

What We Want: Boys and Girls Talk about Reading

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Abstract

Most school-age boys score lower than girls at every level on standardized tests of reading comprehension in almost every country where tested. The amount of reading that a child does is directly related to reading fluency; the more one reads, the more proficient one becomes. After reviewing theories and research studies investigating why boys perform less well than girls, a consensus emerges that one reason boys read less is because the kind of reading they are given to do in school does not connect to their interests. A small empirical study in one rural elementary school provides further insight into motivations for reading and non-reading by both boys and girls.

The evidence is incontrovertible that as a group, school-age boys score lower than girls at every level on standardized tests of reading comprehension, in almost every country where tested, most notably in the United States (NCES 2002), Canada, England, and Australia, where students are continuously tested. Therefore, the obvious conclusion from this data is that we are failing to make readers of our sons. Analyses of statistics are many and controversial, especially as the latest round of “educational reform” fueled by the Education Act of 2001 has generated more high-stakes testing of students and measurable accountability on the part of teachers, schools, and school districts. Additionally, computers have made gathering, storing, and analyzing statistics simpler than ever before, and the Internet has made it easier to publish and retrieve them. But how do the children themselves feel about reading? Teachers and school library media specialists (SLMSs), trained in reading, in books, and in best practices, often assume that they know what is best for students. At what juncture should the students’ viewpoints be taken into consideration?

Review of the Literature

In “Guys and Reading,” former teacher Jon Scieszka (2003) laments his son Jake’s view that “reading is for girls.” While Scieszka’s daughter reads voraciously, when he asked his son, “What books are you packing to take on vacation?” the unenviable answer to a famous author father was “Why would I take books? This is supposed to be a vacation.” Scieszka says:

Researching the problems boys have with reading, I’ve come to the conclusion that much of the cause of boys’ reluctance to read can be reduced to a single, crucial element—motivation. Reading research shows that young people need high-quality teachers, a wide variety of books and a range of reading activities. They need to hear books read aloud.

They need to spend time talking about books. But in order for any of these efforts to be successful, kids need to want to read (2003, 17–18).

Jeffrey Wilhelm encourages boys' connection with reading:

The reason certain text types (like nonfiction) and features of text (visuals) tend to engage boys has much less to do with the text itself, and much more to do with the connection these features encourage readers to make to the world. Certain text features are more applicable and easily connected to the lives of students, and that's the reason boys tend to enjoy text with these features. The ability to see oneself and one's concerns in a text, to take the substance of one's reading to the world were significant contributors to achieving "flow" ... a total immersion in the immediate experience of reading. Indeed this kind of immersion is the basic fact of engaged reading (2002, 16).

Boys identify with the men in their lives, and men, in general, don't read as many books as women. Developmentally, boys view the world as a place filled with rules and tools, and their job is to understand how it works in order to get things done. Newspapers, how-to manuals, and other brief, informative texts address this need admirably. But they don't provide boys with the sustained, language-rich reading experiences they need to become more mature readers (Sullivan 2004).

Another important factor is how teachers, SLMSs, and parents respond to the books that boys appreciate and enjoy. Boys want books about motorcycles and cars, snakes and sports, dinosaurs and the military. The illustrations are important, as are the book jackets; they have to look good to be "cool." These books are chosen for information and for entertainment, not for story or literary quality. If they choose fiction, it's usually horror, science fiction, humor, action, or adventure. With some notable exceptions, boys' preferred reading material rarely makes it to the Caldecott or Newbery lists so beloved of librarians. R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* books, a horror series that appeals to many boys, are deliberately not selected for, or are even banned from, many school libraries, and Stine himself has appeared on the ALA's top ten banned authors lists for years. *Captain Underpants*, poster child for one year's Banned Book Week advertisements and another favorite of boys, also is banned by many school libraries.

Brian Sturm (2003) looked at children's reading preferences, analyzing more than two thousand surveys with public library patrons. His primary results indicated that children prefer animals, science, sports, and literature. Just more than half the surveys were completed by girls. Sturm's study looked at children's interests, not just their preferences. His data was generated from children's answers to the questions, "What would you like to know more about?" and "Where did your librarian tell you to start?"

Most students, when asked, are queried about their reading preferences. An important point to remember: students' preferences and their interests are not always the same. *Essentials of Children's Literature* (Thomlinson and Lynch-Brown 2002) defines a reading preference as a stated or implied choice between several reading options. For example: choose a book to read from the collection in the back of the classroom, or "Would you rather read a romance, a mystery, or a science fiction story?" A preference implies a forced choice between options selected by someone other than oneself. Leveled reading programs, such as Accelerated Reader and Scholastic Reading Counts, are preference-based programs.

An interest, on the other hand, comes from within oneself, can encompass whatever can be imagined, and implies freedom of choice. Knowledge of children's reading preferences provides information about children in general, but knowledge of children's reading interests is personal

and individual. Because most teachers and SLMSs work with particular groups of children over an extended time, they can learn the interests of each child within the group, and in so doing gain powerful, effective knowledge to use in successfully matching children and books. This requires conversation and communication with the individual child.

