that whatever emotional response there is will be deepened, enriched, and truly educated, rather than being the flashy, quick responses that some students do well and some can't pull off at all. (Pirie, p. 45)

We know that literature is an effective vehicle for involving boys in the kinds of discussions that will build their emotional literacy. However, our teaching styles need to invite boys into these discussions in a sensitive, gradual manner that allows them to make connections with the character's feelings and motivations, while maintaining their own sense of competence and self-efficacy with reading.

## Respect the learning pace of every boy

Along with many other boys, Gabe did not have the fine motor skills needed for neat handwriting when he started school, and although he had a large vocabulary, spelling correctly required a tremendous effort on his part, which he was not usually willing to expend. Studies indicate that boys develop language skills and large- and small-scale muscle proficiencies at a developmentally different rate than girls. Inappropriate matches between activities and the developmental level of a boy can lead to academic failure and low self-esteem (Pollack, 1998). Progress that is too slow for the child can lead to lack of interest and boredom as it did with Gabe in reading class. When I asked him why reading in school had seemed so boring, he stated,

I think the main thing that made assigned reading boring wasn't the actual material being assigned, but rather it was that the rest of the class moved so slowly. The class always seemed to move at the level of the slowest reader, which made it incredibly boring for me.

We all remember a time when we were bored listening to an explanation of something we already understood. In addition, we are aware that there are few things as humiliating for a student as being asked to learn material before he or she is ready or able. Therefore, it is critical for us to be patient and sensitive to each boy's individual pace as a learner (Pollack, 1998).

## A few innovative strategies

Some schools have had success with providing boys-only classes in reading and writing. While this may not be practical in all situations, creative programs such as a boys-only book club may lead to success. A boys-only book club would provide an opportunity to give boys a choice of books and topics and would allow them to discuss their unique interests and ideas at their own pace. Book clubs can be held during school at the same time a girls-only book club is being held, or, for teachers working in schools with a more rigid curriculum, gender-specific book clubs held after school might offer more options. Book clubs can also include male volunteer leaders from the community in order to give boys more male readers as role models. There is no one prescribed way to run a book club, but there are many books and websites on the subject that offer suggestions and activities for interested teachers. Book clubs are an innovative way to engage boys and invite them to explore and fall in love with books.

In his book *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader*, Brozo (2002) described a teacher who successfully addressed the issue of peer pressure by labeling a section of his classroom bookshelf "Guys' Rack." Boys and girls were encouraged to choose books from every area of the bookshelf; therefore, the girls did not feel disenfranchised. This label was introduced to point out books that might be of interest to guys. It eliminated the fear of ridicule the boys had been experiencing while selecting books. With a clear explanation of the purpose and perhaps the inclusion of a section for girls' interests, this is an innovative but simple strategy that invites boys into the arena of reading.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that "if boys are not first engaged emotionally with texts—if they do not care about the characters and issues presented—then they will never proceed to more nuanced readings" (p. 195). One approach that several researchers suggest for scaffolding boys' need for competence, for problem solving, and for personal engagement with issues they care about is

through inquiry-based instruction. Inquiry-based instruction is a process whereby students or teachers formulate questions and then students research the answers using many sources, usually answering the question in written form. Teachers can facilitate these lessons in a variety of ways depending on the needs of their students, including more or less teacher-directed questions, independent or group projects, and Internet quests. Some teachers provide the topics and the students formulate the questions, while other teachers may allow a choice of topics for which they provide the questions. Inquiry-based instruction provides an opportunity for learners to collaboratively explore topics of personal and social interest using the perspectives offered by others as well as by various knowledge domains for purposes of producing a more just, fair, and thoughtful world (Harste, 2001). Reading as inquiry is different than reading for comprehension. While reading as inquiry focuses on making and sharing meaning, it goes further to deepen understanding and make sense of the world (Harste, 2001). As Harste suggested, "Writing as inquiry means writing as a tool for thinking rather than as a skill to be mastered" (p. 3). "The kind of interest and purpose that can be cultivated through inquiry-based units will encourage students to tackle difficult texts that they might otherwise reject" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 195).

Another way to engage boys emotionally with texts is through drama. Drama is a fun way to allow students an opportunity to release some physical energy while engaging in literacy acts. In addition, Pirie (2002) pointed out, "For students who are uncomfortable talking about their own feelings, drama offers rich opportunities to be someone else or somewhere else, and to deflect the expression of feelings into fictitious form" (p. 47).

Another powerful strategy for engaging boys in literature is to invite men into the classroom for book talks. Brozo (2002) found that "most teen and preteen boys rarely see fathers or any adult men reading anything at all" (p. 97). This can lead to boys developing the notion that it isn't manly to read, or that certain types of books are more

acceptable than others. As Gabe said, "In my school reading in general wasn't uncool, but reading certain types of material was definitely considered uncool." Many teachers solve this problem by inviting men from all walks of life and all age groups into the classroom to read aloud and discuss their favorite books. I did this when I taught kindergarten, Brozo (2002) did it when he worked with middle school students, and it can be just as effective in high school. Teachers can arrange for men in the community—parents, coaches, school administrators—to read parts of their favorite books to the students. I found that when I told men about the reading statistics of boys they were eager to volunteer. My problem was not finding enough men to volunteer, it was finding enough time in my schedule to accommodate them all. This is a powerful and fun way to teach boys that reading is a masculine activity.

## The power of literature

The gender gap in literacy is significant, and it is not improving. As literacy instructors, we must be proactive in discovering better ways of teaching boys so that we can draw all of our students into the inner circle of literacy. We must broaden our definition of literacy to include reading practices that haven't been valued by schools in the past. We must listen to our boys and give them some choice in topics and activities in order to keep them engaged and build upon their strengths. We must expand our teaching styles to include active, hands-on activities, and to include challenging activities that ensure success and build confidence. We need to employ innovative teaching strategies such as boys-only book clubs, guys' and girls' book racks, and inquiry-based instruction, and provide male readers as role models. Finally, we must be sensitive to the individual learning pace of each boy and instill in each of them a sense of competence.

Gabe is a fine young man, and he has overcome the obstacles in his path to literacy in ways that make me enormously proud of him. In his

usual manner, he is currently reading five different information books at once, although he still has a tendency to discount this type of reading. Although he has triumphed, he hasn't learned to enjoy and profit from all types of literary texts. It saddens me that he doesn't appreciate the delight and insights that fiction can bring.

In many ways, Gabe represents other boys who might be slipping through the cracks in our language arts classes, but not all boys will triumph like he did. Not all of our students will have parents who will model the importance of reading and writing. Many of the parents of our students don't know how to provide opportunities for their sons to develop these skills outside of school, or they have similar misconceptions about literacy. In addition, not all boys will be lucky enough to have a clearly developed interest that will carry them into a career path as Gabe did with computers. We can't afford to let them slip through the cracks. We don't want our boys to lose the joy and power that literature provides. As literacy educators, we believe in the power of literature to help our students understand life and create visions for the future. It is my hope as a parent and as an educator that we will continue to look closely at the unique problems associated with gender and close the gap in literacy so that the lives of all of our students, including the boys, will be enriched by the power and beauty of literature.

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