In defining the term reading itself, there are those who maintain that “readers” are only those who, in Louise Rosenblatt’s (1995) terms, are “aesthetic” readers. She defined aesthetic reading as the habit of explaining the literary qualities of a work such as rhythm, imagery, metaphor, and departures from ordinary diction. Other reading, in her terms, was “efferent” reading, or reading that is for a practical purpose—selecting out and analytically abstracting information, ideas, or directions for action that will remain when the reading is over. Most classroom reading instruction is aesthetic reading. Many, if not most boys, however, tend to read efferently.

Because an information book is much more difficult to read at storytime due to the lack of storyline, teachers often don’t bother. When reading aloud to children, teachers and most parents inevitably choose fiction. Adults want boys to choose books that help them become mature readers, that reward reflection, and that emphasize the emotional rather than the physical; books that will help them study for standardized tests in reading comprehension that emphasize narrative. In short, what boys believe to be “girl books.” Girls are much more motivated by interpersonal relationships and character analyses than boys.

These facts support Sullivan’s (2004) proposition that educators are far less respectful of boys’ reading preferences than those of girls. We define “good” books, he says, as those that conform to the way that girls think. When teachers assign students to read a book or to do a book report, nonfiction books often are off-limits; nor do newspapers, magazines, or Web sites make the approved list. Most boy-friendly books never show up when “good” books are discussed, are rarely booktalked by librarians, and do not make recommended reading lists. He contends that boys notice the omission, and recognize the implication: that books that are funny or action packed or fantasylike aren’t any good, and that the media that interest them are not acceptable. In other words, boys are attracted to substandard materials, and, therefore, reading isn’t for them.

David Booth’s experiences as a teacher and father in Canada place him firmly in the camp with Sullivan. He contends that because traditional male roles downplay expressing and sharing the feelings, emotions, and experiences of others, boys are unwilling to discuss some kinds of texts in a public forum such as a classroom. And that in many school cultures, achieving and demonstrating a commitment to academic goals are seen as “unboy” and unmasculine behavior. Because fathers are boys’ main role models, and men less likely to read than women, he reports four factors that contribute to men who are fathers rejecting reading as a voluntary activity, and, by implication, influencing their sons to feel the same:

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

“Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys” (Smith and Wilhelm 2002), a study of inner-city teens, highlights a dozen major findings of work on boys and reading, of which all educators and those academics studying the subject should be aware:

- Boys don’t comprehend narrative fiction as well as girls.
- Boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls.

- Boys are more inclined to read informational texts.
- Boys are more inclined to read magazines and newspaper articles.
- Boys are more inclined to read comic books and graphic novels than girls.
- Boys like to read about hobbies, sports, and things they do or want to do.
- Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor.
- Some groups of boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy.
- The appearance of a book and cover is important to boys.
- Few boys entering school call themselves nonreaders, but by high school more than half do.
- Boys tend to think they are bad readers.

If reading is perceived as feminized, boys will go to great lengths to avoid it (Smith and Wilhelm 2002).

Michael Gurian (2001) argues that what boys like to read springs naturally from their experiences and how their brains are wired. He asserts that boys' brains engage in less cross-hemispheric activity than girls'; therefore, they need an extra jolt of sound, color, motion or some physical stimulation to get their brains up to speed. This internal wiring explains boys' preferences for sports, action, and adventure books, and also nonfiction titles that satisfy their innate desire to make sense of the universe and to test its boundaries. Boys' fascination with comics and graphic novels can be explained using this rationale. The details of the drawings are as important to the story as text, and reward close examination of pictures rather than words.

In their controversial book *Brain Sex*, Moir and Jessel (1989) premise that a baby's brain is born sexually biased. They also believe that the discipline of school is deeply unnatural to boys. "His is a world of action, exploration and things. But school tells him to sit quiet, listen, not fidget, and pay attention to ideas; everything, in fact, that his brain and body are telling him not to do" (64). They assert that understanding the difference between the male and female brain has implications for education, and that it makes infinitely more sense to reform our educational system in a way that acknowledges, and adapts to, our basic differences.

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) edited *The United States National Research Council's study, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, which looked at physical factors as a partial explanation to the differentiation in reading ability between genders:

Neuroscience research on reading has expanded understanding of the reading process. For example, researchers have now been able to establish a tentative architecture for the component processes of reading. All reading difficulties, whatever their primary etiology, must express themselves through alterations of the brain systems responsible for word identification and comprehension. This suggests that, in all populations, reading ability occurs along a continuum, and biological factors are influenced by, and interact with, a reader's experiences.

There is an entirely separate school of thought that dismisses the current reading paradigm by insisting that education reform, which we undertake frequently and not always systematically, is ignoring the technological revolution. This movement insists, quite rightly in some respects, that we are educating our children for the industrial rather than the communication age. In the future, new information will cease to be published in books, and will instead rely on multimedia and

hypertext. Readers will cease to follow information in a book's linear path, and will follow their line of inquiry multidirectionally depending upon need. Therefore, we should be teaching our children, both boys and girls, to read in electronic formats, because that is where their need will be. We should take advantage of their natural affinity for computers to make them readers for the future. In an article for the online journal TechLearning, Armstrong and Warlick (2004) persuasively point out, "How can we prepare our children for the future, and for jobs that have not been invented yet by teaching them with technology pioneered by Gutenberg?"

Stephen Krashen's (2001, 2004) extensive reading research leads him to the conclusion that free voluntary reading (FVR) is the lynchpin of reading and writing fluency. "For school-age children FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do all the time" (Krashen year?, page # for quote?).

In 1992, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement released the results of a reading literacy study of school in thirty-two countries (Elley 1992). They looked at grade levels where most nine- and fourteen-year-old students were enrolled, and surveyed more than 210,000 students and more than 10,500 teachers. Both groups of students were queried about eleven different strategies that they might use if they wished to become a better reader, and were asked to choose the three that they felt were most important. The dual purpose of the question was to provide information about literacy acquisition strategies promoted by teachers and to reveal which strategies were most often associated with high achievement levels in reading. Both groups of students chose "liking it," closely related to engagement, as their first indicator of reading success. The second choice for the nine-year-olds, who are learning to read effectively, was having lots of time to read.

Postlewaith and Ross (2002) looked at the same data, and concentrated on the data collected for the nine-year-old grade level with students, teachers, and principals. They sought patterns that were consistent across countries to create a portrait of a more effective school for reading literacy, and extracted ten indicators of school, home, and community that were effectively creating literate students. Among the indicators were:

- teachers ensure that students read a great deal in class and have their students visit the school library on a regular basis;
- the school library is well-stocked with books, and the stock constantly grows to meet the demands of the enrollment;
- along with newspapers and magazines for less formal reading, there are classroom libraries with sufficient books available for each student;
- different types of reading initiatives and programs for the improvement of reading instruction, as well as individualized instruction and special remedial reading courses, are available;
- teachers emphasize understanding of the material being read above all, and choose various ways, such as dramatization, oral summaries, making personal connections, and other strategies, to ensure comprehension; and
- in their community, students have ready access to books through public libraries and bookstores.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) surveyed middle school students to determine what motivates them to read. The students indicated that the most important determinant was interest in the reading material. The first step, then, is to determine what is of interest, and then for teachers, SLMSs, and parents to commit to finding and making available materials that match these interests.

William Brozo (2002) agrees. In his book *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader*, he offers:

we have known for many years that a large number of adolescents prefer to read nonfiction, yet it is rare to find this genre in middle school and high school classrooms and libraries. When boys say they like anything with sports, action, and scary stuff, they mean it. We should honor boys' interests by making literature on these topics, especially young adult literature available to them (158).

In counterpoint to Brozo's statement, in 1990, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) took a public stand on using nonfiction in the classroom by creating the annual Orbis Pictus Award for promoting and recognizing excellence in writing nonfiction for children, and publicizing it to all their members and the library community. They recognize on their Web site that "the world of children's literature contains a variety of genres, all of which have appeal to the diverse interests of children as well as potential for classroom teaching. In recent years, however, nonfiction or information books have emerged as a very attractive, exciting, and popular genre" (NCTE 2007). NCTE's prestige helped contribute to the growth in publication of children's nonfiction in the last twenty years, and more good nonfiction is available today than ever before. Selection, however, remains in the hands of SLMSs, and whether they value Orbis Pictus as highly as Caldecott or Newbery Award books, and whether or not they actively promote and model the use of nonfiction books.

Several things, then, are recognized by reading researchers and experts to have a positive impact on boys' reading:

- giving students time to read in school from self-selected materials that are of interest to them personally;
- validating students' reading choices by having a wide variety of topics available in different media; and
- seeing role models reading and valuing reading.

In addition, having nonfiction materials available for free reading and also using nonfiction in the classroom is crucial to reaching some boys.

While we have sheaves of reports on the numbers surrounding students and student achievement as measured by testing instruments, research that seeks to examine their thoughts and opinions is limited. Studies with younger readers, where lifetime habits and opinions are often formed, are few. In other words, their test-taking skills are quantified via high-stakes testing and continuous assessment, but their opinions are usually not considered. In order to shed some light on the student perspective, and to potentially help teachers and library media professionals interest students in reading, the first part of this study seeks to clarify boys' attitudes about reading in general and about their reading instruction in school. The second part looks at the types of reading material that both boys and girls would choose to read in school if given the opportunity.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two parts. Thirty-five boys, aged ten to thirteen, comprised the main sample group. The students were from four fifth-grade classes at a rural elementary school in north central North Carolina. The racial composition of the group was nineteen white, twelve African American, two Hispanic (both native Spanish-speakers), one Asian, and one biracial. Each student consented to a nineteen-question, open-ended interview about reading, with the interviewer's assurance that there were no right or wrong answers and that she was seeking their opinions. A random group was asked a twentieth question about the reading materials in their home. For consistency, all interviews were conducted by the researcher over a period of two consecutive days. The questions were:

- What kind of reader are you?
- Do you like to read for pleasure? Why or why not?
- What would you rather do than read?
- If you could change something about yourself as a reader, what would you change?
- What is your favorite thing to read? Why?
- Do you have a favorite book? A favorite author?
- Do you think reading will be important to you when you're a grownup? Why?
- What types of things will you read when you're a grownup?
- What do you want to be when you're grown? What types of things might a person doing that job read?
- Do the men in your family read? What do they read?
- Are the reading tests you have in school fair? Why or why not?
- Are the reading assignments you have in school worthwhile to you? Why or why not?
- What could your teachers do to make reading more enjoyable for you?
- If you could give your language arts teacher some advice about helping boys, not just you, but other boys as well, to read more or read better, what advice would you give?
- Do you have things in your home to read, and, if so, what sorts of things?

For the second portion of the study, as a potential counterpoint to the interviews, all four classroom teachers conducted a free write created by the researcher with both boys and girls. Sixty-nine students participated. The prompt was, "If you could read anything you wanted for your next reading assignment (not just a book, but a magazine, a Web site, a newspaper, or anything you choose as long as you are reading and can tell me about it) what would you read and why?"

Findings and Analysis

Part One: The Interviews

During the interviews, not every boy answered every question. In the cases where they offered more than one answer, such as the career question, all answers were included in the totals. Totals were arrived at by simple percentages. In the case of two-part questions, separate totals were calculated for each part.

What kind of reader are you?

Many of the boys had difficulty interpreting the question, often requesting a prod toward the answer the researcher was seeking. The question was originally designed to see if the students would self-identify as good readers or poor readers, but as is the case with much research with children, they did not react in the way that the researcher expected. The largest group, 34.3 percent, indicated that they did not know how to answer the question. Of the majority of students who did answer the question, however, their answers were quite revealing. The next largest group, 20 percent, answered the question with the genre of book that they prefer, including nonfiction, adventure, humor, and fantasy. These genres are often associated with boys, but, with the exception of the adventure novel, not often used in the classroom for instructional purposes. Students who self-identified as good or excellent readers comprised 14.3 percent of the total; and 8.6 percent identified themselves as poor readers. An additional 8.6 percent replied that they are occasional readers, reading when the mood strikes them or they have nothing else to do. The last three students identified themselves as a curious reader, reading to find out facts; a “sometimes good” reader; and a reader who wants to write books “for kids like me.”

An examination of fourth-grade end of grade reading proficiency tests for this group indicates that ten of the thirty-five, or more than 28 percent, tested below the level that the state of North Carolina considers to be proficient. Of these ten, only one identified himself as a poor reader. All of the others who self-identified as poor readers or “sometimes good” tested higher than the proficient level.

Looking at the numbers from the other perspective, although the Department of Public Instruction considers higher than 71 percent proficient, only 14.3 percent identified themselves that way; of those, several were not actually proficient. This leads to more questions: How do we boost their confidence in their ability as readers? We know that a key to reading comprehension and fluency is practice. If they felt better about their ability, would they be willing to practice more, and therefore achieve more? What else would motivate them to read more?

Do you like to read for pleasure? Why or why not?

Forty percent indicated that they do enjoy reading for pleasure, 17.1 percent replied that they do not, and the largest group, 42.9 percent, indicated that they like to read sometimes. Of the group that answered yes, the answers fell into four categories: 28.6 percent like to read if the book is interesting or entertaining; 28.6 percent if the book is about a specific subject that interests them; 28.6 percent enjoy general reading for entertainment; and the remainder enjoy reading to learn. Of the students who do not like to read, half indicated that they have other or “better” things to do, and the other half said that reading is not interesting or that they find it too hard. Of the very significant number of students who answered “sometimes,” 42.9 percent said that they like to read if the book is interesting or good, a like number if they are bored or have nothing else to do, and the remainder say that reading takes too much time or that they generally have other things to do.

The general thread of “interest” runs throughout the students’ answers to this question. Though they answered the question in different ways, the largest majority of the boys indicated that they will read if the material is of interest to them. The not-so-subtle message here is that encouraging students to read is not enough. Having books and materials available is not enough. Only when they have the choice to read something that speaks to them and holds their interest will they choose to read, and, by extension, become more proficient.

What do you get from reading?

Over a third, 37.1 percent, stated either that reading teaches them or they learn from it; learning new words was specifically mentioned by 22.9 percent; and 11.4 percent said that reading helps them read more or better. Thus a total of 71.4 percent of the boys indicated some aspect of learning from their reading. In addition, 5.7 percent said that reading takes their mind off things, and another 5.7 percent indicated that they get nothing from reading (these students also answered that they did not like to read for pleasure). The final student answered that he did not know (this was potentially a linguistic problem with a student who is a native Spanish speaker).

Interestingly, not a single boy mentioned enjoyment or entertainment. It seems that the adults in their lives have inculcated the value of reading in order to learn, but that the leap to reading for enjoyment—the foundation for a lifelong reading habit—has not been realized.

What would you rather do than read?

As one would expect, most boys this age prefer active to sedentary activities. More than half, 65.6 percent, indicated that they would rather go outdoors or play active games or sports than read. Watch television had the next highest number of answers, with 14.3 percent; 8.6 percent said that they would rather play video games; 5.7 percent preferred drawing or painting, and 2.9 percent each would rather study or eat.

Even if one combines the television and video game categories, three out of four children would rather entertain themselves than be entertained, a rather encouraging statistic.

If you could change something about yourself as a reader, what would you change?

More than a fifth, 22.8 percent, said that they were perfectly happy and wouldn't change a thing. Twenty percent said that they would read more, and 11.4 percent wished they could read better. Some students, 5.9 percent, were concerned about the way they read aloud in front of the class, and a like percentage feel they read too slowly. Some boys, 5.9 percent, worry about the type of book they like. "I want to like fiction," said a student whose recent experience with literature has been with novels only, and who has a marked preference for nonfiction. This child apparently feels, as pointed out above, that "his type" of reading is bad, and that reading fiction is good. Another 14.2 percent indicated that they didn't know or were not sure. One student answered that he wished he could understand big words, the way he acts about reading; another responded he would change the things that he reads; and a third thought he should slow down when choosing books.

This basically less intrusive way of asking them how they feel about their reading ability is closely related to the first question, and brings us back to the same conclusion. If they felt more confidence in their ability, they would probably read more, and fluency would be improved without the need for further intervention. Although the majority of the boys did not self-identify as poor readers or as needing help, 43.5 percent of the group did indicate areas in which they could improve or where they felt they needed improvement.

What is your favorite thing to read? Why?

More than a fifth, 26.4 percent, indicated a preference for nonfiction: books about animals, sports, cars, and the military were specifically mentioned, as were newspapers and subject-specific magazines. Comics and graphic novels was the next highest category, with 20.6 percent. Either books in general or a specific novel were mentioned by 8.8 percent. Likewise, 8.8 percent each indicated their preference for a specific action or adventure series, such as Magic Treehouse, or a fantasy series, such as Harry Potter or Narnia. Horror and humor categories garnered 5.9 percent each, and the remaining two students indicated that they enjoy I Spy and the Bible.

Answers to the second question were more evenly distributed. Nearly a fifth of students, 19.4 percent, indicate that they like to read a specific thing in order to learn from it (these were all nonfiction readers). A like amount read specific books or materials because they are funny. The next largest group, with 16.1 percent, enjoyed what they read for action or fighting. Entertainment, or the fact that it keeps them wanting to read more was the choice of 12.9 percent, and a further 9.7 percent chose the type of material they did because it pertained to their favorite sport. Two students, 6.5 percent, indicated that they enjoy reading about magic and wizards. One student each indicated: he reads the Bible because it is the truth; he enjoys graphic novels because the pictures help him understand the text; he likes the challenge of reading difficult novels; the thrill of being scared by a horror novel is pleasurable; and finding hidden pictures on the pages is fun. [This is the only time the word fun was used by a boy, and finding pictures, even in a book, is not, strictly speaking, reading.]

The specific types of materials that interest these boys are validated in the research literature. Yet, again, with the exception of the action or adventure novel, are not used as literature for the classroom. Although teachers make many of these types of materials available in the classroom, they are not used for instructional purposes, and this generally tells boys that whatever their favorite types of books and materials, it is irrelevant to the classroom curriculum. Reading instruction will take place with narrative fiction only. Told often enough, even indirectly, that what they enjoy is not important, it is not surprising that so many boys do not enjoy reading.

This is changing in some areas, as reading comprehension tests increasingly include passages of nonfiction. It seems a shame that it takes the change in a mandated test to authenticate the interests of many of our students. There is a growing body of qualitative literature that claims that the use of nonfiction in these tests is directly the result of a backlash to boy's scoring lower than girls on standardized reading tests.

Do you have a favorite book? A favorite author?

More than half the students, 51.4 percent, indicated that they did not have a favorite book. The remainder of the students indicated a specific book within the following genres: 17.1 percent fantasy, 14.2 percent nonfiction, 8.6 percent realistic fiction, 2.9 percent horror, 2.9 percent folktale, and 2.9 percent comic.

Almost two thirds, 65.7 percent, did not have a favorite author. Of the students who did, three mentioned R. L. Stine, two each Dr. Seuss and Lewis Sachar, and one each E. B. White, Beverly Cleary, Stephen King, Dav Pilkey, and D. C. Comics (the student was correct—there was no author for his favorite comic, although the editorial staff of D. C. Comics is listed on the title page.)

More than half of the students, after having been readers for five years and having been read to for at least six years by their teachers, did not have a favorite book, and almost two-thirds could or did not name a favorite author. These numbers are troublesome.

Do you think reading will be important to you as a grownup? Why or why not?

Three fourths, 74.4 percent, stated that reading would be important to them in the future. Another 11.4 percent said maybe. Two students, 5.8 percent, said that they didn't know, and one each "it depends," "I don't think so" and "no."

The answers to the second question were many and varied. The largest proportion, 23.3 percent, feels that they will need to read either for work or to get a job. A further 16.7 percent believe that they will read to learn as adults. Ten percent said that reading will help them in their everyday life in the future. Two students each, 6.7 percent, said that they will need to be able to read

contracts in order to know what they're signing, will have to read more as adults, will need to read letters or mail, or that "I won't get anywhere without reading." One student each indicated: that he will need to be able to read sports plays from his playbook, that he'll occasionally need to read something important, that it depends on the job that he gets, that he won't need to read when he becomes a professional ballplayer, and that he won't read because it's like a hobby to him now that he doesn't think he'll pursue as an adult.

Again, although the importance of being able to read has been inculcated into these students, not one mentioned that reading is entertaining, enjoyable, or fun. They obviously equate reading with work. While that is not necessarily bad, it is antithetical to the love of reading that libraries and librarians seek to encourage.

What do you think you'll read as a grownup?

If more than one thing was mentioned, it is included in the totals. The largest group, 38.6 percent, indicated some area of nonfiction pleasure or informational reading, including books, articles, magazines and newspapers. Nearly a fifth, 18.2 percent, indicated work-related items and fiction books. In addition, 6.8 percent think they will be reading contracts, either as a professional athlete or for purchasing homes or cars; 4.5 percent indicated that they had no idea of what they might read when they grow up. The final 13.7 percent, one student each, indicated that they would be reading: bills and mail; applications such as job applications; the Bible; to his students (this child wants to be a kindergarten teacher); to his own children; and papers from the government (this student is a recent immigrant).

One inference that could be drawn here is that these students are looking to parents and guardians as role models for their future reading behaviors. In most cases, the answers that they gave are the materials that adults deal with daily in their lives at home; items that deal with the day-to-day work and finances. Another thing that asserts itself here is the boundless optimism of these students for their future. Setting aside the two who are completely convinced that they will become professional athletes (one said in this question that he would be reading his contract to make sure of its terms; the other in the previous question said he would need to be able to read sports plays from his playbook), they are already envisioning themselves as working members of their community, applying for jobs and buying homes and cars, and that they know that reading will play a part in their future lives, though it is reading of the efferent rather than the aesthetic sort.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

If more than one occupation was mentioned, they were included in the totals, some boy indicated that they did not know yet what they wanted to do. There were thirty-seven specific answers to this question. As expected, at this age many boys want to be professional athletes; 35.1 percent feel they have a future either in Major League Baseball, the National Football League, or in the National Basketball Association. Three students, 8.1 percent, want to be in the Army—not unusual in North Carolina, where there is a large military presence. Another 8.1 percent want to be firefighters, and one student, 2.7 percent, indicated an interest in being a police officer. Chefs and lawyers accounted for 5.4 percent each. One student each, the remaining 18.9 percent, wanted to be a: meteorologist; ghost hunter; chemical engineer; teacher; factory worker; and auto mechanic.

The previous question was intended to set up the following question.

What do you think a person in that job might read?

Five students from the previous question did not know what they wanted to be, so had no idea about this question, either. Another five knew what they wanted to be, but did not know what a person in that occupation might read. There were twenty-five specific responses to the question, and some students answered with more than one thing; percentages are based on those twenty-five replies. Six boys, 24 percent, felt that a person in their chosen occupation would read some sort of instructional book or manual. Twelve percent, all athletes, feel that ballplayers read plays and playbooks. The two budding chefs know that their job requires the reading of recipes and cookbooks. Two others feel people in their occupation will read contracts. The other 48 percent of the total was singular answers to the question as follows: weather patterns and history; scientific formulas; letters; children's books; newspapers; the Bible; blueprints; biographies; crime reports; sports magazines; law books; and books about trucks.

The majority of the boys did, indeed, have a grasp of the types of materials that people in their choice of occupation would read. This is, in large part, due to their familiarity with the jobs; most know an adult that is currently engaged in the profession that they chose.

Do the men in your family read?

The largest group, 35.1 percent of the thirty-seven answers to this question, answered just, "Yes" with no specifics. A particular relative that reads, a brother, grandfather, father, or uncle (in this descending order) was mentioned 29.7 percent of the time. A further 29.7 percent said that the men in their families do not read at all. The final 5.5 percent, two students, rather wistfully replied, "Some of them," with no further specifics.

The research is clear that all children, in order to appreciate reading, need to see adults reading and valuing reading. Booth (2002), Brozo (2002), and Gurian (2001), among others, all make this specific point. Boys need role models, especially male role models, who read in order to value reading as an activity. As the boys' siblings were usually in school as well, brothers were the obvious answer to the question. In addition, several of these boys are in single-parent families headed by mothers, further explaining the fact that three of the top four answers indicated someone other than the student's father.

What types of things do they read?

There were twenty-six answers to this question, and several of the boys gave more than one answer. Books, with no further explanation, were the top answer, with 19.2 percent of the total. A further 15.4 percent indicated that the men in their families read newspapers. Three of the boys, 11.5 percent, said that although the men in their lives read, they don't know what they read; thus leaving their original answers rather suspect. Another 11.5 percent said that their relatives read history. The final two boys indicated that their relatives read fiction.

The boys' basic indecision on this question tends to leave the veracity of their answer on the previous question rather suspect. It was as if they knew that it was important for their relatives to read, and wanted them to be readers, but when pushed for actual examples, they had to work to retrieve (or perhaps invent) the information. They seemed much clearer on what they themselves would read in the future than what the male influences in their lives currently read.

Are the reading assignments you get in school worthwhile to you personally?

The majority of the boys, 65.7 percent said that yes, the assignments are worthwhile. Twenty percent said no or not really, and one student, 2.9 percent, said "probably." The final 11.4 percent said that the assignments are sometimes worthwhile.

Why or why not?

This follow-up question required some substantial thought, and the answers were not consistent with the previous question. The largest group, 26.6 percent, said that the assignments help them get the right answers on their tests or good grades. A further 16.6 percent said that, “they help me learn.” An equal 16.6 percent, however, answered that they didn’t know why the assignments were valuable. Ten percent replied that the assignments help them read better. One student equivocated saying, “Some are cool.” The final 26.6 percent explained their negativity in a number of ways: four students said that the assignments are not interesting or that they don’t like them; one said, “They are valueless because they have nothing to do with school”; one “You just read and tell what happened, that’s it”; one “They are boring and they don’t bring me anything”; and the final student said “They don’t help you, they just help your grade.”

More than a quarter of the students indicated that reading assignments are valuable because they help you get the right answers on the test or help you get good grades; several of the boys’ who expressed negative feelings did so because they felt the assignments valueless because they only helped their grades and were of no interest to them personally. This inverse relationship indicates quite a few of the students, at this tender age, have already figured out how to work the system and read with how they will be assessed on the material in mind. The fact that more than one fourth of the students answered this question negatively, and another 16.6 percent could not articulate the value of reading assignments, leads to a conclusion that at least with these boys, their reading assignments were perceived as mostly valueless exercises.

What could make reading more enjoyable for you?

The answers to this question provide a plethora of suggestions for classroom teachers. Five students recommended games or activities to go with the story. Four said more time to read what they want. Two students wanted more books that “I’m interested in,” and two specifically mentioned more choice in what they read. Two wanted to read with partners, and another two wanted to read the book, then watch the movie. One student each said: stories with more action; more kinds of books; more reading aloud; books with humor; comics; more pictures (this student also is a comics reader); magazines; a quiet place to read; audiobooks; fantasy; and being able to write my own book. One boy wanted the material to be easier, one said that nothing would help because he’s just not interested, and, in a counterpoint, another said not to change anything because he’s already interested. The final four students said they didn’t know what would help.

Obviously, this opportunity to exercise some control over what they read or how they read it appealed to these students and could potentially make a huge difference in how they perceive reading. Only a single student said not to change a thing.

If you could give some advice to your teacher about helping boys to read more, or read better—not just you, but boys in general—what would you tell her?

A quarter of the boys unhesitatingly said that giving them the choice to read what they are interested in would be most helpful. A further 18.8 percent said more time to read, and a like number said one-on-one instructional time with the teacher. Four students, 12.5 percent wanted the assignments or material to be easier, and 9.4 percent wanted to work with partners or in groups. Two boys, 6.2 percent, wanted activities and games to go with the books. One student felt that reading assignments should be more fun, and one felt that setting individual goals would help. The final student felt that some relevance was needed. He said that teachers need to help their students understand why reading well will be important to them as adults in order to help them understand why they need to read today.

Almost half of these children intuitively knew what Krashen and other reading researchers have been advocating for years: that self-selection of reading material and time during the school day to read are key factors in a child's reading success and their enjoyment of the process.

Do you have things in your home to read, and, if so, what sorts of things?

This was a question that was randomly asked to twenty-four students. Many gave more than one answer, for a total of thirty-four responses. Books, with no further qualifier, were mentioned 23.5 percent of the time. Interestingly, 17.7 percent mentioned nonfiction books, and a like number fiction books. Magazines were mentioned 14.7 percent of the time, and newspapers 5.9 percent. Four students, 11.8 percent, said that they did not have things around the house they could read, and another opined that he only had baby books at his house, which were of no interest to him. One student said he had comics at his house, as both he and his father enjoy the genre. One student said that he had his athletic awards and trophies.

Most of these students do have material at home to read should they choose to do so. According to their answers, most have a print-rich environment. However, six of the twenty-nine, about one in five, had either nothing to read, or nothing of interest, and the awards and trophies that one so highly valued would not be considered reading material by most educators. One in five students is dependent on the school and the school library media program to provide them with reading materials—this statistic carries with it an awesome responsibility.

Part Two: The Free Write

Although the researcher originally requested answers only from boys, the teachers asked to do the assignment with both boys and girls. Three wanted to use the “assignment” as a writing grade, and the researcher agreed in order to ensure their willing participation for both portions of the project. As the data was analyzed, the answers from the girls proved just as compelling as that of the boys. All of the teachers read the answers before giving the researcher the data, and three said that, having read the answers, they would modify some future reading assignments based on the students' answers.

The Boys

Eighteen of the twenty-nine boys, 62.1 percent, indicated that they would like to read books for their next assignment, with seventeen giving specific titles or subjects: 33.3 percent chose a graphic format, such as comics, manga or anime; 33.3 percent chose the fantasy genre naming titles such as Harry Potter, The Magic Treehouse, and Bailey School Kids; 22 percent wanted nonfiction or informational books; of the final two students, one wanted a joke book and the other mentioned generic fiction.

The next largest group, five students or 17.2 percent of the total, wanted to read magazines, and all listed nonfiction titles.

Five students, or 13.8 percent, wanted to read Web sites for their next reading assignment. Four of the five listed nonfiction subject matter for the Web sites, and other, a nascent rapper, wanted to read and memorize the lyrics of his favorite rap artists.

The final two students wanted to read a newspaper specifically in order to learn local and political news, and sports and weather information.

Graphically formatted books have trickled down from public library and bookstore to library media center in the past few years, as teachers and SLMSs recognize their power to lure reluctant readers. It is therefore not surprising that a third of the boys mentioned that they would like to read books chose that format. Fantasy is another genre that has been gathering steam since Harry

Potter gave boys permission to like the genre. Many fantasy books are also action-adventure oriented, and this aspect appeals to boys as well. Harry Potter media hype over the publication of a new book and the release of a new movie also likely played a role.

The remainder of the students chose the non-narrative formats of magazines, Web sites, and newspapers. These media offer information in shorter “chunks,” and stories are usually supported by pictures or graphics. There is no necessity to finish a long story, and no guilt with laying aside a magazine or newspaper, or clicking out of a Web site, as there sometimes is with not finishing a novel.

If grouped together in terms of fiction or nonfiction rather than medium, sixteen of the twenty-nine boys, just more than half, chose nonfiction.

Further analysis yields the fact that 34.5 percent of the boys said they want to read a particular medium for facts or information, 31 percent used the word “interesting” in justifying their choice of material, and 20.7 percent, four out of five of whom chose graphic formats, used the word “cool,” though whether to rationalize their choice or to defend it is unclear. [This word was never used by any of the female participants.]

The Girls

The largest percentage of the girls, 42.5 percent, also mentioned books. Six of the seventeen who did so mentioned a Harry Potter title, and the only commonalities among the other eleven girls were that two chose ghost stories, and two adult titles. Only one girl mentioned a graphic format book.

The next largest group, eleven girls, or 27.5 percent, chose magazines. Of these, nine of the eleven chose pop culture or “fanzines.” The others chose Zoobooks, an animal magazine, and American Girl, a magazine targeted toward middle-grade girls.

Of the girls, 17.5 percent wanted to read Web sites. Of these seven students, five chose pop culture topics for the sites, and the other two chose animal sites. There was remarkable consistency between the numbers of girls who chose magazines and Web sites; they were seeking the same type of information in two different media.

Four of the remaining students chose newspapers, and the last e-mail.

There were three main commonalities in 85 percent of the girls’ responses. Almost a third, 32.5 percent of respondents, specifically mentioned that they wanted facts or information from the material they chose. More than a quarter, 27.5 percent chose a particular medium because either it was “fun” or reading was fun. [This word was not used by any of the male participants.] Fully one fourth, 25 percent, wanted media that deal with pop culture, and all of these students wanted to read either magazines or Web sites rather than books. They specifically mentioned wanting information and gossip about particular celebrities, information on trends in clothes and makeup, and tips on how to be more popular.

Generally boys are recognized as the gender that prefers nonfiction, and the 42.5 percent of girls who chose books did choose fiction; the rest of the sample opted for nonfiction reading, although one could argue that the hyperbole of fan sites and fanzines may constitute fiction. Looked at another way, more than half the girls, 57.5 percent, chose something other than books, something other than narrative fiction.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Books are important to boys and girls, but for different reasons. Boys want action and adventure, even in their nonfiction selections. Girls prefer story and narrative if they are reading books. But more than half the girls and almost a third of the boys in this study would choose something other than books if they could have a choice. Of the 62.5 percent of boys who chose books, 63.5 percent of these chose a non-narrative format.

Traditional reading instruction, with its reliance on narrative fiction and the aesthetics of reading, in Rosenblatt's terms, may not be serving these students best. Generally, these boys felt removed from their reading assignments; many recognized that reading the assigned material was important to their grade, but did not recognize these assignments as particularly helpful or relevant to them personally. They recognized that reading will be important to them in the future, but see their future in terms of nonfiction materials, various media, and for a purpose other than enjoyment. They see themselves as efferent rather than aesthetic readers, and both teachers and SLMSs need to consider their point of view. The good news is that they were full of suggestions as to how to make the assignments better; the bad news that nobody had ever asked them before, and may never do so again.

The students in this study agreed with the experts in the field of reading research. They will read, especially if given the opportunity to do so in class. Interest in the material is key, as is self-selection of materials. Most like to read, and are generally enthusiastic if given the opportunity to select their own materials and format on a topic that is of interest to them. There was a preference for nonfiction among both the boys and the girls, though from markedly different perspectives.

As professionals in the library media field or in education, after years of education ourselves we often assume that we know "what is best" for students. We have reviews (done by adults), textbooks, and best of lists to guide our decisions in purchasing new materials for our library media centers or classrooms. We also, in many cases, have years of experience that help us make decisions. Many of us ask students for suggestions, but usually in a less than systematic way.

Many teachers, especially high school teachers, are conducting learning styles inventories or examinations of multiple intelligences with their students to analyze learning styles and preferences; the results of these inventories are then used to help teachers plan lessons and activities that help individual students achieve. This study is indicative of the need of library media programs to conduct similar sorts of organized interviews with students to determine their reading interests. The first step is to make a determined effort to find out what is of interest, and then for teachers, SLMSs, and parents to commit to finding and making available materials that match these interests. Ask, and then validate their answers by allowing them a choice in what they read. More primary research needs to be done with larger groups of students in order to validate this study, and then the results acted upon in the classroom in order to create engagement of students with text, and, presumably, more capable readers.

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